

MANAGING AND PRESERVING RECORDS AND ARCHIVES THAT GUARD AGAINST COLLECTIVE AMNESIA¹

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Abstract

The article discusses the critical role of records and archives management in protecting the collective memory and safeguarding collective amnesia of institutions and societies. The article touches on some key factors responsible for “collective memory loss” and cites instances of memory loss from the West African region in general and Ghana in particular. The article proposes the following as the way forward: improvement in information culture; development of strong infrastructure of laws, policies and systems; new breed of information professionals, stronger professional collaboration and the revamping of the curricula of training institutions.

Keywords: Records and Archives Management, Protecting the Collective Memory, Amnesia of Institutions and Societies

Introduction

The *World Book Encyclopaedia* (1994) defines amnesia as “...a partial or in rare cases, a complete loss of memory. Everyone the definition continues forgets minor daily incidents as time goes by, but a person with amnesia has large gaps in memory”.

Human beings who fall victim to amnesia are unable to recall past or recent activities or experiences. Such a situation can result from diseases and physical injuries attributable to lack of adequate care, neglect, accidents, disasters, or the natural aging process.

1. A reworked version of the keynote address delivered at the Society of South African Archivists Conference on Guarding against Collective Amnesia, University of South Africa, Pretoria. 14-15 July 2011.

In the context of the definition of amnesia given, there definitely must be a condition or a state which when diseased or injured or disturbed results in amnesia. That state is the memory. *The World Book Encyclopaedia* (1994) again simply defines memory as “the ability to remember something that has been learned or experienced”.

Memory as seen through the lenses of psychologists is the capacity of living creatures to retain information and happenings and to be able to recall them when needed. Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968) put forward a model which structured the human memory into the following three levels

- sensory memory
- short-memory
- long-term memory

The difference between these three categories is an issue of the time span of recall. **The long-term memory**, which is able to store a sizeable or voluminous amount of information for a considerably unlimited span of time, perfectly suits the purpose of this article.

Without dabbling in psychology, biological or the medical sciences, we can comfortably state that there is an intricate relationship between memory, amnesia and the brain. In a very simplistic term, anybody who suffers damage to the brain, loses some degree of memory and hence amnesia.

Several experts and professionals such as Kroeker (2000) and Jimerson (2009) have drawn parallels of memory, amnesia and the brain in records and archives management. These parallels are meant to highlight the role and importance of records and archives in society’s attempt to remember the past, to interpret the present and to be able forge into the future.

Kroeker (2000) defines collective memory as “the term given to the widely shared reconstructed versions of the past that are assembled by both individuals and groups in order to define their present and prepare for the future”.

The link between memory, records and archives is brought home more explicitly by Jimerson (2009) when he wrote:

As the generation of survivors passes from the scene, written records and other forms of documentation must take the place of personal memory.

By extension, a collection of written records, archives, and other forms of documentation constitute corporate, institutional, societal, national and indeed world memory. Anybody, group of persons, society or nation who seeks to understand and re-create the past in order to shape the present and focus on the future, needs reliable information which is provided by tangible evidence and documentation.

Putting it more bluntly, Lloyd (2007) states:

A nation's collective consciousness relies on the traces of memory collected by institutions such as libraries, archives and museums. Such institutions have a responsibility to preserve documents that reflect individual and collective endeavours and that have had an impact on culture and society at national, regional and local levels.

Any loss of such collective consciousness or any gap in the collection results in temporal or permanent loss of memory or what is termed "collective amnesia".

Reason for managing records

I will not pretend to be crafting or re-crafting new definitions for records and records management. Definitions abound in the literature (Cook 1999; Hare and McLeod 1997; Ricks and Gow 1992). The requirements, systems, strategies and best practices for effective records management have also been clearly articulated by ISO 15489.

For our purpose, however, we can define records management as a system of policing records which are by-products of task performance (by individuals, institutions, societies and nations) through their total life in order to ensure their continuous integrity and accessibility for as long as they are needed. In the words of Blair and Kahn (2004):

Records management is not a luxury that only the few can afford. Rather, it is a discipline that must gain greater visibility and traction in corporations and government agencies, not only in the boardrooms but also on the ground floor.

Effective records management ensures the following for individuals, institutions and government:

- Good governance and the ability to formulate implement and sustain effective policies.

- Maintenance of accountability and protection of citizens rights
- Legally verifiable evidence needed to support good management, fulfil policy objectives and protect fundamental values on which society is built.
- Transparency and trust in the society and in government.
- Reduction in corruption and boosting integrity.
- Avoidance of re-inventing the wheel
- Monitoring, evaluating and effective oversight responsibilities.

For all these to come true, there is the need for managing records as a defining or strategic resource.

Archives and collective memory

It is true that the perceived value of records diminishes over time. It is equally true that only small percentages of records which acquire additional value beyond those for which they were created are preserved as archives. The archives of an organisation or a nation constitute the corporate memory of government and form an important part of the collective memory of society.

Archives according to Jimerson (2009) “have traditionally since ancient times, reinforced the power of the politically, economically, socially and intellectually powerful members of society. They also document the lives of common people”.

In the main, archives document major policy decisions and programmes, they provide a record of past performance, testify to rights and obligations of citizens, they document and support continuity of government while providing evidence of achievements and failures.

Archives are a hallmark of any civilised society because they document the experiences of the people and transmit their heritage from generation to generation. Archives give identity to societies and establish their citizenship. Archives need to be managed and preserved to reinforce collective memory and to forestall collective amnesia.

Instances of memory loss

Instances of collective memory loss or collective amnesia abound in our institutions, in our societies and in our nations. They may be on large scales where total collections are lost or on small scales when only aspects of collections are damaged or lost.

Large scale memory loss can occur during disasters such as flood, fire earthquakes, and tsunamis etc. which happen naturally or through the activities of man. Amnesia also occurs through the careless handling of our treasured collections. It occurs as well when that gentleman or lady in the office decides to pass on what he or she perceives as “useless documents” to the peanut seller along the street to wrap her wares.

Most commonly, we fail to protect our collective memory through neglect, irresponsibility or sheer inertia when we supervise the gradual decay of our collection through desiccation, embrittlement, fungus infestation and fading of documents. Of course natural aging also quietly takes its toll.

Whilst it can be argued that the technological milieu in which we operate in these days enhances to a large extent our chances of collective memory storage and access, the technology does not shield us from the vagaries of collective amnesia. A single wrong strike on the keyboard or a wrong system instruction can result in document loss. Computer systems can crash, data can be lost through corruption, or virus attacks. Technological obsolescence can also easily make electronic data inaccessible intellectually. The worst scenario is the personalisation of electronic evidence of official transactions by public officials.

The situation can be particularly grave in our part of the world. A few examples from the West African region with emphasis on Ghana may bring to the fore the gravity of our plight. The following are some information disasters that occurred in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Ghana in recent years.

- 1988 – Arson by students in Sierra Leone destroyed documents at the National Records Centre at Bo.
- 1990 – Electrical fire in Sierra Leone resulted in the destruction of Law Court records.
- 1991 – Arson in Sierra Leone destroyed government records.

- 1987 – Electrical fire in Nigeria destroyed a large number of books and reports of the Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies Library.
- 1990 – Massive destruction of books, artefacts and monuments in the palace of the Alafin of Oyo State.
- 1990 – Rainstorm destroyed documents in the Nigerian National Library.
- 1984 – Fire outbreak at the Agricultural Development Bank head office resulted in the destruction of records, Accra, Ghana.
- 1989 – Fire outbreak at the G.B.C Film Archives and Library, Accra, Ghana.
- 1990 – Fire outbreak at GHACEM headquarters, Accra, Ghana.
- 2006 – Fire outbreak at the office of the head of Social Work Department, University of Ghana.
- 2008 – Fire outbreak at the VAT office in Kumasi, Ghana.
- 2009 – Fire outbreak at the Electricity Company of Ghana, Achimota substation, Accra, Ghana.
- 2009 - Fire outbreak at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Headquarters, Accra, Ghana.
- 2010 - Fire outbreak at the residence of Former President J. J. Rawlings, Accra, Ghana.

Whilst this list is not claiming to be exhaustive, it is a good pointer to the gravity of the problem.

In 2009, fire engulfed the Headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is a critical case because the Ministry does not normally transfer its records to the National Archives of Ghana. It is always argued that the conduct of foreign relations is a gradual process and most times very sensitive. This is the justification behind which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hides to delay the transfer of records generated to the National Archives. With the disaster, national memory of foreign relations accumulated over several years was to a large measure wiped off.

A more serious case was a fire outbreak which burnt down completely the residence of former President J.J. Rawlings together with all his documents which had accumulated since 1979. The value of this collection is enshrined in the fact that Rawlings was two times Head of State in Ghana (1979 and 1981 to 2006). Indeed he is the longest serving Head of State of Ghana.

In addition, the circumstances under which he emerged as a leader, and the transformations both political and economic that took place during his tenure of office are pointers to the fact that the destroyed collection would have constituted one of the richest Presidential collections in Ghana. The true story of the Rawlings era may be lost to Ghanaians of present but posterity will be the worst for it.

The greatest enemy of the collective heritage of Ghana has been the neglect, irresponsibility and the inertia of successive governments and custodians in the management and preservation of public records and archives. Akussah (2005) conducted a survey of the state of documents in the National Archives of Ghana and the following were revealed:

- 63% of documents had pH values of below 5;
- 31% of documents were very brittle;
- 77.3% of documents had fading texts;
- 94.3% of the records had turned brownish; and
- 85.7% of documents had indications of fungus infestation.

The study established a combination of factors as being responsible for the poor state of the documents but the bottom line was poor environmental conditions.

At the moment, the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) is battling to salvage their microform collection, a collection of migrated archives which cost thousands of pounds to acquire from our colonial masters. The collection is at the verge of being lost through the long absence of air-conditioning facilities.

Another research conducted into the management of electronic records in the public sector of Ghana revealed among others the following as threats to electronic records in the public sector; indiscriminate deletion and overwriting, metadata issues, lack of long-term access planning, personalisation of official e-records and issues of portability of data among computer systems (Akussah and Tiamiyu 2000).

Managing and preserving records and archives

We will not bore ourselves with the different models and concepts of records management. Neither will I bore you with the rudiments of preservation. The life cycle concept, the continuum model with

all their variations, the preventive, curative and substitution preservation approaches all point to one direction, and that direction is “sustained availability and access”.

Records and archives are defining resources beyond today, and beyond tomorrow. In the words of Forde (2009:1-4):

Organisations must as a matter of policy, look beyond their immediate requirements and utilise strategies and techniques to ensure that the originals, or if impossible the information contained in them, will be available for as long as needed.

This demands some degree of planning. Muter (2011) quoting Roper states:

Preservation planning is essential to good records and archives management. It is better to focus on preventive preservation measures and ensure adequate environmental and physical controls than to focus on conservation treatments for one object to the exclusion of others in the institution.

Preservation must be seen as a golden thread which must run through the total life of records, and must be proactively pursued. This call has become more crucial today in view of the hybrid environment in which we operate in. Increasingly, business is being carried out electronically.

Electronic or digital information poses peculiar problems of carrier longevity, machine dependency, authenticity and authorship, integrity and metadata issues. These have added extra dimensions to preservation management.

The old tested traditional records and preservation management goals must be married to new standards, systems, tools and skills in order to cope with the changing dynamics in the field of collective memory protection.

Way forward

As nations, particularly of sub-Saharan Africa, we need to develop an information culture in which political leaders, public servants and citizens are aware of and appreciate the value of well-managed records in support of good governance and collective heritage.

There is the need for us to develop strong infrastructure of laws, policies, standards, systems and practices in support of functional records and preservation management programmes. Here, the role of government is very crucial.

There is also the need for a new breed of information professionals – records managers, archivists, and curators supported by effective training which forges a blend of traditional and new skills. This calls for a critical review and re-direction of the curricula of our training institutions. We need also to strengthen our professional collaborations through networking and viable associations.

As records managers and archivists, we must be pro-active in our gate keeping roles. We must see ourselves as standing between collective memory and collective amnesia. We need to make sure that:

- Only what constitutes memory crosses the gate;
- No partial or permanent destruction occurs;
- Integrity is guaranteed; and
- Continuous access is not compromised.

In addition as archivists and records managers, we must begin to play the role of consultants and quality assurers, advising governments, organisations and the society at large on issues of collective memory and collective amnesia. Issues of reformatting and digital repositories, with their attendant challenges should begin to engage our attention.

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