



OFFICE OF THE
INFORMATION & PRIVACY
COMMISSIONER
for British Columbia

Protecting privacy. Promoting transparency.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

CURATING THE FUTURE, PRESERVING THE PAST: GRADUATE EDUCATION IN THE INFORMATION AGE

SPEECH TO THE ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN ARCHIVISTS STUDENT CHAPTER

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**ELIZABETH DENHAM
INFORMATION AND PRIVACY COMMISSIONER FOR BC**

Thank you very much. It's great to be back at my Alma Mater.

Some of you will know that today's symposium, and my speech here today is an official event of the 2015 BC AWARE campaign, an initiative led by the Vancouver chapter of ISACA to raise public awareness about privacy and data security.

It is inspiring to see so many organizations come together in support of BC AWARE. These events promote the exchange of ideas and will help form new partnerships based on the value of privacy and sound data governance as a public good.

So kudos to the event organizers for getting involved.

I want to start by telling you a story... about how I found my career path from information studies to access and privacy.

And... since we're talking about archives, libraries and information management, I thought it would be fun to showcase some of the most beautiful memory institutions from across Canada and around the world.

These are very special places, and the images will just run in the background to my prepared remarks... it's a good place to focus your attention if what I have to say makes your eyes glaze over. 😊

My journey began at UBC.

In the late 1970s I was a student here, studying history and political science.

This was a heady time for Canadian history – and a time of growth, investment and public interest in memory institutions and the professions that surround them.

I was captivated by these records and wanted to work directly with archival material. I wanted to have a hand in determining how future generations will learn about our society through preserving our documentary legacy.

So I followed my passion into this world, and was a member of the first class of the UBC's Master of Archival Studies program in 1981.

That was a time that pre-dated even Luciana (whose leadership in this field is phenomenal!)

I studied with Terry Eastwood, David Breen, and Peter Simmons (who taught a course called machine readable records – main frame computers and punch cards!)

After graduation, I worked as the first city archivist of City of Richmond.

And, in 1989, I landed my then-dream job: City Archivist for the City of Calgary.

Calgary had just hosted a very successful Winter Games, and as part of the Olympic legacy, the City had invested heavily in its archives program. It was my job to curate and capture those exciting events.

It was the first City to have an official Olympic archive.¹

Included in our collection were records, blueprints, posters, special artifacts, the original broadcast videotapes, and tens of thousands of photographs.

I loved this work and this program. I had the opportunity to develop and support the burgeoning archival associations of that time, including the newly minted Canadian Council of Archives.

I also supported experiential learning by hiring contractors who went on to graduate studies in the field, and mentoring MAS practicum students.

But five years later, along came a new city clerk, who decided that the archives program had reached its goals and needed to be scaled back into maintenance mode. My job was eliminated. And I was devastated.

Up until that point in my life, I thought that being a city archivist, and maybe one day a provincial archivist, was my life's mission.

I hadn't even considered other options. I had a goal, but perhaps I also had blinders on, focusing on the singular path I expected my career to take.

It soon became clear to that there was a really, REALLY big world out there where the skills I learned at the School of Library, Archives and Information Studies could be applied in new and interesting ways.

It just so happened that at that time, many provinces were drafting new access to information and privacy laws, which fascinated me as a student of records and information.

¹ <http://www.calgary.ca/CA/city-clerks/Pages/Corporate-records/Archives/Holdings/Holdings.aspx>

Although I hadn't explicitly studied access and privacy legislation at SLAIS, my training gave me unique insights into how organizations could manage and organize records in order to be more transparent and accountable.

These two worlds are quite complimentary.

The ethical and policy issues archivists face are very much at play in access and privacy work. Mediating access between records creators and users within a framework is a foundational matter for both disciplines.

And there is no question that without strong information management practices, legislative information rights could not – and would not – exist in the way they do today.

So, I used my skills and experience to help organizations prepare for Freedom of Information laws in the 1990s ... first as an access and privacy officer for the Calgary Health region, then through my own information management consulting firm ... and then later as a privacy regulator enforcing compliance with the laws in Alberta, Ottawa and now British Columbia.

While my career path may not be typical, it illustrates the possibilities and the different fields that information and archival studies can prepare you for.

Today, budgets for archives and special collections are becoming leaner and leaner... but the amount of information and records out there, and the need to organize and apply that information, is constantly growing.

The explosion of information and communication technologies has increased the availability, mobility and value of data.

As data becomes more mobile, is stored in exponentially larger amounts, and flows between organizations and across borders, there are increased challenges and complexities for information management.

There are some who believe that technology is so advanced these days, it can do the archiving and sorting work for us – give data order, form, and integrity by design.

But as powerful as today's technologies are, information needs to be curated, we STILL need living, breathing professionals, whose foundational principles and skills have stood the test of time. Technology and the data tsunami have only made the discipline of information management more important than ever before.

These skills are applicable in a diverse range of topic areas, and are in increasing demand.

But (and you knew there had to be a But...) the opportunities don't come easily. You will have to work hard to find your niche.

Like me, you might need to take your blinders off, and scan the horizon for what might be coming your way that you don't necessarily expect.

As someone who has been in your shoes, I would like to take this opportunity to impart some advice about what you can do today to prepare yourself for the opportunities of tomorrow.

If you remember nothing else about this speech today, remember these three things.

First: Embrace the digital.

In the words of the Council for Canadian Academies in their recent report on the role of museums, libraries, and archives in Canada's digital society:

“Memory institutions must step up to the challenges of the digital age... lest they become culturally obsolete.”

That's a pretty bold statement. But it also rings true.

Digital technologies are transforming our economy, and shaping citizen expectations about the availability of information in digital formats.

The people want data on demand!

And who can blame them, when a Google Search takes 0.03 seconds, volumes of textbooks are available for free online via open source, and open data is being published proactively by business and government?

These developments affect us all... but information professionals must bring their skills to bear on our digital reality.

To the archivists in the room... the curators of past and present. You preserve the records of major public projects, document the actions and decisions of government, and document historical events that will shape the way we remember.

It will fall to you to make sure that we document in digital, so that the public can benefit from the full spectrum of records, from paper to multi-media.

The discipline of properly APPRAISING and RETAINING digital information alongside historical records will be an essential and valuable part of this work.

The Internet and web world is filled with so much that is unreliable and inauthentic. It falls to archivists to ensure that knowledge is derived from sources that are authentic and reliable, whatever format those sources exist in.

Information managers must ALSO apply a critical public interest lens in the digital era.

The ability to create, organize and mine data stores has the potential to yield tremendous insight into areas of science, health, and social planning

But the promise of a big data revolution is not a certainty. There is a lack of clarity about privacy, about ethics and there is a huge array of competing individual, social and commercial tensions that need to be addressed.

It is often said that the fastest-growing career in the 21st century will be the Data Scientist. The person charged with examining and analyzing data to spot trends,

discover hidden insights, and recommend how to use that data to give their company or sector a competitive advantage.

But behind every great data scientist must stand an even greater information manager, to oversee the writing of the algorithms, to bring an ethical and public interest lens to big data.

Questions of which records to preserve and which to delete cannot be left to machines.

Nor can these skills be acquired in a three-hour seminar as an add-on to big data learning. They are foundational to delivering on the promises of big data... balancing this potential with the public interest.

To keep current, I would encourage the school to continue to evolve content around emerging information management theories and technologies – including enterprise content management and case management systems, as well as big data analytics technologies.

I also encourage you to get involved in the open information/ open data movement. A lot of what I have talked about lends itself to managing existing data, but there is great benefit in having more voices at the open data table, encouraging organizations to make more information freely available.

As open data proliferates, and more agencies push information into the open data pipeline, and as programs and policies multiply, shift and change – the integrity and usefulness of the data contained in the open portals could be called into question.

If open information and open data is to be a successful and lasting movement, we need professional leadership, and to connect open information and data to citizens and our communities.

You are well placed to be the critical voices and leaders of the open government movement – to be the curators of information, and to professionalize open data by

setting standards and promoting best practices, data integrity, data preservation and data literacy.

That's number one: **embrace the digital.**

Number Two: "See the matrix."

As an information management consultant working for financial institutions, oil and gas companies and in health care, colleagues would say that it was rare to have someone be able to walk into an organization and "see" the information architecture at the heart of its operations – 'seeing the Matrix.'

I call this "seeing the Matrix."

You know that moment in the movie when Keanu Reeves comes back from the dead, and all of a sudden sees the data streams all around him that make up the Matrix?

That's what I'm talking about!

The ability of information practitioners to see the matrix cannot be overstated.

It gives you the advantage in seeing how to streamline information systems generally, but it also gives you the capacity to solve BUSINESS problems for organizations, to give them capabilities around transformation and innovation that are wholly dependent on information.

I am not aware of any other discipline teaching this skillset. And it can be universally applied.

Information landscapes are dynamic – they are constantly changing – but the matrix is a system. It is everywhere. And if you can see it, and know how to work that system – you will be imminently valuable, no matter what sector or path you choose.

My third point: archivists and information managers need to get out of the basement and start leading.

We cannot leave this new digital world to the lawyers, the techies and the bean counters!

Government and business, academia, industry all need information managers. And they need leadership at the executive table to get it right.

The work doesn't begin when you hit the "C" suite. It begins when you demonstrate how a disciplined approach to information management has value to your organization and to its bottom line. You need to be on the front lines of digital change.

It's how you show your executive why information, records, and data is the lifeblood of the organization.

It comes when you share your knowledge, expertise and technical skills with the next generation and why this work is so important, in light of, not in spite of, the digital age.

But to do any of these things you need to step forward and make yourself heard!

Information has tremendous, and often unrealized, value for organizations. You need to step up and demonstrate that value, and with it, your value.

I hope you can feel the passion and conviction behind my words today.

Thank you for your attention this morning.

I'm happy to take any questions you may have.