

# Toward Accessioning Standards— Research Records

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**T**WENTY-FIVE YEARS of experience and experiment have brought the National Archives sharply up against the problem of creating a body of accessioning standards that—without presuming either to embrace or imply a tabulation of all accessionable documentation—is less general than the standards of “value” or “usefulness” that are now invoked. The problem is to some degree peculiarly American, because of the absence of an American archival tradition resting on registry practices like those of Europe. In this respect, it now has become a more pressing problem because of the acceptance of the principle of records management, the implementation of which should in time create an American version of registry practices. In any such development, accessioning standards could play an important part, for in addition to their effect as preappraisals for transfer they might very well suggest file-classification schemes and related devices to facilitate the segregation of the “valuable” from the “useless.” In any case, however, records managers and their operating counterparts in government agencies, as well as archivists, need a better guide to answering the question “What shall we save?” than “We must look and see.” This answer long served the American archivist, for even a “look-see,” after a hundred and fifty years of neglect, could and did shear away a mass of the “valueless” and “useless.”

But on other grounds more concrete accessioning standards are now a universal archival need. These other grounds include the expansion of government from its laissez-faire past to its wel-

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fare-state present; technical advances in documentation (typewriter, carbon paper, nearprint); and the multiplication of other than official sources for data on matters of public and scholarly concern (periodicals, private research agencies of many sorts, the growth of scholarship in general). The spread of the records management idea and records management practices to countries other than the United States is itself evidence of the need.

All this is not to say that no accessioning standards exist in the United States that go beyond the abstract level of "value," otherwise undefined. The basic archives law and *National Archives Procedures* add the standards of noncurrency and age, and the absence of dilution with valueless material, close restriction, or disarrangement.<sup>1</sup> These are, however, more of the nature of minimum eligibility requirements than standards; at any rate they provide a much coarser screening than is desirable and possible, and they do not refine the concept of value itself.

Closer to what is now required are the eligibility criteria for accessioning discussed by T. R. Schellenberg in his *Modern Archives*.<sup>2</sup> He discusses the *level* of government structure as a factor in fixing the value of documentation, distinguishing quite plainly among three levels. At the policy and management level, to whose documentation he assigns the greatest importance, he suggests virtually total accessioning. At the housekeeping level, to which he assigns least importance, he suggests minimum but not very specifically designated accessioning. At the operating level, which he recognizes as productive of the greatest bulk of documentation, requiring the maximum disposal, he suggests approaches to the appraisal problem, but within the confines of a general text he is prevented from going very far into detail.<sup>3</sup>

At the housekeeping level there has been a considerable further development in concreteness, by implication at least, in the National Archives' General

ity, across agency lines. Appraisal by this technique is actually for disposal purposes, but where desirable it could—and in some cases does—call for a correlative accessioning.<sup>4</sup>

At two levels, therefore, the problem of accessions standards is well along the way towards solution, although there is room for refinement at the policy level and for extension at the housekeeping level. But these two levels comprise only a small sector of the problem—small in quantity for policy records, small in diversity for housekeeping records. The largest problem is at the program level, in spite of the guidelines provided in Schellenberg's treatment.

This problem thus far has been attacked in two ways: agency by agency and function by function. The value of records, in other words, has been assessed according to their place in the hierarchy of a particular agency and according to their significance for some particular government function of historical or other intellectual importance. This assessment is still special and *ad hoc*; it involves very much the particular knowledge of an archivist well acquainted with his agency and well versed in the functional area (national defense, foreign affairs, the administration of justice and equity, the public credit, etc.) in which it operates. We shall never be free of the necessity for bringing such expert judgment to bear on the act of making an accessioning decision. But it does not provide the accessioning standards we need.

A hint on how we might proceed is implied in the National Archives' General Records Schedule program. It deals with the disposition of records arising out of housekeeping activities common to all or several government agencies. Are there common operating activities that produce typical records susceptible of some degree of evaluation by type? Common activities there certainly are. Whatever their functions, almost all agencies engage in the activities of research, observation, reporting and analysis, and information. Many engage in law enforcement, adjudication, registration and licensing, and regulation. More than a few engage in promotion, assistance, and subsidization, and in construction, operation, or exploitation. If these (or other, better schematized) activities could be closely enough defined, and if each were found to produce characteristic types of records, something useful might be done, type by type, by way of setting accessioning standards.

In the rest of this paper I shall attempt to do this for records arising out of the research activity, and point out how a similar

<sup>4</sup> It is stated or implied, *e.g.*, in General Records Schedule 1, item 2, that personnel folders may be selectively accessioned; in General Records Schedule 5, item 2, that formal budget estimates at or above the bureau level may be.

method might be employed for other records, by activity and by type within activities.

For the purposes of this paper, research denotes those activities of a government agency that are intended to produce information or conclusions based thereon, with respect to some fact or condition relevant to the agency's program.<sup>5</sup> Research is selective and analytical; it may begin by gathering basic data, or it may use data already reported or observed. Its end-products are "studies," "papers," "histories," "analyses," "reports" (not, of course, in the administrative sense), and so on.

We may note four phases of research activity that produce each its own type of record: (1) problem formulation and research planning, (2) data-gathering, (3) presentation of results, and (4) critiques. Each of these phases produces characteristic records that can be evaluated for accessioning, although the records will differ more or less in their form according to the field of research involved. Three of these phases of research activity (1, 3, and 4) are, broadly speaking, sufficiently similar in all branches of research to be discussed generally.

Phase 1 documentation includes: statement of the research program, definition of its objectives, establishment of its budget and provision for its manning, definition of its terms, description of its techniques, provision for its tools (sample design or laboratory apparatus, for instance), time schedule or sequence of operations, and preliminary critiques from significantly interested or qualified sources. Phase 1 documentation characteristically takes the form of directives, memoranda, and other communications, some of which, of course, may be quite technical. In some cases this phase is well documented in a published form (perhaps with results); in others it is only sketchily so documented; in still others it may remain unpublished.

<sup>5</sup> The word "program" is important here. When a public health agency, for example, conducts research in antibiotics, it is engaged in *program* research, and the accessioning standards outlined in this paper are primarily directed at the records produced by such research. When it conducts what is just as commonly (if somewhat pretentiously) called research into its staffing problems, it is engaged not in program research, but in *administrative* research, and the records produced by such research are to be evaluated in the first instance as a species of *housekeeping* records—that is to say on a "level," not an "activity," basis. When it engages in a study of legislative history as a prelude to taking a stand on legislation or revising its enforcement procedure, it is again not engaged in program research, but in *policy* research, and the resulting records are again to be evaluated in the first instance on a "level" basis. Housekeeping and policy research records will seldom present any problem of bulk, and a judgment as to their enduring value can be left either to the archivist who takes them over, or—on an *ad hoc* basis—to the archivist, records manager, and agency official who jointly negotiate the disposition of a particular batch of housekeeping or policy records. At that point, the considerations adduced in this paper may play a part in the decision.

Phase 3 documentation is of course the research result itself—the “studies,” “papers,” and so forth, mentioned above. This documentation may or may not be published, in whole or in part.

Phase 4 is perhaps not itself strictly a phase of research activity at all. But its documentation is often found associated with that of the research operation to which it relates, it is best appraised in connection with the research documentation proper, and thus it should be considered here. The word “critique” is intended, in this connection, to cover only the reactions of professionally competent or politically significant persons or organizations (*e.g.*, an economist or a trade association in the case of economic research) received by the research agency, not “fan” or “grudge” mail from the general public; and the postmortem comments of the research agency itself. Phase 4 documentation characteristically takes the form of communications of some sort and is seldom published, although it may be referred to and even summarized at some length in published (*e.g.*, press release) form.

The remaining phase of research activity—data-gathering—differs greatly from one branch of research to another. We therefore shall defer our consideration of the papers it produces, in order to consider at this point three standards of eligibility for accessioning that apply to all research documentation of the common phases 1, 3, and 4. These are the research project’s administrative importance, its substantive importance,<sup>6</sup> and its success.

A research project is important administratively if it has consumed a considerable part of the resources of the research agency, if it was undertaken in response to some politically or historically important need, or if its results are known to have influenced importantly a major legislative or executive program or the relations of government with nongovernment interests. For an administratively important research project it is suggested that there be accessioned at least summary records of phase 1, a record copy of the final results (in manuscript or published form) from phase 3, and phase 4 (critique) records. That the research project was unimportant administratively does not automatically invoke disposal of all its records (including those specified above), although total disposal would usually be indicated. The other touchstones of evaluation still need to be applied. On the other hand, if the research project, after application of the remaining criteria, is deemed to be important only administratively, then the records specified are the only candidates for accessioning.

<sup>6</sup> See my article, “The Preservation of Government Publications,” in the *American Archivist*, 22: 185 (April 1959).

A research project is important substantively if it was a pioneer endeavor either in subject or in technique, if it disclosed strikingly new facts or made possible new generalizations, if it substantially confirmed less firmly based existing bodies of knowledge or techniques, or if it revealed facts or established techniques and concepts that have been fruitful for further research. If a research project was substantively important, it was probably also administratively important, although it has of course happened—and will again—that an inconspicuous and inexpensive project having little obvious bearing on political or other needs has been substantively important. For a substantively important research project, there should usually be preserved full records of phase 1 and at least those phase 3 and phase 4 records specified under “administratively important research records.” Whether any additional records should be preserved depends upon how the research project measures up to certain criteria of evaluation still to be considered.

We pass on, then, to considering whether or not a research project was successful. We are not dealing here with the degree to which the project unearthed new facts, made possible new concepts or techniques, or solved practical problems—or put facts, methods, or problem-solving on a broader-based factual footing. These considerations are a part of the criterion of substantive importance as we have defined it. But there are research projects that come to nothing. For fiscal, administrative, or other reasons they were not carried far enough, or their laboratory, statistical, or observational base was inadequate, or they were poorly planned or badly executed. Most such projects are abandoned in midstream; a few go on to their end. Such research projects obviously cannot be considered as substantively important; only exceptionally will they have been administratively important; few of them will have produced any records that need be preserved. The records of unsuccessful research projects will usually be preservable only if administratively important.

The remaining phase of the research activity—data-gathering—differs so much from one field of research to another, and its documentation differs so much as a result, that accessioning standards for its documentation can be profitably considered only field by field. The criteria for accessioning are twofold. Are the data exhausted in the final “study,” “paper,” or “report”? Can they and will they be reused?

These criteria, it must be pointed out, apply only to data-gathering records that result from substantively important and successful



research projects as here defined. For we have declared that accessioning in other cases is limited to phases 1, 3, and 4 records at the most.

There are few research projects whose data are made wholly available, in some final, recorded form, as a report, a set of tabulations, a map, or other kind of phase 3 document. Even in experimental projects in the physical sciences or in the observational projects of the "earth sciences," field biology, and so forth—where the final report or other document will most often cover results most completely—there occasionally will be "data records" in phase 2 that are not presented in phase 3. If the research project has been deemed substantively important, then there may be records of such data that should be preserved.

Depending on the nature of the research project, data are documented in various ways. In the case of the physical and biological sciences, in which the experimental method is the most usual, data are noted in laboratory notebooks or on special forms designed, for example, to accommodate instrumental readings. In the case of the "earth sciences" (as geology), the observational method is most prevalent, and field notebooks or similar means of recording observations are employed. In the social sciences, the statistical method occurs most often under modern conditions, and data are recorded on schedules or questionnaires, and from these on punched cards or other means for sorting and tabulating. Finally there is the research of the historian, who records at least a good part of his data as he gathers them from published or otherwise already documented sources.

Of course these various methods of recording the data gathered by research are not each confined to one of the four broad classes of science that have been mentioned here. The statistical method is sometimes employed in medicine, for example, and the observational in both the medical and naturalist branches—and these are biological sciences. Observation, again, is a means of gathering data in the social sciences in the many cases in which an economist or sociologist goes on a field trip that—perhaps in addition to a statistical objective—has something of the character of a geologist's or naturalist's explorations.

With these cautions in mind, we may ask ourselves what are the conditions under which any quantity of data-recording documentation (experimental, observational, statistical, or other) is to be accessioned.

Primary or raw experimental data (as they occur, most often, in the physical and biological sciences) should seldom be acces-

sioned. In many cases laboratory notebooks and similar forms of documentation tend towards unintelligibility when they have passed out of the more or less immediate atmosphere and circumstances of the particular piece of research on which they bear. Again, the basis of these sciences is the "controlled experiment." It is foreign to the nature of the "exact" sciences to match subsequent experiments or controlled observations against past recorded data alone; and in the case of the substantively important research project—the case with which we are most seriously concerned—documentation on the method, standards, and procedures of research will have been marked already for accessioning (making possible the repetition or evaluation of the experiment), as will have been the end results. In the third place, in the physical and biological sciences the objectives of a research project, comparatively speaking, are limited: a quantity, or an identification of substance or process, is sought, and consequently there will rarely be need to preserve specific "data documentation" that goes beyond documentation of procedures and of results. Finally—and this must be almost universally true of substantively important research projects—it is a well established and observed custom among "exact" scientists that they shall describe their procedures and terminate their projects with formal statements of results and conclusions—and these elements are already marked for accessioning under the terms of our discussion.

Nevertheless, there will be relatively rare occasions when experimental data recording documents



likely to be small. Where the quantity is large, however, preservation costs must be considered. Unintelligible experimental research data, already discussed, should, of course, never be accessioned except in small quantities when they constitute a species of memorabilia.<sup>7</sup>

We come next to observational data, such as are recorded characteristically in geology and the "earth sciences" generally, in some branches of the other natural sciences, and in the social sciences when descriptive rather than purely statistical researches are undertaken. Data for such projects take the form of field notes, descriptions, and reports of or notes based on interviews. The field notes may in some cases include rough maps or drawings and in some cases photographs.

In the case of such natural sciences as geology, or in the case of explorations (in the literal sense of the term) based on expeditions (to unknown or little known regions) and having a literally pioneer quality, data-gathering documentation may be accessionable if it is not so rough as to be unintelligible and not excessive in quantity. Documentation of this sort is unlike experimental data-gathering documentation in that it tends more to general intelligibility, and like experimental documentation in that it is not great in bulk. But to be eligible for accessioning the observational data reported must be manifestly useful over and above the report-phase documentation that would be accessioned in any case for administratively or substantively important research projects. There may be a complication here when the data upon which a research project is based consist of a series of observations made for some purpose other than to serve the particular project. Weather observations, marigrams, and seismological reports are cases in point. Data of this type may have a long-term value that depends on their regularity and continuity, and gaps in such a series of observations cannot be as readily or as validly filled from other sources as in the case of the social sciences to be discussed later. For certain basic observational series, therefore, total preservation may be indicated, and this is the point at which—as at many others—appraisal must rest chiefly on an assessment by subject-matter specialists.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See the lengthy discussion in National Research Council, Division of Medical Sciences, *Report of a Survey of Medical Records Created by the Federal Government*, p. 8, par. 4; 16, par. 16; 19, par. 5; 20, par. 3; 22, par. 4; 23, par. 5; 24, par. 6; 26, par. 1; 28, par. 3; and "Comments," p. 28 ff. (Washington, Jan. 1945).

<sup>8</sup> Data documentation in the natural sciences is really of two sorts in origin. It may result from true research projects as defined in this paper: selective, analytical, and productive of "studies," "analyses," and so on; or it may have a purely *reporting* function, as in the cases mentioned in the text, productive of "series" of observations having a usefulness of their own, usually as the representation of some dynamic

In observational research projects, usually in the social sciences, where descriptive data documentation is relatively subjective or consists of interview reports or notes, there is less of a case for accessioning of data except when no report documentation has been produced. Subjective descriptive data will not usually add to the usefulness of a relatively subjective report.

A third type of research data results from statistical research projects, characteristic of research in economics and the other social sciences although not limited to them. Raw data of this type are recorded on schedules or questionnaires, and again—in the case of all but small projects—on punched cards or similar mechanical sorting or tabulating media to which they are transferred for processing.

The problems presented by data documentation in statistical research occur chiefly with respect to schedules and questionnaires. Punched cards and the like will seldom be regarded as accessionable: they are unintelligible except when processed and metamorphosed into tabulations; to process them expensive and elaborate devices and skilled personnel are required; they deteriorate in use and unless very carefully stored; to replace them after deterioration again requires machinery and skilled personnel.

The problem of schedules and questionnaires merits a very full consideration for several reasons. They bulk very large among government records and are often very bulky in individual cases. They often deal with subjects that are of great interest to administrators and to historians and other social scientists. They often contain data, gathered at great expense, that are not made available in phase 3 documentation because incidental to the main object of the research or because resources are lacking for reports or studies of any but the most important or politically relevant results.

Data records of statistical research projects, especially in the social sciences, may differ importantly, therefore, from those produced by the experimental and observational methods, because they are more likely to have value for some subject of research other than the one for whose illumination they were gathered.<sup>9</sup>

process, and not intended primarily as the basis for a particular study or analysis. The two kinds of documentation are similar in form, and both have "research" value. But it might be desirable to deal with purely reporting series separately in setting standards for accessioning, in a discussion of the *reporting activity* of government, listing and grouping the series and evaluating them from a subject-matter standpoint. It may be said here, however, (a) that such series are usually important both administratively and substantively, and (b) that their phases 1 and 4 documentation (objectives, definitions, methods, etc., and critiques) are continuously accessionable as their techniques develop.

<sup>9</sup> There is some incidental discussion of these problems in my article "Archival Sampling," in the *American Archivist*, 20:291-312 (Oct. 1957).

This implies that their eligibility for accessioning is to be determined very specially on a subject-matter basis, with due consideration for the expense of maintenance that their bulk may involve and the likelihood of their further use in view of their bulk and the need for tabulating machinery to exploit them. Accessioning standards for statistical-data records, especially in the social sciences, must proceed chiefly from a consideration of the adequacy and availability of data of nonarchival origin, and must be based on studies of the sources, literature, and methods of economists, sociologists, and political scientists in particular branches of their disciplines. Studies of this sort are very much needed, but their consideration falls outside of the scope of this paper. This much may be said here: As with all other classes of research records, no statistical research records will be preserved except in the case of administratively or substantively important researches, and even then only phases 1, 3, and 4 records will be preserved unless positive reasons, derived from subject matter study, can be shown for more extensive preservation. It is important to note, however, that in the case of statistical-research projects I include among phase 3 (result) records tabulations often called "intermediate"—tabulations, that is, more detailed than, or presenting a breakdown different from, the "final" tabulations that form part of the report or study to which they relate.<sup>10</sup>

As in the case of certain "earth science" observational data, statistical research projects may sometimes rest on data gathered for other than particular research projects—gathered, indeed, for other than research purposes. Income tax returns, for example, are the basis of annual published analyses; wage data, of even more frequent analyses. Whether or not such data are to be preserved is a matter to be approached from subject-matter study. But it may be borne in mind that gaps in this sort of data can for practical purposes more often be filled from other data sources than in the case of the "earth sciences."<sup>11</sup>

We have to consider finally data documentation of the sort for which the classical case is that of the historian making notes not from direct observation of (much less experiment on) the phenomena he is studying but from records—so-called primary and secondary sources—relating to them. Other disciplines beside history proceed in this fashion—for instance, legal research. The

<sup>10</sup> Provided, of course, they are intelligible. Such tabulations often carry stubs or heads that are in code, usually derived from the machine-tabulation procedure set up for the project. Unless the code is available, the tabulations are useless.

<sup>11</sup> As in the case of observational data, we are confronted here with statistical *research* and statistical *reporting*. See note 8.

procedure of the researcher in these fields is to abstract, digest, or copy from his sources, and this type of data record should seldom be accessioned. A well-conducted, successful, and important research project in these fields will in presenting its phase 3 results refer in the conventionally prescribed manner to its sources (which for the most part remain in existence), and to that extent there is no purpose in preserving the "notes" that in abbreviated form reflect the data or source material. It should be borne in mind moreover, that typical research in these fields ends in a product that is necessarily evaluative and subjective. Its value is that of synthesis, and the "data" that it presents, if they are to be reused, must be reexamined at their sources. The exception, in this age of contemporary history and official historians, will be in those cases where the data used are themselves primary: significant documents collected from elsewhere and available, if at all, only as scattered items among other records, or interview notes (if intelligible), or sound recordings.

Whatever else this paper does, it does not pretend to tabulate all accessionable documentation produced even by the research activity of government. It has called attention to the necessity for making accessioning decisions on the basis of expert archival judgment, well versed in particular knowledge of an agency and of the functional area in which it operates. It has invoked also subject-matter competence in relation to experimental, observational, and statistical data documentation. If in spite of these limitations it does outline—perhaps too hastily and in too little detail—a usable set of accessioning standards for the kind of record it attempts to cover, then perhaps it indicates how the problem of standards for the records of other government activities may be approached.

Consider, for example, the "adjudication" activity, which, as I have said, is among those in which many government agencies engage. This activity produces what broadly are called "case files"—a problem area for archivists and records managers on a par with the research-records problem both in complexity and in quantity. Would it be useful, would it be possible, to schematize this activity and the records it produces? Might we divide it into adjudications made by courts (subdivided as criminal and equity), by administrative-law tribunals, and by officers charged with hearing and decision-rendering duties? Could we define the steps or processes by which adjudications are made, and the kinds of records produced in these processes? Could we then indicate not the value of these records but the considerations that must usually be taken into account in making a value judgment on them? Are there any

general circumstances in which the accessioning of adjudicatory decisions alone would suffice for archival purposes? Are there any general circumstances in which the accessioning of such records as briefs, depositions, or full courtroom proceedings is indicated?

Consider, again, the construction activity. Can this be usefully schematized for our purpose as military works, maritime facilities, aeronautical facilities, highways, monuments, special-purpose buildings (*e.g.*, laboratories), production facilities (*e.g.*, dams, power-plants, arsenals), and so on? Could we then set standards for the accessioning of construction-activity records, by type of construction and by form of record—large-scale and detailed plans, elevations, site maps, specifications, estimates, accounts, and so forth?

Again, no tabulation of accessionable documentation, valid in every instance, could result from such attempts at standard-setting. Again, expert archival judgment would enter into particular decisions, as would subject-matter competence in the many fields of social science involved in "adjudications" and in the engineering, architectural, and allied technologies involved in "construction."

I had thought of entitling this paper, in the words of the country preacher, "Unscrewing the Inscrutable." Hedged about as all its statements are, perhaps it is just that. If so, we have come back again to "value" and "usefulness," virtually undefined and unqualified, as the "standards" for accessioning all program-level and many policy- and housekeeping-level records, until and unless some other approach is evolved.

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## Archives

On désigne sous le nom d'*archives* les dépôts de titres et de documents authentiques de toute espèce qui intéressent un état, une province, une ville, un établissement public ou privé, une compagnie, un particulier. Cette définition fait prévoir qu'il y a eu dans tous les temps et qu'il y a dans tous les pays beaucoup d'"archives."

—Ch.-V. Langlois, "La Science des Archives," in *Revue Internationale des Archives*, 1:7 (1895-96).