Institutional Amnesia: A Paradox of the 'Information Age'?[1]

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ABSTRACT   *It is one of the paradoxes of our age that, while new information technologies have provided us with the ability to store, retrieve, manipulate and communicate more data, faster than ever before, at the same time many of our public institutions seem to be losing their memories. Many texts have been written about 'organizational learning', but few about organizational forgetting. The core contention of this paper is that the phenomenon of organizational amnesia deserves attention, from scholars and practitioners alike. My aim, therefore, is to set out the character, causes and likely consequences of institutional memory loss in the contemporary public sector.*

Keywords: information age, institutional amnesia, public sector, re-structuring, re-engineering.

Introduction

It is one of the paradoxes of our age that, while new information technologies have provided us with the ability to store, retrieve, manipulate and communicate more data, faster than ever before, at the same time many of our public institutions seem to be losing their memories. Many texts have been written about 'organizational learning', but few, if any about organizational forgetting. What is the good of learning if the institution quickly forgets again—if it suffers from a form of organizational Alzheimer's disease? Some of us, who have sad experience of elderly loved ones and friends with acute memory problems, will be familiar with the situation in which the elderly sufferer asks the same question over and over again within a short period of time. This happens because they have forgotten that they have asked it—and had it answered—already. Some of our public sector organizations may be in danger of beginning to behave in a similar way. The core contention of this paper is that the phenomenon of institutional amnesia deserves attention, from scholars and practitioners alike. My aim, therefore, is to set out the character, causes and likely consequences of institutional memory loss in the contemporary public sector.

The Apparent Irrelevance of Institutional Memory

It may be that the phenomena I wish to investigate here are, in part, echoes of a wider cultural trend. This could be described as a post-modern focus on an expanded present at the expense of both the past and the long-term future. Thus, in the world of management, stress has been placed on innovation and change rather than stability and

precedent, on creativity rather than experience, on envisioning the future rather than studying the past, on sound bites and keywords rather than full texts. One quick way of checking this is to look through the indexes of recent books on management and organization theory. I looked through 10 reasonably well-known texts on public management, chosen to give a good spread of countries, and found the situation described in Table 1 below.[2]

Of course, indexing is a fallible art, and concepts *may* feature in a text without necessarily being reflected in its index. Having read the books concerned, I doubt whether this is the case. None contains a sustained discussion of the problem I am discussing here. Thus, the broad picture painted by Table 1 lends some *prima facie* credibility to my contention that there is an imbalance between academic attention given to the quite distinct processes of organizational learning and organizational forgetting.

Let us look a little further—at texts where one might have a high expectation of finding something about institutional memory. In a book titled *The Theory of Organizational Design*, which brought together some of the most distinguished Anglophone academics in the social sciences, there is no mention at all of the problems I am concerned with.[3] In *Lessons from Experience*, another edited collection by senior scholars, this time devoted specifically to public sector administrative reforms from an international, comparative perspective, there is a good deal of discussion of learning but only one fleeting mention of the problems of organizational memories.[4] Neither is this bias peculiar to the administrative and management disciplines: a leading social scientist, writing of the study of institutions, makes a similar point about anthropologists:

> They are less inclined to ask why people forget. For them, remembering is the peculiar thing that needs to be explained.[5]

It should, of course, be conceded that there is *some* literature on organizational memory, especially in the field of organizational studies. Even here, though, as Douglas suggests, the emphasis is on how and why things are remembered in organizations, rather than on the specific processes of forgetting.[6]

The Character of Institutional Memory Loss

The basic phenomenon under scrutiny here is *the declining ability—and willingness—of public sector institutions in many countries to access and make use of possibly relevant past experiences.*

This definition encompasses a range of situations. These include, first, a situation in which an organization fails to record significant data or to document its decisions; second, circumstances where such information is recorded but the records are lost; third, situations where the records are not strictly lost, but, for one reason or another, they cannot be quickly accessed; and fourth, occasions when records are available and accessible, but no-one thinks of using them. This fourth type of circumstance is the least clear cut. It is partly a matter of attitude. Although relevant data is available and accessible, the prevailing mentality militates strongly against any such recourse to the past being made.

Before proceeding further, it should be noted that, alongside the paradox of institutional amnesia in the midst of burgeoning new information technologies, there lies a second paradox. It is that, *at the same time*, many organizations have great difficulty forgetting, or letting go of, precepts and standard operating procedures which are no longer serving them well. They go on doing things the same way, although the environment around them may have radically changed. This phenomenon of *bureaucratic inertia* has, in contrast with our topic here today, received a great deal of attention (and will

Table 1. Index entries for memory-related concepts in 10 public management texts, as compared with entries for change, innovation and learning

	Entries related to 'change' (including 'organizational change', 'institutional change' etc)	Entries related to 'innovation'	Entries related to 'learning', (including 'organizational learning', etc)	Entries of 'traditional' memory-related words ('continuity', 'experience', 'precedent')	Entries of modern memory-related words ('information retrieval', 'information storage', 'institutional memory')
Total number of references recorded in the indexes of the 10 cited texts	58	33	46	1	0

not, therefore, be further pursued here). Again, the analogy with sufferers from Alzheimer's is a vivid one. Many of the victims of that distressing condition are trapped in tiny, endlessly repetitive routines of speech and action—often those learned a long time ago, which may now be quite irrelevant to their situations. Thus forms of cognitive and behavioural conservatism can certainly co-exist with a quite radical loss of touch with the past.

Causes of Memory Loss

The main causes are a function of increasing rates of organizational change in the public sector, and of the nature of some of those changes. I will list a few key factors, and then discuss each in turn:

1. An increasing rate of organizational re-structuring, leading to a higher proportion of relatively 'new' organizations, which rapidly lose touch with the records and personnel of their organizational 'ancestors'.
2. Rapid shifts in the media in which records are held, first from paper ('the files') to electronic media, and then from one kind of software to another. With each shift, some of the past is, for a variety of reasons, likely to be lost.
3. The decline of the concept of public service as a permanent career, leading to a higher proportion of public servants with only transient experience of their organizations.
4. The popularity of ideas of unceasing, radical change. These include some of the most fashionable improvement techniques in the public sector, such as re-engineering and benchmarking. These systems of ideas include suggestions that the past is no longer relevant, or even that to look back is defeatist and dangerous.

The case made here is that these four developments interact, unintentionally and in unforeseen ways, to cause institutional amnesia. The first three developments are intended functional changes, which cause memory loss as a by-product. The fourth is different in character, in that it carries a distinct *normative* charge. As Rose has pointed out, drawing lessons from the past is both a normative and a practical activity.[7] In those contexts where all four developments interact we can therefore see a process which is undermining *both* practical *and* normative aspects of learning from experience.

Constant Re-structuring

In the UK many local authority Departments of Social Services underwent four or five major re-organizations during the 1990s. The scale and intensity of this change is well-described by May and Brunsdon:

> As the Audit Commission … observed, implementing central government guidelines entailed 'turning organizations upside down'. Not only did the reforms imply new divisional structures and the redeployment of staff, they also involved the establishment of new responsibilities in finance, personnel and resource management, the reconceptualization of service delivery in terms of performance standards and user involvement, and the simultaneous task of developing local care markets. To add to these pressures, government also expected SSDs to implement the 1989 Children Act and, in a great many instances, participate in the broader reorganization following the development of unitary local authorities.[8]

The UK National Health Service underwent major re-structuring in 1982, 1984,

1989–91, 1995 and 1997–98. In New Zealand, the pace of change was even greater[9] but in many continental European countries a less hectic approach tended to prevail.[10] Even so, the pace of change often increased, and one reorganization theme or idea followed another in rapid succession. For example, Verhaak has described the rapid rhetorical shifts which characterized Dutch autonomization policy during the period 1981–95.[11]

The common effects of major restructurings are well-known. Many staff suffer anxiety as to what their position (if any) will be in the new organization. Their focus is on the new. Distractions from routine work are maximized. The incentives systematically to learn from the past—perhaps already modest—are reduced. New people in new senior posts may well know little of the past experiences of the units they now command, and discovering what records of this experience may exist is not an activity likely to be high up on their lists of priorities—indeed, the pressure will often be on to 'do something new', in order to demonstrate their authority and leadership. A newly arrived UK NHS hospital chief executive, who I interviewed in 1995, proudly explained to me that she had, within 18 months, removed all but one of the existing directors of service, and that she would soon be rid of the last survivor of the *ancien régime*. In a piece of recent Dutch research, Noordegraaf meticulously describes the ambiguous, meetings-led world of a group of senior policy advisers, and observes that high rates of change among these staff 'might lead to a large-scale loss of historical consciousness'.[12]

Frequently, also, changes of office location occur on a large scale, and physical records may have to be transported or divided—often in a hurry.

A particularly interesting example of some of these processes at work can be found in some of the new regulatory agencies set up in the UK to supervise the major public utilities which were privatised by the Conservative administrations of Mrs Thatcher and Mr Major. In a forthcoming study, three British scholars describe how OFTEL, the regulator for the telecommunications sector, worked under pressures which militated against the possibility that it would be able to build up any systematic body of precedent. Even in a regulatory role, where one might have supposed that consistency over time would be a prime goal, this agency found itself living from month to month, issue to issue, without a well-organized memory. By traditional bureaucratic standards, OFTEL had a high staff turnover—to the point where sometimes its consultants functioned as the best substitute for an institutional memory. It also tended to operate through a 'meetings culture', with poor record keeping. Hall, Scott and Hood describe one particular case—that of hotel phone pricing—which they classify as 'adhocratic-chaotic'.[13]

Finally, one might mention the fact that, even where the outer shell of an organization may remain relatively constant over time, the proportion of short-term and temporary elements *within* many public departments and authorities looks as though it has increased. Public organizations are nowadays hung thick with task forces, project teams, working groups and quality circles. Much of the crucial innovatory work is expected to proceed from these spearheads for change. Yet it is precisely in these types of 'special force', rather than in the more settled and routine operational divisions and units, that precedent and the past are likely to have their weakest influence. What is more, it is understandable that the quality, transparency and ownership of the records made by such high-pressure, temporary teams may leave much to be desired. It will be interesting to see, if and when the scholars manage to gain access to the records of Mr Kinnock's current task force for reforming the European Commission, whether it is possible to trace the evidence and sources that they used. To what extent are they attempting to learn systematically from what has gone before? To what extent are they leaving a clear record of their own reasoning for the next generation of reformers to learn from?

The Records—What Records?

The clerical registry lies at the heart of many a traditional bureaucracy. 'Central records' have played an important part in a number of organizational dramas, from Kafka through Orwell to Terry Gilliam's wonderful 1985 movie, *Brazil*, in which a single character input error leads to the collapse of an entire society.[14] Today, however, we are designing organizations where this familiar piece of the bureaucratic landscape no longer exists, and where what is to replace it is not always clear.

New problems with record keeping are various in nature and cause. One is simply that the shift from paper-based records to electronic records may be poorly managed, so that no one is sure anymore what records are to be kept, and in what form. Even if all the necessary data is there, somewhere, it may not be accessible, because no-one knows where it all is. Some elements rest in the 'emails sent' file, others are papers living in folders, and so on. A second problem is that some electronic databases automatically delete old data as new data is entered. A third is that of 'digital durability'—the fact that rapid changes in software may mean that previous records can no longer be accessed— the old software is no longer available.[15] A fourth, more subtle, difficulty arises because of the peculiarly disembodied and abstract forms in which much electronically stored data exists. In management and policymaking it is frequently important to know under what circumstances and for what purposes a particular document was created. This helps to determine how far a particular piece of information is regarded as trustworthy, authoritative, appropriate, etc. With the advent of the electronic media, such contextual information is more often lost or absent.[16] In a study of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Meijer found some support for the hypothesis that, compared to a paper-based system, the use of electronic means:

> tends to lead to an increased focus on up-to-date data at the expense of historical data. Therefore, important data (and queries and context data) for accountability will be lost.[17]

The OFTEL example referred to in the previous section as an example of rapid institutional change, also contained elements of inadequate record keeping. At the time of the study it was going through a transition from paper-based to electronic records, but apparently without a systematic plan. Filing of the growing email traffic was haphazard, so parts of the record were often lost.[18]

The issue of record keeping interacts strongly with the speed and nature of institutional change. One prominent feature of the public management reforms of the past 15 years has been the growth of public–private partnerships and networks.[19] In many instances these have replaced what would previously have been single, public sector organizations in the performance of certain public tasks. Such arrangements may have many advantages, but, with respect to the particular issue we are examining here, they also pose a certain difficulty. To put it at its simplest, in a multi-organizational, public/private network, who keeps the authoritative records? This is not necessarily an item high up on the agenda when such partnerships and networks are formed, but research indicates that having very clear and agreed records of intentions, actions and responsibilities soon becomes fundamental to the success or failure of such hybrid multi-organizations.[20]

The People—'Moving On'

A few months ago I was interviewing a senior official of the European Commission, asking her why, in the planning of a certain set of programmes, so little use was

apparently made of relevant evaluations carried out for the Commission on previous, comparable activities? Her reply was striking:

> The problem with the Commission is a problem of institutional memory.

She went on to say that there were plenty of archives of information about past analyses, but staff had no time to consult these and, with the constant movement of senior personnel, it soon became the case that some staff did not even realise that these records existed, still less what might be in them. The rule of thumb for ambitious Eurocrats tends to be a move every 3 years or so, and to acquire a reputation for expertise in depth on a particular topic is as likely to be a barrier to promotion as an assistance. Europe is run by transient generalists. Interestingly, as this paper was being prepared, the problem was further institutionalised at the highest level. The President of the new Commission, Mr Prodi, announced that a new principle was henceforth to be applied—that Director Generals would have to move at least once every 5 years.

The phenomenon seems to be quite widespread. One senior Canadian public servant, commenting on the effects of rapid staff changes and early retirements, put it thus: 'some of the grey matter of the public service has disappeared'.[21]

A third vignette comes from one of the new-style executive agencies in the UK.

> Each year we have to argue the same case with the Department as to why we have this money. There is no chance of a learning curve with the Department because they keep changing the staff.[22]

A fourth is taken from a sophisticated recent study of the introduction of Total Quality Management (TQM) in five US organizations. The researcher concluded that 'Across all five organizations, the turnover of participants affected TQM programs at all levels', and he quoted an employee in one firm discussing how the intensive original investment in TQM training soon dissipated:

> when you get a new team, its not trained. That money is gone now. We could still have used the training. People change monthly.[23]

In each case the rapid movement of staff, whether to other institutions or into retirement or unemployment, deprives the previous employing organization of accumulated knowledge and skills.

Fashionable Approaches—Re-engineering and Continuous Improvement

An American technique of private sector origins, re-engineering has been quite widely adopted by public sector organizations in the UK, the USA and elsewhere.[24] An inspirational, founding text for re-engineering is *Re-engineering the Corporation: a Handbook for a Management Revolution*.[25] This book takes a radical approach to the question of institutional experience and memory:

> Re-engineering is about beginning again with a clean sheet of paper. It is about rejecting the conventional wisdom and received assumptions of the past. Re-engineering is about inventing new approaches to process structures that bear little or no resemblances to those of previous eras.[26]

This leads the authors to the bold conclusion that:

> How people and companies did things yesterday doesn't matter to the business re-engineer.[27]

Constructivist critiques of re-engineering connect this 'amnesiac hortation' to the

'arrival of the virtual organization in which historical and social relationships are reduced to a practical minimum'.[28]

Even benchmarking, apparently a more sober and straightforward technique than re-engineering, carries an implicit threat to the relevance of the past. Benchmarking projects, which have become very fashionable in some public sectors, tend to privilege *horizontal* comparisons with other organizations rather than 'vertical' comparisons with the particular organization's own past performance.[29] A seductive feature of the widely-used European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Business Excellence Model is the ability it appears to offer of comparing different types of organization, in different sectors and different countries, against a common set of yardsticks. Especially when used in a competitive way, this kind of homogenizing approach may tend to downgrade the importance afforded to the specific historical and contextual factors that make a particular organization different.

The phenomenon of management fads and fashions is a fascinating one, which has attracted some illuminating critical scholarship. The main point to be drawn out for the present argument is that a whole industry has grown up implicitly founded on the assumption that what is past is largely irrelevant, and what is important is to know what is (allegedly) new. Considerable quantities of real money and real jobs rest upon this proposition. Nothing is as obsolete as the management consultant who is still trying to sell the techniques of a few years ago. Brunsson puts it like this:

> there have to be problems which can be used to motivate reform, there have to be new solutions which can be suggested, and the actors should somehow have forgotten how difficult it was to implement their previous reforms, so that they are willing to try again.[30]

Very few consultants enquire in any depth into the history of the organizations for whom they go to work. Short contracts do not allow for that. The priority is to get to know the organization as it is, to understand where its leaders want to go, and to possess some approach or technique which sounds new.

It would be unfair, however, to attribute the murder of organizational history and the worship of managerial novelty solely to the wicked influences of private sector gurus and consultants. The public sector is quite capable of developing this bias by itself. Hood and Jackson, in a careful study, show in some detail how the see-saw of fashion has oscillated through administrative history. They comment that:

> the world of public administration, as well as private corporate management, often seems to be positively programmed to forget yesterday's ideas.[31]

Finally, it might be added that contemporary insistence (in at least some management thinking) on ceaseless innovation, and on comparisons across space rather than time, appears to run against some important recent intellectual developments in the social sciences. In economics, political science and sociology, growing interest has been shown in the power of 'path-dependent' explanations, where the sequence of events over time is crucial to the feasible choice set at any given moment.[32] Although hitherto applied mainly at a macro-historical level, path-dependent models also have a strong potential for meso-level, institutional analysis. Premfors, for example, has shown how poorly the standard OECD 'story' of international convergence in public management reform fits the case of Sweden.[33] More broadly, my own recent work suggests that path-dependent factors help to explain variations in organizational change across 10 OECD countries.[34] History is alive and kicking, and the institutional reformer who pays it no heed may learn a painful lesson.

How New is Forgetting?

Of course, organizations have been re-organized, split and merged before. It was a Roman soldier who wrote:

> we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while creating confusion, inefficiency and demoralization (attributed, probably inaccurately, to Petronius).

Records have doubtless been lost or mismanaged since records existed. For example, there are a number of studies which show how poor the handling of paper-based patient records often was in the UK National Health Service. No claim is being made here that the phenomenon of organizational amnesia is entirely new. The suggestion is a more limited one: that the four factors identified above have accidentally combined to create a set of circumstances in which a significant loss of memory is more likely than at any other time in the last century. Forgetting is an activity which cannot be willed—it is inherently a by-product of other processes.[35]

The Consequences of Memory Loss

Perhaps little attention has been devoted to institutional amnesia because it does not have any significant consequences? After all, if we are living in an increasingly 'instant' culture, where most of both our problems and our solutions are new, then what is the point of pouring over the past?

The problem is that we are probably *not* living in such a culture. In administrative terms, the problems faced by governments and their civil servants are, in analytical terms, often endlessly repetitive rather than brand new.[36] The 'wicked problems' such as crime, poverty and urban congestion just will not go away. There are thus at least two drawbacks to any attempt to govern as though both contemporary problems and contemporary managerial solutions were new. First:

> historical experience gives us additional cases to assess the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary ideas;

and, more importantly:

> Historical knowledge is a good antidote to naive acceptance of novelty claims, and history, in this sense is potentially subversive. That is why authoritarian regimes— within organizations just as much as at state level—often try to suppress it or rewrite it, and why we are sometimes encouraged to think that public management is too 'modern' to have any history.[37]

So what are the consequences? We should not overstate our case by presuming that they are all negative. As Mary Douglas observed:

> Certain things always need to be forgotten for any cognitive system to work. There is no way of paying full attention to everything.[38]

But this does not mean that we should, goldfish-like, allocate our scarce reserves of attention exclusively to events of the moment. The consequences of highly forgetful organizations would be likely to include the following:

1. intermittent and poor policy-learning—re-trying solutions which failed 5 or 10 years ago;
2. increased vulnerability to fashionable, but superficial and inadequate, organizational solutions;
3. costly attempts to break out of path-dependent, self-reinforcing trajectories by copying

innovations which may have worked for other institutions on different paths but which do not fit *this* path;
4. failure to value the knowledge—not necessarily formalized and systematized (and certainly not digitalized)—which exists among long-serving staff;
5. inconsistencies and discontinuities in dealing with citizens/service users. These could be particularly troublesome in organizations which serve citizens over long periods of time, such as health, social security and education.

Conclusion

The argument is that institutional amnesia exists and is an important phenomenon, worthy of further study. The argument is *not* that this problem is everywhere, or even that it is a vast and urgent threat. It *could* be widespread, but its full extent cannot be accurately estimated—the research has not been done. There do, however, seem to be *prima facie* grounds for believing that the number of occasions on which organizational amnesia is likely to be a problem has increased, as the pace of public sector restructuring has intensified in so many countries.[39] Incidentally, it is *not* being claimed that, in a perfect world, all data would be retained and accessible. 'Total recall', as it is sometimes called, is also a form of mental illness—almost as distressing, in its way, as Alzheimer's. And it is certainly no part of my intention to recreate the central registry, which, in practice, was often a dim, dull and demoralising place to work.

In conclusion, then, I would merely propose that the well-established field of organizational learning should be complemented by parallel enquiries into organizational memory. My expectation is that such studies could—for example—yield a set of empirical 'indicators of forgetfulness'. The presence of clusters of high readings for such indicators would constitute a warning sign to those responsible for the organization(s) concerned. A final speculation is that the issue of institutional memory may turn out to have an affective as well as an instrumental dimension. As individuals we define ourselves largely in terms of our memories. As citizens we may be more likely to feel trust towards a larger political community when the institutions of that community exhibit continuity and sense of their own history.

Notes and References

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