

Combining Archival and Records Management Terminology

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RECENTLY I presided over a meeting of about a dozen persons, each of whom has been an archivist or records manager for at least two decades. I asked them on their way to the meeting to pass a large basement room in a nearby hospital and tell me what it contained. The hospital staff felt it knew, for the word "Archives" was in large gilt letters on the door. Three of the group told me it was the "central files," two said it was a "records collection," another two said a "holding area," one said an "archives," two said a "records center," and one said a "files repository." The reasoning included statements such as: "It can't be a file room; there is no office equipment in use." "It doesn't qualify as a records center—it's too small." "It isn't a records center—the files aren't really inactive." "Records don't have to be permanent to become archives—that is a Federal Government fiction." "It can't be an archives; it is staffed by medical records librarians." I am not sure that my crude experiment proved very much; we did not engage in debate; we did not attempt a consensus. It probably shows in a small way, however, some of the chaotic terminology found even in our own professional world, which creates a communications problem.

The truest professional glossary confines itself to those terms that the profession involved may be said to control. If one wants to find the most authoritative meaning of a term, he seeks out the most relevant professional glossary. Glossary compilers serving a profession, however, are under a great compulsion to include in their list of terms not only those controlled by their group but those they frequently use from among terms controlled by other groups. The producer of a glossary of medical terms, for example, feels there are a number of chemical terms he ought to include so that his readers will not have to purchase a chemical glossary, which includes thousands of terms they do not use. The inclusion of terms not controlled by the professional group, insofar as it saves the professional user money, seems a worthwhile proposition.

What terms does the archival profession control compared with, for example, those controlled by librarians or records managers? The determination becomes hazy when, for example, some record centers are controlled by records managers and other similar centers are controlled by archivists. It becomes even hazier when the practice in industry, where the archives is often under the records manager, is contrasted to the

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situation in the Federal Government and in a number of States, where at the highest level the records manager is the subordinate of the archivist. One has a comparable situation when many manuscript collections are controlled by libraries; yet often similar papers are controlled by archival agencies. Can archivists bypass problems of this kind by calling their manuscript collections *private papers* and leave the term *manuscript collections* to the librarians?

Many people ultimately enlarge a profession by enlarging the concepts under which that profession operates. These concepts, however, have to be put into words. The mere process of defining the concept thereby becomes a matter of semantics as well as a matter of substantive professional interest. The terms in which theories are cast have a tremendous bearing on fixing the visibility and viability of those theories. As Irving Babbitt said, "All great revolutions are preceded by a revolution in the dictionary." As battles of this kind are fought out, the glossary developer finds himself caught up in the battle. It is not an assignment to give to the fainthearted or the battle-weary.

The roles of the lexicographer and glossarian are of interest to me. The lexicographer, almost since the days of Dr. Johnson, has been a describer of usage, often revealing its illogicality and contradictions. The glossarian, however, is supposed to be more of a prescriber. He is supposed to eradicate the fuzzy and weird, the inchoate and confused. For him it is fundamental that behind each term there must be a clearly defined concept or idea, systematically related to the other concepts that make up the body of thought in question. He must choose and condemn in the process of satisfying himself that the above requirements have been met.

If we all agree that the dictionary makers are forced to believe that *usage* controls terminology more than *professional correctness*, then we can understand why more and more terms that make professors of English wince are being placed in dictionaries. When they first appear in the dictionaries, the definition is preceded by the word *colloquial*. After a few editions, the word *colloquial* is omitted. Although the glossary maker operates as more of a judge than lexicographer, he too is caught up in the usage web. Records managers outnumber archivists about 30 to 1. When records managers and archivists use the same word differently, after a time the usage factor lies with the records manager, simply because there are more of them. Another factor favors the records manager. Archivists inherit papers. The papers have already been named—voucher, ledger, correspondence, certificates, forms, directives, permits, licenses, notebooks, crew lists, bills of sale, and so forth. The archivist, as inheritor, tends to be stuck with the name of the term inherited. These kinds of terms get their acceptance from the records managers and even the public before the archivist comes onto the scene. Such terms are then generally beyond his control. As a theologian might say, they are part of the "given." The control of the archivist, in short, is

probably limited to the processes of which he is the sole or principal practioner. For example, the records manager does not *calendar*. Insofar as it is done, it is done by archivists. This, then, gives the archivists an unchallenged right to define the term, and the public, if and when it uses the term, is certain to use the professional definition.

The great gray area, of course, comes in the commonalty of concern shared by the archivist and the records manager. Both accession, accrete, arrange, code, process, downgrade, classify, and so on. When they utilize the same purposes and methodology, as well as produce approximately the same kind of end product, definitional differences are inconsequential. This means the glossary developer must be exceptionally well informed about the basics of his profession or rely heavily on someone who is. The difficulty may come with words like *appraisal*, an archival term for the process of determining the value of records; but it is a process also used by the records manager in an institutional environment, where there is no archivist present, and the records manager perforcedly assumes this responsibility. The archivist may "appraise" to determine the permanently valuable; the records manager may "appraise" to determine retention short of permanent retention. Is this intellectual activity the same? If not, who can tell the records manager to use another term?

Between the lines of a good glossary, gradually and naturally, emerges the image of the professional involved—what he does and what he must know. The good glossary defines all the terms used in the professional's position description and in the doctrine undergirding and giving meaning to that position description. Our basic problem starts with this image, which is supposed to emerge naturally. In the case of neither the records manager nor the archivist can a single image emerge without the glossarian's deciding in advance which image will emerge. This is the opposite of natural emergence.

Thus, the greatest difficulty in combining archival and records management terms lies in the fluctuating nature of both fields of endeavor. As a person who is in perhaps as good a position to know as anyone in our country, I hope I shall not be misunderstood when I say records management concepts are generally in a state of shambles. If you prefer, I can phrase it *a state of flux, a state of change, a period of plasticity, a time of technological shakedown, or a season of adjustment*. It's hard to work with the nebulous and the unhinged, with the shadowy and the fluid.

There are a number of reasons for this state of records management doctrine. Partly, it is the changing rate at which records can be created, the changing size of so many of the creating organizations, the changing cost of generating records, the changing recording media, and the changing types of documentation. True, these are physical things, not ideological formulations. But they are physical things that have the power to force reformulations. Changes in mass, speed, and content

can change political, economic, and sociological thinking as well as records management thinking. Perhaps an equally controlling factor (though it may be a derivative one) is the state of management doctrine. After all, records management is an offspring of management. If this particular parent is having rough times, so must this particular child. Managerial concepts on such things as information, control, coordination, and degree and types of centralization must be resolved better than they are now before any subordinate areas of work, including records, can settle down.

Let's start off with the definition of records management itself. There are at least 10 valid definitions current in 1969. How can each be valid? It is because each is defining a kind of records management presently being practiced. The situation resembles a country with 10 political parties. No one belongs to a majority group. Indeed, one feels good if 20 percent of his professional colleagues see it his way. Ernst Posner, when he wrote his *American State Archives*, decided to put a glossary in the book. He asked me for a definition of records management. I gave him one that began, "Records management is a changing ensemble of practices that variously includes such concepts as managing correspondence, forms, files . . ." Ernst came to see me and said, "The more often I read this, the less it says." I could not have agreed more. Ernst decided it was too abstruse for him and kneaded out some of its abstractness. His definition reads well, but what did he really do? Consciously, or unconsciously, he accepted 1 of the 10 definitions of what a records manager does. In the process, he discarded nine as being invalid in some way. Ernst is an old hand in our business, and I assume he knew perfectly well what he was doing.

The British Standards Institute, which claims glossary terms are standards, vigorously states that unrealistic definitions may do more harm than good. They erect houses that do not stand long. They arouse expectations that can rarely be met. For example, to include forms management in a records management definition does not automatically bring forms management into the field of records management.

What I have said of the inclusion of forms management is equally true of correspondence management, files management, reports management, and records equipment management—they may, or may not, be parcels within the records management plantation.

Archival management, from what I know, is almost equally fluid. Not as helter-skelter as it was in 1929, certainly, but still to define a word like *inventory* one must exercise legerdemain to come up with a wallpaper to cover the cracks so that they will not show. I should expect to have difficulty with terms like *archival establishment*, *archivist*, *arrangement*, *catalog*, *finding aids*, and *records* and with making suitable distinctions between *restoration*, *repair*, and *rehabilitation*. The problem with *archival establishment* is how to distinguish it from a *records center*. This may be easy for the Federal Government, which has two concepts, but it

is not for commerce or industry, where the two are indissolubly intertwined as a single concept. The term *archivist* may be easy to define when it represents the Federal civil service vocation, but what happens when there are several State civil service definitions, and in many particulars they do not agree.

How far have I strayed from my theme of the problem of combining archival and records management terminology? I trust not at all, for I have tried to show:

1. When one combines a dominant use with a less dominant use, the dominant use will eventually prevail regardless of glossaries.
2. If the glossarian succumbs to idealizing a concept that is full of warts and wrinkles, he will probably get more of a caricature than a useful photograph.
3. A glossary that sticks more to principles than practices has a better chance of being helpful to those most in need of a glossary. Similarly, a glossary that clearly distinguishes between concepts and objects has a better chance of being helpful.
4. A glossary for an emerging body of public administration doctrine begins as an attempt by the many different practitioners—the more the better—to come to agreement. It forces a reconsideration of contemporary terminology, purging many concepts and consolidating others. If a glossary is developed at the national level with a due regard for consensus, it can do more than document agreement—it can help create it.
5. "Everyday words," it has been said, "tend to become vague in meaning and rich in association." This vagueness weakens them for the professional who must use words that he can define exactly and have few irrelevant associations. Much of the foginess surrounding records management as a concept, or series of concepts, stems from the widely variant use of these concepts by a multitude of people.

*Society of American Archivists
Church Archives Committee*

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