

Acceptance of the 2009 Emmett Leahy Award

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A premise

I would like to dedicate this important award to the thousands of colleagues around the world who share with me the passion for this wonderful and complex work which, to be successful, requires generosity, spirit of sacrifice and a continuing effort in reformulating and openly discussing the knowledge and the tools necessary to face the challenges presented by contemporary records. In my long professional life I had the opportunity to join practical experience as State archivist, records manager and consultant for the private and public sectors with educational and training responsibilities.

My commitment to practice all facets of the records profession while maintaining a consistent vision and enthusiasm has been exacting and exhausting (my family has paid a price for this and I think that this is the reason why they have been as happy as I for this important recognition: it is a recognition also for their patience and their loving support).

I believe, though, that without this passion and the direct involvement in the real world to improve the quality and the centrality of recordkeeping with good principles and efficient methods, without tenacity in the commitment that one makes, our profession would be overwhelmed by the complexity of the technological and organizational changes and the proliferation of uncontrolled information, with dire consequences for the protection of the world documentary memory.

The ability to face risks and challenges using sound and convincing theories and coherent methods is the best instrument we have not only to induce records creators and those who regulate and audit them to accept our assistance as an authoritative resource and to get interested and involved in the determination of records related processes and procedures, but also to pass on to our younger colleagues a degree of emotional investment similar to the one that has driven us to accomplish what we have accomplished or we have tried to.

With Jean Paul Ricoeur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 2000, p. 206), a French philosopher who has examined in depth the legal and moral duties of preserving and using our documentary memory, against the attempt of some writers to deliberately misrepresent and manipulate documentary evidence, I wish to stress how central and relevant is to the protection of the tangible representations of our past to develop concepts, principles, methods and tools that allow us to exercise systematically and rigorously the function of trusted custodians against the present and persistent danger of willful oblivion. According to Ricoeur, the reasons for doubting the past are always present in any scientific reconstruction as conducted by historical work: this is why - he states - we have to celebrate as much as possible the victory on the abuse and arbitrary analysis of documentary sources as the proud result of the fatigue and labour of the records profession. This professional effort must not be primarily focused on the permanent custody of valuable records, but on the building and defence of the evidentiary capacity of the records and any recorded information at the moment of its creation and on our capacity of documenting reliability and accuracy, presuming authenticity, and making possible its verification over time. In the end, we do not have anything better than the documentary evidence - Ricoeur concludes - to be assured that a fact has happened and can be verified for centuries. For this reason, the wisdom and the skills of records managers and archivists, applied to the societal need for trustworthy records, have been and are crucial in pursuing the goal here envisioned.

To accomplish such goal has always been difficult, but in the digital environment – as all we know very well – it is a true challenge, never to be solved and continuously faced. A deep understanding of this challenge is necessary to accomplish our professional goal which can be acted as the defence of documentary memory to

support democracy, participation, and access, as a mission of active citizenship. This requires that we define the right balance between:

- innovation and tradition,
- information technology and record theory,
- the protection of the impartiality and integrity of the records as evidence and the need for flexibility and interoperability.

About innovation: e-government as an opportunity for change and a challenge for democracy

The starting point of this effort to balance opposite needs is a direct and involved participation of all kinds of records professionals and an integration of their competencies in their academic curriculum and across curricula of the experts active in this area: technological and organizational knowledge, together with records management and archival knowledge have to be supported by developing more comprehensive educational initiatives like the one that is presently being undertaken by the European Commission through the development of a postgraduate master in Digital Preservation. Its aim is to build a standard reference curriculum with an interdisciplinary approach and to create the conditions for developing interrelated and multidisciplinary working teams, strongly motivated and able to take on the responsibility for advanced management systems.

In synthesis, a renovated culture for innovation is required, based on established principles, but result-oriented, involving integration of competencies and supported by a rigorous and concrete vision, which is sustainable and capable to exploit the potentiality derived from a wise and smart use of ICT. The effort of ensuring efficiency and quality of public service can be a crucial engine of the whole process. The goal is ambitious and implies a convinced and harmonic participation of all the involved actors: public administration, private sector, universities, and all the organizations dedicated to the creation and dissemination of knowledge in the relevant fields.

It is important to be aware of the non transient nature of this complexity due to the continuing innovation of the technologies and the organizational changes; also for this reason cooperation is going to be the major factor for success: it is not by chance that institutional networks and networks of competences are largely promoted and financed by research agencies in Europe. JISC, ERPANET, DELOS, DCC, DPC, just to name some of them, are networks that have primarily focused on the role of individual professionals and the need for stronger and interdisciplinary skills. The traditional prescriptive approach to do our jobs is not adequate to face the uncertain boundaries of digital records and the varied nature of the skills required: the ability to define standards and rules, to provide consultancies, prototyping, auditing, and educating and training staff and manager's organizations.

In the Italian Government School for the Public Administration, where I will work for the next two years, we are going to deliver, in the context of a master of e-government, a course specifically dedicated to design profiles of in house trainers in electronic record management systems, with the aim of ensuring the presence in every agency of proactive individuals able to support their institution in the correct and smart use of technologies, to adapt business processes without losing the quality of their information and records systems, and to wisely direct any outsourcing decision because of their understanding of technological evolution and their ability to take advantage of it, based on a solid conceptual background.

Goals and requirements for the future: maintaining the quality, accuracy, and reliability of our documentary memory and educating complete professionals

Documentary memory, be it used for communication and accountability or for instrumental abuse, is part of our personal and collective identity. Identity is one of the key terms that need to be included in the records professional's vocabulary, and we know that, although complex, this is a crucial thing to do as a healthy exercise in democracy. Historians have dedicated thoughtful pages to the function of records professionals as mediators between personal and collective memory. But to fulfill this function in such a way that it can support

democracy, we need stable and authoritative principles and consistent but non rigid methods guiding our actions: we can keep the past alive by preserving its authentic and reliable traces. To do so, the first step is to define and consolidate, in the form of standard functional requirements, those basic and advanced principles which enable us to plan and verify the adequacy of the documentary information systems, their procedures and their methods. Such a step must be supported by research.

The role of the research as a critical component and a means for combining the need for innovation, quality and consistency with established principles and methods

Indeed, the participation of our professional community to research activity is necessary: educators and trainers must push towards scientific research to overcome the limits of the present circumstances and avoid the marginalization identified by Ken Thibodeau in his Leahy Award acceptance speech last year. Research can:

- reinforce the work of the professional international community and its cooperative interrelationships,
- stabilize our achievements as the bases for further concrete applications,
- increase the knowledge and the participation of younger researchers and professionals who are the beneficiaries of leading edge academic knowledge.

A conclusion

In some countries, the defence of recordness and its role in ensuring transparency in government and business is a dangerous activity, which requires a degree of courage and independence we could not have imagined to have to demonstrate. In some other countries of consolidated democracy, there are unexpected periods (I have direct experience for this) when this effort of defence requires a high level of tenacity and real confidence in the mission of our profession and in the theoretical principles and methodological tools supporting it. In all these situations, positive results can be achieved only if relations with allied professions and all stakeholders are strong and we are convinced and convincing. The capacity and the will of cooperating within organizations and with the outside world and trusting the others is the most important social quality to be nurtured for facing the future (as in my life I have always personally tested). This is why I wish to conclude with the words of another important philosopher, the American John Dewey, who reminds us what is at the basis of the records profession in a mature democracy: “until secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance are replaced by inquiry and publicity, we have no way of telling how apt for judgement of social policies the existing intelligence of the masses may be.” (*The public and its problems, 1927, Henry Holt & Co., p. 209*)