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1.01 Scientific article

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek

IS THERE A PLACE FOR RECORDS SYSTEMS IN ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION??

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Abstract:

The paper aims to see if and how records systems have impact over archival description. If the answer would be positive, then it is a fair enterprise to check if the standards for archival description can accommodate the description of records system. Are these just tools for managing records, elements of the history of a records aggregation? Or are they, as presumed, a contiguous context, that must be highlighted? Is it enough to describe past records systems implicitly, from various descriptive attributes or it is worth to have defined a specific entity?

Key words:

records system, recordkeeping systems, archival description, records management

Izvleček:

Ali je pri arhivskem popisovanju prostor za dokumentni sistem?

Prispevek poskuša ugotoviti, ali in kako dokumentni sistemi vplivajo na arhivsko popisovanje. Če vplivajo, potem je smiselno preveriti, ali standardi arhivskega popisovanja zadoščajo popisovanju dokumentnega sistema. Ali so to prava orodja za upravljanje z dokumenti, elementi zgodovine združevanja dokumentov? Ali so, kot predvideno, bližnji kontekst, ki mora biti poudarjen? Je dovolj popisati pretekle dokumentne sisteme v smislu različnih popisnih atributov ali je vredno definirati specifično entiteto?

Ključne besede:

dokumentni sistem, sistem za upravljanje z dokumenti, arhivski popis, upravljanje z dokumenti

This paper seeks to present some considerations about the role of “records systems” in the organisation of archives. Omnipresent in records management literature, records system existence has less exposure in archival management studies, though it has the potential of being very relevant for archival arrangement and description. The topic is by no means new; in fact, it was closely examined by David Bearman in one of his studies (Bearman 1993), but, since then (at least to my knowledge) it was not re-examined in connection with archival description and arrangement. And I find the topic even more relevant today than in 1993, because “records systems as a service” tend to become more and more a standard.

1. Terminology

Reading English professional literature from various sources, results in reaching the conclusion that the term “records system” has several meanings.

ISO 15489, the main standard on records management, defines the records system as an “*information system which captures, manages and provides access to records over time*”, noting that it can consist of “*technical elements such as software, which may be designed specifically for managing records or for some other business purpose, and non-technical elements including policy, procedures, people and other agents, and assigned responsibilities*”. (ISO_15489-1 2016, 3.16). The same definition can be found in ISO 30300 (ISO_30300 2020, 3.54) and ISO 16175-2 (ISO/TS_16175-2 2020, 4.14), all of them sharing basically the same source, which leads back to the Australian recordkeeping practice.

In UK, in a document concerning the records management practices, the term is defined as “*an information or process system that contains records and other information. It can be either a paper-based system or a digital system*” (National_Archives 2000, 26). More recently, James Lappin and his colleagues went very wholistic, defining the records system “*in the broadest possible terms as being the sum total of all the applications, repositories, structures/schemas, processes, policies, and rules that the organisation uses to capture, organise, and manage all the information that it creates and receives in the course of conducting its business*” (Lappin 2021, 246).

In US professional literature, as early as 1950, Helen Chatfield defined the record system as “*the means by which we gain control over the information contained in the documents, and so are able to render an effective reference service*” (Chatfield 1950, 259). David Bearman published in *Archivaria*, in 1993 an important study, where he uses interchangeably the terms “record-keeping systems” and “records systems”, by which he understood “*a special kind of information system... [that] keep[s] and support[s] retrieval of records*” (Bearman 1993, 17; see also figures at pp. 18-19). In the Pierce-Moses’ glossary, the term “records system” is absent, but, again, “recordkeeping system” is defined as “*coordinated policies and procedures that enable records to be collected, organized, and categorized to facilitate their management, including preservation, retrieval, use, and disposition*” (Pearce-Moses 2005)¹.

In Canada, the standard on electronic evidence defines a records system as “*whole of an organization’s records, and the records management and records preservation systems that control them*” (CAN/CGSB-72.34-2017 2017, 3.64; see also 5.1).

The above collection of definitions allows for several conclusions. Firstly, it seems the concept of a records system was not central to recordkeeping professional studies until the midst of 20th century² and it was more and more used with the advent of

¹ It has to be noted that, under the reference of the same author, the *Interpares 2* project dictionary records the following definition for “records system”: “*The records system of a creator comprises the methods and the rules which determine the regular accumulation of records produced or acquired, and permits the delineation of a coherent archival structure adequate for the administrative and informational needs of the creator in the following areas · control of provenance, definition of the procedures for production, acquisition, accumulation, and movement of records; · organization and regular accumulation, which involves the same records functions with respect to the activities from which the records results (creation and maintenance of the archival bond); · secure preservation and transmission of integral and authentic records (elimination of risks of manipulation and dispersion)*”. (http://interpares.org/ip2/ip2_terminology_db.cfm). It should also be noted that, under this entry, it is cited as a definition for “records system” the one of NARA on “series” (<https://www.archives.gov/research/data-model/series.html>).

² See a similar remark in (Bearman 1993, 17) and (Piggott 2012).

electronic systems. Hence the need to make a specific emphasis that records systems may be also paper based, not only electronic. Electronic records systems are only the tools, the technical part allowing the performance of processes associated with records systems.

Even though less theoretically examined, records systems exist “naturally”, by the implicit or explicit set of rules and responsibilities used for creation and management of records. As such, the statement from ISO 16175-2 (ISO/TS_16175-2 2020) is justified, which says that “*all organizations will have at least one, and generally more than one, records system*”.

With the notable exception of the Canadian standard, all the other works seem to agree that records system is rather a management framework, hosting and regulate records organisation and use. Hence, it may be regarded as a “container”³ (*records system*) with “content” (*records*) (Hofman 2005, 136). On the other hand, Maria Guercio, though agreeing that records system comprises “methods and rules” (Guercio 2001, 255-256), considered that a records system is “*constituted by a complex of interrelated records and includes within its essential components the ensemble of their relationships... (the archival bond)*” (Guercio 2001, 248). From this perspective it implies both rules and the records in order to have a records system. In this case, the “container” and the “content” would form an inextricable whole. Difference between the two perspectives, for the sake of theorizing, can be relevant: can a records system be implemented in what concerns procedures, policies, responsibilities, but yet containing no records? In my opinion, it can be the case, and Claudio Pavone mentioned such cases, where system of records arrangement is prescribed in a certain way, but in practice a different system was implemented (Pavone 2004, 71); in the former case, the system exists, but not the records organized according to the system. As such, though admitting the “container” and the content are intimately connected, and that the container significantly influence the understanding of the content, I find them as two separate entities.

2. The records systems and the aggregation of records

Various recordkeeping standards have been developed in the last 30 years, from many perspectives and grounded on various administrative traditions. On a Venn diagram of these standards, in the intersection three entities are present: Record, Functions and Agents. Between these, there is a causal link: an Agent exerts a function and as a result of its performance, a body of records results. Records are therefore the result of Agent’s actions and an evidence of the functions exerted by it. Considering various sub-divisions of these three entities, a possible example may look like this:

Level of detail	Function	Is performed by	Agent	produces	Record
	Ambient function		Organisation		Fonds
	Function		Workgroup		Subfond
	Work process		Workgroup		Series
	Activity		Workgroup		File
	Transaction		Person		Item

³ It must be noted though that analogy with “container” should not be taken too far, because the records in a records system may have “virtual” positions in various other systems (sometime manifested as “relations”), so, instead of one place in one “container, many virtual places for record may exist.

Of course, this is an oversimplified model, but I think it captures, in broad lines, the essentials of the formation of “natural” (read, activity-driven) records aggregation. In a particular environment, it is possible that a document is registered in the incoming register, then it goes to a member of staff, who deals with the task, solves it, and issues an answer. The whole set of records resulting from these activities is arranged in a file (a whole file as a case or just a part of a file with similar sets of records, resulted from similar tasks). This kind of activity is recurrent within a work unit and in the other work units alike, and hence the files, series and subfonds are accumulated, generating, on the timeline, the archive of the organisation⁴. (See also (Hofman 2005, 147-148)). While the work units may be temporary and reorganisation may occur more frequently for the purpose of a better goals achievement, the functions and the activity processes tend to be more stable. As a result, the relation between records aggregation and work processes and functions are more persistent than the relations with a certain work unit. David Bearman notices this relation between functions and aggregation of records: *“Archivists recognize that organizational functions (or “competencies” as the Europeans call them) are the roots of business processes, which in turn dictate the way in which transactions are conducted. The way that the process is conducted is reflected in the organization of records to support a function”* (Bearman 1993, 19).

In spite that all seems a very coherent and consistent process, in practice aggregation of records in organisations and work units may be also influenced by specific recordkeeping rules. While the principle of aggregation may look like the one simplified above, the specific ways of capture, file, arrange and use records may vary, from process to process, from unit to unit. A university, for instance, will not deal only with general administrative records, but also with certain sets of records, specific to the educational mechanism. Catalogues, student files, student registers, curricula, certificates—are all types and series of records that relate to a general function and are regulated by the specific pieces of legislation governing that ambient or social function of education. All information within those records is related to each other, from the moment of registration to the issuing of a record or its archiving. The complex of rules, control systems, arrangement etc. are a records system for university education records. The same situation may be found in other areas (mostly in cross-sectorial ones), like in human resources management, bookkeeping, medical care etc. As such, it seems correct to consider that in fact, in an organisation there are several *records sub-systems*—probably more obvious if the scale of the organisation is larger. This multiplicity was noticed before by Hans Hofman, who wrote: *“the system may be one system or a range of systems that operate within an organization either separately for each of the departments or business units or in close collaboration with each other in a distributed environment. The systems should at least be governed by one record keeping regime that includes the policy strategies rules and methods of the organization”* (Hofman 2005, 136).

An important feature prompts when the business processes are automated, and the “records systems” make use of software that manages many work- and information flows within one department or even at the organisational scale. In such cases, series may exist only virtually, when querying the system, as a result of integration and processing of the data stored (case anticipated in (Bearman 1993, 18-19)). A digital education management system, embedding workflows, will very likely be able to store all the type of records mentioned above, displaying different views on the information stored when queried. The records will be available on demand, and they may not be preserved as individual records or series of records, but as data and rules for aggregation

⁴ Of course, this is an oversimplified description. Many other actors may influence the creation of an archive.

of those data. Depending on the scale of the automated system, it may be the record system of one business unit (a department of the university or the education part of the university), THE records system of the whole organisation, with specific embedded workflows and records functionalities (that is, an enterprise level system, that deals with records from both the core and supporting processes) or, in some cases, even the records system for a whole domain of activity (like, for instance, a national scale system for managing education records in universities (like in the case presented by Markus Schmalzl (Schmalzl 2019)). Moreover, as James Lappin et al notice, what may be regarded as records system may not even be able to bring together all records pertaining to a case, since records, as result of transactions, are performed at a very detailed level (Lappin 2021, 261): the university system may manage education-related records created on site, but not the emails connected with those records, that are still kept in the email client. In such circumstances, the whole of documentation could only be retrieved by querying several records systems of the organisation. The archive will look like aggregation of data from different systems, and an understanding of records could be achieved only by querying various datasets.

3. Arrangement/description: any room for records systems?

Based on the presentation above, it appears that identifying the body of records from within a records system may or should have a relevance on processes of archival arrangement and description.

Firstly, to identify the original arrangement and the internal provenance of an archive, the records system of origin is relevant. Bearman went even further and considers that the true provenance is the one related with the records systems (Bearman 1993, 20). As I said above, while the organization inner structure may suffer various changes in time, the functions and, implicitly, the work process, are more stable. For instance, no matter if there is an independent department for human resources or a department sharing many functions or only several employees that perform the work: since the creation and organisation of human resources records are regulated specifically, the work process will be performed according with those regulations, so the “creator” of the records series will not only be identified easier, but also more precise: it is the records system for human resources.

Identification of the records system may also have an impact on how to draw the boundaries of records aggregations. Taking the example of a national-scale education records system above, which embeds the rules and host the records, how will one university deal with its records stored in this system when it will cease its activity? Will it extract the records out of the system, in order to have its own, complete, archive? Or all the records contained in such an umbrella-system will be one set of records, with full rights, related with the in-place records from each client-universities, and the provenance will be “Ministry of Education”? This big picture can also be instantiated for systems inside of an organisation: a unique automated system of the university will have “virtual” series of records; it will not be store “touchable” series of records, but only tools for “calling” them from the system, based on certain parameters (Bearman 1993, 19). The records system will be then the container holding all the records of the university. In this perspective, again, the records system may determine the level/set of records within an archive. And this may challenge some of the traditional archival picture over aggregation of records, where, for instance, records could be arranged in series of book-registers and records, no matter the original records systems they belong to. The emphasis will not be put on discrete items (records or folders), but on larger aggregations, corresponding with a change of emphasis from discrete activity process to functions that

are served by a certain automated system of management and preservation) or are supported by certain automated systems.

One important challenge that also pleads for records system as determinants for levels/sets in archival arrangement that is already present since a long time, but rarely considered (at least, from my knowledge) is the moment when records system change. The system can change completely (the set of rules, procedures, IT systems etc.) or only part of the system (like classification scheme). Would this moment determine the start of a new aggregation? In two successive classification schemes, the same series (as function and content) may have two different codes. Often, in historical archives, for paper records, such series are considered persistent, no matter if the source records systems changed. The different codes they received in time may be recorded in their description, but they are considered one series. But in electronic environment, it may be more practical to keep records grouped based on the automated system of provenance instead of extracting series as such and re-organize them across systems. So, "here is our server/storage, archive it" may not be a fictional request...

While I hope the demonstration above pleaded convincingly for the relevance of records system in arrangement, it is not clear where is its place or if it has a proper place in archival description. To start, I would like to remind the ISAD(G) definition of archival description: "*The creation of an accurate representation of a unit of description and its component parts, if any, by capturing, analysing, organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate and explain archival materials and the context and **records systems** which produced it*" (International Council on Archives 1999, 10) (my emphasis). And while records systems are listed as something different than the context (?!), their place in the description is not clearly identified. A good position would be in the element 3.2.3 *Archival history* or 3.3.4 *System of arrangement*. But, as resulted from the definitions, a records system is more than a system of arrangement and, also, it may be involved in more aggregation of records. In order to reveal its influence in the production and management of sets of records it needs to correspond to a type of aggregation/level/units of description that reunite all the series contained in the records system, that is, something like subfonds or high level series. (It is clear, nonetheless, that such a structure is completely inadequate to describe modern interconnected automated systems.)

The new conceptual model for archival description (Records in Contexts, RiC) seems more promising in modelling the possibility to describe records systems in a more accurate and explicit way (International Council on Archives 2019). If we consider the records system firstly a set of rules, it can be modelled using the entity RiC-E16 Rules. The system is managed and used by RiC-E07 Agents (for instance, RiC-E11 Corporate bodies) and its technical component may be described by using the entity RiC-E13 Mechanism. All Agents are related with the body of records created, captured and managed by using the records system. So, in theory, it would be possible, but the complexity of description makes this action a difficult endeavour. As such, I believe that records system will continue to be present in description only as the "content of the container", even in the cases where automated systems will, basically, determine the limits of series or subfonds. But such determination would continue to be rather implicit.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, records are produced by the organisations or individuals in the regular course of business. But beside being produced, records are captured and managed according to a set of rules, responsibilities, and by supporting tools, which constitutes a records system. As such, records systems seem to best preserve provenance and all its relevance better than the structure of the creator, because it is directly connected with the way records are accumulated and used. With the advent of automated systems, a consolidation of work flows occurred and records producing tools, and hence such systems tend to become the records system itself.

Despite its relevance, archival practices on arrangement and description have tended to neglect the description and examination of records systems. Their electronic version though may require a special attention, since it may be the one which define new type of sets of records, while “melting” old ones, that would only exist virtually.

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POVZETEK

ALI JE PRI ARHIVSKEM POPISOVANJU PROSTOR ZA DOKUMENTNI SISTEM?

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Strokovne literature, ki se ukvarja z arhivskim popisovanjem, je veliko, saj gre za osnovno dejavnost poklicev, ki se ukvarjanjo z upravljanjem z zapisi. Medtem ko so pred 30 leti standardi za arhivsko popisovanje šele nastajali, imamo danes mnoge standarde, nekoliko trendov; v nastajanju je celo nov konceptualni model in ontologija. Standardi bolj ali manj odsevajo klasične arhivske pristope, identificiranje skupkov ali setov zapisov z namenom popisovanja. Danes je splošno priznano, da arhivski popis pomeni ne samo popisovanje zapisov ali setov zapisov, ampak tudi agente, funkcije ali mandate, torej vse elemente, ki so del nastanka in upravljanja z zapisi skozi čas. Pri tej sestavljanji entitet pa se zdi, da ena manjka: dokumentni sistem.

Dokumentni sistem definira standard ISO 15489 in iz definicije je jasno, da ne gre za IT-sistem, ampak prej za okvir za nastanek in upravljanje z dokumenti. Tako dokumentni sistem postane kontekst, najbrž najbližji kontekst za razumevanje strukture in, morda, pomena organizacije dokumentov. Ne glede na to pa obstaja zelo malo referenc na dokumentne sisteme in njihov vpliv na arhivsko popisovanje.

Na temelju teh idej poskuša prispevek ugotoviti, ali in kako dokumentni sistemi vplivajo na arhivsko popisovanje. Če je odgovor pozitiven, potem je smiselno preveriti, ali standardi arhivskega popisovanja zadoščajo popisovanju dokumentnega sistema. Ali so to prava orodja za upravljanje z dokumenti, elementi zgodovine združevanja dokumentov? Ali so, kot predvideno, bližnji kontekst, ki mora biti poudarjen? Je dovolj popisati pretekle dokumentne sisteme v smislu različnih popisnih atributov ali je vredno definirati specifično entiteto?