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APPRAISAL OF POTENTIAL DIGITAL ARCHIVAL CONTENT

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Abstract:

The appraisal is a set of critical processes and skills in records management and archival practice. It is not an elementary operation; thus, to some archival writers, it belongs to the background of archivists' work. On the other hand, other archivists consider appraisal a critical archival process. This paper thematises the value of digital archival materials. The author starts with a reflection of value and appraisal and a literature review. Then, the author examines various digital archival content and their value in archives and repositories with distinctive missions. After that, the author reduces the catalogue of values that governs appraisal operations and analyses the notion of the value of digital content. Finally, the paper provides essential guidance for applying consistent appraisal criteria on potential digital archival content.

Key words:

appraisal, digital archival content, recordness, semiotics of archives, value

Izvleček:

Vrednotenje potencialnih digitalnih arhivskih vsebin

Vrednotenje je niz ključnih procesov in veščin pri upravljanju z zapisi in v arhivski praksi. Gre za kompleksen postopek; zato del arhivske stroke meni, da ne sodi v ospredje arhivistovega dela. Po drugi strani pa nekateri arhivisti označujejo vrednotenje kot ključen arhivski proces. Ta članek obravnava vrednost digitalnega arhivskega gradiva. Avtor na začetku razmišlja o vrednosti in vrednotenju ter poda pregled relevantne literature. Nato preuči različne digitalne arhivske vsebine in njihovo vrednost v arhivih in repozitorijih različnih vrst. V nadaljevanju avtor omeji katalog vrednot, ki usmerjajo procese vrednotenja, ter izvede analizo pojma vrednosti digitalnih vsebin. Na koncu pa članek podaja osnovna navodila za uporabo doslednih meril vrednotenja potencialnih digitalnih arhivskih vsebin.

Ključne besede:

vrednotenje, digitalna arhivska vsebina, zapisljivost, semiologija arhivov, vrednost

Appraisal is a work of careful analysis and archival scholarship, not a mere procedure. (Cook, 1992, in Nesmith, Bak & Schwartz, 2021:121)

1 Introduction

Several similar definitions of *appraisal* in archival terminology sources define it as establishing whether some *content* of interest to records managers and archivists has a value that makes it worth accessioning and keeping for some time, over the long term, or permanently (Appraisal in ICA-InterPARES MAT and SAA dictionaries), depending on different national archival regulations and philosophies. The appraisal could be performed before, during or after accessioning the archive. If done before, it is done in the environment of the records creators as an evaluation. The records creators' goal is to create fonds that the smallest group of employees could manage as possible, and it emphasises the need to destroy the records with no value when value ceases to exist. If it is done during accessioning, it is conducted by an archival institution and linked with its acquisition policy and mission (Cook, in Nesmith, Bak & Schwartz, 2021:122; Craig, 2004). If performed after accession, it is a re-appraisal process. To some archival writers, the re-appraisal is problematic (Benedict, 1984). To some, the problem lies in the appraisal process in general. According to these authors, this could be for various reasons, from the inadequacy of appraisal for the contemporary technological environment (Gilliland, 2014:18) to the inconsistency of the appraisal with the classical European archival theory (Duranti, 1994). However, the appraisal process reflects the role of the archival institution in time and society and circumstances have changed since archival concepts inseparably linked to Roman law were actual (Boles & Green, 1996). For many archival writers, the appraisal is the condition for successful management, preservation, and usage of archival material. However, the foundation of appraisal in the archival theory of the past should be of little importance. After all, although it dramatically benefits from self-reflection, archival science is not predominantly theoretical science (Ritter, 1987:42). Therefore, the advocacy to include appraisal in archival science studies makes much sense.

The value reflects the definition, role, and usage of archival material. The value and appraisal thus depend on notions of both archival material and archives (i.e., societal institutions, community repositories), apprehension of archival records and archives by numerous archival practitioners and users with different education and motifs. The appraisal is not an easy, straightforward, objective, and precise step-by-step process, and it cannot be streamlined to apply to every organisation. It depends on the skills of the records managers and archivists. The excellence in appraisal skills is reachable through education and learning about various appraisal schools, their reasoning, and the practice of records managers and archival experts. Although it cannot be set as a stringent process, the appraisal should not be unsystematic and shambolic: even skills such as "alchemy" (Cox, 2004:283) depend on some rulebooks. It is a process that requires high-level theoretical frameworks and skilful practitioners and turns archivists to be responsive to different users' views.

2 Literature on the appraisal and the value

Tertiary archival literature defines and details *appraisal*, other linked processes and the value attribute (ICA-InterPARES MAT dictionary, SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology, Encyclopaedia of Archival science). The appraisal process can result in preservation. In this case, it is linked with selection, "archivalisation" as the impulse for

archiving or its initial stage (Ketelaar, Summers), accessioning as gaining control over the material of archival value, acquisition policy and re-appraisal activities. *Disposition* is the point that diverts this overall process to preservation or destruction. *Deaccession* is the process by which material, once transferred, is removed from the archives. Many archival writers thematise appraisal. Appraisal, as the subject of interest, occupies archival literature over past decades, from Jenkinson, who rejects it in principle (but leaves it for central registry offices, Jenkinson, 1922:144), to Schellenberg, Booms, and Acland, Bailey, Bastian, Bearman, Beaven, Blouin, Boles & Greene, Botticelli, Brown, Caswell, Cook, Cumming & Picot, Dollar, Duranti, Eastwood, Foscarini, Frognar, Galloway, Gilliland, Harris, Hilton, Johnson, Kesner, Kolsrud, Lemieux, Lockwood, Menne-Haritz, Olsberg, Pollard, Sink, Summers, Wiśniewska-Drewniak, Yeo, Young, and many others.

This paper does not aim for a comparative analysis of appraisal theories or mapping these theories; however, it adverts to the number of books and papers about appraisal and its significance. There is an essential link between appraisal and *value* in the literature. To name a few archival authors who underlined this link clearly – Barbara Craig sees appraisal as a broad archival function, an intellectual activity, and a process (Craig, 2004: 129-130, 161-162). She emphasises the value as the primary term of the appraisal (Craig, 2004:82). Richard Cox also sees appraisal as "the core intellectual responsibility of the archivist" (Cox, 2004:276), differentiating appraisal from collecting and "memory rooms" (Cox, 2002; Cox, 2004:50, 240). He links appraisal with the organisational objectives, construction of public memory and evidence or memory-related values, in contrast to objectives and values of collecting, which range from symbolic to commercial or even those comparable to religious values. Through the macroappraisal theory, Cook aims to grasp social dynamism in institutional and other archival material reflecting citizen and state interactions. Records which expose that interactions have the most value for archiving. Another theory related to appraisal, the documentation strategy, links appraisal to thematically oriented acquisition and the pursuit of records related to topics that should exist in society because they mirror contemporary societal values (Samuels, 1986:116-117, 120). Postmodernism and feminism both underline the diversity of values in archives-forming processes, where "nothing is certain" (Harris, 2012:154) and where we are caught in "multiple coexisting archival realities" (Caswell, 2013:277). Caswell and Cifor introduce "ethics of care" into the appraisal function and analyse four relationships and values linked to these relationships: archivist-records creator, archivist-topics, archivist-user, and archivist-community (Caswell and Cifor, 2016). Their view means that appraisal is led by understanding the creator's values, empathy for subjects, and listening to users' needs. It is possible to appraise *content* by applying more than one value simultaneously. Considering that, we could ask about the potential digital archival content and the values for its appraisal.

3 The richness of various potential digital archival content

The problems in the appraisal process heighten when performed on digital content because the definitions of the material of archival practice and the catalogue of values deviate from definitions applicable to traditional paper records (Ivanović, 1999:8). The catalogue of values will be discussed in the next section of the paper. This part of the article focuses on what the term digital archival material should encapsulate. First, separating digital material from paper in archival processes, including appraisal, does not make sense anymore. In most creators' organisations and agencies, work is done in a hybrid records management environment. Paper records get scanned straightaway, and officials use digital surrogates. The entire administration strives for paperless digital

citizen-state interactions, which have become common with implementing various e-Citizen platforms. Second, the traditional "record" concept is too constricted for our contemporary digital environments. In today's digital environments, designers of content services or systems and archival practitioners should ask themselves what content requires managing and preserving. Third, it is the question of the status of digital material, as Ivanović noticed (Ivanović, 1998:10). If a "record is a construct...of a deed...along with a trace that deed leaves behind" (Hurley, 2021:106-107), we may not need to conceptualise our target of interest just as records. Instead, we could broaden its definition to other forms of fixed information that construct deeds and actions.

There are many forms of digital content except records in the traditional sense. Potential digital content that might be preserved covers mixed textual, visual and audible objects with hypertextual content, infographics content, video content with comments and additional links, audio recordings, various datasets and content derived from these datasets; visualisations, technical and geospatial content, user-generated content, content resulted from collaboration using wikis and other means, shared databases, graphical databases, the media content of multiple provenances, educational and other games, podcasts, blog posts, vlogs, virtual and augmented reality content, social media content, content resulting from various communication processes, and so on. (Let us ask ourselves very quickly in passing to what extent would the diplomatic analysis apply to these forms of digital content that, more or less, lack the attribute of "recordness"?)

In addition to the problem of the broadness of digital content that needs our attention and preservation, the "recordness" attribute indicates only one value from the catalogue of values – the evidential value. It, therefore, cannot serve as the only recommendation for positive appraisal decisions. Some archival writers refer to the concept of recordness as an obstacle to successful acquisition as it "leads both to the retention of vast amount of unused material by archives and their failure to acquire and preserve much that could be truly useful" (Green, 1998:144). Undoubtedly, mainstream archivists and users expect to recognise the attribute of recordness when examining official records. However, other types of archives and their users are willing to conduct with the preserved material in circumstances that are not purely evidentiary driven. Or, maybe the notion of evidence includes more than the connection between archival material and deeds? Not just evidence of the deed but direct or interpretative evidence of responsibility, evidence of the situation, evidence of structure, evidence of social dynamics, etc. Some archives do not acquire material for its evidential value in their relationship to deeds but for other notions of evidence and other values. A considerable degree of these archives exists nowadays as digital repositories.

4 Reduction of value catalogue and analysis of value of digital archival content

There are several different values, from monetary value, technical, evidential, memorial, and societal - to emotional, cognitive, and intrinsic value. Monetary and technical values are extrinsic to archival material because they refer to the possibility of acquiring material and thus should be excluded in appraisal in a refined sense. These values do not answer the question of the worth of material for me, my archive or our community's archive. Monetary value resists the idea of the pricelessness of cultural artefacts, which is naïve. However, due to its dependence on the market and related external factors, it is essentially excluded from the archival taxonomy of values. Technical value was less often applied to traditional archival material but more discussed and considered when discussing digital materials. In the case of traditional paper records, archivists did not seem to attribute primary significance to the "technical value"

or the possibility of acquiring content, as Ivanovic (1998) has already stated. It strays the archivists from their duty of treating all archival content, regardless of the medium, with the same care. The technical criterium is questionable because it misses the link to the meaning of material and instead relates to the practicality of acquisition. To say that acquisition relates to appraisal (and Craig, Cox, and many others have stated this relationship) does not necessarily mean that these processes are identical. The link between appraisal and acquisition should not be mistaken for a conceptual interconnection. Something could be considered valuable and loved, even though it may be impossible to reach, acquire, manage, or preserve.

Similarly, other authors, like Ericson, distinguish appraisal from acquisition. The appraisal answers why to preserve something, and the acquisition focuses on whether we, the particular community operating the repository, should preserve it (Ericson, 1991:68; Duranti and Franks, 2015:9). Technical "value" in this sense does not relate to fundamental appraisal choices. Instead, it relates to acquisition capacity – the impracticality, impossibility, incapacity and thus unwillingness and refusal to acquire the material. It becomes essential when "realistic" acquisition decisions trump "ideal" appraisal choices. "Selection for preservation" (Ivanović, 1998:9) is essential but should not be mistaken for a value-related consideration. For example, and this could easily be a common one, archivists can reject large paper formats for their archives if they lack cabinets for preservation. However, the reason for this act of discarding would lie in the inadequacy of equipment, not in the insufficiency of the worth of archivalia. Article 2 of the ICA Code of Ethics links acquisition, not the appraisal, with risks associated with "the integrity or security of records" (1996). Technical "value" is, in truth, the technical *precondition of acquisition*. Acquisition answers the question of *my ability to preserve the content*, paraphrasing Timothy Ericson's definition of acquisition. *My capability of preserving the content binds a technical value to the acquisition, not the appraisal process*. Even if the adjectives "technical" and "appraisal" are put in the syntagmatic relationship (Technical appraisal, SAA Dictionary of archives terminology), "technical" relates to the preservation-related reasons and use-related reasons like the readability (Ivanović, 1998:8). In earliest days of our coexistence with digital archival material, in the innocent period of troubles with dust on media, readability issues were considered as something that negatively affects the value of records. Dollar linked "technical considerations" with data consistency, readability, and validation (Dollar, 1978). (Even then) it felt like a matter of future usage, not the value itself. (Nowadays) when digital material becomes ordinary and the digital environment becomes more stable, the connection between appraisal, acquisition, and preservation should be the following. The material being appraised is a *conditio sine qua non* for acquiring and preserving. The acquisition connects appraisal with the tendency to own material, defined in the form of the archives' mission, and with the practical preservation capacity of the archives. Archival material *in the repository* results from appraisal and its concretisation – acquisition.

Other listed values answer the principal question – not what can be bought, sold, or invested in, nor what could be preserved by my repository, but simply what is valuable to me, someone, or some group as a subject. In Jenkinson's case, for the creator. Schellenberg adds current and future administrators or researchers and their understanding of the institution's operations, future users, and their information needs (Schellenberg, 1956:139-140). In Brenneke's theory it is about sources of the past (Schellenberg, 1956:14) and proofs of history and administration (Duranti and Franks, 2019:70). These values, evidential, memorial, societal, emotional, cognitive, and intrinsic, thus pertain to the *archival values catalogue*. In many cases, archival material evokes more than one value from this catalogue, and its appraisal follows decisions concerning multiple values. Memorial and societal value evoke cohesion of society or its

part and helps to build their common or shared heritage. In its illusory silence, emotional value convokes the former emotional states of the individual or group of individuals and can intensify such emotional states. Cognitive or informational value calls attention to new information for users about some persons, facts, or events. Conversely, it is challenging to establish it precisely, and it should be considered as an additional value of archival material. It is the weak spot of Schellenberg's conceptualisation of value, and he was aware of it. Intrinsic value is even harder to establish than cognitive value. It refers to the uniqueness of the archival item and, even more, the transcendence of material, which ceases to be the mere oddment of administrative activity. In its autoreferentiality, the intrinsic value is the final value of archival material; all archival material, as such, has some intrinsic value. The catalogue of values is open and incomplete, but it should be set to rules. The archival-value system should be uniform in a thorough manner – for what reason it should be pinpointed by answering the previously stated principal question or using some other sound monotonous principle.

Once defined in the current management system (system in a broader sense of environment, consisting of a community of managers, other involved experts and users, ICT components and repository, and rules for their use), digital material can have various archival values and become digital archival content. To apply these various archival values, the definition of digital materials must encompass records and other materials that transcend the notion of "recordness" because "recordness" by archival tradition best refers to an evidential value. If "recordness" is an obsolete term in contemporary information governance and archives, the notion of "archival records" could be renewed and even replaced by *archival content*. In recent decades, a maturation in understanding and defining the material of digital archives could be detected. A record, recording, image, post, database, or dataset, all comprehended as archival content, could have evidential value for its creator or creators (for fiscal reasons, proof of accountability) evidential value about its creators and the functions they conduct, cognitive value for its users, memorial and societal value for the community or society, emotional value for individuals, and intrinsic value per se. Appraisal transforms the archival content from the trace of activity to the self-referential object and the trace of something other than activity. Finding these values requires proficiency and makes appraisal tasks more complex than just following some "mere procedure" (as Cook stated in Nesmith, Bak & Schwartz, 2021:121).

A parenthesis - digital content of archival value is ingested into the archives according to the technical precondition of acquisition. Managers and users could even reflect on the monetary, non-archival value of archival content – it does not belong to the professional archival universe, but it is not forbidden.

5 Conclusion, recommendation, and future work

Various appraisal concepts and criteria circulate in records management and archival communities. In general, appraisal criteria should relate to the value and meaning of the material for users. Nevertheless, what is value/what are values? The question about the values themselves could finally be raised, and a hypothesis could finally be formulated. According to the opinion of the author of this paper, a value selects and directs the correlation of archival content and its always-evading and thus non-present *signified* (Saussure, 2000:123) – the activity users were never involved, the creator that ceased to exist, some emotion which was forgotten – the past. A specific value directs to a distinctive chain of supplements; a chain of supplements, in some cases, could be endless, especially if it is launched by emotional value.

It also changes the archival content because it denotes the type of trace this content turns out for a user or users to be. This operation is even more seeable in the case of digital archival material than in traditional paper records. It is indicative that digital records are easy to reuse. This operation is installed in the foundation of the reuse of archival material. Values are unsurprisingly linked to the concept of re-usage.

For the user or recipient, an archival item supplements an object of memory or identity. However, the user cannot construct the past entirely; it is unreachable. Archival item replaces the creator (the creator requires archival material to be constructed), the creator stands for acts (acts require creators) and acts supplement order (order is constructed through deeds). Nevertheless, these *signifieds* are not realities. Past has lost its quiddity, and it is not the past anymore – but the archival narration or interpretation of the past. Because of this inaccessibility and distance, the past requires archival items for construction and completion. The source lies in archives, not in realities, constructed but taken for granted.

We should not reduce the strength of archives. It is a logocentric view of archives (comparable to weakening of *signifiers*, scripture and text, Derrida, 1976:370) and a positivistic view of archival science as auxiliary science. For the user, in the present, it is not crucial whether the event precedes the archives. The past needs archives – users cannot know the past without the archives. Archival content derives or shapes events in which users were not involved. This process does not occur with events only; the same goes for identities, community, and reminiscence of emotion. What does archival content betoken for its managers and users? An archival item becomes "a condition of experience" for the user (also comparable to scripture and text, Derrida, 1976:216), an experience enabled using values for appraisal.

The value should be seen through meaning and meaning through this supplementation process (the flow of *evoked signifieds* without the possibility of reaching the positive reality). Technical "value" does not participate in this process; it does not offer itself as a supplement. It supplements nothing. This process of supplementing guides us to deem archival items worthy. "[M]eaning and significance *in* archives is unstable, imbricated in ever-shifting contexts..." (Harris, 2012:153-154). Although very contextual, which makes appraisal dependent on historical-societal context (Cox, 2004:245), community- or personal-life period, this supplementing process can help us focus on the significance of potential archival content. It is crucial in our digital world that involves content with many unstable and volatile characteristics, because of which we could maybe decide to discard the material. An archival value directs the user in his or her interaction with archival material towards event and creator (evidential value), identity, community, society, nation (memorial and societal value), emotion, empathy, and experience (emotional value). Applying various values by different persons or even by the same persons at different times provides various meanings to archival items. Archival items then serve different purposes. That is why the same documentary material could be considered worthy by community archivists and worthless by archivists who work in mainstream archives (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2022; Caswell, in Bastian & Flinn, 2020 – they would agree that a community archive would grab what a mainstream archive throws overboard).

This paper dealt with deconstructing a heterogenous system of values casually used by many archivists, constructing a neater system of archival values, and initialising the (Derridean) hypothesis of the archival value theory. Values direct the interpretation of archives and personal or shared history, identity, and future. Future work should dig deeper, test the hypothesis introduced here, and further explore the notion of archival value.

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SUMMARY

VREDNOTENJE POTENCIALNIH DIGITALNIH ARHIVSKIH VSEBIN

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Vrednotenje je sklop ključnih procesov in veščin v upravljanju zapisov ter teoriji in praksi arhivistike. Za nekatere arhivske teoretike vrednotenje ni v skladu s klasično evropsko arhivsko teorijo in naj bi bilo zato postavljeno v drugi plan. Za nekatere druge pa zavzema ključen oziroma bistven segment arhivskega dela, saj na njegovi podlagi prihaja do razlik v obsegu dela in postopkih, kot sta opisovanje gradiva in njegova hramba. Vrednotenje tudi ni natančen, absoluten in enoten postopek. Kljub temu bo avtor skrbno preučil nedokončan in odprt sistem vrednot, povezanih z arhivskimi vsebinami, skozi prizmo procesa arhivske interpretacije in z upoštevanjem pomena in doprinosa vsebin.

Digitalno arhivsko gradivo je v nekaterih pogledih v nasprotju s klasično arhivsko teorijo tudi zaradi svoje značilnosti in načina uporabe. Ker obstaja v arhivskih repozitorijih v mnogih oblikah, obstaja tudi več različnih gledanj nanj. Ne bi bilo primerno, če bi uporabili vrednotenje samo za tisto digitalno gradivo, ki ustreza nečemu, kar tradicionalno obravnavamo kot "zapisi". Obilna količina digitalnih vsebin postane očitna pri upravljanju vsebin v podjetjih in pri storitvah vsebin v oblaku. Arhivisti bi morali razširiti definicijo zapisa z lastnostmi arhivskega gradiva na vse vsebine, ki so zajete v repozitorijih – to so npr. različni nabori podatkov, podatki iz podatkovnih zbirk, različna sporočila ter dinamična spletna in multimedijška gradiva. Poleg tega obstajajo danes zelo različne vrste arhivskih repozitorijev. Digitalna družba in tradicionalni državni arhivi so si med sabo različni, zato se pri svojem delu sklicujejo na različne vrednote in merila.

Vrednotenje in z njim povezani postopki so sicer zapletene, vendar ne nedosegljive veščine. Kot večina spretnosti tudi te zahtevajo predanost, premišljevanje in doslednost pri konceptualizaciji, pristopu in uporabi, kakor so že navajali nekateri arhivisti. Osrednji koncept je vrednost. Avtor nasprotuje nepremišljeni in površni rabi koncepta vrednotenja, zlasti v primerih potencialnih digitalnih arhivskih vsebin. Namesto tega obravnava različne cilje vrednotenja v digitalnih okoljih (povezanih z digitalizirano in digitalno vsebino), omeji katalog vrednosti na sistem in poda osnovne smernice za uporabo meril vrednotenja.