

# Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

## The Whole of the Moon

I recently encountered studies on how culture influences the way we perceive things. Western cultures, for example, tend to focus on objects, analyzing the object's attributes and categorizing it in order to discover rules governing its behavior. East Asian cultures focus on context "noticing relationships and changes and grouping objects based on family resemblance rather than category membership."<sup>1</sup> Westerners have less complex social networks and value individualism and autonomy; thus they tend to see social and physical objects as distinct and separate. East Asian cultures have complex interdependent social networks; thus they tend to look for relationships among objects.



The perspectives are different, one more analytic, the other more holistic; neither is "right" or "wrong." Galileo focused his analytical skills, bolstered by his telescope, on the moon, adding to our understanding of the moon as an object. The ancient Chinese took a more holistic approach, looking at the moon's relationships to other forces and thus discovered its influence on tides (a connection Galileo never made). Both approaches furthered our knowledge.

This cultural influence on perception perhaps explains why Vermont state government traditionally attempted to manage its records as distinct objects, narrowly categorizing records into series without examining the record's complex relationships with the functions they support and with other records, especially those created through similar functions conducted by other agencies. For decades records management focused on the physical object, a record, created by an individual agency or department, without taking a more holistic view of the government functions the records support.

Consequently it is often difficult, if not impossible, to locate similar or related records—and the information and knowledge they contain—across bureaucratic boundaries. The relationships among records have not been documented and the dependency on accessing records through government structures (which we routinely restructure) rather than the functions they support compounds the problem.



The problems associated with viewing record series as distinct objects have long been recognized. This has been particularly true in recent decades as we turn to information technologies to create, store, manipulate and transmit records. Information technologies lend themselves to more global—more holistic—views of information. They do not, however, automatically create those holistic views; indeed, they cannot if information is idiosyncratically categorized at the agency or department level.

As early as 1957 the Little Hoover Commission noted that fragmented recordkeeping was a barrier to developing "centralized data processing." See <http://vermont-archives.org/publications/voice/pdf/CentralizedDataProcessing.pdf> (my December 2007 column).

The Vermont Information Strategy Plan, launched by Governor Richard Snelling in 1991, identified agency-based "silos of information" as a barrier to improving government services and effectiveness. In 2003 Governor Jim Douglas commissioned the Vermont Institute on Government Effectiveness to look at the use of technology to improve government services and their 2005 report echoed the image of information silos as a barrier.

With the creation of the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration in 2008, a new effort was launched to take a holistic view of government records and information. That work is being done by a record analyst unit under the direction of Tanya Marshall. Tanya and her staff are using functional analysis and a faceted classification approach to break down the information silos so that records and information can become a business asset to government and citizen alike.

In brief, functional analysis is the study of how things are related and dependent on each other for their existence, value, or significance and faceted classification is a way to break down these relationships and dependencies into basic concepts (facets). VSARA uses a system, called the Vermont Functional Classification System (VCLAS), which consists of five core facets: agencies/departments; legal requirements; government functions; activities/services; and record types. VCLAS provides a mechanism for uniformly and systematically defining, describing and managing public records. The system also enables VSARA to look across the universe of Vermont's public records and identify relationships and dependencies not only among records, but also among agencies and departments, legal requirements, government functions, and the activities or services performed.

VSARA's record analysts are doing more than changing how the state categorizes and defines its records; they are attempting to transform our institutional culture so the existence, value, and significance of government information will be better understood and utilized. Their work combines Galileo's analytic focus on the moon and the ancient Chinese view of the moon within a network of forces. Or, to paraphrase the Waterboys, they will allow us to see not just the crescent, but the whole of the moon.

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<sup>1</sup> *Richard E. Nisbett and Takahiko Masuda, "Culture and point of view," published in the September 2003 Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America and available online, as of December 14, 2009 at <http://www.pnas.org/content/100/19/11163.abstract>.*