ESARBICA JOURNAL

JOURNAL OF THE EASTERN

AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

REGIONAL BRANCH OF THE

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON

ARCHIVES

Volume 36

2017

GOOD GOVERNMENT AND GOOD GOVERNANCE: RECORD KEEPING IN A CONTESTED ARENA

Alistair G Tough

University of Glasgow

Alistair.Tough@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

This article addresses the challenges that arise when record keeping systems are advocated as a necessary under-pinning for good government and good governance. The relationship between record keeping and accountability is analysed and contextualised in relation to transparency and Freedom of Information legislation. The importance of capturing oral communication is referred to. The barriers to progress that can arise where official information technology systems are misused for personal and recreational purposes are recognised and possible solutions discussed. At the outset an historical analysis of the development of record keeping systems is offered. This article is based both on the author's experience as an archivist and records manager and on academic research – much of it carried out in archives.

The development of record keeping systems over the last 100 years

Over the last century, and especially during the last forty years, record keeping systems have developed and changed dramatically. It is possible to regard the situation as it exists today as representing chaos and failure but, on balance, the author is inclined towards qualified optimism regarding the future.

In the Edwardian era, the years before the First World War, the predominant kind of system for records of a documentary (as opposed to financial) nature was a discrete-item pre-action workflow methodology familiar to public servants as the registry. This involved handling each report, memorandum, map etc as separate items every one of which had to be assigned a unique identifier, entered in a register, cross referenced with related material and indexed by name and place. This way of functioning has been aptly described by Martin Campbell-Kelly as 'When people were computers'. A major change, to the use of files based on corporate and/or personal names or subjects, was pioneered in Natal in the 1870s and then copied in Mauritius, Australia, Trinidad and Zanzibar

before being adopted across Whitehall in the 1920s. Elements of both of these methods persist in the 21st century, for example in the continuing use of registers of seals for major contracts and in the widespread use of file registries in the developing countries of the Commonwealth. A key feature of these systems was (and, in some instances, still is) that they captured large volumes of use-generated metadata, both where documents were treated as individual items and when they were aggregated into files. By use-generated metadata is meant such data items as which documents had been aggregated temporarily before being sent to an Action Officer, who wrote minutes on the minute paper and when, to whom it had been circulated, who had asked for it to be brought up and when it was formally closed. This pattern continued until the 1980s, at least.

Card-based record keeping systems became common in the 1920s. The civil service and other organisations made extensive use of them for personnel management purposes. They were widely used also for stores management where pre-digital precursors of today's spreadsheets proliferated. Unlike files and registers, card-based systems have tended not to survive and become archives. A major factor in their piecemeal destruction was the ease with which card-based systems could be weeded of non-current items. Cards were a significant element in the development of machine readable systems too, with comparatively simple edge-punched cards serving as a hybrid 'bridge' between hand written and/or typed formats and automated systems.

Early computerised record keeping systems had to be of a numeric nature. Financial and stores records lend themselves to automation of this kind. Other records were rendered capable of being captured by means of coding. The Scottish Morbidity Record databases are good examples of this, with both diseases and operations being coded to enable retrieval and analysis. Over time financial management systems of a 'black box' nature emerged. A key characteristic of these 'black box' systems is that very few people understand what happens inside them. Even auditors frequently have to take on trust that the relationship between inputs and outputs is reliable. This is in marked contrast to the classic components of double entry book-keeping where the manner in which transactions had been analysed in the ledger can be readily traced to the journals and vouchers. As a result, the competence and diligence of ledger clerks has become a key issue in relation to the functioning of financial systems.

The two most significant changes of the last century came with the development of programs that could process text and the development of Windows operating systems. The developers at the Palo Alto Research Centre who created Windows came from a North American background and implicitly assumed that American post-action filing systems were a universal norm. They had no concept of pre-action workflow on the Commonwealth pattern. As client-server architectures became the norm, shared drives were widely introduced. Despite their name, shared drives frequently had the perverse effect of discouraging the shared use of records. In the absence of the electronic equivalents of coherent file plans, IT departments positively encouraged a process of Balkanisation by setting up drives named after individual members of staff. In response to the resulting chaos, Electronic Document and Records Management Systems and Content Management Systems were introduced. In the public sector in the UK, EDRMS

have not been particularly successful: the primary cause was a failure to integrate business process with record keeping. Or, to use different terms, EDRMS have produced disappointing results where the implications of moving from pre-action workflow to post action filing have not been properly thought through. In the private sector in North America CMS seemed to be achieving greater success. Both EDRMS and CMS are still in use today but the advent of Web 2.0 has changed the parameters of the game.

Digital systems in general, and the cloud in particular, have been seen by some commentators as leaving record keeping professionals with no real future. By way of evidence, they may reasonably point to a range of recent UK government enquiries relating to the war in Iraq that demonstrate woefully inadequate record keeping: the Butler, Chilcot and Hutton enquiries. However, it is reasonable to argue that rumours of the death of our profession have been exaggerated. Private clouds, such as the Government cloud proposed by the Cabinet Office, consist of hitherto stand-alone networks that belong to the taxpayer: so there is no logical reason why joining up these should pose any fundamentally new problem. The speed with which Microsoft have offered a cloud based (or cloud compatible) suite of products, crucially including their SharePoint product, demonstrates that integration between client-server architectures and third party cloud services is possible. Perhaps most significantly, some content collaboration services such as Huddle offer the opportunity to harvest use-generated metadata even in respect of records held by a genuine third-party cloud provider. This reverses the pattern established by earlier Cloud based services like Flickr and You-Tube which have routinely stripped out metadata during the process of uploading.

Both research and practical experience lead me to the conclusion that use-generated metadata is likely to provide the key to securing the future of electronic record keeping systems. In essence, this is because evidential value can be assured by fully utilising the capabilities of ICT systems, in ways that transcend the short-term horizons and project orientations that characterise many IT professionals, in order to capture use-generated metadata. However, published evidence in support of this view is hard to come by.

There is a particular reason why evidence of good practice is so scanty in the literature. This is to do with security. The organisations that have made the greatest progress in electronic Records Management tend to be those that hold the most sensitive and the most important records, for example in the UK the Cabinet Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the major pharmaceutical companies. They have devoted substantial resources to designing and implementing new record keeping systems because the content justifies the effort. However, precisely because the content is sensitive, they have been reluctant to describe their systems in print lest this should help terrorists, spies and commercial rivals to penetrate those systems. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office presumably feel very pleased that they have not suffered the deeply damaging consequences that have befallen the U.S. State Office through the Wikileaks fiasco: it should not surprise us that they are reluctant to describe their record keeping systems in public prints.

Orality

The author's published research work demonstrates that the processes of capturing oral sources in a written form via District Note Books (which are familiar to many here today) were subject to change over time. The first generation of British District Commissioners were apt to present as authoritative and unchallenged an account of the African past given to them by those currently in positions of authority. Their successors, in contrast, began to see the African past and even customary law as contingent and contested. I have argued that the experience of being witnesses to contests over the legitimate succession to chieftainships played a key role in this development. One aspect of this change is the growing tendency of British colonial officials to acknowledge the contributions of African collaborators to the process. Whilst the main focus of my work is on the creation of records in oral cultures that had been recently exposed to Western influences, I have discussed also the 'Hansard' model, based on the daily journal of the House of Commons in the UK. The Hansard process involves subtle processes of tidying and making coherent verbal communications. In the process, incomplete sentences become complete, incoherent utterances become coherent and stuttering and mumbling disappear altogether. There is evidence to show that this sometimes proved especially difficult to carry into practice at the interface between written and oral cultures. The literature cited in this work demonstrates that the topic has a relevance to contemporary debates about record keeping and accountability: for example, where conversations (including telephone conversations) and personal accounts on mobile devices are used to transact business, few traces may be created in formal record keeping systems.

Record keeping and accountability

Much of the literature of records studies starts from the assumptions that (1) accountability must depend on the existence of record keeping systems and (2) that this provides, or ought to provide a strong justification for expenditure on both current and historical records. In my publications the author has examined these assumptions in a critical fashion and on the basis of experience, both in the UK and in developing countries. This examination has been undertaken in a constructive spirit, seeking deeper understanding in order that the objective - making record keeping systems genuinely serve accountability - may be realised.

In particular, the author has analysed in detail the distinction between probity and responsibility and its implications for record keeping systems. By probity is meant behaviour that is ethical and honest. This has both a passive side – not stealing or abusing public property – and a positive side – most importantly giving an honest day's work in return for one's salary. By responsibility is meant especially the challenges that surround taking significant policy decisions and then accepting accountability for the consequences. As a result, the author is inclined to challenge established and orthodox thinking from Western Europe and North America, not least in relation to apparently

routine financial record keeping. At the same time, it seems to him that the dangers of defensive record keeping need to be recognised and elaborated critically: not least because (in the West) an astonishing proportion of public servants' time is taken up with producing records that serve no other purpose than to be available as a defence against accusations of negligence and malpractice.

Much of the existing literature assumes an executive presidency and federal government on the model of the United States of America. It seems necessary to challenge this assumption by discussing the relationship between record keeping systems and accountability in the setting of parliamentary democracy and cabinet government. In addition, instead of assuming that the public good is self-evident, we need to examine what constitutes the public good explicitly.

The relationship of accountability to records appraisal is a topic on which the author has worked with his wife, Yvonne, not least during our time in Malawi. The results have been published in the *ESARBICA Journal*, so there is no need to dwell on them here.

Transparency and Freedom of Information

The author takes an unorthodox position in relation to Freedom of Information legislation and transparency. In essence, his argument is that good government is ultimately more important than instant – but often deeply flawed - accountability. Here the distinction between probity and responsibility is crucial. For probity to be upheld it is desirable that unethical conduct should lead to sanctions promptly. Responsibility is different, not least because, in the short term, the consequences of decisions are all too frequently impossible to judge.

The heart of the matter is that premature access to records relating to policy formulation tends to have two undesired and undesirable consequences. Firstly, and most importantly, it tends to undermine good decision making. Secondly it is corrosive of good record keeping. Tony Blair has publically confessed that the experience of government has caused him to change his mind on this issue. Let me quote Mr Blair:

> … governments like other organisations, need to be able to debate, discuss and decide issues with a reasonable level of confidentiality. This is not mildly important. It is of the essence. Without the confidentiality, people are inhibited and the consideration of options is limited in a way that isn't conducive to good decision-making. In every system that goes down that path, what happens is that people watch what they put in writing and talk without committing to paper. It's a thoroughly bad way of analysing complex issues (Blair, 2010, 516-7)

The abuse of official IT systems for personal and recreational purposes

One of the crucial challenges facing records managers in the ESARBICA region is the rampant mis-use of IT equipment, not least Internet connections and client-server networks, for personal and recreational use. This is frequently on a scale that has an adverse impact on the operating systems – essentially slowing everything down. The evidence for this problem can be detected in countless offices where civil servants and other workers listen to music that they have downloaded (i.e. copied) onto 'their' computers. Further investigation usually reveals the presence of digital photographs and other graphic objects. In one large organisation of which the author has knowledge only 15% of server space was taken up with files in formats associated with work (word processing, database, presentation and spreadsheet software). The remainder of the substantial server capacity was devoted to family photographs, recordings of church choirs and other things of a less wholesome nature. This state of affairs reflects both weak IT management and weak Records Management. It reveals also a major challenge relating to concepts of work.

Dealing with this situation is likely to require both serious change management strategies and the employment of specialist software designed to detect and prevent abuse. It should be noted, however, even automated 'solutions' may by problematic. For instance, most software designed to block pornography is designed to detect white men viewing photographs or films of white women: it operates by detecting 'skin tones', i.e. shades of pink. This is not particularly effective if the primary problem is black men viewing pornographic images of black women.

The author has encountered two organisations in Malawi that had successfully overcome this challenge. One is the Medical School in Blantyre where the senior staff, primarily professors of medicine, were determined that their students would have access to electronic journals online. With top management simultaneously strongly motivated and possessed of the necessary technical understanding, the problem was tackled by means of severe disciplinary sanctions imposed on those who stored non-work content on official systems. A very different approach was taken by the Privatisation Commission. They chose to have two parallel IT systems. One is reserved solely for genuinely work-related content and activities. This is actively monitored and policed. There are, however, few occasions when punitive measures are required because the other IT system is openly acknowledged as being available for personal and recreational content.

However this kind of behaviour it is approached, it will have to be dealt with before electronic – records management can be fully successful.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of able and good people working in the record keeping professions. Those who deliver teaching, learning and research in records studies have shown themselves to be creative and dedicated. There is, however, one change that is essential if real progress is to be made in securing the digital future. Record keeping professionals and educators must embrace the basic principle that today's records are not created in

113

order to provide tomorrow's archives. Good record keeping is not an end in itself but a means to an end or a range of ends:

- support of policy formulation,

- management of immediate business needs,

- accuracy and effectiveness in the management of money, people and tangible resources, generation of information for planning,

- underpinning business continuity,

- enabling risk management and

- satisfying regulatory and statutory requirements.

It is essential that we keep these objectives firmly in mind.

References

Blair, A. 2010. *A journey*. London: Random House.

Campbell-Kelly, M. 1994. Railway Clearing House and Victorian data processing, in *Information acumen. Understanding and use of knowledge in modern business,* edited by L. Bud-Frierman. London and New York: Routledge: 51-74.

Maxwell-Stewart, H. and Tough, A. G. (eds). 1999. *Selecting clinical records for long-term preservation*. 2nd ed. Glasgow: Wellcome Unit for History of Medicine, University of Glasgow.

Moss, M. and Tough, A. G. 2003. Metadata, controlled vocabulary and directories: electronic document management and standards for records management. *Records Management Journal* 13(1): 24-31.

Tough, A. G. and Lihoma, P. 2012. Development of record keeping systems in the British Empire / Commonwealth, 1870s – 1960s. *Archives & Manuscripts* 40(3): 191-216.

Tough, A. G. and Tough, Y. 2012. Accountability and records appraisal. *ESARBICA Journal* 31: 3-23.

Tough, A. G. 2011. *Electronic Records management in Malawi. An introductory workbook*. Zomba: National Archives of Malawi.

Tough, A. G. 2011. Oral culture, written records and understanding the twentieth-century colonial archive: the significance of understanding from within. *Archival Science* 12(3): 245-265.

Tough, A. G. 2011. Accountability, open government and record keeping: time to think again? *Records Management Journal* 21(3): 225-236.

Tough, A. G. 2009. Archives in sub-Saharan Africa half a century after independence. *Archival Science* 9(3-4): 187-201.

Tough, A. G. 2008. Records and the transition to the digital, in *Record keeping in a hybrid environment: managing the creation, use, preservation and disposal of unpublished information objects in context,* edited by M. Moss and A. G. Tough. Oxford: Chandos: 1-25.

Tough, A. G. 2008. Accountability and recordkeeping: some thoughts. *ESARBICA Journal*, 27: 4-15.

Tough, A. G. 2007. Record keeping and accountability. Why the distinction between probity and responsibility matters. *Archives and Social Studies* 1(1): 1-20. Note: This journal has ceased publication. [Online]. Available WWW: http://archivo.cartagena.es/files/36-185-DOC_FICHERO1/08-tough_record.pdf (Accessed 20 September 2017).

Tough, A. G. 2004. Records management standards and the good governance agenda in Commonwealth Africa. *Archives & Manuscripts*, 32(2): 142-161.

Tough, A.G. 2004. Post-custodial / pro-custodial argument from a records management perspective. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 25(1): 19-26.