

“Rethinking Appraisal”: Conference Overview

By Luciana Duranti

And **if we kept it all?**—Seamus Ross asked at the beginning of this conference.

We never kept it all. I stated in my opening remarks for this conference that “archival” appraisal was a result of the tremendous accumulation of records that resulted from the Second World War...”archival” appraisal, that is appraisal as an archival function, conducted by an archival institution as a prelude to the process of preservation. “Records” appraisal has always been carried out by the creators of the records. Monarchs’ chanceries used to keep the important records in the treasury letting all the others languish on the benches and disappear out of lack of care, floods, or fires. Some records survived, forgotten in attics or basements, and were found by subsequent occupants. Cities, universities and monasteries had their important records in chests linked by chains to the floor and protected usually by three locks, the keys of which were held by different people. So, the archives “treasure” has always been consciously separated from the archival “sediment,” and carefully protected (incidentally, before Brenneke and Schellenberg all records were called “archives” everywhere, not just in Latin countries).

When large archival institutions began to appear, in Spain first, then in Naples, and gradually throughout Europe, they acquired all the remaining records of creating bodies that were extinct, the so called “closed fonds”, and, later on, the records of living organizations that had been kept in an inactive status for half century or so, all of the records left, the archives treasure of those years.

But, during the Second World War new agencies had come up, functioned, produced tons of records, and died. What to do with all those records? Archival institutions could not possibly

acquire them all. In addition, the post war agencies began producing records at a faster and faster rate and did not have in place any system for eliminating part of them on a regular basis. Two functions grew out of this mess: records management, which was conceived primarily as a disposal system, and archival appraisal, a selection system of last resort.

Fifty years later, the world has succeeded in finding again some order in the way it manages its records, and now the selection of the records starts like in the past in the creating office and is, or should be, regulated by a retention and disposition schedule throughout the records life cycle, so that, in the end, everything that, in such schedule, has been destined to permanent retention—the archives treasure of our days, identified jointly by records managers and archivists—will enter the archives and be subject to no further selection. The identification of the archives treasure of our days is carried out through this new function of archival appraisal, whose only new characteristic with respect to the selection occurring in previous centuries is the participation in it of the archival institution, organization, or program. Traditional archivists, those who were already archivists before the 1950s that is, and their followers, still do not like it, and consider it a necessary evil not because of selection per se, but because of the appraisal, the assignment of values, that conditions such activity. As Ken Thibodeau stated yesterday, the only properties of the records that we archivists should assess are their characteristics of authenticity, impartiality, naturalness, interrelatedness, and uniqueness, because the existence of the archival bond (that is, of the relationship among the records that belong in the same file, series, or fonds, which gives the records their unique contextual meaning and makes them all equally necessary to the existence of the aggregations), the existence of this bond provides the records with equal value with respect to each other. Thus, to destroy a part of the aggregation means to hurt the integrity of the whole and change the meaning of its parts. This is one of the reasons why, even in the

course of a planned disposition through the life cycle, selection does not occur within files, where the bond among the records is the strongest.

So, back to Seamus' question, **now that we supposedly can, why do not we keep it all?**

Because selection of the sources is part of life like any sort of selection, and if we do not select the records professionally, guided by our archival knowledge—as Michael Day said—somebody else will do it for us, and not as respectfully of the records properties as we would, rather on the basis of available resources, of conscious ideology, or of some bad legislation that requires saving everything for a specific time only,.. and then “all goes dark”—as Jason Baron said. **Why any specific archives conducts appraisal**—the question posed yesterday by Barbara Reed and reinforced by Hans Hofman—should be answered on the basis of the mission or mandate of the archives. There is not a unique general answer other than everyone tends to hold on to the things that one needs for survival and not to others. What is needed by different societies and organizations at different times is different and will continue to be different.

Now, the central question posed by this conference was whether appraisal as we understood it in the paper world has changed when confronted with the digital environment.

A statement was made yesterday by Ross Harvey about the use of the term appraisal...He said that we should perhaps use other terms for all the activities that have been described under the umbrella of the term appraisal. Ross is probably right. Terry Eastwood had already made a clear distinction between **selection** of records, which is the process that starts at creation and continues till the records are acquired by the archives for permanent retention, and is therefore the prelude to preservation, increasingly part of preservation itself, and **appraisal**—which is an attribution of

value to records, a value external to the records and defined by the acquiring institution or program—which is supposed to justify the choice of continuing retention for a possible permanent preservation. In his commentary on the appraisal position paper posted on the DPE site to which Maria Guercio referred, Verne Harris defines appraisal as “the telling of a story using records systems and sites of records creation as the primary raw material.” Indeed this is what appraisal would be if it were the assignment of an external value to records or to the activities generating the records rather than the recognition of their inherent value based on their nature and on the acquisition policy of the archives, and it would belong in the realm of the historian.

But, let’s talk now about **selection**.

From the reflections of Terry Eastwood, one may see that, with digital records, the function of selection has changed in four fundamental ways: first, the preserver must assess the **authenticity** of the records considered of continuing value; second, the preserver must determine the **feasibility** of the preservation of the authenticity of the records; third, the disposal decision must be made very **early** in the life of the records; and, fourth, the preserver must constantly **monitor** the records of the creator and, if warranted by the changes that they have undergone through time, revise the disposal decision. The implementation presented by Philip Boudrez supports the need for these activities.

Are these changes of a methodological or of a theoretical nature? In other words, is the selection process required for digital records a different way of doing the same thing or does it reflect a radical alteration of the nature of the selection function? I would say that the former statement is true and that the theory of selection has not changed: its purpose is still that of preserving a

concentrated, essential record of the past that maintains intact all its archival characteristics of naturalness, impartiality, interrelatedness, uniqueness, and, most importantly, authenticity, without which records could not be trusted either as evidence or as sources of information.

But, if not the selection theory, something quite essential to fulfill the requirements of such theory has changed. To start with, the methodological requirements posed by the digital environment are quite radical and require that archivists be involved with the creators on an ongoing basis and walk the very thin line that separates a competent guidance to proper creation and maintenance procedures from outright interference in the making and keeping of the records. It is a difficult balancing act, vital to the protection of the impartiality of the records, but it is possible to accomplish it if organizational policies, strategies and plans of action exist to support the work of the archivist. Indeed the “external” values that guide the appraisal of records in the course of the selection process must come from those written policies, strategies and plans of action—as Ken Thibodeau stated. Much more rigour is required with digital records than ever was with paper records, because of the trust that is put in the designated preserver, the only possible neutral third party handling materials that are easy to manipulate, tamper with, accidentally corrupt, or destroy.

In addition, and we have heard it clearly yesterday, the scalability of the process is an issue. While all archives will eventually acquire digital records, and none is completely ready for this, most archives do not have the resources to even begin to get ready. Thus, it is important to scale down the selection process in terms of basic requirements and to identify in each specific context what is essential and what is not for taking control of the digital records under the jurisdiction of each given archives. This is indeed the goal of the third phase of the InterPARES project,

implementing solutions in small and medium or low resources archival organizations or programs.

However, the selection process Terry Eastwood and Philip Boudrez described is only relevant and possible with digital records that are created by organizations, are kept in record keeping systems or in document management systems, are subject to laws and regulations, formally participate in procedures, etc. Even so, there are big obstacles to implementation also in these situations, and they derive from the quality of the records, from their poor metadata and documentation, from the archives ability to maintain their characteristics, including functionality and interoperability, and from the limits of the human and financial resources available, as pointed out by Rory McLeod. This might mean, that, instead of or, hopefully, before examining and assessing the value of records, we have to focus on records creators and their functions, and learn how to appraise records by understanding functions, conducting simultaneously a top down and a bottom up analysis—as Fiorella Foscarini and Philip Boudrez told us—or also mean—as Mariella Guercio and yesterday Barbara Read pointed out—that appraisal needs to become an iterative process that only stops when the records acquired by the archives are designated as destined to permanent preservation. I am sure that Ross Harvey does not intend for a selection process to continue forever, because we will eventually end up with keeping nothing from any given time. The values attributed to records at any given time as revealed by that which we have chosen to preserve are themselves an important source of information and are to be protected by protecting the acquisition as it happened. By technical re-appraisal he refers to the choice of changing the format of records, not of eliminating them.

But the most significant change I see has to do with the object of our selection, with **the material** we appraise in order to make a selection for preservation. And this is also the area in which the term appraisal appears to be reaching a bit too far, and needing the support of terms describing different, sometimes new, activities.

Talking about the material we appraise, I am referring both to the areas of endeavour generating this material and to its technical and formal characteristics. For centuries archives have acquired records of an administrative nature. When records of artists or scientists entered the archives, they did so together with their personal correspondence, accounting book, etc, that is, as part of the artist's or the scientist's fonds (sometimes as part of the fonds of those who hired them, like the Roman Catholic Church financial ministry). While these circumstances still exist today, the arts and the sciences are often large collaborative endeavours; they are organized in and behave as large business organizations or government institutions...in some cases they are business organizations or government institutions. The materials they create are in large part the records of our times and we must preserve them. The entities produced by media arts and scientific research then come to our attention as digital materials of great complexity. However, interestingly enough, they are not technologically or formally different from the digital materials generated today by city administrations or by some federal agencies such as Statistics Canada or the Ministry of Natural Resources. Geospatial data sets are produced by a variety of activities, and so are records that enable performances or instruct on how to generate further records. Increasingly, confronted with these digital entities, archivists feel that they have first to identify what is the record and, when unable to do so, to determine, on the basis of the creators functions and activities, whether a record should exist, and if so, to help the creator to redesign the system to enable it to create records that can be preserved and serve a memorial or an evidential

function. Now, is this an appraisal activity? I do not think so. It does occur in the course of the assessment of the records for selection and preservation purpose, but **to collaborate with the creator to design its digital system and its components**, like the metadata schemas necessary for a certain type of records, **is a records creation and management activity**, perhaps even only a consultancy activity, not an appraisal activity. Because of this, InterPARES has produced a booklet for records creators (individuals and community of practice, as well as organizations) to guide them in the creation of proper records that can be authentically maintained over time and, eventually, appraised and selected for continuing preservation. **Appraisal is an activity conducted on existing records in relation to values defined by an archival policy**. So, let's make some examples of the difficulties for appraisal proper presented by the characteristics of the digital material we are confronted with.

1) Digital music. 3 types of records (manifested and stored): recording of a performance (digital audio), stored record (computer patch) enabling a performance, manifested record instructing a performance (digital score). Which one to select for preservation depends on the purpose of the archives, and, as demonstrated by the case studies of the National Library of Wales, requires a close collaboration with the creators.

2) Astronomy data. 3 types of records: daily data dumps expressed as images; data sets expressed as stable content; data sets expressed as dynamic interactive content. There is no question that scientific data must be preserved overtime, but in what form or by whom in each given form? The first two types of records are indeed of the kind archives are used to preserve, while the third might be more usefully kept by the creator for further use. If the third type of material does not have a limited variability of content and form, perhaps the database containing them should be

treated as a record and appraised in its entirety, with the intent of acquiring it or not, rather than of selecting parts of its content.

[In relation to data sets, I would like to make a brief reference to Nilsson's paper and to the idea of preserving only the data when an existing record is well known—going the other way around. This is not a new thing. Medieval notaries used to preserve the *imbreviaturae* rather than complete records of transactions, but kept the *formularia*, so that some time in the future the data could be inserted in the proper form]

3) Blogs. Individual personal or professional blogs are individual records. Archives are not in the business of acquiring individual records out of context. Thus, they would encounter blogs in the course of an appraisal activity of either the fonds of a person or the fonds of an organization, such as a newspaper. Now, is the blog such a new thing? Obviously no. We have very old blogs called *glossae*, the writings of the *glossatori* on the margin of texts. If we had not preserved them, much of our jurisprudence would never have developed as it has. Thus, again, we must consider the identity and the integrity of the record as it exists when we decide on what to select for preservation.

Now, what about the case Michael Piggott has shown us: records that are purposely generated by indigenous people in order to preserve memorials of their past? In other words, from the initial purpose of selection, through the purpose of preservation, should archival appraisal move towards the acquisition of a function of production of a recorded memory, but a long time after the occurrence of the recorded activities or events, not during their course (as in the case mentioned earlier, where bad records or only dynamic data sets are created while records should exist in their place for operational and accountability reasons)? There is nothing new about this

idea of encouraging the documentation of an undocumented past—one needs only remember the documentation strategies of the '70s—except for the fact that the type of materials generated in the process envisioned by the Trust in Technology project can only come into existence because of digital technology and can be considered authored—if not created—by indigenous people (the creator is in fact the project...if the project were run by the archives, the creator would be the archives). Now, one cannot help wonder what happens to the impartiality of the records when they are created post factum for the purpose for which they are intended to be used by researchers rather than as a by-product of activity. The same question arises also in the case of the self-selection of the Australian individuals participating in the census in ways different from all other residents. In other words, in both cases, if we are talking about archival appraisal, archival theory as we know it is set aside. But I do not think we are talking about appraisal. I think that this is a **documentation activity**, not an archival activity at all. After the conclusion of the Trust and Technology project, the archives that is competent by jurisdiction or policy will have to decide whether to acquire the fonds of the project Trust in Technology, and it is at that point that appraisal will occur, and, if the material authored by the indigenous people will be found worth acquiring on the basis of the archival policy, then archival description will place it in the right context, which will allow researchers to use it for what it is, the record of how indigenous people see a memorial of themselves as a people, centuries after the facts and following a communication schema framed by others. As to the content-rich census records, they are what they are, and certainly what they say cannot be generalised. The census is kept in its entirety, thus, the task of appraisal in this case will simply be that of documenting what happened.

The issue is quite different when, for reasons primarily of social and professional responsibility, but also of transparency and accountability, records must be created that contain a certain type of data and must be kept for the same use for which they are created, probably for a very long time. I am referring here to the patient health records discussed by Spyropoulos and Papagounos. In such case, appraisal, that is, the assessment of the value of specific data sets, is conducive to the definition of the form of the records that should contain them and of the digital presentation that will allow for their long term use, accessibility and preservation. There is no issue of record impartiality here, and although appraisal does serve a creation purpose and is followed by the actual creation of new documentary forms, it does not affect the nature of the resulting records, as the data sets already exist and the records that come to contain them are used in the usual and ordinary course of business by the creators for their own purposes...they are not generated for research purpose.

[note: this is not much different from what is happening at the Singapore at the Technological University, where a new way of teaching using constructivist and critical pedagogy requires the acceptance by the university administration of types of records demonstrating students knowledge that never existed before, and that are purposely created to enable documentation of students' progress].

What all the cases discussed in these two days do demonstrate is the truth of what Terry Eastwood said, that appraisal, differently from selection, is entirely conditioned by context, and requires two parties, the creator and the preserver, who must have a very clear, transparent relationship. Precisely because of the fragility and volatility of digital records, trust is paramount and must permeate every activity carried out on them. This is why what Barbara Reed called the

democratization of appraisal, and the InterPARES project calls documentation of the selection process, is so important. And the justification for appraisal decisions should not be based only on archival motivations, but also on costs and risk benefit, as shown by Perla Innocenti and Rory McLeod, and on ethical and legal motivations.

What about automated approaches to appraisal? They require the creation of a set of consistent and exclusive rules. How can we do this? Boles and Young tried fifteen years ago and failed. I honestly do not believe that automated approach is or should be possible, but we do need a scientific methodology. The scientific methodology for appraisal that so many have called for does not really require a rigorous cost-benefit analysis, although this is absolutely necessary for management purposes, because no record should be refused only on financial grounds and no record should be acquired just because it would cost no money, or rules that can be implemented in some sort of automated way, although those related to the technological aspects of the records can be very useful for technical appraisal, or strategies for text mining and other tools for visualizing processes, although this could provide support to appraisal, but first and foremost, a methodology for understanding the nature and characteristics of modern record creators, for identifying their functions and for understanding the nature, structure and behaviour of the new digital entities we are constantly presented with by the new technologies and by the uses that people make of them.

Sir Hilary Jenkinson used to refer to the archivist as the “jack of all trades,” and believed as I do that archivists must be “all to all records”, including the most complex ones and those created in the course of activities we might not fully understand, like blogging or messaging. It is a very tall order in light of the difficulties with which we have been presented during the past two days,

but discussing such difficulties and accepting the challenge is the first step towards success. And this is my parting wish to all of you: that you may embrace the challenge and meet it, and have lots of fun in the process. And may the sun come out for the week-end and warm you up while you stroll through the streets of this beautiful city! Thank you!