

Capturing the Broad Spectrum of Human Experience: Some Suggestions on the Adoption of the Hybrid Model as an Appraisal Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Archival appraisal remains one of the thorniest issues in archival science. For centuries, archivists and academics have grappled with this issue on the best methodology to be adopted but without reaching a consensus. This is because the future research potential of records is a variable that is difficult to determine and this highlights the gravity of the appraisal task. It is against this background that the reliability of our collections as evidence is brought into question particularly in this web-driven information culture. It is apparent that the pressure to save less is a reality in view of this age of information abundance wrought by the introduction of new technologies. The temptation to dispose is thus significantly high in any appraisal endeavour and the hybrid model is strongly recommended as a documentary strategy.

Catturare l'ampio spettro dell'esperienza umana: alcuni suggerimenti per l'adozione del modello ibrido come metodologia di valutazione

SINTESI

La valutazione d'archivio rimane una delle più spinose questioni della scienza archivistica. Per secoli, archivisti e studiosi si sono cimentati con questo tema sulla migliore metodologia da adottare, ma senza raggiungere un consenso. Questo perché il futuro potenziale di ricerca dei documenti è una variabile difficile da determinare, e questo evidenzia la gravità del compito di valutazione. È contro questo contesto che l'affidabilità delle nostre collezioni come prova viene messa in discussione soprattutto in questa cultura dell'informazione guidata dal web. È chiaro che la pressione a salvare meno è una realtà in vista di questa epoca di abbondanza d'informazioni formate con l'introduzione di nuove tecnologie. La tentazione di scartare è quindi significativamente elevata in ogni sforzo valutativo, e il modello ibrido è fortemente raccomandato come strategia documentaria.

Zajemanje širokega spektra človeških izkušenj: nekaj predlogov za uvedbo hibridnega modela kot metodologije valorizacije

IZVLEČEK

Valorizacija ostaja eno izmed najtežavnih opravil v arhivski znanosti. Stoletja so se arhivisti in akademiki spoprijemali s tem opravilom na osnovi različnih metodologij, vendar pri tem nikoli niso dosegli konsenza. Raziskovalni potencial gradiva za prihodnost je namreč spremenljivka, ki jo je težko določiti in prav to še poudarja pomembnost in težavnost valorizacije. To pa je v nasprotju z dejstvom, da je zanesljivost dokazne vrednosti naših zbirk v tej, na spletu temelječi informacijski kulturi, zelo vprašljiva. V dobi informacijskega obilja, ki ga je povzročilo uvajanje novih tehnologij je očitno, da je pritisk na to, da se shrani čim manj, realnost. Skušnjava po izločanju je pri vsaki valorizaciji precej visoka, zato je zelo priporočljiv hibridni model.

Introduction

Archival appraisal is a contentious issue in archival science and for all the thinking, there is as yet no generally accepted theory of appraisal that could inform methodology and practice (Shepherd 1997). This is the view similarly put forward by Couture (2005) when she noted that many authors have written on the theoretical and practical aspects of appraisal and that what is discernible is how latent a minefield the issue is with regards to methods, processes, and approaches. Cox (2011) echoed similar sentiments and reiterated that appraisal is an endlessly complex activity and the contentious issue of re-appraisal suggests that archivists have not resolved everything. A coherent approach to appraisal is evidently lacking (Cox 2011) and Ngulube (2001) agreed and asserted that the process is characterised by a hit and miss approach due to lack of a standardized appraisal approach. Despite the schismatism, appraisal remains one of the most critical responsibilities of an archivist. Archivists are the society's gatekeepers as they determine what is to be preserved for posterity.

It is against this background that the reliability of our collections as evidence is brought into question particularly in this web-driven information culture. It is apparent that the pressure to save less is a reality in view of this age of information abundance wrought by the introduction of new technologies. The temptation to dispose is thus significantly high in any appraisal endeavour. To avoid this pitfall and to be ethically correct, the thesis of this paper is anchored in the proposition that after the appraisal process, those records deemed of no value should be kept by utilizing the omnipresent technologies be they digital or microfilm.

The hybrid model is therefore strongly recommended as a documentary strategy. In this model, hybridization will integrate appraisal as a document management technique with document imaging in order to preserve an impartial documentary record. The use of microfilm and digital imaging alongside appraisal will ensure that the broad spectrum of human experience is sufficiently documented whilst addressing the underlying document management concerns of archivists. This model sounds plausible and does guarantee in the long term access to the complete documentary record of society. In addition, this model eliminates the controversy surrounding appraisal as it was Professor John Franklin Hope who poignantly noted that one must save everything because "there's no way to know what's going to be valuable ten, fifteen or a hundred years from now" (Cited in Ham 1984:12).

Historical development of archival appraisal

The history of appraisal goes back to 1898, when the Dutch triumvirate of Muller, Freith and Fruin, pioneers in archival historiography, advocated the provenance principle in archival arrangement. The volume of records then was manageable and archivists could keep everything (Cook 1995:38; Millar 2010:114-115) and the author of this paper is of the view that this practice should be maintained in view of the fact that omnipresent technologies will eliminate the need for selectivity and enable us to retain everything as noted by Professor John Franklin Hope earlier on. This view was also shared by David Holdsworth (cited in Deegan and Tanner 2006) who remarked that:

If it costs very little to keep digital data, we might resist the temptation to discard those items of little interest to us, but which researchers might find valuable.

To the contrary, some commentators, notably (Yeo 2012; Bettington 2008; Millar 2010; Cox 2011) have argued that we cannot (yet) live in an ideal world where no record is ever destroyed in spite of the advances in technology.

Be that as it may, a number of authors have grappled with the appraisal problem when it comes to the issues of theory and practice but with no solution offered as to the best methodology to be adopted. Archival appraisal is a contingent, subjective and political process that invariably involves an element of risk (Bettington 2008) and the gravity of moulding the future that is entrusted to archivists cannot be minimised as archivists decide what is remembered and what is forgotten, whom in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not (Cook 1995:33). Should we therefore befriend an archivist to avoid our history being relegated to the dustbin when we simply need to keep everything to avoid this subjectivity? Bailey (2013; see also Cook 2013; Ngulube 2001) acknowledged the potential for prejudice and noted that first and foremost, it is important to recognize

(and sometimes to reiterate) that all archival appraisal decisions are by their very nature subjective, no matter how many attempts are made to objectify the process through the use of common methodology or to base them on scientific methods.

Interestingly, a formal definition and any explicit references to appraisal have been omitted from the International Standard on records management, ISO 15489-1 (ISO 2001). This status quo evidently reflects the lack of professional consensus on appraisal (Bettington 2008:138) and it is therefore not surprising that archivists have invented – and rejected and redefined and reinvented – a range of theories and principles surrounding appraisal and acquisition of archival materials: some highly objective, others equally subjective (Millar 2010).

Consequently, six models have been offered on appraisal methodology namely, the Schellenbergian model, sampling, black box, macro-appraisal, re-appraisal and the hybridization model which will be the focus of this paper. The six models on archival appraisal have had a tremendous influence on the development of archival practice over the course of more than half a century. This influence becomes patent when one considers that each model has its shortcomings and as such new models evolved to compensate for the deficiency of the other. Ngulube (2001) pointed that most of these methods have been criticized for being ineffective, excessively labour-intensive and unaccountable. It is against this background that Bettington (2008) advocated the need to adopt a mix of methods as selecting the best appraisal method depends on many factors relating to the purpose of the archives, past and present appraisal practices and the broader documentary universe.

The Schellenberg model for instance is value based from a historical point of view and this anticipation of values is misplaced in view of the fact that not all records serve a historical function. Sampling developed as a model in an effort to capture as accurately as possible a sample that represents a whole series of records. The Black Box concept insists on a varied approach to appraisal by emphasising that the appraisal decision hinges largely on threefold factors, namely value of information, costs of retention and implications of the appraisal recommendation. On the other hand, macro-appraisal takes a different dimension altogether as it emphasises appraising processes before the records in an effort to capture the contextual milieu that lead to records creation in the first place. Reappraisal is emblematic of the fact that no appraisal decision is perfect which serves to highlight the gravity of the task at hand. Nonetheless, this paper will focus on hybridisation as this methodology takes an all-embracing outlook as the model tries to adopt a mixed documentation approach in archival appraisal through its use of microfilm to provide low-cost storage.

Hybridization

The concept of hybridisation is not new. It is increasingly becoming popular in information management, for instance, hybrid libraries and information systems are becoming prevalent. The hybrid model that marries appraisal and preservation has proven to be an effective documentation strategy (Ngulube 2001). In this model, hybridisation integrates appraisal as a document management technique with document imaging in order to preserve an impartial documentary record (Ngulube 2001: 263).

This appraisal-preservation model is premised on the view that archivists should continue appraising records and selecting those that might be kept as originals in their limited repository space while keeping those non-current records deemed of no conceivable value as information surrogates on microfilm instead of completely destroying them without leaving any evidence that they ever existed (Ngulube 2001: 264, Garaba 2005:93). The cornerstone of this argument is why appraise for disposal on the flimsy excuse that there is no space when new technologies can take of these storage concerns. Therefore, document imaging will augment and not replace appraisal and microfilm would provide the solution to the much-proclaimed space and retrieval problems. Document imaging techniques can save 95 per cent of space occupied by records (Ngulube 2001: 264).

In addition, the use of microfilm alongside appraisal will ensure that the broad human experience is sufficiently documented while addressing the underlying document management concerns of archivists. By using the hybrid model, records managers and archivists can protect the originals from deterioration through handling and use by providing microfilmed information surrogates. Constant consultation of documents will engender the rapid deterioration of documents if their providers do

not take some proactive measures like providing information surrogates. This model is plausible and as Ngulube (2001: 264) aptly remarked, it does guarantee in the long term, access to the complete documentary record of society.

Conclusion

Archival appraisal will forever remain a hot potato in archival science simply because the process is full of subjectivity and it will remain greatly contested in the field of archivology (Ngulube 2001). What I consider valueless might be of value to you as the future research potential of records is a variable that is difficult to determine which explains the delicateness of the task at hand. Cox (2011) rightly noted that nearly any documentary scrap has potential value. Professionally and for ethical reasons, archivists should continue appraising records but those of no conceivable value to them should not be destroyed but kept as information surrogates using microfilm and digital technologies for instance.

This appraisal-preservation model will eliminate the controversy surrounding appraisal as Professor John Franklin Hope's dictum that one must save everything for there is no way one can tell what can be needed in ten, fifteen or a hundred years from now is candidly correct. To some critics, this might be profligacy, neo-Jenkisonism to be precise, a defeatist approach bereft of pragmatism but it is well worth it considering that the broad spectrum of human experience is captured for documentation to be representative of society. In the words of Ham (1984), we would then have anticipated every conceivable research use. Metaphorically stated, appraisal as an art of selective remembering and forgetting as noted by Stoler (2002) definitely needs revisiting in the wake of the promise offered by hybridization.

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SUMMARY

Archival appraisal is a contentious issue in archival science and for all the thinking, there is as yet no generally accepted theory of appraisal that could inform methodology and practice (Shepherd 1997). It remains one of the most critical responsibilities of an archivist. Archivists are the society's gatekeepers as they determine what is to be preserved for posterity. The future research potential of records is a variable that is difficult to determine and this highlights the gravity of the appraisal task. It is against this background that the reliability of our collections as evidence is brought into question particularly in this web-driven information culture. It is apparent that the pressure to save less is a reality in view of this age of information abundance wrought by the introduction of new technologies. The temptation to dispose is thus significantly high in any appraisal endeavour. To avoid this pitfall and to be ethically correct, the thesis of this paper is anchored in the proposition that after the appraisal process, those records deemed of no value should be kept by utilizing the omnipresent technologies be they digital or microfilm. The hybrid model is therefore strongly recommended as a documentary strategy. In this model, hybridization will integrate appraisal as a document management technique with document imaging in order to preserve an impartial documentary record. The use of microfilm and digital imaging alongside appraisal will ensure that the broad spectrum of human experience is sufficiently documented whilst addressing the underlying document management concerns of archivists. This model sounds plausible and does guarantee in the long term access to the complete documentary record of society. In addition, this model eliminates the controversy surrounding appraisal as it was the distinguished American historian Professor John Franklin Hope who poignantly noted that one must save everything because "there's no way to know what's going to be valuable ten, fifteen or a hundred years from now" (Cited in Ham 1984:12).

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