

## **The Role of the International Council on Archives In the Information Age**

First of all, I should like to say how delighted I am to be here in Japan for the first time during my period as ICA Secretary General. I thank the National Archives of Japan for inviting me and for organizing this symposium today. I joined the ICA Secretariat way back in 2006, when Mike Kukuchi was President of the National Archives of Japan and ICA Vice-President in charge of the CITRA (Round Table), the ICA annual event which preceded the Annual Conferences which we have today. Ever since that time I have been constantly impressed by the strong support of NAJ for ICA which I know is greatly appreciated by the ICA leadership. Mr. Katoh, as President of NAJ, currently serves as President of our East Asian branch (EASTICA) and in this capacity is a member of ICA's Executive Board. Everyone in ICA hopes that NAJ will continue to be engaged in our activities for many years to come. In this respect it is very encouraging that we saw much a large Japanese presence at the recently concluded International Congress

in Seoul, and, together with the Korean organizers, ICA is deeply grateful to NAJ for financing the team of Japanese interpreters.

In this talk I do not intend to give you a purely factual recital about the history of ICA or its current organizational structure. The basic facts about our organization can be obtained from our new website, to which much content will be added in the coming months. Instead I should like to try and point the way forward for ICA over the next four years, stressing that I am expressing a personal view from my vantage point as Secretary General.

However, in order to understand how an organization works today, it is necessary to sketch some of the historical background. In the immediate period after the end of the Second World War, there was a general belief in the importance of international cooperation as a means of avoiding armed conflict in the future – hence the creation of the United Nations system. The International Council on Archives was created by a small group of national archivists meeting in UNESCO Headquarters on **9 June** 1948, the date on which we now celebrate International Archives Day throughout the world.

From these modest origins ICA has achieved steady growth. For many years the National Archivists played a very strong role in the organization, meeting every year to discuss topical issues over a round table, called in French la Conférence Internationale de la Table Ronde des Archives (CITRA). It is significant that the title of this event is in French – for a long time the main working language in ICA was French rather than English. Today the ICA Secretariat is based in Paris, and our main governance meetings are conducted in both languages. And the constitution of ICA is based on the model of a French association.

From the 1970s the professional archival associations, grouped together under the Section of Professional Associations (SPA), have increasingly made their presence felt in ICA. And in due course they have been joined by a whole host of other archival institutions which are not national archives, including local, parliamentary, business and university archives. However, as the CITRA was largely reserved for national archivists and the chairpersons of professional associations, the only event at which all ICA members could meet up to 2012 was

the Quadrennial Congress. These gradually expanded to meet the growing demand of archivists at the grassroots to meet their colleagues working in different cultures but often on the same issues. Every Congress between Montreal (1992) and Vienna (2004) attracted more than 2000 participants. Since 2013 we have organized Annual Conferences that are open to all ICA members, who also have the opportunity to attend regional branch or section events. It is an indicator of the underlying vitality of ICA that, in spite of the many other possibilities now on offer, the Quadrennial Congress is still an event which plays a major part in the life of ICA and means a great deal in the professional lives of many members. The recent attendance at Seoul confirms that the Congress format is still widely welcomed.

ICA was an invaluable forum for the exchange of professional information throughout the period of the Cold War, enabling archivists to some extent to get round the political obstacles in the way of international archival cooperation. From its inception ICA worked closely with UNESCO, publishing *Guides to Sources for the*

*History of Nations* and also the Records and Archives Management Programme (RAMP) studies. It also published its own journals ARCHIVUM and later JANUS, which merged in 2000 to form *Comma*, which appears twice a year and which remains a significant membership benefit today. The continuation of *Comma* as a printed publication in the electronic age provides an opportunity for practicing archivists to publish reflections on their work without having to endure all the procedures which have to be endured for publication in a more academic journal.

In the 1990s ICA showed itself to be alert to the dawning of the information age by the publication of the first International Standard for Archival Description, known as ISAD (G), which promoted the standardization of catalogue descriptions and in due course the exchange of these descriptions over the Internet. ICA has maintained its pioneering role with the publication of the draft Records in Context to coincide with the recent Congress in Seoul. The ISAD (G) family of descriptive standards have been used by thousands of archivists throughout the world, without them being aware that the

standards were created by ICA, partly because there was no clear and distinctive ICA brand at the time. Until recently ICA has been astonishingly ineffective in promoting itself and marketing its products – a situation which we have belatedly remedied by the appointment of a Marketing and Communications Manager in the ICA Secretariat in Paris.

Today ICA as an International Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) has over 1,600 members in 200 countries and territories, 13 regional branches covering the entire globe (of which EASTICA is one), 12 specialist sections, a Programme Commission (called PCOM) which provides the impetus for all the organization's professional activities, including a growing number of Expert Groups covering a huge range of subjects, from digital record keeping and records management to archive buildings, legal matters and shared archival heritage. As a comparatively small organization on the international stage, we need to form partnerships in order to exert any serious influence at the international level.

Although the funding for common projects which we hitherto enjoyed from UNESCO has long since dried up, there is still a certain amount of cooperation between the two organizations. We play a part in advising UNESCO about proposed inscriptions for inclusion in the International Register of Memory of the World and also, as a founder member of the International Committee of the Blue Shield, provide expertise to UNESCO concerning the implementation of the Hague Convention (1954) relating to the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict and, by extension, in cases of natural or man-made disaster as well.

In the Blue Shield we work in partnership with our sister organizations, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), the International Council on Museums (ICOM) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). What is striking is that these associations are all much larger than ICA – for example, ICOM has more than 32,000 members – and have correspondingly greater resources. ICA has to find a way to stop being the poor relation in this uneven quartet, and for me the

inescapable conclusion is that our organization has to increase in size in order to carry out its mission effectively. Of course it is not just a matter of size –we need to establish a clearer sense of our priorities as well. Coincidentally, profound changes in its external environment are currently taking place which might enable ICA to achieve the necessary growth over the next few years.

The present situation is admirably summed in the introduction to the communiqué ‘Archives, Harmony and Friendship: Sustaining the Spirit of Seoul’, which was approved by the ICA General Assembly in Seoul last week. *‘Technology has generated an exponential growth in the amount of records created by individuals, families, public authorities, voluntary organizations and private companies in a bewildering variety of formats. These records need to be responsibly managed, based on a careful balance between the right to privacy and the right of access. The information contained in records are potentially an immense asset but need to be managed wisely for the benefit of society as a whole.’*



*For a long time archive institutions were considered as a backwater, meeting the needs of a comparatively small section of society familiar with its specialist procedures and erudite terminology. The rapid development of innovative online services has changed all that for good, enabling millions of users to access the information that they require without ever setting foot in an archive. The general public can now access the collective memory kept in archives in a way which previous generations could never have imagined’.*

I should briefly touch on the other changes that are taking place in this era of globalization – increasing political instability in many parts of world (leading to increased risks for vulnerable archives); the effects of climate change in creating more extreme weather conditions; the growth of a ‘digital divide’ within and between societies (those who have easy access to the latest technology and those who do not); and the demands of citizens for instant access to information on the Internet. Also, the speed of modern communications and the spread of sophisticated IT infrastructures means that there is now one global market place for information.

In this context archivists have a major role to play in managing the *information* contained in the record from the earliest possible stage, even before the creation of the record; in selecting for permanent preservation those records of enduring historical value out of the huge mass of data that is generated every day; in ensuring that permanent archives are successfully preserved and can be swiftly retrieved; and in making the archives available as widely as possible, onsite and online, as is compatible with legislative requirements. So it is no longer adequate, if it ever was, for archivists to focus purely on the later stages of this process and the historical archives – they must see the process of creation, selection, preservation and access in its totality.

For many years in ICA there was a strong emphasis on historical archives with little acknowledgement of the importance of records management. *The Strategic Directions for the period 2008-2018*, as approved by the General Assembly in Kuala Lumpur in July 2008, were based on the assumption that archive professionals should no longer consider themselves merely as curators of historical archives,

but as information managers. Since 2008 ICA has made great strides in terms of repositioning the profession, but vestiges of the old mentality still remain. For example, ICA's *Basic Principles on the Role of Archivists and Records Managers in support of Human Rights* (draft, May 2016) had to be redrafted in order to incorporate the records management dimension. This should not have been necessary if the concept of archivist as information manager had been accepted throughout ICA. Archives have considerable cultural and historical value, and should therefore be exploited as fully as possible. But the scope of the archivist's work extends beyond this. Even the traditional approaches to records management are outmoded in the digital age. First appraisal decisions about the value of records cannot wait for five years, as was the case in a more leisurely era in the UK system, but must be taken long before that, sometime even before the record is created. It is not necessary to accept all aspects of the late Terry Cook's theory of macro-appraisal in order to recognize that the review of archives file by file can now no longer be sustained. As I mentioned, ICA has set up new Expert Groups on Digital Record-

Keeping and on Records Management which should help archivists to rise to the challenge of records management in the digital age, in addition to any national guidance which may be available. And other ICA Expert Groups are producing best practices and tools in many other areas of archival management, including archive buildings, archive description and photographic and audiovisual archives.

At the same time ICA is making considerable efforts in order to increase the visibility of archives and the archival profession in the public mind, and also to influence decision-makers. It was a major achievement to have the *Universal Declaration on Archives* endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2011. We have a lively Expert Group on Advocacy and this year more archivists around the world participated in International Archives Day on 9 June than ever before. We are in the process of setting up new Expert Groups on Legal Matters and on the 'Shared Archival Heritage' (which is to be preferred to the rather divisive notion of 'Displaced Archives'). We send an expert representative to every relevant meeting at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva, with the

basic objective of ensuring that archive services benefit from intelligent exceptions to otherwise quite sweeping copyright restrictions on access and dissemination of unpublished archives. Most recently, we have become active in the Open Government Partnership, arguing that transparency, openness and accountability must be underpinned by effective records and archives management.

ICA has just had a Congress in Seoul which is generally reckoned to have been a great success. However, we must resist the temptation to rest on our laurels and to become complacent. Instead, we should reflect in a healthily self-critical way on the progress that we have made together in the last four years and should identify the challenges and opportunities for the next four years. Since the last Congress in Brisbane (August 2012) we have managed to attract archive professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds to attend our Annual Conferences, all in Europe, and we are also reaching out to new audiences on the social media. The steady increase in the number of individual (category D) members in ICA is especially pleasing. The impact of this year's International Archives Day

provides an indication of what we can do when we are really determined to make our mark. And in Seoul we launched a new website which I believe will prove to be worthy of our organization. Our website is the principal weapon in our communications armory. In the coming four years ICA should use it to the full in order to increase its visibility and to offer better services to a growing number of members. Here one of the Recommendations of the Seoul Declaration approved last week is particularly relevant:-

*To continue the modernization of the International Council on Archives as an organization so that it reaps the full benefits of technological improvement while upholding linguistic and cultural diversity, and in particular to capitalize on the opportunities of social media to attract new audiences and to recruit new members.*

(Recommendation 9)

Let me say in passing that although ICA concentrates on providing content on its website in one of the six languages used at UNESCO (English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian and Arabic), we do recognize that Japanese, with over 130 million speakers, is one of the

world's great languages. We would be delighted to produce more key ICA documents in Japanese but this depends on the voluntary effort of motivated archive professionals who are fluent in the language.

On the basis of our solid achievements in the last four years, ICA should now develop its capacity to write influential position papers on the major public policy issues of the day. While continuing to work in partnership with like-minded organizations on these issues in various international forums, we have to be clear where ICA as an organization stands and not be so dependent on the intellectual efforts of our partners. In parallel with this, ICA has to give additional impetus to our professional programme, so that archivists throughout the world have the best practices and tools which they require in order to meet the challenges of the digital age. There are still many gaps in the professional products we provide, and these gaps need to be filled as quickly as possible.

Sometimes ICA spreads its scarce resources too thinly and does not in practice display a clear enough sense of priorities. In this connection

we should regularly remind ourselves of the three objectives which we have set ourselves in the four-year Strategic Implementation Plan 2014-18, which can be regarded as a midterm adjustment to the Strategic Directions 2008-2018.

- 1. Repositioning Archives as essential in good governance, administrative transparency and democratic accountability*
- 2. Monitoring and influencing the development and use of new technologies, especially in relation to the challenges of providing access to information, protecting citizens' rights and preserving collective memory, which are all implicit in archives management*
- 3. Building capacity (in particular new competencies and skills) in the records and archives profession so that it can handle the twin challenge of managing digital records and archives on traditional media.*



In every initiative that ICA undertakes we need to ask how likely it is to contribute to the achievement of one or more of these three strategic objectives.

In my personal view ICA also needs to achieve more coordination in the efforts of its various bodies without in any way compromising the cultural diversity of the organization and stifling innovation among our members.

In conclusion, although the global environment is subject to significant uncertainty, and the pace of technological change constantly increasing, I believe that ICA is on the right path of reform but almost certainly needs to travel along it more quickly. However, there is every reason to be confident that the necessary acceleration will take place and that ICA will be a larger and stronger organization by the time the next Congress takes place in Abu Dhabi in 2020.

**David A Leitch**

**ICA Secretary General**

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