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Appraising digital records, or Swimming in treacherous shoals

Penn, E.

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Appraising digital records, or Swimming in treacherous shoals

I'm going to start with a definition. Many different definitions of appraisal exist and I struggled to find a nice short one – this is one which is fairly standard and I hope recognizable to all. This definition is taken from the UK National Archive's guide 'What is Appraisal?' available on their website. For those who remember their archival theory – this is pure Theodore R. Schellenberg and it dates back to 1956 and his publication of *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*.

[slide 2]

Schellenberg argued that the primary values of records (the value to the organization that created the records for administrative, legal and fiscal purposes) could be easily judged, by examining the position of the creating department within the administrative hierarchy, and by understanding the functions and activities performed by the records' creator. However, he thought that judging secondary values (the historical value to the organization and wider society) was less straightforward, depending on a knowledge of research needs and resources, and, perhaps, most importantly, could never be based on absolute standards.

Schellenberg believed not only were such judgements likely to be relative to time and place but that this was also desirable. He argued that 'diverse judgments will spread the burden of documentation of a country among its various archival institutions, making one preserve what another may discard. Diverse judgments, in a word may well assure a more adequate social documentation'.¹

Schellenberg detailed how archivists could make appraisal judgments in a published *Bulletin of the National Archives* in October 1956 entitled *The Appraisal of Modern Records*. In this pamphlet, he suggested that there were a number of tests that might be applied to judge the evidential and informational values of records.

Firstly, a practical test was required to judge the evidential value. Schellenberg described this as an 'objective approach' which depended on thorough knowledge of the source of the records and their relation to the activity for which they were first created.

By comparison, he thought that three separate tests were required to assess the informational value of records: Uniqueness, Form and Importance.

In the first two tests, consideration should be given to both the information contained in the record and the record itself – with judgment appearing fairly straightforward.

But for the third test of 'importance', Schellenberg admitted that the archivist 'is in the realm of the imponderable, for who can say definitely if a given body of records is important, and for what purpose and to whom?'² Nonetheless he believed that such evaluation was possible by an archivist who had a 'specialized knowledge of subject-matter fields pertinent to the records' and 'a general knowledge of the resources and products of research'.³

Schellenberg provided several examples of the different types and series of records that should be preserved, before acknowledging that 'the standards should never be regarded as absolute or final. At best they will serve merely as guidelines to steer the archivist through the treacherous shoals of appraisal'.⁴

¹ T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Melbourne: F W Cheshire, 1956), p148.

² T R Schellenberg, *The Appraisal of Modern Records, Bulletin of the National Archives No. 8* (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1956), p.22.

³ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.38.

He concluded that appraisal standards must be applied with 'moderation and common sense' and must be based on thorough analyses of 'the documentation bearing on the matter to which the records pertain'.⁵ Schellenberg also argued that the archivist should seek the advice of scholars, but must assume 'a role of moderator' in making the final decision.⁶

As well as forming the basis of The UK National Archive's current appraisal guidance, the text of Schellenberg's 1956 pamphlet also continues to be available on the guidance section of the U.S. Archives website.⁷

So, the question I want to consider is just how relevant, or practical, really is Schellenberg's theory today, over sixty years after it was written, especially when it comes to the appraisal of digital records?

[Slide 4]

The digital world is complicated. This is a cleaned-up applications diagram of all the IT systems in use at the University of Westminster. It nicely illustrates the scale of the challenge. The University has employed an 'Ecology of Systems' model for over 10 years. This essentially provides staff and students with choice when it comes to using a tool to do your job or carry out certain activities. There's not just one tool you can use, but possibly several, and staff and students are free to choose the one that suits them.

The 'Ecology of Systems' model has bred a complex technical environment, with many dependencies and data exchanges, which this diagram illustrates well. It also makes it a difficult environment for the user, and the archivist, to navigate.

[Slide 5]

How can we appraise records when we don't even know where they are? At the University, we have more than a dozen different (known) storage locations for unstructured digital information including shared networked drives, Microsoft SharePoint team sites and Google drives. Unstructured digital information is information held outside of corporate applications such as our student records system or finance system. It can include word documents, excel spreadsheets, powerpoint presentations as well as Google docs, pdfs, email, video and audio files. The commonest complaint we hear from staff in particular is- I don't know where to put things, or find things, or what the latest version is.

This impacts on the operational effectiveness of staff to do their jobs and, of course, on our ability as archivists to ensure that information created :

- can be identified (for example, for the purposes of an audit or to answer a Freedom of Information request)
- that it can be disposed of (for example, in accordance with data protection regulations)
- and finally that it can be transferred to the University Archive (to preserve institutional memory and to support research)

So we definitely need to find a way to appraise all this information in a way that is realistic and effective. I would like to propose that one possible solution is a methodology originally devised for traditional paper records.

[Slide 6]

The More Product, Less Process method, known as MPLP for short, was devised by two American

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁷ <http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/archives-resources/appraisal-of-records.html> [accessed 28/5/19]

archivists, the late Mark A Greene, then Director of the American Heritage Centre at the University of Wyoming, and Dennis Meissner, then Deputy Director of the Minnesota Historical Society.⁸ It is also sometimes known as the Minimal Processing Approach.⁹

Greene and Meissner's article, entitled 'More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing', was published in *American Archivist* in the winter of 2005 and has had a huge influence on North American appraisal practice; yet has been largely ignored here in the UK.

It should be noted that when American archivists talk about 'processing' they generally include a wider range of activities than appraisal alone, including arrangement, description, cataloguing and minor preservation tasks – all of which UK archivists have traditionally separated out as explicitly different activities.

Before I summarise the MPLP method, I want to briefly set it in the context of earlier appraisal theories proposed by Greene. In 1997, when Greene was working at the Minnesota Historical Society, he and another colleague, Todd Daniels-Howell, attempted to develop a pragmatic approach for the selection of business records for permanent preservation, based on the assumption that 'all archival appraisal is local and subjective'.¹⁰

This became known as 'The Minnesota Method'.

Greene argued that by carefully analysing the records' creators, appraisal criteria could be established that was 'rational and efficient relative to a specific repository's goals and resources'.¹¹ Greene explained that the rationale for developing the methodology was in response to the overwhelming volume of business records, which meant that appraisal had to take place at a series rather than an individual record level. In order to evaluate which records should be preserved, the method analysed current holdings, took account of current and predicted staffing resources, studied the needs of users and considered institutional priorities and goals.

The method categorised the various records' creators into sectors and ranked them according to economic impact, existent documentation, identification with the state of Minnesota and the degree to which the particular sector was unique to Minnesota. These rankings in turn enabled Greene and his colleagues to determine which series of records should be preserved and actively collected by the Society.

Greene further developed the Minnesota Method by shifting the focus from record creators to the records themselves, through the application of a concept of utilitarian value. Greene believed that an evaluation of records based on their use-value was effective as an appraisal criterion and he defended this view in a 1998 article in *Archivaria*, entitled: "'The Surest Proof": A Utilitarian Approach to Appraisal'.¹²

Greene argued that use was 'the only empirical measurement' of the value that an institution or society may have of its archives. He acknowledged that whilst an evaluation of use may not be

⁸ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, 'More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing', *American Archivist*, 68.2 (2005), pp.208-65.

⁹ Robert S. Cox, 'Maximal Processing, or, Archivist on a Pale Horse', *Journal of Archival Organization*, 8.2 (2010), 134-88; Dennis Meissner and Mark A. Greene, 'More Application while Less Appreciation: Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP', in *Journal of Archival Organization*, 8.2-3 (2019), pp. 174-226.

¹⁰ Mark A. Greene and Todd Daniels-Howell, 'Documentation with Attitude: A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records', in O'Toole (ed.), *The Records of American Business* (Chicago: SAA, 1997), p.162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mark A. Greene, "'The Surest Proof": A Utilitarian Approach to Appraisal', *Archivaria*, 45 (1998), pp.127-69.

entirely free of bias or wholly scientific, nonetheless, he regarded such an approach as ‘a step towards making more rational and thoughtful choices’.¹³

It is the importance of utility as a measurement of archival value which formed the basis of the MPLP processing methodology proposed by Greene as a way to deal with the cataloguing backlog of many archival institutions.

The More Product, Less Process theory argued that the existence of continuing, ever increasing, cataloguing backlogs is a disservice to researchers and a blight on the archive profession. Greene’s working hypothesis was that these backlogs exist because archivists are spending too much time on tasks that don’t need doing. Examples he gave include describing all records at item level, the removal of staples from every document, the unfolding of documents, and the repackaging of documents into archival folders.

[Slide 7]

Greene argued that archivists have become obsessed with an ‘ideal standard level’ which is applied to every collection irrespective of whether it is warranted.

Instead, he suggested that archivists should take a ‘hard-nosed, pragmatic, forest-not-trees approach’ which focuses on the needs of users as the driver for all processing activity. The aim of the archivist should be to achieve what Greene termed ‘a golden minimum’ that:

1. *expedites* getting records into the hands of users
2. Assures *adequate* arrangement for users
3. Takes *minimal* steps with regards to preservation
4. Provides *sufficient* description for users

Greene concluded his article by opining that pride in our craft often gets in the way of the real objective of making records accessible; and that archivists have allowed techniques appropriate to another age ‘to survive unchallenged in an era where the volume and character of records are profoundly different’.¹⁴

The North American archival literature has generally been favourable towards the More Product, Less Process methodology. Despite a few concerns voiced about what some have regarded as ‘cavalier’ attitudes towards conservation and preservation¹⁵, there is evidence that it has been widely implemented in many US archival institutions.

Surprisingly, the method not been as popular in the UK, where, surely most, if not all, archival institutions are facing similar backlogs. I have found only a handful of articles in the UK literature about MPLP¹⁶, and only one which considers MPLP specifically in a UK context, written by Rachel

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.151.

¹⁴ Greene and Meissner, (2005), p.26.

¹⁵ For example, Jessica Phillips, ‘The Defense of Preservation in the Age of MPLP’, *American Archivist*, 78.2 (2015), pp.470-87.

¹⁶ For example, Dorothy Waugh, Elizabeth Russey Rohe and Erika Farr, ‘Flexible processing and diverse collections: a tiered approach to delivering born-digital archives’, *Archives & Records*, 37.1 (2016), pp.3-19; and Julia Kastenhofer and Dr Shadrack Katuu, ‘Declassification: a clouded environment’, in *Archives & Records*, 37.2 (2016), pp. 198-224. The only other examples are reviews of American publications that appear in the UK literature: Anne Barrett, Book Review of *How to manage process in archives and special collections* by Pam Hackbart-Dean and Elizabeth Slomba (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2012), in *Archives & Records*, 35.1 (2014), pp.59-62; and Stephen Scarth, Book Review of *Donors and archives: a guidebook for successful programs* by Aaron D Purcell (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), in *Archives & Records*, 37.1 (2016), pp. 117-9. The largely North American adoption of the MPLP Method is also evidenced in Dennis

Anchor at the University of Leicester in 2013. Anchor suggests that although there is sympathy for the pragmatic approach proposed by Greene and Meissner, there is a general absence of metrics about processing in the UK as well as a lack of consensus over whether minimum measures are acceptable.¹⁷

Anchor focuses on cataloguing and description but, in my view, her findings about the wide variation in descriptive practice and the 'contradictory understandings of acceptable levels of processing' in UK archives, could equally be applied to UK appraisal practice.

Anchor concludes that 'if applied on its own terms, far from attacking professionalism, MPLP reminds the archival community of the importance of developing standardized baseline practice, in order to be able to assess productivity and deal pro-actively with increasing backlogs'.¹⁸

[slide 8]

So can the More Product Less Process method be a useful tool for appraising digital records?

Greene and Meissner's 2005 article makes no mention of digital records. In 2010, Greene wrote a follow-up article entitled: 'MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore', in which he addressed the applicability of MPLP to appraisal specifically as well as the issue of digital records.¹⁹

In this second article, Greene is highly critical of the average archivists' approach to appraisal, suggesting that most simply accept material into the archive and assume appraisal will occur during processing – which, when it does, is usually at file or item level. Greene believed that too many archivists are 'averse to doing appraisal' and he blames this on our obsession with being 'guardians of the past' and fears about making mistakes by overlooking historically important documents or by not identifying any and all 'confidential' records in our collections. He argued that the sheer volume of modern collections must force us away from this type of thinking and into accepting 'that "good enough" is better than "one of these days"'.²⁰

In Greene's view, appraisal is not about inspecting individual records but is instead about assessing the activities of the records creator against the repositories' collecting priorities. In making appraisal decisions, the archivist needs to consider the mission, audience and resources of the present because archivists are 'selectors, not collectors'.²¹

And as for digital records, Greene asked 'why should appraisal and description of electronic records be – or need to be – any different than that applied to analogue materials?'.²²

He also argued that high level description – at collection-level – may be 'necessary as a matter of practicality when it comes to massive quantities of born digital files'.²³ Greene suggests that it may even be preferable so that coupling collection, or series, level metadata with the ability to search individual files gives users the best of both worlds. Meissner and Greene both argue that 'there is

Meissner and Mark A. Greene, 'More Application while Less Appreciation: Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP', in *Journal of Archival Organization*, 8.2-3 (2019), pp. 174-226.

¹⁷ Rachel Anchor, "'More Product, less process': method, madness or practice?', *Archives & Records*, 34.2 (2013), pp.156-74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.165.

¹⁹ Mark A. Greene, 'MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore', *American Archivist*, 73 (2010), pp.175-203.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.178.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.181.

²² *Ibid.*, p.192.

²³ *Ibid.*, p193.

nothing to prevent us from organizing and describing digitized (or born digital) material at the file or even series level, except our own fascination with individual documents'.²⁴

In August 2017 the University received a 12-month grant from Jisc to participate in an extension to their Research Data Shared Service Digital Preservation Pilot Programme, to explore the archival and records management aspects of digital preservation. As part of this work we ran a workshop for UK practitioners on the topic of appraisal where we explored how well traditional appraisal theory and practice can be applied to digital records and how we document these processes. The findings of the workshop indicate that although many practitioners expressed uncertainty or even unease at appraising digital records, no one identified any appraisal activities which they carried out on digital records that did not have an analogue equivalent, and vice versa.²⁵ They did, however, identify changing levels of impact of some appraisal activities when dealing with digital records; for example, the importance of pre-transfer activity, and of early engagement with records creators. The immediacy of the transfer of digital records from source to archive gives archivists an opportunity to engage with records creators and explain what we do and why, and perhaps even get them to do some of the work during the process of records creation like titling and version control or adding metadata about copyright or sensitive content.

So how we are putting digital records appraisal into practice at the University of Westminster? Well, very much like the methods suggested by Greene and Meissner. For example, we recently received an accession from our in-house design team who create all the University's official publications including prospectuses, course handbooks, degree show invitations and event marketing. The accession comprises 14,500 individual files in 3630 folders, equating to over 1 terabyte of data. An added complication is the fact that the design team work on macs, whereas we, like most of the University, work on pcs. We transferred all the records onto a newly purchased mac-compatible external hard-drive and then used a Macbook (actually the personal device of one of my team) to transfer the records in batches into NextCloud which is our storage area for ingest into Archivematica and AtoM (our digital preservation and dissemination systems). This means we have a back-up, and that we can pull the records back onto our networked pcs if necessary.

The volume of data and the time-consuming nature of the transfer itself means that it was unrealistic to appraise at file or even folder level. Instead, our decision to retain all of the data for long-term preservation is based on several factors: the role and importance of the records' creator; the records' perceived evidential and informational value as institutional records, in support of our goals and priorities as detailed in our collecting policy; as well as a consideration of the anticipated use-value of these records based on known usage of equivalent paper records.

The transfer of these records had to be done as a matter of urgency because the design team had run out of space on their shared network drive and were starting to delete old records so that they could continue working on new jobs; but it has enabled us to engage with the team in terms of the new records they are now creating and to actively plan future transfers.

It is a 'good enough' approach: we've taken immediate measures to ensure that the records are adequately preserved for the long-term and can be sufficiently accessed in the present, whilst hoping that future technology will enable potential weeding and destroying of data that is not of long-term value. Put another way, it's a risk-based approach that for this particular series of records favours the retention of some potentially non-value records over the loss of any high-value records.

²⁴ Dennis Meissner and Mark A. Greene, 'More Application while Less Appreciation: Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP', in *Journal of Archival Organization*, 8.2-3 (2019), p.195.

²⁵ *RDSS Digital Preservation – Records and Archives Management Pilot. A Report for Jisc by University of Westminster, July 2018*. Available online: <http://recordsandarchives.westminster.ac.uk/>

[Slide 9]

At our appraisal workshop, several participants agreed with the suggestion by Harrison and Schuurmsma that appraisal is a craft. I do not believe that the act of appraising records is a strictly scientific exercise with a clear right or wrong that holds true in all contexts, nor is it an art implying an aesthetic attachment to value; instead it is something that archivists get a feel for that involves both skill and experience, akin to a craft.

Greene concluded his 2010 article with the statement: 'The illusion of perfection tempts our profession, but it is not clear that our institutions or society want or need us to be perfect. It is possible that they want and need us to be efficient, looking at the forest rather than the trees, and flexible enough to deal with admitted problems in new ways.'²⁶

Arguably, More Product Less Process fits well with the notion of the archivist evolving as a guide or a mediator rather than an expert, whereby users are pointed to a likely area of interest rather than to a precise item.²⁷

Is adopting More Product Less Process then a sign of 'professional maturity' in accepting 'good enough' processing in order to 'revolutionize' access? Especially if it is teamed with an active and regular programme of reappraisal that can take advantage of advances in technology?

To conclude, in my view, Schellenberg is still relevant today. To seek perfection in any archival endeavour, but especially in appraisal, appears to be futile and unnecessary. Instead, the best we should strive for is 'good enough', keeping our focus on facilitating access as the key driver for all our appraisal and other processing decisions.

To repeat Schellenberg's words written in 1956: 'the standards should never be regarded as absolute or final. At best they will serve merely as guidelines to steer the archivist through the treacherous shoals of appraisal'.²⁸

[Slide 10]

Thank you.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.199.

²⁷ Anchor, (2013), p. 167.

²⁸ Schellenberg, *The Appraisal of Modern Records, Bulletin of the National Archives No. 8* (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1956), p.38.

Appraising digital records, or Swimming in treacherous shoals

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Dr Elaine Penn

Head of University Records and Archives

<http://recordsandarchives.westminster.ac.uk/>

Definitions: What is appraisal?

Appraisal is the process of distinguishing records of continuing value from those of no further value so that the latter may be eliminated. Records can possess different types or degrees of value to an organisation, which will affect how long collections need to be kept. In general, there are two layers of value:

Primary value: the value to the organisation that created them for administrative, legal and fiscal purposes.

Secondary value: the additional historical value to the organisation and wider society. This can include ‘evidential’ value derived from the way the record documented the history, structure and functions of an organisation, and ‘informational’ value in providing research material on persons, places and subjects.

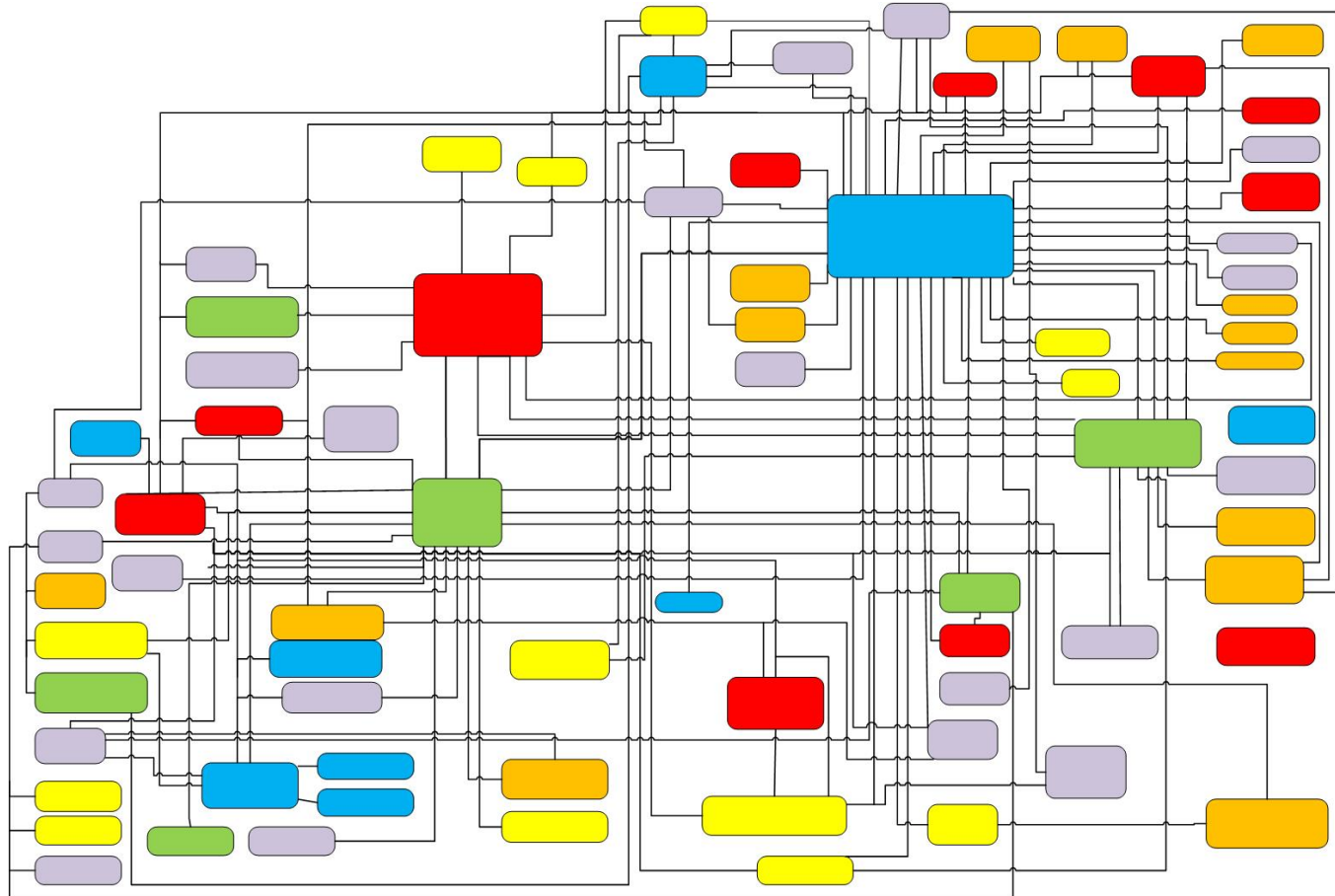
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/what-is-appraisal.pdf> (last updated August 2013)

Theodore R. Schellenberg (1903-1970)

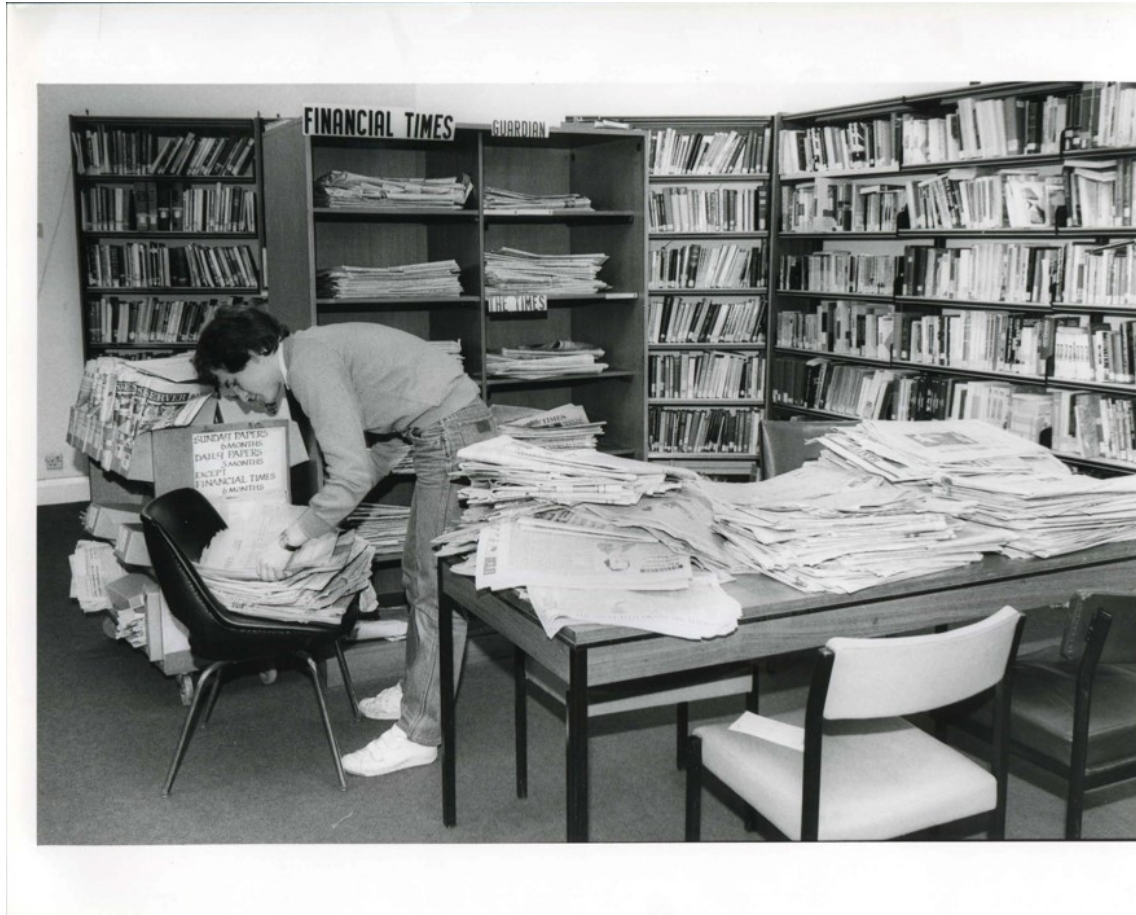


Image courtesy of The U.S. National Archives (GetArchive LLC)

The importance of context - 'Ecology of Systems'



Unstructured information



Mark A. Greene (1958-2017)



Dennis Meissner



Images courtesy of CARA News and Society of American Archivists

More Product, Less Process

- The Golden Minimum: to maximise accessibility
- ‘An archivist can get to know the forest pretty well without examining each tree, coming away with a better sense of the big picture’.

Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, ‘More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing’, *American Archivist*, 68.2 (2005) pp208-65

Appraising digital records



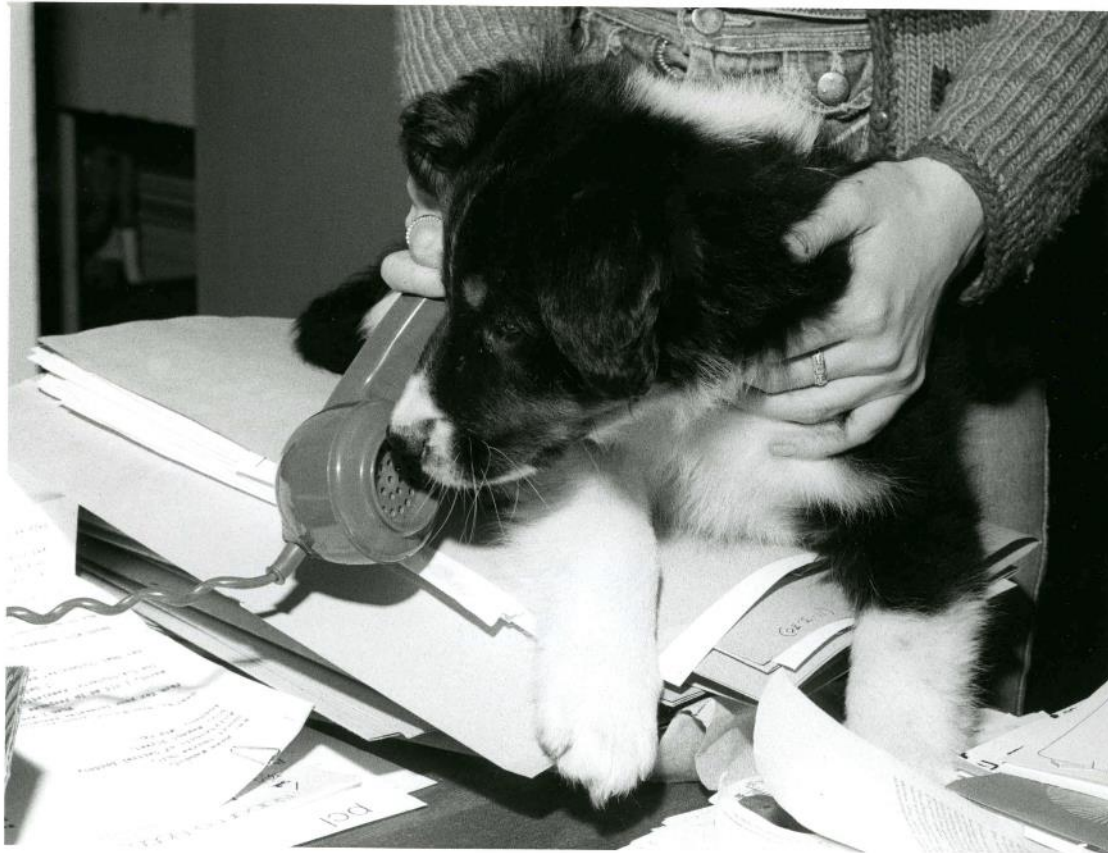
Is 'good enough' enough?

'Selection, like management, is not an exact science; if it were then the archivist might have exact criteria and theorems to guide him. Nor is selection solely an art. It can be argued as more of an art than a science, but it is preferable to consider selection as a craft, practiced to achieve certain ends with suitable criteria or guidelines to meet these ends.'

Harrison and Schuursma, *The Archival Appraisal of Sound Recordings and Related Materials: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris, UNESCO, 1987), 27.

Thank you. Questions?

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