

Archival Appraisal in the Digital Era: Cultivating a New Professional Agenda



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- **Volumes of data** increased by 5000% between 2010 and 2020.
- **About 2 quintillion** (2,000,000,000,000,000,000) bytes of data are now created every day.
- **A further tripling** of these quantities will have occurred by 2025.

<https://techjury.net/blog/big-data-statistics/>; <https://www.g2.com/articles/big-data-statistics>

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People say that history repeats itself ...

In 1991, American archival consultant David Bearman observed that “it would require 450,000 man years to review the 4.5 billion feet of paper records created annually in the United States, to say nothing of the machine readable data ...”

David Bearman, *Archival Methods: Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report, No.9* (1991), p.11

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Sir Hilary Jenkinson objected to the idea that archivists might play any part in selection and destruction ...

“For an Administrative body to destroy what it no longer needs is a matter entirely within its competence and an action which future ages ... cannot possibly criticize as illegitimate”.

Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Clarendon Press, 1922), p.149



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Technical report 21946, published by the International Standards Organization in 2018, dismisses the notion of appraising records created in the past, in favour of appraising present-day functions.

International Standards Organization, *Information and Documentation: Appraisal for Managing Records (PD ISO/TR 21946: 2018)*

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- **Let us move on** to consider other approaches that have been suggested.
- **In recent years there has been a lot of interest** in involving users in appraisal ...

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In the world of digital archives, when labour-saving approaches are sought, we almost certainly need to look to computer science and consider the use of automated tools ...

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Perhaps we need to move beyond attempts to find easier or more efficient ways of identifying records that we can destroy ...

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Why do we continue to argue in favour of appraisal and selective destruction?



Terry Cook: the archivist's task is "to preserve the clearest image possible of ... society ... by choosing the best records".

Terry Cook, "Many Are Called, but Few Are Chosen? Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files", *Archivaria* 32 (1991)

Adrian Cunningham: a "mission to document the important things that happen in society".

Adrian Cunningham, "Digital Curation/Digital Archiving: A View from the National Archives of Australia", *American Archivist* 71 (2008)

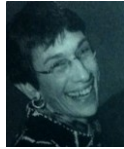
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G. Thomas Tanselle (2002): Archivists ... "often express the view that they have a duty to society, and to the future, to weed out insignificant material.

The arrogance of this position is astounding. There is no way for anyone to know just which artifacts someone else, now or in the future, will find of significance; and there have ... been innumerable instances of materials that were ignored at one time but highly prized at another."

G. Thomas Tanselle, "The Librarians' Double-Cross", *Raritan* 21 (2002)

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American archivist Helen Samuels wrote an article with the title “Who controls the past?”



Helen Willa Samuels, 'Who Controls the Past?', *American Archivist* 49 (1986)

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Charles Jeurgens, Marens Engelhard, and Henk Wals (2016):

Because data analysis techniques can allow digital archives to be analysed on a scale that was previously impracticable, we need to question the tenability of assumptions that only limited numbers of records are of real value and need to be preserved.



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- **What about the argument** that vast quantities of records cannot be *managed* effectively within the limited resources available to archival repositories?
- **If much larger quantities of material** are kept, there is a much greater risk that they will be managed unsystematically.
- **But as more archival records become digital,** we will be able to use computational tools to support their capture, maintenance, and findability.

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- **If new tools allow us** to cope with records in much larger quantities, could we perhaps keep *everything*?

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At a pragmatic level, we will *not* be able to keep everything:

- Constraints on storage capacity or computing power
- Privacy legislation
- Benign neglect

But future archivists are likely to keep many *more* records than their predecessors.

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- **Appraisal will not vanish**, but its aims and scope will often be different ...

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We cannot tell our employers simply to “keep everything” ... but in the digital world much more can and should be kept:

From: David Fricker
To: Geoffrey Yeo
Date: 28th October 2021

It can be dangerous to allow agencies to adopt a “keep everything” mentality, which becomes a lazy approach to records management; ... and, over time, would lead to neglect for and possible loss of the records that have been “kept.” ... [Because] keeping a record ... requires resources ... some prioritisation is required. ... In the digital world we can and should keep much more, ... [but] that increased volume ... does not diminish the need for ... selection and preservation.

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Archivists also need to give serious thought to claims about the “right to be forgotten”.

But in today’s world destroying digital materials is considered unusual; keeping them is thought to be the norm.

- We will be out of step with our users' expectations if we fail to take this into account.

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Further questions:

- Might *litigation concerns* provide an argument in favour of destroying as many records as possible?

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- How should archivists respond to the *ecological* implications of large-scale digital preservation?

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What does this mean for archivists' professional agenda?

- A moral obligation to develop and adopt large-scale storage and access solutions that have low environmental impacts.

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The contemporary digital world presents us with a number of major challenges.

If we do not keep digital archives in sufficient quantities, others will take on this task.

- Do we want others to do this, probably with minimal concern for integrity, authenticity, and contextualization?
- Or are we prepared to embrace the challenge ourselves?

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Thank you!



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