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What is Recorded is Never Simply ‘What Happened’: Record Keeping in Modern Organizational Culture

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Abstract. Traditional premises in archival theory and practice hold that archival records are authentic as to procedure and impartial as to creation because they are created as a means for, and as a by-product of, action, and not for the sake of posterity. Such Positivist assumptions about the nature of records have come under sustained scrutiny in the archival literature over the past decade. The post-Positivist view of records embraces the record as a socially constructed and maintained entity. This paper situates itself within this new paradigm in an exploration of the beginning of the life of the record. It is therefore concerned with the creator (or recorder) and the social construction of the record. In expanding beyond a purely administrative- and juridical-based theory of records, this paper draws upon research from other disciplines, such as sociology, in order to place records and record keeping within a framework that allows for an understanding of their social nature. In particular, the goal is to determine the underlying social factors that directly influence and shape the creation and keeping of records and to begin to understand how these factors manifest themselves in the construction of the record.

Keywords: archival theory, documents, ethnomethodology, law enforcement, organizational record keeping, paperwork, records, research methodology, social theory

Introduction

Deft [defendant] recovered almost immediately [from the effects of the Taser] and resumed his hostile charge in our direction. Ofcr Wind and I drew our batons to defend against deft's attack and struck him several times in the arm and leg areas to incapacitate him. Deft continued resisting kicking and swinging his arms at us. We finally kicked deft down and he was subdued by several ofcers using the swarm technique.¹ (Passage taken from the arrest report of Rodney King)

¹ Quoted in John Van Maanen and Brian T. Pentland, "Cops and Auditors: The Rhetoric of Records", in Sim B. Sitkin and Robert J. Bies (eds.), *The Legalistic Organization* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 73.