

## Commentary

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Both Helen Samuels and Richard Cox have read deeply and thought carefully about appraisal; they bring to this topic a wealth of ideas surpassed by few other archivists. Equally important, much of their collective experience is based on genuine research, the kind Frank Burke keeps telling archivists they should do, but nobody ever seems to get around to actually doing. I have great respect for their past work and high hopes for their future endeavors, but I am disappointed with this particular effort.

In this paper Cox and Samuels consciously avoided saying what they believe archivists' professional research agenda should be. Instead, they have presented a few examples of what might be on that agenda. This decision is justified by the authors' claim that they could not create a comprehensive agenda; and even if they did, it would simply repeat the Committee on Goals and Priorities (GAP) list. I think that claim is nonsense; if that were really true, there would be no need for these sessions, or for their publication in the *American Archivist*. The point of the GAP-related sessions is to probe the GAP report and to determine which actions, out of the sweeping array of possibilities GAP proposed, are needed now.

I address this point so forcefully because I believe archivists need to be as precise as possible in goal setting, because it has such important consequences. The amount of time archivists give to research is very small. They must, therefore, spend that time in the most profitable way. To do that, archivists should actively discuss not what appraisal topics they *could* research, but which appraisal topics they *should* research, attempting to decide which are the most likely to offer the greatest rewards. This issue can

never be fully resolved, which is just as well, since there is room, and need, for disagreement and maverick research. But I am convinced that there is a need to think through and prioritize the archival research agenda as clearly as we can.

The remainder of my commentary takes advantage of the authors' patience and good natures and discusses what I think their priorities are, rather than specifically what they have written. I take this license with some uncertainty, but I hope any necessary corrections will be quickly forthcoming. In this way we can begin the priority-setting process I have advocated.

The authors' assertion that appraisal's penultimate goal is to document society is a reasonable, but debatable assumption. The goal of documenting society is rooted in a belief that the archivist has a fundamental commitment to a broad, historically oriented social mission, independent from any narrow, institutionally specific goals that are established by the archivist's employer. In fact, however, many archivists would argue that this prioritization is backwards, and that the archivist serves first the institutional mission of his or her employer, and only secondarily a vaguely defined cultural role. This is an important issue, but one that transcends the immediate topic. For the purposes of today's discussion, I accept Cox and Samuel's assertion and want to examine the applicability of the projects the authors have outlined for the goal of documenting society. Cox and Samuels have identified four areas as important:

1. The nature and interrelatedness of archival records, or what I would prefer to recast as the interrelatedness of information available in different formats within a specific archival

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- collection and across information sources, including but not limited to, other archival sources;
2. The quality of the documentary record;
  3. The importance of machine-readable records as a special set of appraisal/documentation problems;
  4. The role of automated descriptive systems.

I would like to discuss each of these and then end my comments with a few words about the centrality of documentation strategy to appraisal.

On the topic of interrelatedness, I completely agree with Samuels and Cox that the relationship between forms of documentation within a single collection and information existing across the broad information universe is grossly underexplored and is a research topic of primary importance if archivists are to begin to rationalize the appraisal process. An example can illustrate this critical problem. Last year a noted historian on the University of Michigan's faculty, who had just finished a volume discussing the 1967 Detroit race riot, shared with campus archivists his views on the value of archival material. One of the questions asked was whether his book would have been any different if the manuscript sources for the riot had been destroyed and he had been forced to use only the printed record of the press and the various subsequent investigations. After a long moment's reflection, he answered that while the book's examples would have been poorer, his basic interpretation would have been unaffected by using only print sources. Coming from a scholar with a lifelong commitment to extensive research in primary sources, the statement that for this book they did not matter very much is profoundly disturbing. This example reinforces the point that Cox and Samuels have made about the consequences for appraisal

created by the interrelationship between information formats and specific information in a broadly conceived information universe. I agree that this is a basic priority in need of immediate research.

A second research area which Cox and Samuels correctly assert as primary is the quality of the documentary record. Here, however, I would like to draw a sharp distinction between the idea that archivists need to better understand how to evaluate quality—that is, how archivists decide what to keep—and the concept of adequacy of documentation, which the authors place under this heading.

Before archivists can determine the meaning of the term "adequacy of documentation," they must decide what the adjective "adequate" really means. Documentation adequate for what purpose? Documentation adequate for which user groups? Documentation adequate in what sense of the word? In order to determine what adequate means, archivists must develop a better understanding of how they evaluate documentation. How do, and how should, archivists determine quality? What are their criteria? What is their ultimate goal?

Determining how archivists appraise is the critical need. Without a much fuller understanding of the way in which archivists determine what to keep and what to destroy, the appraisal process, as well as the whole concept of an adequate documentary heritage, will be a poorly defined decision that archival and nonarchival critics can rightly conclude rests uncomfortably close to whim and capriciousness.<sup>1</sup> Until archivists understand what they are about in appraisal, the whole idea of appraising records for an adequate documentary heritage is an unobtainable chimera that should be put aside in favor of the more pressing problem: how archivists decide what to retain. Determining how that is done is the second half of the appraisal research agenda that,

<sup>1</sup>For a more extensive argument on this point, see F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5–13.

along with the question of interrelatedness, establishes the two areas in which archivists need to concentrate current research efforts.

Having strongly endorsed Samuels and Cox's concern over interrelatedness, and, with a qualifier and personal twist, having also endorsed the need for an exploration of the quality of the documentary record, I must now part company with them over the significance of automated records. Despite the real danger of being dismissed as yet another reactionary technophobe, let me suggest that the impact of automated records often should be considered as a subset of other, broader issues.

Cox and Samuels correctly point out that computers allow one to manipulate information in new ways, present a host of technical problems affecting access to information, and may even create certain new documentation needs because computerization replaces certain types of information manipulation with different processes that exploit the new information technology's capabilities. All of that, although serious, essentially relates to the form of the record, not the information itself. Computers allow users to manipulate more information in ways which previously were difficult, and in some cases impossible, to achieve.

In this context, the primary appraisal issue raised by electronic records becomes a subset of the broader question of the interrelatedness of information within and across record groups. Just as archivists need to consider carefully how the information contained in manuscripts, printed sources, and photographs interrelate, so, too, archivists need to think about how information in electronic formats ties together, or stands apart, from information in other formats. As part of the general enhancement of archival knowledge about appraisal, archivists need to more fully understand the time-

honored principle that format enhances and detracts from the value of information.<sup>2</sup>

I not only think that most appraisal problems relating to machine-readable records are only a newly defined subset of existing problems, I also believe adapting automated descriptive systems for exchanging appraisal information is not of great immediate importance. I understand why Cox and Samuels value this idea. The possibility of exchanging appraisal information is important, and the lack of information exchange at the current time is often very frustrating. The best information exchange system imaginable, however, is not of much value if the information flowing through it is not very good. Right now, most of the information archivists have to exchange is of poor quality because the archival community does not understand appraisal well enough to have a great deal to exchange. Rather than worrying extensively about the best way to exchange mediocre information, the immediate priorities should be to better understand what archivists are appraising and how they are appraising it. Information exchange can and should follow later.

Finally, Cox and Samuels have suggested that documentation strategies might be a nexus tying together the several appraisal agenda items they have listed. What role could documentation strategy play in the two areas I have isolated as being of most immediate importance, the questions of interrelatedness and quality of selection?

In the area of interrelatedness, documentation strategy may prove a valuable tool in helping archivists understand how records are created and how various formats serve their makers' needs. What is critical is that the documentation strategy forces the archival community to view information about a subject or an area as an interrelated package. By being forced to look consistently at information that way, ar-

<sup>2</sup>See G. Philip Bauer, *The Appraisal of Current and Recent Records: Staff Information Paper #13* (Washington: National Archives, 1946) for one of the earliest discussions of this point.

chivists will begin to think seriously and systematically about questions such as what kinds of information are in computer data bases, what kinds of information are in printed sources, what kinds of information are in traditional manuscript sources, and how do all these interrelate? These are important issues to consider. The virtue of documentation strategy is that it forces archivists to directly address them.

In the second critical area of study, quality of selection, I do not think documentation strategy is going to prove particularly helpful. Documentation strategy will help archivists understand the document universe, and may even suggest useful material that currently does not exist inside that universe. But archivists will still have to select out of that universe what should be saved, whether it be an "adequate documentary heritage" or some other idea. As I have already argued, archivists do not as yet know how to do that consistently. Furthermore, a committee made up of archivists, records creators, and records users will not do much to further this goal.

In many ways, documentation strategy is old wine in new skins; unfortunately, the archival folklore suggests that the vintage was not very good to start with. The idea of using outside experts to help make appraisal decisions is very traditional. Theodore Schellenberg, for example, mentioned it in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> It could be profitable to debate whether archivists have really implemented Schellenberg's advice on this point, but the prevailing wisdom seems to be that consultation usually is not helpful.

Record creators generally do not care very much about what happens to their documents once they are through using them. Secondary users of records are usually afflicted with tunnel vision and argue that anything that might ever be of use to them should be saved, with little concern for anything else.

Ultimately, the appraisal decision, what to save, falls back on the archivist who must answer this question based upon professional methodology. That methodology is not improved by knowing what the documentation universe looks like, although that knowledge allows archivists to use archival methodology more systematically. The pressing need is to work on archival selection methodology. Documentation strategy brings that need into better focus.

So where does all this leave archivists? Let me conclude with three observations. Richard Cox and Helen Samuels are absolutely correct when they emphasize the critical need to research topics relating to the interrelatedness of information and the way archivists go about selecting information and record formats. I think, however, they have overemphasized the importance of machine-readable records per se, and the immediate need for a mechanism to exchange appraisal information. Finally, I think that documentation strategy will not prove the single nexus in helping archivists resolve the basic problems in appraisal, although it does have significant applications in one of the two most critical areas.

<sup>3</sup>T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956): 149-52.