Across Space and Time:
The Records Continuum Model and the Collections of the Meertens Institute

Douwe Zeldenrust

Huygens Institute - Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

Access to data and collections is one of the most fundamental starting points for every digital humanities researcher. Traditionally, resources are managed by archivists using the 'Records Life Cycle' (RLC). This model is viewed as fundamental to archival ideas and programs. But the growing need to work with digital records began to highlight key conceptual deficiencies in this paper-orientated model (Gilliland, 2016). Consequently, the alternative 'Records Continuum Model' (RCM) was developed. It is better able to cope with digital information. The RCM is more flexible and offers insight into the complex contexts in which (digital) documents are created and managed (McKemmish, 2016). It is increasingly adopted by governments e.g. and potentially provides a viable framework for managing humanities resources as well. But within that domain the RLC is still dominant. This paper will reflect on the potential and the issues of using the RCM as a concept for managing data and collections of institutions within the humanities.

While the RLC is a one-dimensional and linear model where records go through different stages of usability, the RCM emphasizes the fluid characteristics of records management. And where at the RLC a record ends up in an archive (or is destroyed) at the end of its life phase, the RCM assumes that archives and collections are more than records that have been selected for permanent preservation. It emphasizes continuity in the process and provides a multidimensional view of recordkeeping across space and time (McKimmish, 2016). For example, it encompasses the possibility that archiving and pluralizing (with disseminating as part of that process) are parallel functions and not successive management phases. RCM researcher Vivian Frings-Hessami explains the latter as follows: '(…) records are always in a process of becoming as their contexts and use are always susceptible to change' (Frings-Hessami, 2017).

In order to make the first steps in introducing the RCM within the domain of the humanities three case studies will be presented. These case studies originate from the collections of the Meertens Institute, a humanities institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. This Institute has a rich tradition in documenting and studying language and culture in the Netherlands, as well as Dutch language and culture throughout the world. The Meertens Institute has over 750 different collections, in total more than 15 terabytes of data, 6000 hours of audio recordings and 2 kilometers of archival material, which have been gathered in a period of over 90 years (Zeldenrust, 2020). These collections concentrate around three major topics: language variation, onomastics and ethnology. Each case study covers one of these research fields and centers around a particular collection.

The case studies have been selected on the bases of two criteria. First, the collection needs to contain both analog and digital items in order to explore the suitability of the RCM for the various characteristics of humanities collections (across space). Second, the collection needs to have been accumulated over a long period of time in order to make the (re)use, collection management policies and possible changes visible (across time). The first case study is the audio collection 'Nederlands in Amerika' (Dutch in America) accumulated by Jo Daan (Collection 2001). The second one is the collection 'Vernoemingsnamen' (eponymized place-names) amassed by Rob Rentenaar (Collection 191). And the third case study is the 'Volkskundige Trefwoorden Catalogus' (folklore keyword list) made by Han Voskuil (Collection 141).

Lastly, the use of the RCM as a concept for managing data and collections of institutions within the humanities is part of my PhD research. As this research is ongoing, this paper will show work in progress.

Resources

Frings-Hessami, Viviane (2017). 'Looking at the Khmer Rouge archives through the lens of the records continuum model: towards an appropriated archive continuum model'. In: Information Research 22, 4.

Gilliland, Anne J. (2016). 'Archival and Recordkeeping Traditions in the Multiverse and Their Importance for Researching'. In: Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish and Andrew J. Lau (eds.), Research in the Archival Multiverse. Monash University Publishing, pp 31-73.

McKemmish, Sue (2016). 'Recordkeeping in the Continuum'. In: Anne J Gilliland, Sue McKemmish and Andrew J Lau (eds.), Research in the Archival Multiverse. Monash University Publishing, pp 122-160.

Zeldenrust, Douwe A. (2020). Verzamelen verandert, Collectiemanagement Plan Meertens Instituut 2020 - 2023. Amsterdam: Meertens Instituut.

Archives

Meertens Institute, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Collection 'Nederlands in Amerika', Collection 2001.

Meertens Institute, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Collection 'Vernoemingsnamen', Collection 191.

Meertens Institute, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Collection 'Volkskundige Trefwoorden Catalogus', Collection 141.