

## **In Search of a Single Version of the Truth**

**Written by Neil McCallum, Workshop Director, PAI professional development workshop on Effective Records and Information Management: Practical approaches**

We have until very recently been living in an age which has witnessed the progressive dismissal of the role of facts, the value of statistics and the concept of expertise in favour of confident, increasingly combative assertions of certainty. A UK Government Minister famously said in 2016 ‘The people in this country have had enough of experts.’<sup>1</sup> People talked of a ‘post-truth’ world. One commentator observed that the concept of ‘evidence-based policy making’ was rapidly giving way to ‘policy-based evidence finding.’ This is what we think needs to happen: Now go and find the data to support that plan.

But all that is changing. The hunt for a vaccine to defeat COVID-19 requires experts. Lots of them. Facts. Statistical analysis and accurate, reliable recorded information to base literally life and death decisions for the whole planet upon. It’s time to rebuild trust in scientific rigour and the best research methodologies. It’s also time to recognise the importance of gathering and managing accurate information.

The term A Single Version of the Truth comes from computing where it is used to describe the concept of keeping all an organisation’s information resources in a single, centralised database or in distributed but synchronised databases so that it is consistent and up to date. To ensure that everyone is accessing the same, and the most recent information on any given topic. In short, that we are all on the same page.

The idea is attractive and deceptively simple. But surely this what every organisation has always sought to achieve, I hear you ask? Well, yes and no.

Organisations, particularly in the public sector, have historically undervalued the importance of their information resources. Records Offices, Registries and File Stores have long been administrative backwaters; places staff are keen to avoid or, if they are unfortunate enough to be posted there, desperate to escape from. In at least one country in which I’ve worked, being posted to the Registry used to be a formal disciplinary penalty. This image problem impacts on the motivation of the staff, the quality of the service they offer and the respect the rest of the organisation shows to them and to the information resources they hold. Standing Orders, rules and standard operating procedures relating to information handling are routinely ignored. As a result, files go missing and ‘temporary jackets’ abound.

The progressive introduction of IT over the past decades, in particular the ever expanding range of social media by which we all communicate (and which have been such a blessing during these periods of lockdown and self-isolating), have compounded the problem. A vast amount of official information is communicated and critical decisions made on personal email accounts, in encrypted WhatsApp chats and unrecorded Zoom meetings. What is kept is held by the individual officer. Little, if any, of this material makes it to the organisational information storage system or becomes part of the corporate memory. So, for far too many organisations the answer to the question, ‘Where are we on X?’ is, sadly “It all depends on who you ask”. There will be multiple versions of the truth. This needs to change.

Traditions of confidentiality and official secrecy also militate against the effective sharing of information. As does the inevitable competition for resources between departments and distrust between different agencies.

There are also issues about classification. Not just in how we manage the information we hold, to which we will return later, but in the lack of an agreed definition of what things actually are. This has two elements: How we choose to see things and how we decide to describe them.

Let me give you an example: Speaking on one of our workshops a few years ago, a Professor of Criminology posed two simple questions: 1. How much crime is there? 2. How does the level of crime this year compare with the last?

He made the point that for something to be counted as a crime, three things need to happen. First, it must be **seen** as a crime. Whatever the behaviour is must be consistently perceived as a criminal act. Secondly, it must be **reported** as a crime. Thirdly, it must be **recorded** as a crime. At each stage, things can and do fall through the cracks.

We see these very issues at the heart of current debates about COVID-19 mortality rates when comparisons are attempted between countries. Inconsistent approaches are taken to what is seen as a Coronavirus-related death, what is reported as such and what is recorded. The same applies to how many tests are being carried out. Even to what constitutes an item of Personal Protective Equipment: is a pair of gloves, for example, one item or two? The answer depends on a range of things, not least what point you are trying to prove with the number you arrive at.

What we need to work towards is this idea of a single version of the truth. That version needs to be:

- Authentic
- Accurate
- Reliable
- Up to date

This sounds simple in theory but in reality it's something we all struggle to achieve.

The system required to support this corporate truth must be able to capture information and store it in to a robust, secure, organisationally owned database, classify it in a way that enables effective and speedy retrieval, manage access to it and ultimately dispose of outdated and unnecessary material.

There was a nice illustration of the importance of classification in the UK last month. In Newmarket, Suffolk, the local Library took advantage of being closed during lockdown to get their regular cleaner to do a 'deep clean,' which involved removing all the books from the shelves. Shelves were wiped down, but the books were returned not according to the classification scheme order they had been in, but in height order. <sup>ii</sup>



Photo Credit Suffolk Libraries

The BBC reported that *'James Powell, of Suffolk Libraries, said staff "saw the funny side" but it would take a "bit of time" to correct. "It looks like libraries will be closed for a while so we'll have plenty of time to sort the books out. The cleaner is lovely and does a great job in the library. It was an honest mistake and just one of those things so we would never want her to feel bad about it.'*

An innocent mistake and an amusing story, but it does illustrate how every information resource facility, holding hard or soft copies or a mix of both, is only as good as its ability to find things, which in turn relies on classification and storage.

None of these are new lessons. Returning to the medical sphere, the ancient Greeks knew the key principles as well as we do. Retelling the legend of the mythological father of medicine in his book *Mythos*, Stephen Fry writes that Asclepius' mentor *'taught him that knowledge is gained from observation and careful record-keeping rather than from spinning theories.'*<sup>iii</sup> Words for our time.

Scientists and medical researchers will be the ones to find a vaccine. Planners and logisticians will be the ones to organise production and distribution at speed and to scale. But underpinning all these experts are those who know how to manage and access information so that we can most effectively target and deploy the massive resources required to win this battle.

A single version of the truth has never been more important.

---

<sup>i</sup> To be fair to that Government Minister, he was talking about economics, a discipline about which Edgar Fiedler observed that if you ask a question of 'five economists, you'll get five different answers. Six if one went to Harvard,' but it chimes with the times.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-52412655>

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen Fry, *Mythos* London. Penguin Books 2018 P 251.