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CHALLENGING THE ARCHIVAL ARRANGEMENT

Abstract

Archival arrangement is one of the main activities in archival processing. It is assumed it is based on common understandings and principles. However, there are archival practices that does not fully comply with these principles and understandings, and yet the archives still exist and users are still using the records. Consequently, it may be questioned if the archival principles are not cultural-conditioned and in what circumstances archival arrangement, as presented in international professional literature, can add value to archival processing. The work implied should balance the practical reality of resources and needs of the stakeholders. The modern technologies bring a transformation of archival arrangement, converting it from physical to virtual by reducing the relevance physical location of a record on shelves in favour of a logical property of records.

Keywords: archival arrangement, archival principles, archival metadata, users

LA SFIDA DELL'ORGANIZZAZIONE DELL'ARCHIVIO

Sintesi

L'organizzazione dell'archivio è una delle principali attività di gestione dell'archivio. Si presume che si basi su comuni conoscenze e principi. Tuttavia, esistono procedure di archiviazione che non sono pienamente conformi a questi principi ed intese, eppure gli archivi esistono ancora e gli utenti stanno ancora utilizzando i documenti. Di conseguenza, ci si può chiedere se i principi dell'archivistica siano condizionati dalla cultura, ed in quali circostanze l'organizzazione dell'archivio, così come presentata nella letteratura professionale internazionale, possa aggiungere valore alla gestione dell'archivio. Il lavoro implicito dovrebbe bilanciare la realtà pratica delle risorse e delle esigenze delle parti interessate. Le moderne tecnologie portano una trasformazione dell'organizzazione dell'archivio, convertendola da fisica a virtuale, riducendo la pertinenza della posizione fisica di un documento sugli scaffali a favore di una proprietà logica dei documenti stessi.

Parole chiave: organizzazione dell'archivio, principi di archiviazione, metadati di archiviazione, utenti

IZZIVI ARHIVSKE STROKOVNE OBDELAVE

Izvleček

Arhivska strokovna obdelava je ena glavnih arhivskih dejavnosti. Domneva se, da temelji na skupnem razumevanju in načelih. Vendar obstajajo arhivske prakse, ki v celoti ne ustrezajo tem načelom in razumevanjem, vendar arhivi še vedno obstajajo in uporabniki še vedno uporabljajo zapise. Posledično se lahko sprašujemo, če arhivska načela niso kulturno pogojena in v kakšnih okoliščinah lahko arhivska ureditev, kot je predstavljena v mednarodni strokovni literaturi, doda arhivsko vrednost. Vključeno delo mora uravnotežiti dejansko resničnost virov in potreb zainteresiranih strani. Sodobne tehnologije vnašajo spremembe v postopke urejanja arhivskega gradiva s pretvarjanjem iz fizične v virtualno obliko in s tem zmanjševanje fizične lokacije zapisa na policah v korist logične lastnosti zapisov.

Ključne besede: *arhivska ureditev, arhivski principi, arhivski metapodatki, uporabniki*

It is a fact that these days almost all professional conferences are dealing with electronic records or the way analogic records can be turned into digital. And this is happening despite the fact many of the National Archives (or, broadly speaking, Archives...) are still having huge amount of paper records, many of them not processed yet. Until two or three decades ago, the professional journals were full of studies reveling issues the archivists had in processing analogue records. Were all those issues solved miraculously by the mere presence of electronic tools, since the former are not present in professional debate any longer?

I doubt it is the case, and I believe it is just a different agenda. Expectations of users are different than decades ago, and, as a result, the professional interests changed. And I said that as an excuse for coming again to a classical topic, archival arrangement. While the digital side will have its place in the analysis, my primary focus will be on traditional records. More precisely, I would like to play the devil's advocate part, questioning to what degree the archival arrangement is crucial in archival processing, if the famous "structure of archives" is relevant enough in order to justify the effort for creating it.

THE DEFINITIONS

Although any archivist can define archival arrangement, I would like to start by reviewing some of the definitions, in time.

In 1964, in a book edited by ICA, the *arrangement or classification* ("le classement") was defined as *"le rangement dans un ordre déterminé de documents d'archives"* (ICA 1964)[1].

In 1988, also in a book edited by ICA, it can be read the following parallel, but not equivalent definitions, in English and French: *ARRANGEMENT. (1) The intellectual operations involved in the organization of records (1)/archives (1) based upon the principle of provenance and the registry principle, reflecting the administrative structure and/or competence or function of the originating agency. If this is impossible, then an organisation based upon other criteria adapted to the physical type or form or content of the documents, such as an alphabetical, chronological, geographical or subject order, may be*

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1   It should be noted the term arrangement lacks as an entry, the only term being classification.

used. Arrangement may be carried out at all or any of the following levels: repository, record/archive group, sub-group, class or series, item or document.

(2) The physical operations complementary to (1) above, such as numbering and shelving. Also referred to as sorting.

(1) CLASSEMENT. (1) Opération intellectuelle consistant à ordonner les documents d'archives à l'intérieur des articles et les articles à l'intérieur des fonds ou des séries, selon un plan reflétant la structure interne des organismes producteurs des fonds, conformément au principe du respect des fonds et au principe du respect de l'ordre primitif, ou, en cas d'impossibilité d'application de ces deux principes, selon des critères chronologiques, géographiques, alphabétiques ou thématiques. Le classement se fait traditionnellement, dans la pratique archivistique française (sic!), dans le cadre des séries et sous-séries. (...)

(2) RANGEMENT. Opération matérielle, complémentaire de (1), consistant à placer les articles dans les magasins selon l'ordre des cotes. Sinonym – classification (Walne, 1988).

In 1996, in an American dictionary, arrangement was defined as *"the intellectual and physical processes and results of organizing documents in accordance with accepted archival principles, particularly provenance, at as many as necessary of the following levels: repository, collection record group or fonds, subgroup(s), series subseries, file unit, and item. The processes usually include packing, labeling, and shelving and are primarily intended to achieve physical control over archival holdings (Bellardo, 1992).*

In 2002, for the National French Archives, it was defined CLASSEMENT as *(1) Opération consistant à la mise en ordre intellectuelle et physique des documents d'archives à l'intérieur des dossiers, et des dossiers à l'intérieur d'un fonds, réalisé en application du principe du respect des fonds, ou, en cas d'impossibilité d'application de ce principe, selon des critères chronologiques, géographiques, numériques, alphabétiques ou thématiques. Le classement aboutit à la constitution des articles, à leur cotation et à leur rangement sur les rayonnages et conditionne la rédaction de l'instrument de recherche permettant de les retrouver. (...) (2) Opération matérielle de mise en ordre des documents par leur insertion dans le dossier correspondant.* [English]: (1) *Arrangement, classification* (DAF, 2002)

In 2005, another American analytic glossary of archival terminology defined arrangement as *"1. The process of organizing materials with respect to their provenance and original order, to protect their context and to achieve physical or intellectual control over the materials(...) Arrangement is distinguished from classification, which places materials in an order established by someone other than the creator. One note indicates that "Though not widely practiced, arrangement can be employed in an intellectual sense, without a corresponding physical ordering of material. For example, five folders stored in four different boxes can be listed together in a finding aid as an ordered series without changing their storage location. Arrangement with respect to original order presumes such an order is discernable. Archivists are not required to preserve 'original chaos', and may arrange such materials in a way that facilitates their use and management without violation of any archival principle"* (Pearce-Moses 2005)[2].

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2   The author also cite Miller, with a more refined definition of arrangement: The process of organizing and managing historical records by 1) identifying or bringing together sets of records derived from a common source which have common characteristics and a common file structure, and 2) identifying relationships among such sets of records and between records and their creators.

Reading these definitions, one can easily notice the concept has its evolution in several decades, increasing the complexity and facets of the term. While at the beginning archival arrangement referred mainly to the physical ordered grouping based on some criteria, later on the term is considered to have dual facet, physical and intellectual. The latter is not clearly defined, but it implied the creation of statements about a) provenance and original order (or other type of order, if "original" one is not discernable) and b) (not so often practiced) to virtually associate some archival material, without change their physical location (in other words, to create some relations among descriptions, while the records are physical still kept separately). The purposes for arrangement reflect also physical vs intellectual duality: a) to identify the items on shelves and 2). to support creation of the finding aids, i.e. description of records.

In definitions that confess the influence of Oliver Holmes (Holmes, 1964), arrangement can be done at various "levels": repository, fonds, subfonds/subgroups, series, item. The approach was later included in ISAD(G).

One common reference is the well-known principles of archival arrangement. The literature on this matter is huge. I would only like to remind here some aspects. Firstly, the Respects de Fonds, as enounced by the French National Archives in 1841, referred only to fonds level provenance, whilst "inside" of a fonds the archivists could implement any order s/he wants. Only later, in 1898, the Dutch archivists Muller, Fruit, Fruin added the need for inner respect (i.e., original order), that is not only to group together records from the same creator, but also to respect the order the offices of origin gave to those records (Popovici, 2016). This "order of the offices" creates a direct link between archival arrangement and records classification; in the best of the possible world, filing plans should be mirrored, for permanent records, in archival arrangement. Moreover, the criteria used in records classification (organization, functional, subject based etc.) should be preserved by archivists. And, respectively, series and files created through classification plans should be consistent with series and files in archives. A structured presentation of the fonds is one of the ISAD(G) requirements.

It is to be noticed that in the definitions, in case of a not usable original order, there is no conditions for what order to be used; basically, anybody can do anything, no matter the functions, processes or mandates of a creator. And, since in practice the life a creator is complicated, it is reflected in its records structure, it may not be very easy to identify original order; so, it is easier to re-arrange everything and "make order" than "restore order".

Secondly, there were emphasized more than once the advantages of using these principles of arrangement. Keeping the original creator arrangement is *"the only realistic way to cope with large volumes of archival material from different provenances" (Horsman, 1994:54);* it obviated the need for contentious rearrangement according to subject (Schellenberg, 1961:18); it was a convenient method for retrieval, by gathering and describing records generated and received by the same institution or person (Duchein, 1983:67); it is a way to preserve the "objectivity" of the records and to provide insight into the functions, processes, and personal relationships of the records creator (Schellenberg, 1961:18).

DOING DIFFERENTLY

I had an opportunity to visit an archival repository in Russia this year and, while watching the labels of the archival boxes, I found them extremely instructive in what concerns the system of archival arrangement. The labels indicated the fond, the inventory number, folder number. Inventory—as I was informed, was basically the finding aid of an accession. The big structure, in this case, was the *fond–accession–(*maybe *business unit, date)–folder*. Of course, organizational divisions may appear in inventory, but they are repeated in another finding aid, for those files belonging to a different accession. In this case, a finding aid would not represent the full series of records, nor even intellectually, while subfonds are rather archival groupings based on management criterium (accessions), than "organic" (business units or broad functions of creating body).

The reason those labels were so suggestive for me is that I was familiar with this system, from my country. In Romania, as a record management legal requirement, all folders created in one year by an organizational unit should be listed (compiling a *records inventory*). One inventory is listing in detail (reference code, classification code, date, content description and other relevant information) the folders bearing the same retention period, no matter the classes from the filing plan (read *series*) they belong to. When accessioned, the records inventories become the transfer lists. After crossing the "archival threshold", if there are many accessions in the repositories, there can be more approaches. One possibility is to treat each accession like a subfond, and the transfer list becomes the *archival inventory*[3]. Another is to re-process various accessions and to re-arrange the whole fonds, as to merge various groups from different accessions. In all cases, the final structure will be like *fonds–subfonds–(date)—folders*. As one can see, nor in this case the series are revealed, though the internal rules for archival processing recommends grouping files based on "topics" (Norme, 1996:art.17). For the sake of practicality, records may be also arranged by external form, into folders and book-registers groups. Most often, because it is the easiest solution, files are arranged chronological, without any attention to the organizational or functional structure of the creator. In all cases, the archival inventory should reflect the physical order.

Comments about the system used in Romanian archives may start with the remark that even arrangement is not what in other languages/practices is. Though in Romanian professional studies arrangement can be done at many levels (Ciucă, 1978:286), as envisaged in international glossaries, in National Archives rules arrangement at fond level is distinguished from the other types of arrangement, and even get a new name: "fonding". It is defined as "archival operation of identifying the records of a creator", in contrast to "arrangement" which is archival operation of grouping records and archival units according to other criteria (Norme, 1996:art 11). While the source for this is quite certain (influence of Soviet practice[4]), I find it hard to argue, logically speaking, that *grouping records based on* provenance is different than *grouping records based on* other criteria, including internal provenance. But the practical usage and lack of theoretical reflection on the matter strengthen this approach.

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3   Since it may be confusion, it may be necessary to highlight the fact that "inventory" has multiple understandings: 1). it is a list of folders in one year (within the creating agency); 2). it is the sum of all inventories (1) that are transferred in one accession to archives; 3). it can be, if a re-processing occurs, the consolidated finding aid, for the whole fonds. This approach is substantially different from others (for instance, the one used in Archival Portal Europe, where one inventory is the finding aids of one fonds).

4   Direcţia generală a Arhivelor, Norme de bază în munca arhivelor de stat, Moscova, 1962 (Romanian translation, unpublished). It should be noted, however, that Romanian translation of Russian rules for archival processing did not employed term arrangement at all, but the duality fonding versus systematization (= arrangement records within a fonds). See for the Russian standard today http://base.garant.ru/190736/

The second remark is that most of the solutions adopted reflect practical responses in archival work. Keeping the records grouped on accessions implies lesser physical effort, even to the detriment of intellectual arrangement. For instance, mixing series by listing all existent folders may not give the overview of which what classes of records were kept and which not. Of course, this impedes on a real assessment of overall information preserved, but gives an easy way of compiling information and helps creating lists for disposition (all files that should expire ar the same moment are listed on the same inventory). Moreover, if there are hundreds or thousands of folders, the identification and description of series would have acted as a summary for the files in that series, as the folder description of files acts like a summary for the records contained. But again, processing files one after another exclude the need for a broad orchestration and identification of smaller groups of files. Third, lack of series identification hampers the identification of all files pertaining to the same process, since the files belonging to the same class themselves maybe scattered on various years or inventories; but, except for the increased time necessary to retrieve all the files in one class, it may be a good way to avoid misleading researchers about the content of a series.

The approach of arrangement files based on their date represents a solution for efficiency. The speed of processing is higher, the required expertise of staff is minimal and the overall orchestration for processing is easier (for arrangement, anyone can read some figures to determine the span dates of a file; in description, just take year after year, and the finding aid is ready). On the other hand, except for the overall provenance (which, in fact, it is mostly *custodial* provenance), very few contextual information is provided. Also, separation *folders* vs *registers* it is the practical response to an attempt to arrange records as to be as easy as possible retrievable, managed and stored.

Since the inventories reflects the physical order, they basically reflect the archivists needs of managing records. It is not made, in many cases, no other intellectual connections between divisions of the creators, mandates, functions, activities and so on, except for an overall description at fonds level, in introductory part of the inventory. Such information is and remain of course embedded in the archival material, but they are not usually revealed in divisions of the archival finding aid. In the best case, subfonds are visible as headings in the inventories, but not other more elaborate description. Hence, users must browse inventories, read description after description and find out what they need.

BETWEEN ACCEPTED PRINCIPLES AND DOING DIFFERENTLY

It may look surprisingly, but users like to browse... I recall, in my professional career, only one user complaining that the records are not grouped based on the divisions of the organization, and then on series. List of files were satisfactory enough for most of the users. Browsing contents descriptions may only be enhanced by having some sort of automation; if those inventories can be merged into, let's say, a huge searchable pdf file, I believe it will be characterized as a great achievement that would be surpassed only by the full digitization and text search availability. And this is a case not only for Romanian users.

This year in Bucharest I had a very nice conversation with a colleague from Germany. She shared with me memories from the time she was a researcher of German archives (before becoming archivist) and she confesses that, during her Ph.D. studies, she never read the prefaces of the archival inventories, where detailed information about structure of fond or other contexts records were provided. She preferred to go directly to abstracts and read page after page until she found what she needed. Of course, if it would have

been available, probably she would use a search engine... But what was memorable in her speech was: *"I never read the prefaces—but very likely, if I would have done it, it would not have changed a bit my results"*. That was a very elegant way of saying the archivist work of intellectual arrangement and contextualized description was hardly relevant from her perspective at that time.

A quite similar experience I had with a friend archivist from Austria. In his case, he had available the online searching. His first method of research – the full text search through descriptions of records; no browsing hierarchies for records, no mandates, no creator descriptions.

And this made me wonder what the use of making elaborated arrangements (and descriptions) would be, why to bother (as archivist), if nobody cares (as user). Of course, ideologically speaking, the answer would be "because this is what an archivist would do", but I would argue that archivists are not the same everywhere, the resources are not the same everywhere, the archival material is not the same everywhere, nor the requested level of processing. And, above all, without a practical ground, it may look like archivists are aiming for perfection instead of doing something useful. In other words, I wondered if all our theories justify the amount of work we are supposed to do.

It may sound outrageous, but I am definitely not the first one saying it. Peter Horsman said *"Archival methods centred on respect des fonds, therefore, serve custody and the convenience of the archivist in managing collections in tidy and well defined groupings. They do not necessarily serve users or researchers. Of course archivists pretend—and they may actually believe—that their own administrative convenience also best serves users by protecting provenance. The user, however, has often been seriously misled by archivists and their fonds" (Horsman, 2002:22).* Also, David Bearman argued that *"...archivists and records managers schedule, appraise, accession or destroy, describe and retrieve collectivities of records, generally at the series level. Because this practice does not best satisfy many users, the recordkeeping professions have developed theoretical defences for it, but it is preferable to accept the obvious—we manage paper records collectively because it is too expensive to manage them individually"* (Bearman, 1996)

As a first remark, I would like to argue is that archival principles may not fit very well everywhere. While it is acknowledged their birth was due to certain particular legal and administrative contexts, it should be equally accepted that even today such principles are fully applicable only in certain cases—which, after all, questions the character of universal principle itself. Simpler said, those principles may be contingent to administrative traditions. The identification of fonds had issues which lead to Australian series system; lack of systematic records management lead to unusable original "order" and let the archivist impose his/her own order.

On the other hand, arranging records into subfonds or series is a way to divide holdings into manageable units. *"The practical response to providing intellectual control over large volumes of records accessioned from paper recordkeeping systems was to employ top-down, collective description of records aggregates (...)item level description, even of such a simple element of information as the date of specific records, has not been a regular part of archival practice because of the expense of acquiring such data in a paper environment, not because archivists did not realize that researchers would find such metadata valuable".* (Bearman, 1996) But, in the case of Romanian example, since the legal provisions asks for compiling detailed lists, the arguments above has no point. Records are managed at folder level, description already exists, so not using the series or other levels of aggregation may be well ground.

In the same time, for average users, even custodial provenance may be irrelevant. We can see this every day, and not only in the archives. The "fake news" is an issue because regular people are not accustomed to question the source and the motivation (read, mandate) of releasing a certain information. And since many people would tend to blame the lack of proper education for this, I would emphasize that even professional users in the Archives are looking mostly for information and the critical thinking is often not applied to the record itself (who created the record, why was created, who preserved the record, on what ground, why the record is grouped with other records etc.).

It is also true that we should not consider only the needs and interest of certain category of users in doing our job. After all, archivists, in responding to administrative needs based on their holdings, may be considered also users of the archives, and their needs should also be taken into consideration. For instance, information about where one group of records was accessioned from, who aggregated some files together, how many folders are in a certain group maybe appropriate to be collected, but it is very much dependent on the context of practice.

It is equally important, when assessing the information needs, to consider whether the goals for holding and processing archives are to *deliver information* or to *deliver records*. If the former, then in most cases a careful arrangement and reconstruction of original order may be irrelevant. If somebody finds the piece of information s/he needs, nothing else matters. It should be stressed, however, that for advanced users, retrieval by archival structures may be useful. In a finding aid, it is not the information in the record that is searched, but the information in the representation of the content. Representation is mediated by archivist and some pieces of information relevant for a certain user may exist in a file, but not to be revealed in the description. Or may exist in the description, but, as long as not the same words are used to describe the same information, it cannot be easily retrieved. Also, having folders and book registers kept separately, and being unaware of the structure of the archives, one cannot have the full understanding about how the information can be correlated or if the information is complete. In such cases, having upper level description (as for series, for instance) is a useful method of retrieval, helping to identify the body of records that may contain a certain information. If such high-level description is not done, then the information may remain hidden. It is equally true that, if the description of high-level groups is only an aggregation of information from the members (that is, bottom up collection of descriptive information), then creating the aggregation is rather useless. The most relevant need is to have information about the aggregation as a whole, which leads us to the need for an arrangement based on structure of the organization or on functions, under the prerequisite that information about such criteria to be also available and helps retrieval by contextualization of information.

On the other hand, if it is to deliver records, not only cultural information artifacts, provenance and original order get their highest potential. David Bearman noted: *"physical aggregation has reflected the administrative boundaries of custody because physical control dictated who could see records and use them, which offices had access, and when records were retained and destroyed. The fonds reflected the ultimate legal and administrative responsibility for records and their recordkeeping systems. The procedures of this administrative entity were crucial to estimate the trustworthiness of the records inherited at a later date."* (Bearman, 1996) Preserving the information necessary to trace back who created records, in what circumstances, for what ground transferred records to the archives, which were the original relations between various records grouping etc. may be relevant mostly to authenticate the records and their source and preserve and prove the quality of evidence.

The remarks above made visible that nobody questioned the need for records to be in a proper order in a repository, as to be retrieved. The only questionable part of archival arrangement may be its intellectual side, how relevant is to associate records together and what information can be derived as to enhance the retrieval or meaning of records and if the results compensate the work efforts. The answers for the first issues are, as I tried to show, circumstantial, and depends a lot on the recordkeeping traditions, knowledge of users and of the archivists.

For the last question, about return of investment, it should be highlighted two changes that the development of technology brings. Firstly (and this is the most relevant for traditional records), the digital transformation of finding aids reduced the need for them to be a mirror of physical arrangement. Putting physically a file in a certain series was never just an act of housekeeping, but it implied a certain transfer of properties from that series to that file; that is, the respective file got an (implicit) attribute, which was shared by all other files form that grouping. With the separation between physical and logical, if the records are properly housed and shelved and uniquely identified through reference code, then the finding aid can create relevant grouping without physical efforts, only by virtually associating records having the same properties[5]. Secondly, using properly formatted finding aids, it allows for users to create their own arrangements, based on processing the metadata delivered (for instance, create their chronological order, across various divisions of archives). This seems to eliminate completely the need for (physical) archival arrangements, changing the emphasis from moving records in a repository to the recording of relevant properties allowing users to display the representation of records in the desired order (Shepherd, Yeo, 2003:96).

That last point is quite common among the scholars dealing with electronic records, especially in the area of re-using records management metadata for classification[6], and long time anticipated[7]. The only issue is that in order to use metadata for arrangement, those metadata must exist (Hedstrom, 1993:8), and some reports in the matter are not so optimistic (Kettunen, Henttonen, 2010). And this is beside the arguments brought already that creating relations revealing provenance is something that is not solvable through operational metadata, which focus on creator needs and not on archival needs (Macneil, 1995:30).

CONCLUSIONS

Archival arrangement—as any arrangement—started as a practical need of keeping a certain order to information and the carrier it was recorded to. In certain historical conditions, some rules were developed in this regard, for making the job done in a certain way. Despite being raised as "archival principles", various practices show that, sometimes, those principles are not respected, and the alternative practices satisfy the needs of those communities.

Arguments developed in time by archivists and archival scholars supporting the archival arrangement needs to be balanced with the practical reality of resources and needs of the stakeholders. Those needs (reflecting both the interest of archivists and those of the researchers for records AND information) should be considered on long term by archival processing, and an adequate argumentation for the professional efforts implied should be provided. In this regard, modern technology facilitates a transfer from the physical to virtual arrangement and a democratization of arrangement, by offering to the users the possibility to create their own arrangements, provided that the necessary metadata are presented in descriptions.

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5   A practical example in Popovici 2017.

6   See for instance Bak 2012.

7   See debates in Canada, Wallace 1995; Wallace 1993; Hedstrom 1993, MacNeil 1995.

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