

Rapporteurs' Summary of ICA's Annual Conference 2013.

When Karel Velle opened the first Annual Conference of ICA, he described the programme as 'well-balanced, interesting and exciting'. I am sure that all participants would agree that it has been all of that, and more. I have found it both thought provoking and frightening at the same time. Why frightening? Consider the fact offered by Galina Datskovsky: data is doubling every 12-18 months. How do we cope with this? What can we, as information professionals, contribute? Are we seen as part of the solution? And whether we are or not, it is something we are all facing, no matter which part of the world we live in, and whether we work in the public or private sector. And it is not going to go away!

The theme of the conference—Accountability, Transparency and Access to Information—could hardly have been more timely or apposite. In this post-wiki leaks, post-Snowden world in which distrust of public bodies and politicians seems to be at an all-time high, it is surely time for our profession to take centre stage, to help bring that trust back: trust in the documents themselves, trust in us as a profession and even, perhaps, trust in the institution of government. As our President noted in his opening speech, the voice of the archival profession cannot be heard enough. Our perspective is the future; we serve the citizens of tomorrow and those who will be around well into the future.

When we consider the programme, we can discern three broad strands:

- Open government and open data, with the attendant issues of access to information, Freedom of Information acts, privacy and personal data protection
- Current challenges to records managers and their role
- Citizen engagement with government and archives.

The conference opened with a lively and challenging plenary session which set the pace for the next two days. Anne Thurston, speaking on records as the foundation for achieving global development referred to the UK government's action plan on open government which states that 'transparency and open government are ideas whose time has come...information that governments hold should be open for everyone to see', and reminding us that, if this transparency revolution is to succeed the records professional is a key player. But are we widely seen as being key players? Anne thought not. Yet within the

Open Government partnership, the US and UK governments have highlighted records management as central. If a government is to be held accountable, data needs to be accurate. The quality of the records management system makes the data trustworthy. We do have a unique contribution to make in defining policies and systems: if we do not engage, others will do it for us. To date, according to Anne, the profession has not communicated effectively with the policy makers.

William Debeuckelaere, President of the Belgian Privacy Commission reminded us that the right to privacy also implied the right to know how your data was dealt with by others.

Alison North stressed the importance of accountability, without which lay the road to 'death, death, destruction and death'! She illustrated her presentation with the case in which she appeared as an expert witness: a gas pipe explosion in San Bruno California. The records relating to the pipeline had been destroyed: the case became a record keeping issue. It soon became clear that while organisations think they hold records, they often do not. As Miriam Nesbitt noted 'if you have something and you can't find it, then you don't have it'. Accountability matters!

The overwhelming message I took from this plenary session was that we need to fully understand and appreciate that our contribution is crucial. We need a multidisciplinary approach and must not remain isolated within our profession. We need to remove ourselves from the environment in which we work, and in which we feel comfortable, and learn to speak to others over and beyond our sister organisations. We need to speak to IT professionals, to lawyers, to whoever it is appropriate, and, most importantly we need to get out of our comfort zone. Alison compared the profession to the TARDIS in Dr Who: larger on the inside than it appears on the outside. She urged us to, like Dr Who, break out of our particular TARDIS.

In the parallel sessions which followed, these issues were addressed in greater depth by a wide variety of speakers. We learned that, while it sounds good, open data does not raise accountability and that, in some ways, it acts as a smokescreen and that it is, in fact, no substitute for a good Freedom of Information act. But are such acts the answer? We learned that, where they exist, such acts are mostly used by journalists, by campaigners, for political purposes but that they are not widely used by 'the ordinary members of the public'. Indeed

it can be argued that Freedom of Information acts have muzzled the record, in that people are less willing to write things down, out of concern that such documents might be subject to a FoI request at a later date.

But where there are FoI acts, an efficient records management system is vital, in that if there is no record of what people wish to see, then it might as well not exist. Distrust in government is often a direct outcome of the loss of records. Citizens are less inclined to believe the official version of events, which leads to a growth of conspiracy theories, which feeds back into distrust, and a vicious circle is born. David Clarke (a journalist, user of archives and a keen advocate of FoI legislation) advocated more transparency about appraisal decisions, urging us to be more accountable ourselves.

We learned that we cannot assume that FoI legislation can be found in all countries, and that the gaps are not always where we might expect. Italy, for example, does not have such an act, but only a law which allows some access to some classes of documents, but this has serious limitations. We have to take cultural differences into consideration when thinking about FoI acts. Mariella Guercio reminded us that, in sharp contrast to the situation David Clarke outlined for the UK, there is no tradition of investigative journalism in Italy so there is no real pressure for an FoI act. And even where such acts are in existence, they are not always all they might seem: in the UK much material is exempt. David Clarke urged us to be more pr-active in making it clear to the public at large that they have the right to use FoI legislation, and that there is always the danger of a backlash and a strong counter attack to the creation or expansion of FoI acts.

As a profession, we now often find ourselves in the middle of two opposing sides: in the access v. privacy debate, in the wish to capture electronic data (emails) as opposed to the fear of its creators that they would thus find themselves open to FoI requests, between the rapid advance of technology and widespread social and political angst, between what people want/expect the documents to contain and what they do in fact reveal. Archivists can find themselves accused of destroying/falsifying material simply because it does not tell a researcher what they want/expect it to contain.

An interesting point was made on the role of the records manager, which is still much the same as it ever was, despite the rapid changes in technology. Records managers give context

to the material, orient users and stream line information, only now they have to keep up with ever rapid changes. Is it just a case of 'plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose'? And even if that is the case, the rapid rate of technological change, which can only get ever more rapid, is and will continue to force us to change and develop, perhaps faster than we are used to, in order to secure our crucial position at the centre. President Obama noted in a White House memo that 'proper records management is the backbone of open government'. That being so, we are the key players. It is the quality of the records management systems we are responsible for creating and running, that will make the public (at all levels whether government or private individual) trust or doubt the data they find.

So what are the key messages to take from this first ICA annual conference?

- The relevance and success of the archives and records management sector depends on our ability and willingness to collaborate with other sectors. We need to talk across boundaries, to other professions.
- We have to be able to cope with technological changes and developments and with increasing expectations about access which are forcing us to react quickly to these changes
- We are still not seen as key partners, but we do have a unique contribution to make and we need to understand and appreciate that our contribution is unique and have the self-confidence to promote ourselves with other professions.
- We have to think how we present and position ourselves. Are we archivists, records managers, information pioneers, change managers? Does it matter what we call ourselves or is it more important how we are perceived by those with whom we work?
- We need to think how we advocate the work we do.
- We need to learn from each other. This conference has been an excellent example of how we best do this.

Galina Dastkovsky summed the current situation up perfectly, when she noted that 'Information governance is not an end goal-it is a journey, and you, the information professionals are in the drivers seat'. And that, surely, is where we want to be.

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