CHALLENGES OLD AND NEW: MANAGING ARCHIVES IN OUR TIMES [1]

Terry Eastwood
School of Library, Archival and Information Studies
University of British Columbia
Email: eastwoods@telus.net or eastwood@interchange.ubc.ca

Abstract

The author posits that three areas challenge contemporary archival communities: the need to come to grips with a balanced and effective policy and strategy for acquiring private archives; the need to develop the capacity for long-term preservation of electronic records; and the need to strengthen the role of archives in support of worldwide trends towards greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of governments and other organizations. He examines these three areas and how they have been reflected in recent archival discourse to show that pursuing effective action in these three realms, which he sees as being related, constitute the principal challenge to archival institutions and programs now and into the foreseeable future.

Keywords: Appraisal, Digital Archives, Records Management, Electronic Records

Prelude

To characterize the challenges archivists face today, I want to look to the past before looking forward. Three events set the stage for my remarks. In 1974, speaking at the annual conference of the Society of American Archivists, Gerald Ham declared that appraisal is "one of the most important and intellectually demanding tasks" archivists have, but he then asked, "why must we do it so badly?" Ham's paper set off a three-decade long reconsideration of appraisal. I want to look at the perennial problem of the archivist's evaluative stance and measure the recent discourse about it to frame one of my themes (Ham 1984:326).

In 1975, the National Archives of the United States established the first formal program for archival care of machine readable records, or

as we now say electronic or digital records. There is little doubt that digital records present the archival world with many challenges, but archivists have agonized since at least 1975 over exactly what those challenges are and how to meet them.

In 1976, the year of the American bicentennial, Congress revised the lame 1966 Freedom of Information Act to give a stronger right of access to the information citizens need to exercise judgment about how they are being governed. The 1976 U.S. law ushered in the latest phase in the modern trend towards greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of democratic institutions. The changed regime of access to records, including companion legislation protecting the privacy of subjects of records, has arguably had profound effects on the archival realm, although these effects are slow to work themselves out, difficult to ascertain, vary widely from country to country, and have therefore not as yet spawned anything like the discussion we have seen of appraisal and electronic records.

These three themes connect in many ways to present the archival world with its major challenge, as I aim to explain.

The challenge of appraisal

At this remove, Ham's anguished cry for better appraisal is deceiving. It may have kicked off the debate, but, for all its apparent iconoclasm, it was in many ways the last gasp of the very kind of thinking Ham deplored. He instinctively understood that traditional practice of acquisition had been "too closely tied to the vogue of the academic marketplace", and very much wanted archivists to avoid being "a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography." Yet, he insisted that the object of the exercise, the reason archives exist, is in fact to build holdings "that document culture" and reflect "the broad spectrum of human experience" (Ham 1984:329). He speaks approvingly of the archivist as "an historian of his own time" (Ham 1984:331) a phrase coined by the American historian Sam Bass Warner. He saw this contradiction as the archivist's peculiar dilemma. Somehow the archivist had to transcend current research trends and "worry about all the history that needs to be written" by fashioning intelligent acquisition and selection from among a prolific and technologically complex world of records (Ham 1984:329). However,

the thrust of Ham's critique that resonated most among his colleagues lay elsewhere. He summed it up in one sentence. "With a few notable exceptions, there is no realization that our present data gathering methods are inadequate or that our fundamental problem is the lack of imaginative acquisition guidelines or comprehensive [cooperative] collecting strategies at all levels of archival activity." After remonstrating on the barrenness of the literature in addressing his concerns, he opined: "For the archivist, the area of acquisition strategies remains a vacuum" (Ham 1984:327-28). This call for better method was answered among others by Helen Samuels' writing about documentation strategy and Terry Cook writing about macro-appraisal. More recently, a number of writers have probed appraisal from a postmodern point of view. I want to use the ideas of Samuels to frame discussion of one aspect of appraisal, and Cook's to frame another. I will then briefly survey the postmodern perspective on appraisal, and along the way indicate some of the appraisal challenges, perennial though they are, that archivists face everywhere, but first I wish to provide some conceptual framework to help us see what is at stake.

The contemporary discussion has been about the theory, method, and practice of appraisal, but it is often difficult to detect when any given author is exposing theoretical, methodological, or practical concerns. In its broadest sense, theory is the analysis of ideas about some object of thought. It is about exploring the foundational concepts of a discipline, a subject, or some way of being or acting in the world. For my purposes today, I want simply to distinguish theory from method and method from practice, and then speak briefly about two quite different kinds of theory that are at play in this discourse about appraisal.

If theory is the analysis of basic ideas or concepts, we can then posit, for the sake of argument, that theory is about the nature of archival materials. But, as Trevor Livelton (1991:12) notes, archivists "both have and use ideas.... They may not," he says, "always be conscious of those ideas while working, let alone set them up for examination, but their concepts guide their practice at almost every turn." Basic ideas, such as those about the nature of an archival document or record and the nature of a coherent body of archives, imply subsidiary ideas about how to work with archival material. Ideas about how

to treat the material are also theoretical, but they can be distinguished from the ideas about *what* the material is by calling them "methodological." A method is a manner or mode of procedure, especially an orderly, logical, or systematic one or it is a way of doing something, especially in accordance with a definite plan. Archival methods, then, act as the bridge between theory and practice; they are the vehicle of realizing the animating power of basic ideas in our practical applications. Obviously, many ideas go into building orderly, logical, and systematic modes of archival procedure, but, and this is vital, these procedures are set in some societal and institutional context that will have its influence on them. So, it is a nice question as to how far our theoretical reach should extend. We have to have ideas about the larger world in which our work is situated, so we need to extend our theoretical investigations beyond the realm of the nature of the materials with which we work. I think that we can see that this has been the case in our efforts to build appraisal theory and methods.

Theoretical appraisal ideas have been of two kinds. They are either normative or explanatory. Normative theory seeks to develop a programmatic scheme of ideas in some field of human action. It is about right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate actions. It is formulated from the point of view of the human actor. It is, if you like, the value laden aspect of theory. Every field of human endeavour experiences constant contests over value laden ideas. Just think, for instance, about the contests over value laden ideas about how to educate young people or how to eliminate poverty. By contrast, explanatory theory seeks to develop a scheme of ideas concerned with the actual, with the nature of things or human actions. It is not usually concerned with what is appropriate, but rather with understanding what exists or what is going on in some realm. It is descriptive, predictive, and explanatory. It is formulated from the observer's point of view.

Although it was not put in these terms, Ham's challenge to archivists called for the articulation of normative and explanatory theory and of method as a way of doing appraisal according to a definite plan. That he was interested in normative theory was expressed in his question, "why do we do it so badly?" As I have already alluded, Ham's own normative theoretical ideas were actually very traditional. He took the

view that archivists have collective responsibility to assemble a *comprehensive* and *representative* body of sources for the study of the past, and he thought they were doing it very poorly. His values were informed by the values of scholarly inquiry, even while he realized that the actual value judgments archivists make should avoid being influenced by current fashions of scholarship. Ham did not explicitly call for normative theory, that is, for a new programmatic scheme of ideas about the goal or values of the exercise of appraisal, because he rather assumed that everyone should agree with him about the need to preserve a comprehensive and representative body of sources in order to document society in the past. Because he largely assumed his normative theory, Ham passed quickly to address what he regarded as the vacuum of method, the lack of institutional acquisition strategies and coordination among them to ensure preservation of a comprehensive documentation of society. While realizing that some countries in the world may have little more than a national archival institutions, I assume that the archival endeavour in complex, contemporary societies will requires a multiplicity of repositories working toward the common goal of preserving a rich archival documentary heritage.

Several American archivists took up Ham's challenge, Helen Samuels among them. Samuels worked on developing some orderly, logical, and systematic mode of archival documentary strategy. She conceived of documentation strategy as a means to cope with the problem of selecting the permanently valuable records in some defined sphere from the various bodies or persons that in the modern world inevitably interact to accomplish large human purpose. She saw it as a four step process involving (Samuels 1986) [2]:

- choosing and defining the sphere to be documented;
- selecting advisors and the site for the strategy;
- structuring the inquiry and examining the form and substance of the available documentation; and
- selecting and placing the documentation in repositories.

Samuels argued that documentation strategies and institutional functional analysis were mutually supportive techniques. She saw them as a means of coordinating the activities of many institutions or programs for the preservation of archives. As Archivist of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Samuels went on to apply her

ideas in her work to acquire university records. In her book *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*, she wedded functional analysis to the goal of forming comprehensive documentation of the experience of her institution. As she put it, "a representative record of the full breadth of an institution is the best insurance that future researchers will be able to answer the questions they choose to ask" (Samuels 1992:8). In her view, "functional analysis aims to broaden a sense of the activities and actors that must be documented to achieve a full understanding of the institution." If that were the goal, she goes on to say, "we must acknowledge that the official administrative record is not enough" (Samuels 1992:7). Samuels shared Ham's normative ideas. Her main normative idea was to effect comprehensive and representative acquisition and selection of records in some well-defined sphere to provide the sources for an understanding of the creator of the archives in question. Her principal methodological idea was to arrive at value judgments by analyzing functions and assessing the degree to which records documented how those functions were actually carried out rather than by assessing the utility of the content of records for research purposes, as it was supposed had traditionally been done.

American efforts to implement documentary strategies along Samuels' lines were largely unsuccessful. Archival institutions and programs found it difficult to make the investment in research and inter-institutional coordination that Samuels called for. She herself retreated to her own domain at MIT and set her sights on the goal of achieving a robust preservation of records that documented the functions of the university on the grounds that, that would serve all needs. In the main, this episode in American archival circles addressed the question of appraisal for acquisition and selection of private archives of both organizations and individuals. Although Samuels documentary strategy turned out not to be the solution, she and Ham both put their fingers on an enormous challenge archivists face today. We live in a society that profusely spawns private organizations. The vast majority of humanity is literate, and each person has his own archives. Whatever your normative ideas are in this realm of private archives, the questions are: how do you identify records creators of interest and how do you organize yourself and plan activities to select and acquire their records? Sitting passively to wait for opportunities to present themselves is an option. Many institutions and programs take

this option, and justify it on grounds of lack of resources, sometimes even when they have a specific mandate to preserve private archives. The result, at least in my country, is that there is a large gap between the rhetoric of institutional vision and mission and its efforts and results to preserve private archives. No doubt the obstacles are great, but a passive stance and undirected energies leave institutions and archivists open to the charge they are not living up to their responsibilities. [3]

Let me now turn to the public records question. Terry Cook applied functional analysis to the environment of public or government records in his exposition of macro-appraisal. In his essay "Mind over matter: towards a new theory of archival appraisal" Cook rejected what he called " 'the-value-through-use' approach ... in most contemporary archival thinking in North America" (Cook 1992:41). He favoured instead ideas he detected in European circles, particularly in Germany, about acquiring records that "reflect the values, patterns, and functions of the society contemporary to the records creators" (Cook 1992:49). He believed that archivist should preserve records that reflect the image of society by focusing on "the mechanisms or loci in society where the citizen interacts with the state to produce the sharpest and clearest insights into societal dynamics and issues.... It is at these points of sharpest interaction of structure, function and client [which he called hot spots] that the best documentary evidence will be found." He was quick to warn that his notion of societal image was not to be equated with the prevailing ideology of the time, for he recognized that "marginalized groups" not forming part of the democratic consensus needed the archivist's special attention (Cook 1992:50). He advocated keeping records that documented instances where "there is evidence of significant changes, variations and distortions" between the goals of a government program and its results. He also believed in keeping more records relating to events seen as being momentous in the eyes of contemporaries than of other events (Cook 1992:57).

It is a nice task to pin down Cook's normative ideas. He sees the archivist as a keen student of government and the society in which it is situated, but also as a kind of watchful judge of government performance, in particular as it treats marginalized groups. Working as he was in a public archives, he concentrated more on the problem of

selection than on the problem Samuel's addressed in her notion of documentary strategy: how to identify private records creators whose records an institution wanted to acquire. So he developed the notion of the connection between "hot spots" and best documentary evidence. His appraisal archivist sounds very much like a combination of sociologist and contemporary historian, not far from the historian of his own time of which Ham spoke so approvingly. He claims that his method of structural-functional analysis, ranking of the importance of agencies and offices, and comprehensive research focus of appraisal work will help the archivist avoid the pitfalls of the old value through use model. As he puts it at the end of his essay:

> By accepting the model of the citizen-state dialectic, the archivist can focus with confidence on a manageable part of the whole, without having to know the whole universe. He or she can then concentrate on looking for evidence of significant changes, variations, and distortions between targets and results in the most important societal structures and functions. It is at such points that the image of society is sharpest. Accordingly, this model should allow archivists to isolate those series of records that most closely reveal the nature of society, the dynamics of government ... and the prevailing ideological currents of the age in which the records were created. This approach does not explicitly search for values in the records per se – whether evidential or informational – but rather how accurately the records project and sharpen the image of the citizen-state dialectic, and of the separate actors, agents, and functions involved therein (Cook 1992:59).

In fact, Cook's normative ideas are closely tied to the values of democratic government. Implicitly the impetus for his theory comes from notions of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, and to such other values as are usually summed up as human rights that civil societies are expected to observe. Essentially, his appraisal theory aims to leave us with archives that will allow the future to see how government operated (transparency), how it acted in particular cases that deeply affected citizens or caused widespread concern and interest (accountability), and how well it reached its objectives (responsiveness). Cook does not use these terms, but I think it is fair to say that he presented a theory of appraisal based in its normative

aspects on the democratic virtues of an open society with accountable agencies striving to respond adequately to public needs, including the requirement to treat individuals fairly and equitably.

Let me turn the page to look at those writing from a postmodern point of view. I think that we can see that they have developed several themes that apply to the problem of appraisal. They have considered the connection between archives and the exercise of power. They have developed the idea of appraisal as an act of intervention that contributes to and changes the nature or characteristics of records. They argue that appraisal is unavoidably subjective, and contrast this view with the prevailing view of early writers on the subject. They connect appraisal with the processes of identity and representation. They call for a richer appreciation of context in all archival work, including appraisal. Given the necessary subjectivity of appraisal, they call for greater transparency and accountability in its exercise. [4]

These writers see records and archives as instruments of power and also, in Francis Blouin's (1999:106) words, as "a vehicle through which power preserves itself through history." In this view, then, they see archival selection as an act with the potential to reveal or obscure power relationships and to determine the representation the future will have of events and the actors involved in them. In the opinion of Verne Harris, the acts of appraisal are necessarily political acts that involve deciding whose stories will be told from records archivists select (Harris 1998). Terry Cook and Joan Swartz go so far as to say that the archival profession has failed to recognize the power it wields, with "a concomitant abdication of responsibility for the consequences of the exercise of that power" (Cook and Swartz 2002:5).

As much as it is incumbent upon archivists to recognize the power they have, in particular the power to determine the life or death of records, their power, it might be argued, pails in comparison to those who hold executive and administrative power in governments and other organizations, and, in particular who have the power to decide the rules affecting the disposition of records. These rules have to be constructed so that archivists see all the records and can decide, as free from outside pressure as possible, which records should be kept and which should be destroyed. We know how far even today many

states are from creating such a situation where public records are concerned. Only governments truly committed to transparency and accountability are prepared to adopt an open regime for disposition of records in which the aim is to preserve records that will reveal how a people are governed so that they can reflect on their past actions as they consider those now and in the future.

In another vein, these writers see all the acts of archival appraisal, description, and preservation – and for some even beyond to acts of use and interpretation – as leaving their mark on the record, on the archive, changing or adding to its meaning. They aim to change what they believe is the prevailing view that the record, the archive is something static and unchanging. The record can never be considered, Eric Ketelaar (2001:136) says, as "an artefact with fixed boundaries of contents and contexts." They believe that the mark archivists leave on the records changes them, becomes part of their nature, and cannot be ignored when interpreting them.

These same writers urge archivists to accept, in Harris's words, that what has archival value will be "specific to place, time, culture and individual subjectivity" (Harris 1998:48-9). They advise the profession to abandon any notions they have of being impartial, and advise their colleagues to acknowledge, or even, as Cook (2001:28) puts it, to celebrate, their own historicity and biases. As much as we have to acknowledge that appraisal is undeniably subjective, it is quite another thing to exhort archivists to abandon their efforts to be the impartial mediator of all the interests that pertain to records, that is, to favour none, to serve all and above all the interest of the integrity of the record. As much as coming to grips with our subjectivity is a problem of appraisal, one wisely raised into greater relief by postmodernists, the greater problem, it might be argued, is to maintain the reliability and authenticity of records in the face of the many tendencies in modern life to ignore, abuse, and neglect records. It may not be fashionable nonsense to consider archivists' actions affect records, but there are more important and compelling needs to treat records and the various interests they serve equitably, which is never an easy thing to do.

As to the connection between appraisal and identity making and representation, postmodern writers invite us to face a conundrum.

Writers like Elizabeth Kaplan (2000) inveigh against an essentialist view of archives as the pure evidence of experience. For her they are anything but the unsullied representation of authentic experience. People are too interested in engineering the view they have of themselves and the past, and she warns archivists to be aware of the pitfall of trying to engineer the way people and events are seen and identities manufactured. But, as Harris (1998) sees, you can hardly take action to consciously privilege, for instance, marginalized groups without tinkering with their story, without becoming in some way an engineer of their identity such as it will be revealed by archives – a frightful thought for any postmodernist. No line of thinking in the post-modern critique is more wrongheaded than this one. The archivist can neither make records speak of things about which they are silent, nor manipulate them to tell a particular story. Interpreters of records may well be able to do that, but archivists should not even try to engineer who is to be heard. The great challenge of the archivists is not to be apolitical, as some postmodernists suppose they have tried to be, but to avoid caving into the many ideologies swirling about them and serve the record.

As might be expected for writers influenced by postmodern thinking, context is everything. As we have already seen, Samuels and Cook, and most other writers about appraisal for that matter, recognize that a thorough evaluation of the various contexts of the records is essential in appraisal. Moreover, part of the context of records that arrive in archival custody is to account for how they got there, to explain the grounds for preserving them and not others so that future users have some sense of the mark the acts of appraisal have made on the record they face. In short, the insight here is, if we are necessarily subjective actors or participant observers in our acts of appraisal, the least we can do is account for the grounds on which we made our decisions. This may sound simple, but in fact it is a big challenge to account for why and how we make appraisal decisions. It has not very often been done adequately in the past, so archivists will have to learn how to make the often unspoken criteria they use in making decisions explicit in documentation of the exercise.

Let me now try to connect my theme of appraisal with my other two themes. Let me begin with what I hope we can accept as a truism. The generation of archivists now working, certainly those who are

early in their careers and still relatively young, will have to solve the problem of long-term preservation of digital records. It is 30 years since the U.S. National Archives, the most well endowed archival institution in the world, first began keeping digital output, but even it struggles still to establish its Electronic Records Archives. Its Strategic Plan of 2000 made this pledge.

> We will work in partnership with other Government agencies and the private sector to develop and implement an Electronic Records Archives, which can preserve and make accessible any kind of electronic record in a format that frees it from the computer system in which it was created (National Archives and Records Administration. 2000).

The U.S. government is investing tens of millions of dollars to see NARA fulfill this pledge. NARA aims to have 97% of its digital holdings preserved and accessible by 2007, no matter the original format. (I think it has actually fallen behind in this aim it set in the year 2000, but no matter.) As we all know, the need to develop the capacity to care for digital records has become unavoidable, virtually the world over, because so many records and so much data are now created, communicated, maintained, and must continue to be maintained over the long-term, in digital format. This is as rapidly becoming the case in people's personal lives as it is in their work lives. Formidable obstacles stand in the way of developing digital archives capacity. I think that the archival profession worldwide is familiar with these obstacles, but I might try to summarize the most serious of them.

- Digital recordkeeping is often woefully inadequate, making the work of archivists difficult if not impossible to do, with the result that archivists have to involve themselves as advisors on digital record making, record keeping, and record maintenance.
- Technological obsolescence and storage media fragility can seriously compromise and certainly complicates long-term preservation of digital records.
- As yet, neither industry nor government nor any other entity has made much of an investment in research and development into building digital archives capacity, with the result that, at the moment, each archival institution is faced with having to build capacity virtually from the ground up.

- Given that it is so easy to alter digital records, whether intentionally or accidentally, digital records must carefully be protected from corruption to maintain their trustworthiness over time.
- Despite simplistic assumptions that digital preservation is mainly about storage capacity, and such capacity seems to grow cheaper by the day, building and maintaining systems for long term preservation of digital records is going to be costly, not only for hardware and software but also to hire and train the personnel to help devise, implement, and maintain what will certainly be very large, very complex, and very specialized information systems.

So, the situation is clear: the archives of the future will mainly be digital; the capacity to deal adequately with the quantity of digital archives coming our way does not yet exist, and archival institutions face serious obstacles to build their digital archives capacity. I doubt that this is news to anyone in the archival profession, but I think that it is also true that very few outside the profession, including what my American colleagues call "resource allocators", have much sense of the magnitude of the problem or the consequences of not addressing it. It is also a large challenge to educate the world about the problem and the needs archives have.

So to my final theme. Archives were once the secret seats of power. No one who was not an instrument of power saw or used archival documents. As the great French archivist Michel Duchein observes, this began to change in the 18th century when there was a silent duel between the owners of archives and intellectuals like Voltaire to open them to view. Records and archives are indeed the source of information and knowledge about the actions taken by the powerful and affecting the powerful and the not so powerful. Currents in society outside the archival sphere have pressured governments and other organizations to be more transparent, accountable, and responsive, but, unlike other sources of information and knowledge, access to records and archives are always trammeled with considerations of confidentiality, political and national interest, privacy, and so on. In most countries the world over, the first open viewing of public records came through their release to archives in the 19th century, but, in deference to these concerns about protecting the interests of the creators and subjects of records, records tended to be released to

archives only long after they had been created, often when the entity that produced them had long disappeared. Archivists were basically rescuing the remnants of a long distant past about which they were rarely access concerns. In the latter half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the political and cultural interest in national, regional and personal memory making and the growing interest in contemporary historical events encouraged governments to be more liberal in allowing access to archival public records. But, as late as the beginning of the 1970s, it was still a privilege rather than a right to see what governments were up to by examining their records.

As we know, that has been changing, slowly and with many a misstep and backsliding along the way as testament to the many enduring interests in concealing records in the exercise of governance. Still, the situation for archives changes dramatically when citizens can exercise a right to see public records under freedom of information legislation. As difficult as it is to plumb the effects of the new access regime, we have a fairly good idea of some of them. Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy laws:

- accustom public officials to transparency and accountability, and this can make them less hesitant to transfer records to archival care;
- highlight the connection between good recordkeeping and good governance to the potential advantage of archival concerns;
- cause officials, particularly those close to political power, to be careful about what they record, giving rise to concern about the quality of records as evidence of what occurred; and
- instill in public administration and in archival work a greater concern for the dignity of individuals and their right to fair and equitable treatment and protection from inappropriate exposure.

I fully realize that these laws and their effects have not penetrated everywhere, but I do believe that they institute values that people everywhere share. These trends towards greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness also affect organizations in the private sector. Good corporate citizenship is an expectation of the public, as reflected in the laws to protect the environment and so on. So, even archivists and records managers working to preserve

records of private organizations will not be immune to the pressure to promote and contribute to a more open, accountable, and responsive outlook on recordkeeping. Let me now try to connect these three themes to speak of some of the great archival challenge of this century.

Let us take this matter of preserving private archives first. I think that we can say that it needs to be given due attention to that accorded to public records. To do anything in this realm requires a planned, documented, and systematically pursued approach to ensure that we leave an adequate documentary heritage of our times. It means that archivists everywhere need to spend far more time than most of them do outside the walls of their repositories talking with records creators, proselytizing for their cause, and carrying the archival ethic to the people, as it were. If as the postmodernists say, we necessarily reflect our society's values, we have to engage more with society to develop populist archival values. Our own view of the matter needs such engagement if we are to avoid the pitfalls of imposing our biases on the world and on the archives it leaves behind for posterity. We often hear that archives are not understood or valued by the populace. Spending all one's time in the office is not going to change that. In the era of digital records, it is even more necessary to be alive to the dangers of corruption and loss of private records than it is in the more highly regulated public environment. I realize that it is difficult for archivists to tear themselves away from the mountain of work they have, with too little to do it with, but it is very unlikely that the passive approach will leave much of any value or possibility of use to rescue years hence. Archivists are society's records experts, and it badly needs their expertise these days, so they should not stint with it.

On the public records side, archivists play an important role in promoting and effecting transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of governments. Society should be able to question its public archives to assess how it has been governed over time in order to make its historical experience manifest in the choices it makes today. This is a longstanding historical and archival ethic. It is true that any number of stories can be told from the archives, but the point is the great value of preserving archives has always been that arguments about the past are far more likely to avoid myth making, special

pleading, and fabrication if there is some evidence to go on. Of course, archives do not communicate historical truth, that most illusive of things, but, despite the layers of context they may acquire, buried there in the documents there is documentary truth to be found, if only one is wise enough and knowledgeable enough to see it. All archival documents speak of their time and place, the actors who made them, the actions they took, and the thoughts they had. I believe all archivists know and believe this, and they recognize the enduring and fundamental probative or evidentiary value of archival documents.

However much we might quibble with the normative ideas of archival appraisal theorists have had in the past -- remember I said that arguments about normative ideas are inherently endless, although not necessarily unproductive for all that, for each generation of archivists must puzzle out what it thinks is the best evaluative stance for its society in its time -- recent writers have reached some valuable points of consensus, which I must confess only validate longstanding theory. Both Samuel's and Cook, for instance, have grasped the well established archival idea, that archival appraisal's main aim is to winnow all the records a given creator has produced down to those that will best explain how it carried out its tasks and responded to its circumstances, and that this can only be done by thorough and comprehensive analysis of all of any given creators records in the context of its functions or activities. If this is done diligently according to well publicized plans, the collective result will be an array of well formed archives whose components can speak with some integrity to the future. The result will not document society; it will simply be a part of its documentary heritage. It will provide a window on the past, but what anyone will see through the window is completely unpredictable. The impartial quality of archival work is not that archivists are objective, or that the results of their work can ever be truly comprehensive or representative, but that, working with explicit methods and procedures and selection criteria, they aim not to favour any actor or any sphere of human endeavour. They will no doubt be thwarted in their goal by concerns of the powerful and by the limitations with which they work, but their work will rest on solid ground and they will be able to defend the decisions they make. They will contribute to and buttress transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in the sense that people can look back and judge past actions, assess their

consequences, and adjust their sights for their time accordingly. At least, that is my interpretation of what is appropriate for my time in the place where I live. I would hope that it is not too far from the sense of the matter archivists everywhere have in their time and place.

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Endnotes

1. This paper is a reworked version of a keynote paper presented at the XVIII BIENNIAL Eastern and Southern Africa Regional of Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) General Conference on Archives and Records in the Information Society: The African Agenda, Botswana, Gaborone, 25-29 July 2005.
2. Helen Samuels, "Who controls the past?" *The American Archivist* 49: first presented her ideas, which she reflects on later in "Improving our disposition: documentation Strategy".
3. At the 2005 ESARBICA Conference, it was pointed out to me that many national archives in Africa do not have a mandate to acquire private archives. This situation is not uncommon even outside Africa. However, if public archives only acquire government/public records, it is still a challenge for the country, even maybe a greater one, to articulate means to preserve private archival material.
4. In my analysis of postmodern appraisal ideas, I am indebted to Jennifer Douglas, "Postmodern appraisal and the 'new' impartiality," (Term Paper in Archival Studies 520: Selection and Acquisition of Archival Documents, School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia, March 2005), 24 pp. Ms. Douglas was a student of mine in this course, and it is my hope that she will publish her paper.