

Digital Continuity: Re-inventing the National Archives for the Information Society

Presented by

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the topic “Digital Continuity: Re-inventing the National Archives for the Information Society”

This issue is so important right now for all of us in the international Archives community as we find new ways of meeting a very new set of challenges, while preserving our values and traditions as archivists.

As the President of the International Council on Archives I am a keen observer of international developments in this area. However today I would like to share the perspectives of the National Archives of Australia and the Australian Public Service and I hope that this will be of interest and relevance to you as you face your own challenges in your own way.

These are interesting times to be in the business of Government information, because right now the public that we’re serving is enjoying an unprecedented “information abundance”. We are all operating in a huge information marketplace serving up oceans of data to a society with an unquenchable thirst. At the same time, perhaps empowered by all this information, we’re seeing our society trending away from loyalty to our established democratic institutions and tending instead to engage with specific social issues that cut across boundaries of socio-economic groups, geography and political party. And of course this modern society of ours is fuelled by information – propelled and propagated by 24/7 news providers, social media and a rapidly expanding internet infrastructure.

In this accelerated, modern democracy public opinion can move very quickly indeed. Social media has given every individual a loud voice – a platform to broadcast their opinion. And very quickly indeed other voices can coalesce around that opinion and it becomes a movement. Picked up by news services it becomes a political issue; a job for government.

Government, in response, must move just as quickly. A government which is too sluggish in its response, or is incapable of showing leadership in this public discourse

will lose its connection with the people and lose its capacity to effectively and successfully develop and implement policies and programmes fit for a 21st century citizenry.

Behind the scenes (and in some cases on centre stage) public servants work at a frantic pace to prepare advice for Ministers and reach decisions on key matters of policy and delivery. Here again, things are changing. Across the public service, we are working in new ways, seeking more innovative methods of operation that cut through red-tape, cross departmental boundaries and connect data silos. Within the public service this too is a rapidly expanding information marketplace – a complex and dynamic information eco-system that comprises many technologies, systems and data holdings running on government and non-government platforms. And this is a good thing. We should, indeed we must, embrace new technologies and methods if we are to grow our competence as professional knowledge workers and continue to be the service that Australia requires now and into the future.

But there's another trend that I want to specifically address today. And that is Trust. Because in Australia and in some other nations it feels to me like the general public is exhibiting lower levels of trust in public administration and not enough confidence that as public servants we are performing as we should to serve the government of the day and deliver public services in the right way.

We are seeing calls for greater levels of transparency and accountability, with expectations of increased public scrutiny and faster access to government records as public information. There also seems to be an accepted position that the general public must always resort to legal proceedings – for example through freedom of information legislation - to get the information it wants; because the public service is either unwilling or unable to locate, collate and provide information that should be in the public domain.

The public could be forgiven for thinking that transparency is not sufficiently supported by government systems and procedures, instead it seems to be an ongoing battle requiring a disproportionate diversion of resources on all sides.

To understand what's going on here requires us to look at the way Government information is managed within the ranks of the Australian Public Service.

Once upon a time, government records came in a "file". A tidy arrangement of A4 pages bundled up in a folder, chronologically arranged on a shelf in the Registry. Minutes of meetings, memos, letters, signed approvals, newspaper clippings, ministerial briefs. All there. Intact, in line, in waiting.

It's a bit different now. Today's digital government record – the trail of evidence of decisions and activities – is peppered across Departments; in databases, non-government systems and cloud services; perhaps here in Australia, perhaps in foreign jurisdictions. They're in the emails, the websites, the voicemail, the personal devices. They're stored on new platforms, old platforms and obsolete and unsupported platforms.

So, the question for today: What is the future of Government Records, and what should we as Archivists be doing to ensure that the Archives of the future will uphold our values Transparency and Integrity of Government in the Digital Age?

As the Director-General of the National Archives of Australia, charged with the responsibility to protect and preserve the record of Government, this is more than a little important – indeed over recent years we have realigned ourselves and our policies to meet this challenge head on.

I would like to share the experiences of the Australian Public Service and the National Archives of Australia to describe the changes we are going through and our aspirations for the future.

Of course I speak here today with some humility, because I have such respect for the internationally respected Japanese traditions and expertise in the preservation and access to documentary heritage. Nonetheless, I hope that as I speak of our digital future you find some points of mutual interest.

We often talk about the three V's of digital information – the incomprehensible *volume* of data being created, the *velocity* at which it is communicated and ingested into systems, and *variety* of formats that it takes. But there's another V – *vulnerability*. And it's the vulnerability of digital information that threatens its value as evidence for accountability.

This is a massive issue for Archivists the world over, as we face a rather counter-intuitive probability that this age of information abundance may in fact leave very little useful records for future generations. A prospect that Mr Vint Cerf, Vice President at Google and the “father of the Internet” describes as a “Digital Dark Age”.

How could this be? After all in the digital world, as opposed to the paper world, it's actually very difficult *not* to create a record. We leave “digital fingerprints” whenever we complete a task on a digital device.

Unfortunately, while we generally believe that digital information once created will always exist “somewhere” and can one day be retrieved through a ubiquitous search engine, this simply is not the case.

While paper based records will sit patiently for years in a cardboard box - safe, intact and stable; digital records are extremely vulnerable from the moment they're created. Left unattended and unprotected in email accounts, web servers and shared drives, they easily fall victim to deletion, alteration or are lost through neglect, technological obsolescence or cyber threats.

Bringing this back now to accountability in government – I would point to two factors that jeopardize the long term survival of government information: the power and convenience of office technology and our overly process-centric approach to innovation.

Like many government administrations, the Australian Public Service is, and always has been, an early adopter of Information and Communications Technology. This is a good thing; it has enabled major productivity improvements and streamlining of services. This continues today – right now we are seizing the opportunities of the digital disruption through major initiatives such as the Government's Digital Transformation agenda and the Public Sector Data Management programme, which also underpins Australia's plans to join the Open Government Partnership.

These are important developments that will re-engineer the processes of government; bringing a step change to the services provided by government agencies and releasing more government datasets to uphold accountability and to fuel the digital economy. But these benefits will be short-lived and the processes unsustainable if we adopt a wholly process-centric approach – this time it needs to be different. It needs to be *info-centric*. To make changes that not only redesign transactions but also accumulate information assets that create value well into the future.

We need to understand the difference between technological obsolescence and Information obsolescence.

We know with absolute certainty that the technology we use today will be obsolete probably even five years from now, let alone ten years from now. We know that processes come and go, even whole Departments split and merge with periodic Machinery of Government changes.

But the irony is that we also know with equal certainty that the information we create today absolutely *will* be needed. The information that we can preserve and re-use will deliver benefits and dividends for many, many years to come. Everyone knows that. It's our collective memory, it upholds our rights and entitlements, it's our cultural heritage and it's our national intellectual capital. It is the national identity.

But in our day-to-day work, we don't always recognise this self-evident truth. Information is treated like data, not much more than food for software. And when the software is obsolete, so is the data.

Technological obsolescence is good; we should welcome it. It's a sign of progress. It's a sign of advancement. It's a sign of reinvention. New technology empowers greater productivity and reveals previously unimagined opportunities.

Information obsolescence, on the other hand, is regressive. Information obsolescence takes us backwards, because it means we are losing the raw material of our digital economy and hindering our ability to make real progress.

Information obsolescence is the sign of an organisation that loses its memory and is ill-equipped for the future.

And of course, losing information that is evidence of government activity is a loss of accountability, transparency and integrity.

And importantly for us, it diminishes the value of Archives.

In the brief time that remains I'll describe the policies and programmes that we at the National Archives have to help Australian Government agencies manage these challenges and risks.

The Archives runs an annual survey tool, known as Check-up Digital which has been assisting agencies to measure their maturity in digital information management practices and improve the ways they manage digital information.

Check-up Digital is designed to assist agencies to:

- improve awareness of what mature practice information management looks like
- identify pathways to improve agencies' digital information management
- set priorities for next steps to increase digital information management maturity, and
- build a business case for resources to improve business outcomes.

Check-up Digital helps both agencies and the Archives by showing the 'big picture' about how the Government is travelling on the path to digital information management.

As part of the Australian Government's 2011 *Digital Transition Policy*, we at the Archives set a target for 1 January 2016 – for all born-digital records created in agencies to be managed digitally and later transferred to the Archives in digital format only.

Of the 180 government agencies in scope I'm pleased to report that the majority has met the target, and most of the remainder have strategies in place to meet it.

To recognise the outstanding work done to achieve this result and to inspire achievements across the Public Service, we created the National Archives Digital Excellence Awards for the first time in 2015, shining a light on some exemplars of digital information management. These included:

- The National Offshore Petroleum Titles Administrator (NOPTA), for a seamless integration of EDRMS with other agency business systems.
- The Federal Court of Australia, for the first Australian fully-digital official record of all court documents, completely replacing paper court files. This was accomplished using off-the-shelf technology without additional funding.
- The Department of Immigration and Border Protection, for an online self-service facility – *ImmiAccount*, which allows clients to use a secure online account to manage visa applications.
- The Department of Human Services, which developed a variety of digital channels for payments and services, including the myGov service which allows people to access a number of online government services and update their own details.

We have published these case studies on our website, to celebrate the success and inspire more achievements.

The agencies that indicated they would not meet the 1 January target vary in size and profile. Of course we need to understand the impediments faced by these agencies and do all we can to assist, facilitate and encourage the requisite reforms.

One of our early findings is that some agencies failed to meet the target because they had undergone multiple administrative reorganizations, for example following the Government's re-allocation of Ministerial responsibilities. This is a common occurrence in the Australian system that usually follows Federal Elections and is referred to as a "machinery of government" change.

For the Archives, this understanding revealed that the information these agencies hold is not easily shared, and cannot be merged through machinery of government changes due to data incompatibility. The information may be locked away and safe but it is inaccessible, or is at risk of becoming irrecoverable. So we know that this issue of interoperability is a priority area of focus as we build information management policy.

However, Digital Transition within the agency is only the beginning. Once agencies have achieved their Digital Transition, we must look at the long term sustainability of information management across the Commonwealth; this we refer to as Digital Continuity.

Digital Continuity is essential for Government moving ahead in the digital age. It is how we will bring the past to the present; how we will account for our actions; and how we will continue to make informed decisions for the future.

The steps to achieve digital continuity are laid out in our DC2020 policy. Launched in October last year, it is a whole-of-government approach designed to progressively adopt standard information governance practices by the year 2020.

It advances strong governance frameworks to ensure that information is properly valued, and managed accordingly. Information assets will not be left neglected in uncontrolled environments, enabling requests for information to be dealt with quickly, accurately and comprehensively.

Agencies will transition to entirely digital work processes, meaning complete records will be kept of business processes including authorisations and approvals.

Agencies will also have interoperable information, ready to move between successive generations of software and hardware, and seamlessly shifting through machinery of government changes. No more information obsolescence!

Data and Metadata standards will enable stronger intellectual management of records, including fast tracking information into the public domain to uphold transparency and fuel the digital economy.

The policy also recognises the need for certified information professionals across agencies and across government. This network of professionals will work to maintain adequate standards of information stewardship across the Commonwealth.

To get us started on this journey to 2020, the Archives has developed a minimum metadata set, a Business System Assessment Framework and a range of training products, as part of a suite of tools and guidance that will assist agencies to meet the policy requirements.

The Archives is at the forefront of digital information management and committed to setting the standard for transparency and integrity across all Commonwealth Government institutions. But the National Archives is not the only player in the game. We see the Digital Continuity policy as the “information pillar” of the broader Digital Transformation agenda, complementing the role of the Digital Transformation Office and others in forging real and necessary change.

A key part of our strategy is therefore to encourage all government agencies vendors, commercial providers and supporters to come on board, to get involved and to work collaboratively to ensure that as we work we are also preserving the memory of the nation.

We are also encouraging all public officials to take this on, but not just as an obligation for compliance with rules and regulations, but as a matter of professional pride. After all, the records we make and eventually hold in our Archives become much more than bureaucratic necessities – they are our cultural heritage, a national economic asset and the underpinning of our national identity.

Thank you for allowing me the time today to share these thoughts with you.