Thinking Outside the Box:
Re-Imagining Archival Description with the "Series" System

Dan Davies

The massive amount of information in archives has long presented archivists with the challenge of representing it in a way that both enhances its value as evidence and facilitates research. Over the last two centuries, archivists have responded to this by adopting various means of collective description of records. They have moved away from attempting to replicate the information in individual records and toward general descriptions of the context of the creation of groups of records related by a common provenance. By the 1980s in Canada this approach found expression in widespread adoption of the fonds as the focal point of archival description. The fonds approach, however, has been criticized for not being flexible enough to account for the varied creators or multiple provenance of a given body of records. By contrast, another approach, the "series" system, first developed in Australia in the 1960s, has enjoyed increasing popularity because it depicts the complex multiple provenance many records have. The series system has recently been adopted at the Archives of Ontario and Archives of Manitoba. This thesis examines the history and strengths and weaknesses of the fonds and series systems, and argues that a significant enhancement of the latter, based on postmodern insights into the mediated character of communications and knowledge, offers a preferred approach to archival description. Among other advantages, archival descriptive systems would then show the influence that the archival process itself has on archival records as a feature of their creation or provenance. In this way Canadian archivists would confront, with more sophistication, the longstanding historical challenge of representing information in archives.