Structures, Boundaries, Contingency, and Proportion Are Good for Recordkeeping
Postscript to On-Line Access to Archives (and Other Records) in the Digital Age

This presentation was a last minute addition to the Conference programme and, with the exception of the last part on Documenting Australian Society, was simply an opportunity to re-present old ideas. Unexpectedly, the Conference provided a context in which this old wine found itself in need of new bottles. For some years, new and exciting approaches to use (and re-use) have been whirling about and they were notably on show in Parramatta. The contours and terminology of this new landscape are not yet settled but, in order to compare and contrast, I will proffer a summary that will serve until a better analysis emerges:

- **The a posteriori approach[1]** exemplified by networking, data linking and transformation, etc. for use and re-use, either within or across boundaries. It seeks out and establishes patterns of relationships based on attributes, terms, ideas, or other descriptive features. Results are random and unforeseen or, at any rate, outside the descriptive structures imposed by source systems. This is different from, but congruent with, the kind of user scripts used to re-process descriptive data that Tim Sherratt (who proclaims the triumph of content over form, ideas over control, people over systems[2]) demonstrates so dazzlingly.

- **The a priori approach[3]** exemplified by structuration in the capture and preservation of records reflected by customary description in the source systems and, yes, by form and by control. It is the approach to federation put forward in my *Modest Proposal* and used in many other federation tools (such as TROVE, Ancestry.com, Archives Portal Europe, Europeana, Archives Canada). Federation using this approach gathers (or harvests) materials that, in one way or another and ignoring the profound differences between them, result in pre-determined display of results using frameworks within which resources are found and understood by reference to form, control, and system capabilities.

One approach frees the user to impose meaning on the materials and the other compels the user to submit to a meaning imposed by the materials.

Hitherto, I have been concerned with distinguishing the *Modest Proposal* from other frameworks. I have not so far gone on to contrast a priori approaches (in their various manifestations) with a posteriori approaches but such comparison may be inferred (and sometimes, if I am not entirely mistaken, have been slyly implied) in presentations of one or the other. Each can be presented in the same conference (as in Parramatta) without a suggestion of incongruity. It is time to bring the contrast into the open. It will take more than a postscript to do so, but here, in summary, is a first attempt at it.

My starting point is that the two approaches are "as well as" not "instead of" and may, indeed, be complementary. Certainly that is so as far as the *Modest Proposal* is concerned. The utility and benefits of a posteriori for the user are undeniable. One approach is not better than the other, having regard to the different purposes each serves.

The session in Parramatta on ubiquity seems a good place to start. I can't begin to summarise the complex ideas underpinning the three papers delivered in this session, but they certainly emphasised contrasts between ubiquity and structure. Ideas limiting ubiquity are portrayed in the use of terms such as boundaries, limits, and contingency. Specifically, ubiquity accommodates a posteriori and is hostile to a priori (or so it seems). It would have been possible to conclude that ubiquity, in and of itself, is an absolute good, virtuous in its own right, whose merits are frustrated by a priori. My response is in the form of a paradox : ubiquity is neither good nor bad in itself but

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[1] a posteriori : relating to what can be known by observation rather than through an understanding of how certain things work, *Merriam-Webster* online
[2] Tim Sherratt, *Discontents*
[3] a priori : relating to what can be known through an understanding of how certain things work rather than by observation, *Merriam-Webster* online

only contingently - by reference to how it is used, what it is for, what purposes it serves, and what requirements it fulfils (or fails to fulfil). I would say the same of a priori – not instead of but as well as, not binary but relative.

I say this because contingency, limits, boundaries, and frameworks[4] are virtuous in recordkeeping. It is how we include and exclude things and how we position them in relation to each other that supports (or imperils) evidence. The a priori approach is what recordkeeping is all about and we cannot have it said that it is a vice. Implicit in a priori is the idea that the first boundary to be established will be between recordkeeping resources and other information. But going a posteriori around that boundary and going beyond structures particular to those resources is also a good thing when use and re-use are in play. Both approaches are based on relationships. There is potential, therefore, for congruence rather than contrast. Alongside limitless and random conjunction, an a posteriori recognition of defined relationships that characterise recordkeeping (if only our descriptive practices were better employed) might thus powerfully deliver results that illuminate the character and meaning of the record. Meaning comes from a statement of what is and what is not; it comes from providing the user with information that this is important and that is not. Evidential relationships are relevant precisely because they are preferred over others, because they affirm the pertinence of one relationship over another – at source and prior to use. When all relationships have equal value, their meaning as testimony to the circumstances of their creation and use is vitiated: when everyone is some-body, then no one's any-body (W S Gilbert).

In the weekend following the conference I read an article about a newly elected, climate-denying, Senator that seemed apposite:

> At one point … he launches into a history of the US Federal Reserve that jumps back to King George III and the American War of Independence and concludes, 20 minutes later, with the carbon tax. "See, there's just so much …" he says at one point. It's easy to see how such a brain, let loose in the limitless data field of the internet, might stray from its core mission.[5]

The internet permits the user to find out for himself and no one wishes to limit that freedom. Sometimes it empowers the user, for good or ill, to reach conclusions not otherwise possible – heterodox insights that may conflict with (or confound) orthodox belief, providing better understanding, or seeing what we thought we knew in other ways. But it should also be an entry-point to wisdom and meaning derived from collaborative endeavours using agreed methods for handling and portraying data when fitting it to a particular purpose (in our case, testimony to events and circumstances). These can, of course, like any scholarly methodology, be challenged or overthrown within the collaborative boundary or from outside of it - but never without the attendant risk of straying from the core mission.

The a priori structure that has, up to now, exemplified recordkeeping values *par excellence* is the dreaded hierarchy. No one needs to urge upon me its limitations – I have railed against the multi-level rule for decades. But with all its faults, it satisfies certain recordkeeping requirements. While a posteriori shows devilishly beguiling features (Gee, ma, look what I can do!), probably faces fewer implementation hurdles, and benefits from its agility in adapting to fresh technological possibilities, if it fails to satisfy recordkeeping requirements which a priori tools such as the hierarchy (for all its faults) do meet, however clumsily, we are no better off.

Whether or not a posteriori can be used in meeting recordkeeping requirements remains to be seen. This is why I keep emphasising that the starting point must always be the functional requirements. A posteriori proposals (and a priori proposals, for that matter) cannot be allowed to simply self-justify in their own terms. It is not enough to point to virtuous features or to contrast with perceived flaws in other offerings. Justification for any proposal lies in whether or not it does what we want and the requirements state what that is.

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[4] To say nothing of form, control, and systems.
[5] *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, October 22-23, 2016, p.23

I was, at first, minded to add "Contingency" to the list of functional requirements in the *Modest Proposal.* But that would be wrong, because I think treating the a posteriori approach as hostile to recordkeeping would be as flawed as regarding a priori as the only satisfactory solution. Where recordkeeping relationships have been carefully crafted and defined and collaborative authority controls apply, there is no reason why a posteriori cannot satisfy most (if not all) the requirements – e.g. for federated access. I have used a wiki to exemplify the *Modest Proposal* but the user interface need not comprise a single technical solution. A wiki component in a total solution might be the best way for the barefoot archives to engage but more sophisticated sourcing, from better endowed and technologically advanced contributors - employing, singly or shared, a posteriori approaches - is certainly feasible.