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An Accountability Framework for Archival Appraisal

Jim Suderman

Abstract

The electronic environment has caused archivists to re-examine what they do and why they do it. What was understood or perhaps taken for granted in the paper environment is not understood and cannot be taken for granted in the new electronic environment. But such a re-examination also tells us that archivists do not believe themselves to be simply part of a production line, overseeing the acquisition of some records and the destruction of others. It reminds us that we believe ourselves to be active and responsible participants in the shaping of human memory and contributors to the quality of life within our societies.

It is not surprising then that we should look to our processes to see how they are accountable to our stakeholders. And central to any concept of archival accountability is our understanding of the records we seek to preserve. In this way the remarkable impact of modern information and communications technologies on the conception, creation, use and preservation of records requires us to not only refine our understanding of what we mean by records but also how we accountably fulfil such a core function as appraising them. It is my goal to outline a framework for understanding archival appraisal accountability. The paper begins by describing archival appraisal as a business process of archivists that is executed within archival institutions and goes on to address appraisal principles and ethics. It concludes by suggesting that an essential component of any accountability framework is determining for how long archivists are accountable.

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