

Traces of Tracing

archival consequences of use and reuse of documentation

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Research question and approach

This paper has a strong archival orientation, that is a perspective from archival science. The direct question is: how should archivists deal with archives that are, often artificially, created by tracing services and similar research institutes, since the purpose for which the records have been brought together and organised is less important, or even does not exist anymore. The first time that this question raised in a conference was in October 2011 at the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen. At that conference was clearly a disagreement between archivists and those who were oriented on research about individuals. This discrepancy, between archival correctness and user needs is as old as modern archival theory, that is from the last decade of the nineteenth century with the publication of the Manual of Muller, Feith and Fruin, the beginning of the era of classic archival theory. I will use this Manual as the codification of classic archival science, and even archival dogmatics. Based on the Manual the archival answer to the question of what to do with the archives of tracing services would be the respect des fonds, the principle of provenance, das Provenienzprinzip. And dependend of the level of archival orthodoxy that might include not only restoring the original archives, but also the internal original order.

However, post-modern archival theory challenges the rigid, classical approach of the Manual – as actually the Manual itself does as well in section 12, that reads:

If it is difficult to reconstitute a dismembered archival collection [archive / fonds], the various parts of that collection, wherever they may be deposited, should nevertheless be described by a single official in a single inventory, with mention of where the documents are located.

Before coming to a possible solution I'd like to analyse the problem, starting with two of the basic, widely accepted archival concepts

Archival concepts

The Archive

The Manual defines the Archive (the American edition of 1940 uses the term Archival Collection, only in the last decades of the 20th century replaced in North America by the term Fonds) as

The whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, insofar as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or of that official.

Despite of the previous quotation from section 12 it is obvious that the authors had in mind the ideal archive in a physical sense, complete as a physical whole, brought together in one repository. The conceptual archive coincides with the physical reality.

However, that reality is seldom existing. [santa maria dell'anima], due to events in the custodial history or administrative complexity. Since the publication of the Manual archivists have been struggling with this problem, striving to construct an ideal physical whole of records. The most important example might be Schellenberg's record group, defined as

A body of organizationally related records established on the basis of provenance with particular regard for the administrative history, the complexity, and the volume of records and archives of the institution or organization involved. (APPM2)

The record group is above all a pragmatic approach for archives administration, a last attempt to harmonize physical reality with conceptual theory. This approach has been seriously criticized by Australian Peter Scott as early as 1966, and there, in Australia, replaced by the more flexible and process rather than organization oriented Series System.

The first edition of the ICA guidelines for description, ISAD(G) was still based on a Manual/Schellenbergian model of the physical, hierarchically structured archive. The second edition of 1996 supports a less physical model based on Australian concepts. Post-modern and post-custodial theories of the late 20th and early 21st century developed a much more conceptual model, dividing the logical archive from the physical collection, recognizing that an archive can have been created by more than one person or organization, and that the physical collection is primarily the construct of custodial activities. Enough for now, I'll explain it with a few examples/

Original order

But first a few words about the original order – and not too much, because the differences between the classic view and the post-modern one are similar to those about the Archive or fonds.

The classic view is expressed in section 16 of the Manual:

The system of arrangement must be based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it.

This, and the sections that directly follow it, have been criticized as of the very beginning, but I will leave that discussion apart. Even if, conceptually the authors might be right, what they had in mind was again a rather stable, fixed and above all physical order of archives from the past, mainly the ancien regime. And as far as they had been looking also to contemporary administrations, these were primarily well organised state organisations, with a pre-described record-keeping system, and not to twentieth century bureaucracies. What is of was the original order? The desk of the official, the temporary arrangement in the office, or the more or less organised storage, half forgotten in the basements or the loft?

Current archival thinking considers the original order as being something dynamic, in a constant state of flux, so to say. This thinking stresses the dynamic relationships between the records (information) and the activities in which they are created, used, reused and eventually recreated. That is an order that hardly can be fixed in the physical arrangement of acid free boxes, but only – and I would say only partially – established in archival description, wrapped in narratives, as I asserted in the 2011 Bad Arolsen conference.

Examples

Netherlands Red Cross¹

Enough theory, for now, a few examples may make it more concrete. The first example is about not respecting the fonds, the one that I also used in Bad Arolsen and that is closely connected with the today subject: tracing.

Shortly after the second world war the task of tracing dispersed persons was assigned to the Netherlands Red Cross, which established a special Information Bureau. One of the sources it used, were the card trays of the Joodsche Raad, the Jewish Council, established by the occupying forces to administer the Jewish community. The card trays formed a detailed kind of civil state of the Jewish population. The staff of the tracing service not only used the cards as a

¹ I thank the Netherlands Red Cross for their cooperation and providing me with the photographs.

source of information, but added new data onto them, re-creating a new series on the same physical documents of the previous one. Most of the Jewish Council records are not in the Red Cross Archive in The Hague, however, but in Amsterdam at NIOD, the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. The Red Cross still receives requests about what happened with persons, and consequently still uses the card trays. But what if that stops (or the task will be assigned to NIOD, should than the card trays be transferred to the Jewish Council fonds? Or are they exclusively part of the Information Bureau records of the Red Cross? No doubt that conceptually they belong to both fonds and the likely best solution would be to leave the records where they and establishing relationships through description. Even now they might be the case, and it is striking that in the NIOD finding aid of the Jewish Council fonds no reference is made to the collection at the Red Cross. Are Archives – that is archival institutions – still rather custodians of their proper holdings rather than facilitators of research?

NIOD

Let me briefly present some other examples, now from NIOD. The NIOD is founded directly at the end of the second world war, with the primary task to write the history of the Netherlands in the war. The institute had the mandate to bring together all those materials, from whatever origin, that might be useful for that purpose. Therefore the task was to fold: both library and archive, and research institute.

In the first years the emphasis was on collecting documentary materials, as many and as quickly as possible. Theoretically correct arrangement had not the highest priority. That was the same for other institutions that dealt with resolving post-war problems, like the Red Cross I mentioned before, and like the political services that traced presumed collaborators and traitors. The latter organisations plundered the fonds of the National Socialist Movement (NSB); many of the records ended up in the archive of Special Justice, the tribunal responsible for the judgment of persons accused of collaboration and treason.

But not all archives are mixed up because of administrative or juridical activities, carried out by organisations to which these tasks formally were assigned. NIOD staff contributed to the confusion during scientific research as well.

First two quotes, again from the Manual:

Section 8: The various archival collections placed in a depository must be kept carefully separate.

Section 19: In the arrangement of an archival collection the interests of historical research should receive only secondary consideration.

Just one example of an archive from the NIOD collection to illustrate non respecting this rules: the fonds Kamp Vught, a concentration camp in which the occupier locked all kinds of people, including political prisoners, Jews, Jehova witnesses, Sindri, homosexuals etc .

For the purpose of writing the history of the Camp records from several fonds were gathered, that now form one collection: the fonds Kamp Vught.

Connected to this collection is another kind of mixed fonds, the collection Camps and Prisons, in which materials from the ladies Van Beuningen en Timmenga, who during the war provides inmates of Camp Vught with food, clothing and correspondence with their families. After the war the correspondence has been used for tracing activities.

Initially these tracing activities were rather scattered over various private and public organisations. When the military government decided to assign this task to the Red Cross a part of the records were transferred to that organisation, including the Jewish council series, but also other materials considered to be relevant.

Analysis

[Sheet Quote: section 2: An archival collection is an organic whole]

The conclusion is that the collections are ‘artificially created serving primarily, if not exclusively, research. And consequently violating archival rules according to section 19 of the Manual. The theme of this conference is not so much what happened to the records, as how to deal with these records now research questions are different from tracing – either dispersed persons or those suspected of having committed war crimes. Should archivists now start with re-arranging according to the principle of provenance. Already in the beginning of my paper I answered that question with “No”, or at least with not physically rearrange the records. In the first decades of the application of the rules of the Manual Dutch archivists tried to do so. For instance, the records of the the city and province of Groningen had been mixed up halfway the nineteenth century up and arranged in a chronological order, following the then valid rules of diplomatics. In the twentieth century, when the city archive became a separate institution next to the state archives in the province – they are now again one institution – archivists started with separating the local from the provincial records, but a work that could not be achieved for 100% since traces of provenance got lost.

I’ll give one extra example, not from the tracing environment and more historical: the Sant Ufficio in Rome, the former Roman inquisition, and currently the congregation for the doctrine of the faith. Originally the congregation was primary an ecclesiastical tribunal, judging heresy. For the

greater part the archive was organised in case files, in chronological order and possibly with indexes on personal names – great for tracing, so to say. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the period of enlightenment, judging individuals was considered to be done, anymore. Indeed, in some Italian states, such as Tuscany, the offices of the Roman – that is papal – inquisition were closed down. The congregation itself, the holy office in Rome, became an expertise centre of catholic theology, which it still is. The records were rearranged according to the subject, bundles broken and new bundles created. The main structure of the archive was divided into series, each dealing with a sacrament. Old indexes possibly destroyed, and new rubricelle created. Those matters that did not fit in, were set side in what is now called the Stanza Storica. Nobody would even think of restoring the original order. Actually, not even Muller, Feith and Fruin.

Models

We may see in the examples above four models of what disturbances happened to archives:

- Rearrangement by the administration itself, because of changing activities, changes in recordkeeping system, changes in information needs (Sant Ufficio)
- Transfer to and use by a succeeding organisation as source of information (Special Court of Justice)
- Re-use and re-creation of the records by another organisation (Red Cross)
- Mixing and rearrangement for and by researchers of archivists

A lateral effect of all of these models is that those records which did not serve any of the new functions, are more or less left abandoned.

Archival ideas revisited

To sum up and conclude. What to do with records that lost their *Heimat*? For all of these kinds of rearrangements (and many other, more or less similar questions of arrangement the classic approach, the dogma, did not have workable answers. New directions, you may call them post-modern, post-custodial or just common sense and pragmatic – as a matter of fact the whole principle of provenance basically is – focus on description, that is: representation, rather than on physical arrangement, dividing the logical (content, structure and context) from the physical. Emerging terminology speaks of manifestation dependent and manifestation independent metadata, but don't be afraid, I'll leave that for another conference.

In practical terms this means leaving the collections and their arrangement as they are, not only for practical reasons, but also because any existing arrangement has its history and its meaning. It is the duty of the curator of a collection to define the many relationships between the records, between the records and the activities, and between the records and the people or organisations that created them, modified them, used them, managed them, and how these relationships could be interpreted as traces to the complex, multifaceted context of the records. In other words: it is all about the context, or the context is all.

Current archival description models and metadata schema do support this, archival methods and practices less. It requires an inter repository approach and collaboration, and rather a way of story telling than formal archival description. That's why my previous title: Wrapping context in narratives.