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[Home](#) > Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage

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## Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage

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**Information is a [conceptual labyrinth](#) and at the same time a [hyperobject](#)**

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Geredigeerde tekst van zijn lezing tijdens een congres van de Australian Society of Archivists in 2000 in Melbourne. Gaat over de relatie tussen evidence en memory.

"The theme of this year's conference is 'Beyond the Screen: Capturing Corporate and Social Memory.' Most of the interesting sessions ahead of us deal with the cultural, heritage, and historical dimensions of archives, and other cultural institutions, and with the related theme of improving interactions with our many users, traditional or web-based. Most users see archives primarily as the essential source for learning about Australia's heritage, or about their own identity as individuals, families, and groups within the larger historical patterns of their communities, regions, and country. Archives for them are about remembering the past in order to better enjoy the present and thereby envision a brighter future. There is a stimulating array of topics and speakers planned for us to explore these issues today and tomorrow, and I for one look forward to hearing them all.

This thematic focus on the cultural and historical dimensions of archives represents a clear change from the predominant themes of recent ASA conferences, however, or, indeed, from the prevailing national discourse about archives for which Australians are best known internationally. That national discourse focuses, as have recent conferences, on record-keeping issues, often equated closely with what traditionally has been called records management in government institutions and business corporations. Part of that record-keeping discourse has included facing the difficult challenges of capturing electronic records in meaningful context, with appropriate metadata, from the whirlwind of computerized information sweeping across our organizations. Another part has concentrated on developing industry-wide job and training competencies for records-keepers who work in modern organizations -- and it is record-keepers they want, not archivists. Another part has been focusing on the status of documents as reliable and authentic evidence of transactions and thus as the underpinning for accountability in public life and for democracy itself. Another orients archival appraisal away from saving records for history to ensuring that important business functions are identified (or appraised), so that reliable records may be created as evidence of those functions. And overriding this predominant discourse, at least here in Australia, and anchoring it in theory and vision, has been the model of the records continuum, which both summarizes the many dimensions of record-keeping in institutional life and lends legitimacy to the definition of the archivist as record-keeper. This new archival discourse is not unique to Australia, of course, although I think it has its most complete and sophisticated articulation here. But many leading international archival theorists also advocate the same record-keeping ideals for the archivist of the future.

In this predominant record-keeping discourse, in Australia and abroad, there is virtually no attention paid to personal or private or family or group archives. They have been cast - beyond the pale, -as Adrian Cunningham and I have both asserted, into that cold, dark place where private manuscripts, and the archivists who care for them, seem to have been relegated by the mainstream public records archivists of Australia, and by the archival educators and theorists who support them here and abroad. There seems little space in this new discourse that is dominated by talk of business transactions, evidence, accountability, metadata, electronic records, and distributed custody of archives, for the traditional discourse of archivists centered around history, heritage, culture, research, social memory, and the curatorial custody of archives -- whether these latter relate to personal records or to public or institutional archives. Record-keeping by archivists, some assert, is a business activity, not a cultural pursuit. Archives exist from the moment of creation in business processes, not as cultural assets. A continuum of interests joins records creators, records managers, and archivists.

Those archivists so politically incorrect as to defend the heritage or cultural purposes of archives are seen as somewhat passé, as wanting to turn the clock back to a quieter time when archivists waited passively at the end of the life cycle for records to arrive at the archives when their creators no longer needed them -- or were dead. Such archivists are supposedly more comfortable mounting pretty exhibitions or interacting with scholars writing history than they are with aggressively formulating policy at the cutting edge of computer technology and organizational change.

These traditional historical or cultural archivists, no doubt covered with a thin layer of dust, when not having high tea with influential donors, just don't get it. They prefer managing relics to records, with the implication that perhaps they themselves are relics in a profession now dynamically adapting itself to the information age. Mergers of the archival and records management associations are even bruted about, which would truly leave manuscripts archivists not just beyond the pale, but out in the cold, and obviously further devalue the heritage and cultural role of public records archives. This divisive tone in the archival profession is especially strident in North America, where some advocates of the new approaches have called traditional archivists, and this in writing: obsolete, stupid, psychologically deficient victims of self-delusion, and mentally incompetent. But one Australian archivist has compared the state of professional intelligence of traditional archivists to those who believe babies appear automatically in cabbage patches.

Now perhaps I have overdone this a little for effect, and certainly there is always the danger of creating straw figures when doing this kind of labelling, or when dividing ideas too simplistically into opposing dichotomies. But if my account may not be the full reality, it certainly is the perception of that reality among significant numbers of archivists viewing Australian archivy from both sides of the ideological fence, and whether here at home and abroad.

I sensed from afar in Canada, and have since had confirmed in discussions over the past five weeks with Australian archivists, that the focus of this ASA programme is a deliberate attempt to give voice to the cultural and heritage dimension of archives, to bring them back from beyond the pale and thus to try to re-balance the record-keeping discourse of the past decade. So-called traditional archivists are asserting that they do know the proper causality of cabbages and babies! They know too that the title of your much-respected journal is, after all, already nicely balanced as Archives and Manuscripts, and should not be re-titled Archives Really Meaning Records Bearing Evidence of Business Transactions, and Those Pesky Manuscripts Better Left to Librarians Anyway so We True Archivists Can Link Arms with Records Managers in Common Cause as Record-Keepers!

My message this morning has three stark points:

- 1) the archival profession is threatened, at least in the English-speaking world, with serious schism, a schism that is already engendering within the profession personal animosity, incompatible working and research agendas and, at a deeper and more foundational level, incompatible educational programmes and work competency descriptions;
- 2) should such schisms successfully fragment the archival whole, it will be our clients, our records, and our broader mission in society that will suffer, as well as society's knowledge of the past and its understanding of itself; and
- 3) it need not be this way.

My argument today is an inclusive one that I hope will suggest a commonality of mindset and strategic interest to all archivists, and especially so in Australia. I say especially in Australia because what you have done here in the past has the potential, in my view, for leading the English-speaking archival world out of its impending crisis. That involves rethinking aspects of the records continuum as a unifying vision for all archivists. That is why I have entitled my opening address slightly differently from the conference theme; my title is 'Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage'

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#### Links

[1] <https://www.labyrinth.rienkjonker.nl/biblio?f%5Bauthor%5D=350> [2]

<http://www.mybestdocs.com/cook-t-beyondthescreen-000818.htm> [3]

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