Mergers – Possibilities & Impact of Mergers in Australia and Overseas

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Synopsis
Archives and recordkeeping are already converged in the recordkeeping continuum. We can, should and do collaborate and cooperate with other cultural institutions and information disciplines. However, our core commitment to ‘unconvergeable’ recordkeeping should remain our professional identity and purpose.

A short history of convergence
Before I talk about current convergence debates, I want to point out that as archivists we have dealt with some of this before. We found our collective way through a convergence problem that regenerated our profession. We even had a conference about it in 2001 - ‘Convergence: a joint conference of the Australian Society of Archivists and the Records Management Association of Australia’. Ten years later, convergence is widely accepted by the Australian archival profession, and most of us work somewhere within the recordkeeping continuum model.

What’s new in convergence in 2013?
This time the convergence debate is mostly about merging archives with other cultural institutions, and particularly libraries. The usual reasons for advocating convergence – and other speakers have addressed these – are financial imperatives, user expectations, converging technology and IT systems (including cloud services and better Internet technology), governance and compliance. This time it is not our purpose being called into question, but our methods (such as our descriptive practices, accessibility and delivery) and our organisational and institutional positioning.

Underneath all this is the common fear among libraries, archives and museums that in the digital world we will become irrelevant. That bigger is better. That we need to speak with one voice in order to be heard.

Convergence is generally seen as the joining of two separate archives, libraries or museums at a state or national institutional level, either as organisations or in functional splitting and/or sharing. But convergence is not just about large institutions, and it is not just about cultural organisations. Increasingly, all sorts of small and medium-sized cultural organisations are hybrid and collaborative. Archives run museums, and libraries have long kept archival collections and worked closely with archives. Local studies centres are amalgamating museums, libraries and archives in one service, with shared access, storage and exhibition services. Many regional cultural centres are doing the same, with art galleries added too.

On the other end of the convergence pincer are our colleagues in IT. There is an equal (but mostly opposite) pressure for records management functions to be located within IT departments and disciplines. I’m not going to talk about this in any detail, but I’m sure that those of you operating within IT departments or other ‘digital’ parts of your organisations can speak to the benefits and pitfalls of these mergers. In many organisations it just makes business sense to cluster information disciplines. In others, I’m sure, these mergers are initiated with a view of recordkeeping as a technology rather than a business function. The move to merge archives and
recordkeeping functions with IT is operating at state level too. Agencies such as the NSW Office of Information have taken on the whole newish cluster of functions being called ‘information governance’, including information security, security classification and labelling, cloud services and information risk management and data custodianship.

**How are we already working with convergence?**

I will concentrate my comments on the cultural sector, because that is what I know best and where I work. So how are we – the so-called ‘GLAM’ sector or ‘memory’ institutions – already working within the convergence continuum? What have we already learnt from each other? In a digital and networked world, is convergence already business-as-usual?

There are many different ways of borrowing ideas, tools and methods from other parts of the cultural sector (and beyond), but here are some examples:

- **What have we learnt from libraries?** In the past decade we have learnt much from the traditional library strengths in discovery, search, standardised description, subject and controlled vocabularies and authority records. Plus I think we have largely adopted their model of the borrower or user *versus* our previous idea of the archival ‘visitor’. We now actively encourage digital self-service and browsing. And many of us, like libraries before us, have put our catalogues, finding aids and digital holdings online, allowing unmediated (by a physical archivist, that is) access to our holdings for the first time. For libraries digital access to catalogues and holdings has been an enormous, shape-shifting change. It won’t be any less seismic for archives and archivists.

- **And how are libraries learning from us?** Libraries, for special and rare book collections at least, use collections management models, along with the ideas of provenance and context. Increasingly, they are turning their attention to the archivist’s natural habitat of managing and distributing unique material in what should be (or might have been) our territory of digital repositories, research data initiatives and documenting the digital present.

- **What have we learnt from museums?** I think we can and have learnt a lot about audiences and engagement from museums – archivists everywhere are much more actively curating and interpreting collections, writing narratives and telling stories. We put on more exhibitions than ever and more of all sorts of exhibitions include archival content. Plus I think we have also learnt something about how to do item-level description from museums – and maybe even come to terms with the fact that our online users will largely work from the item level up. I’ll talk a bit more about what museums might learn from us (and how difficult this is in practice) when I discuss some of the programs the archives is involved with at the Australian Museum.

- **Beyond the GLAM sector:** we can also learn from our collaborations with commercial providers of archival ‘product’ like *ancestry.com*. They have made searching easy – not just by providing the item search that users want, but by ignoring our institutional and even national boundaries. One of the lessons of *ancestry.com* we should learn (but I don’t think we have yet) is that they encourage users to publish and share and talk about their research and findings – they make research very personal and really social.

In summary, if convergence is about users and engagement then I think that archives are already doing it. We can and have learnt from the work and methods of other cultural workers. We can and we are adapting to new digital environments, new user demands for access and delivery, financial imperatives and technological change in creative ways.

But what about records and recordkeeping? Records can’t be subsumed into the ‘memory institutions’ or ‘collection management’ rhetoric of most convergence or merger discussions. And
this is really the business we are in. Yes, we work in institutions or organisations and we manage physical and digital archival collections and provide access to them – but so do libraries, museums and galleries. We can and should collaborate, share and network where we can but our core business and our professional identity is recordkeeping. And it can’t be converged.

Museum archives and the benefits of not fitting in

In so-called ‘memory’ institutions that are all about collections, it seems ironic that no one is sure where the archives and records holdings, staff and functions fit. Are archives part of a library (often), corporate services, legal and governance, collections and registration, or research divisions? Are archives and records singular or split into two functional units? Are they a collection, a function or a service?

At the Australian Museum in Sydney, the archives is something of an organisational ‘outlier’. It began within the Library. In time, with the addition of recordkeeping to the archives mandate, archives moved as an autonomous unit to Corporate Services. It has recently been moved again to the ‘Engagement and Cultures Division’ grouped with Pacific and Australian Indigenous object collections. Like other museum archives, we oscillate between a service, risk and compliance role (with an emphasis on recordkeeping) to a more heritage, collection, cultural, access and outreach role, with no settled resting place. Every museum in Australia seems to have come up with a different compromise solution to the place of the archives. Perhaps because every museum has a different history, but more likely because, surprisingly, there has been little understanding or recognition of the core role of recordkeeping within Australian museums.

This organisational uncertainty about archives is a symptom of something that all archival programs share – just more obvious because you might think archives would be better understood in a cultural institution setting. So how can that obvious tension help us talk about broader convergence issues for small and medium-sized archives? And what is the active, social role of archives and records that will mean this tension continues? The one that came from converging archives and records into the recordkeeping continuum.

The active archive

In the continuum model, archives and records are not static, they exist in relationships and in motion – they move between people, places, functions and time. And they continue to accumulate context (and meanings) over time. They don’t rest, and they are not finalised. So the allegiance of the archivist and the archives is not to the orderly world of collections and collection management but to an activity, recordkeeping. Evidence, transparency, accountability, democracy – this rhetoric and our roles don’t fit with a move towards the static language of collection management for archival collections that convergence discussions often invoke.

The Australian Museum Archives: recordkeeping, collaboration and cooperation

To finish, I want to give some examples from my own work and ask some last questions – what can we do to make sure we keep recordkeeping front and centre in what we do at the same time as making ourselves useful and relevant now and in the future? How can we collaborate without convergence?

At the Australian Museum, the Archives and Records Unit is responsible for the entire archives and records program – paper archives, objects and photographic archives as well as current recordkeeping including managing TRIM and the EDRMS, training users, providing recordkeeping analysis and giving advice. We are actively involved in recordkeeping-in-place within business systems – so system design, policy, protocol, metadata standards, and system and data migration.

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1 I don’t want to oversimplify this to an ‘us versus them’ debate as it is obvious that museums and libraries are also looking for new languages and concepts of collections and collection management in the light of the impact of the digital.
And of course, we try to make sure the archives of the future are being created now. Which also means taking the lead on digital preservation.

Alongside our core recordkeeping role, we are keen to collaborate and cooperate where we can, and are increasingly involved in cross-functional projects especially in access and engagement. I have heard librarians talk about an inside-out library and it is a term that resonates with what we are trying to do in the museum archives:

- Probably the single most important collaborative project we have undertaken has been to move our archival collection records into EMu, the same database that the science collections use. We have a separate module for the core archives catalogue but share other modules with the rest of the museum – so, for example, we share geographical and people registrations as well as collection management modules for conservation, storage and loans with the other science and cultural collections.

- This move has meant that we are part of the museum mainstream and the museum’s records, specimens and objects are connected in all sorts of interesting new ways. Plus we get access to the support and expertise of the museum’s collection informatics team. We have had to make some changes to the way we do description to fit into a highly structured, item-focused database, but we have increased our visibility, access and use. And there has been the unforeseen advantage for archives staff in a deeper understanding of the rest of the museum’s collection management practices.

- One of the most important tasks we have is to document the EMu collection management system itself as a recordkeeping system. This database provides vital evidence about the museum’s massive natural history and anthropology collections, their development, custodianship and use. This is a museum, so ownership, rights, creation and use are always contentious (especially for cultural collections) and archives have always had an important role in contextualising science and ethnographic collections and research records. Historically, this has been done through the field diaries, reporting, correspondence, registers, schedules etc that surround collecting activities. Since most of this documentation has shifted to EMu, we now need to make sure that we are documenting that database as one of our core recordkeeping systems. Our recent organisational move to cultural collections in part recognises this role, but is explicitly driven by the imperative of access – and by that the museum means cross-collection, one-stop, digital access and discovery at item level.

- Story telling is also increasingly important for museums and for archives, so there is a new narrative element to our collections search – and not just for archives or the cultural collections but also for science. This is another great opportunity for us to showcase and leverage our contextual expertise and our holdings.

- We are also looking outside the museum to make connections and build context for our records. We have initiated and are hoping to further build an Australia-wide field notebooks project to bring together and make discoverable the diaries and field notebooks of Australian scientists. This is an attempt to cross the institutional boundary to connect at least part of our holdings to other linked archival records and to specimen, biodiversity and collection records held in natural history museums around Australia. We have made a start to this by linking and exposing images and transcriptions of field diaries, as well as some of our scientific illustrations, on the Atlas of Living Australia (ALA). We are also using the ALA’s Biodiversity Volunteers Portal for a ready pool of willing volunteer transcribers for our field note holdings.
In the spirit of turning the archives inside-out, we have recently been involved with a round of the Apps4NSW initiative, a data re-use hackathon run by the NSW government as part of their open data initiative, Data.NSW. We released a selected archives dataset from EMu to the developer community to suggest, design and create mobile applications for our scientific illustration collections. The ‘Art of the Scott Sisters’ app will be released in February 2014.

Like many other archives and libraries, we are increasingly involved in displays and exhibitions, outreach and public programs, so we initiated and co-curated the Scott Sisters exhibition of 19th century butterfly paintings in 2011, and a Frank Hurley in Papua photography exhibition in 2010.

We write for the museum’s paper publications and website in blogs and museum history-related pages. We publish as much online, contextual information about the museum as we have time for, so that we are the go-to, authority source for museum administrative history.

*Find the ‘unconvergeable’*
Archivists’ ability to understand, connect, and share is vital to our future both in our own workplaces and across institutional boundaries. It makes us natural partners for IT (when IT is viewed as a tool to improve use of information, records and knowledge within an organisation, rather than just technology) as well as for libraries, galleries and museums. We can learn from each other, and we need to work together. Archives are trying hard at this and finding creative and engaging ways to collaborate, cooperate and share and make our content as relevant, available and accessible as widely as possible.

But more than finding ways to work together, we need to find and exploit the ‘unconvergeable’ in what we have and what we do. This is our real ‘value proposition’. We have always sold uniqueness in our holdings, but the really unique thing we have as professionals is our point of view and a core commitment to keeping records – to appraisal, to preservation, and to access to unique and primary views of the past.