

Appraisal: the difference between a good archivist and none

Theo Thomassen, Marburg, August 12, 2011.

A few years ago, my aunt Mary, in her professional life a teacher and a management consultant, died at the age of 79. She was single and left no children. My sister took care of her heritage. After having deleted all files at the computer, as aunt Mary had requested, she asked me to look at her personal papers. So I did. Now aunt Mary's personal archive is stored in my house, eleven boxes, professionally arranged and described.

In the beginning I was puzzled by the fragmentary character. There was a lot of material related to her dissertation and a lot of teaching materials. There was not a series of letters or other series. There were a few postcards of my grandparents from the fifties, recent insurance certificates, notes on a meditation course she had taken, and some correspondence with a priest she had apparently been in love with, without having been able to start a relationship for obvious reasons. I began to understand more of it when my sister told me that at the end of her life aunt Mary had bought a shredder in order to destroy all personal papers she could find: most of my eleven boxes appeared to be filled with the papers she had overlooked, because they were fallen behind a chest, stored in a dark basement, or locked away and forgotten. But what did this matter? Having processed the papers that had accidentally survived, I never opened any box and my family, though aware of their existence, never consulted any of the documents either. The value of the remaining papers turned out to be emotional rather than informational. Without losing their historical potential, they are kept as a symbol rather than as a source of family history.

For most people records appraisal is an ongoing process, executed not regularly and very deliberately, influenced by incidents and changing circumstances and not directed by explicit objectives. Most of the times, appraisal becomes a serious job only when somebody has died. Then, decisions about what is to be destroyed and what is to be kept often become complicated, in view of conflicting desires of the family members and the deceased. The collection of papers of the latter will be dispersed, fragmented and partly torn up. No one will ever be able to reconstruct from these fragments the story of the original collection could have told; remaining traces of the life story of the deceased will be appropriated by members of the family and integrated in one way or the other in the live stories of their own.

One of the appraisal issues that fascinate me most are the differences and similarities between the way in which lay persons maintain and dispose of their records and the way in which archivists do it. In order to explore these differences and similarities, I would like to act for the next thirty minutes as if I were a self-employed archivist, a consultant on the practical appraisal issues of private persons in particular, who has to bridge the gap between daily practice and current professional principles and approaches.

What I find most interesting is the way individuals like my aunt Mary are telling with records the story of their lives, the story of who they want to be and who they want to have been. Because that is what aunt Mary did and what we all do: we document our lives and the lives of people we are involved with not only by sending, receiving, collecting and storing email messages, memoranda, letters, blogs, photographs and

videos, but also by destroying some, maybe most of these documents. While we change ourselves, we change our story and our records.

Narrative psychology holds, that you are the story you tell about yourself. If you want to grow older, move to other positions in family life and society, develop your knowledge, feelings and opinions, you have to grow, move and develop this story as well, otherwise it prevents you from becoming who you are. Narrative psychologists consider a patient with a phobia, a neurosis, a depression or another mental disorder, as someone who is telling the wrong story about himself. In therapy they help the patient to change his or her inconvenient story and – if necessary - to replace it by a convenient one. In doing so they help the patient to change and cure himself.

Changing yourself implies changing your records. If you wish to consider your former girlfriend as part of your new life, you will be inclined to keep her love letters and move them from the pedestal cupboard to the attic. But if you prefer to exclude her from your new life, or keep them from the eyes of your new lover, you will be more inclined to burn them. (I leave alone here, that most love letters are not written at all.)

A friend of mine, a female lawyer, employed by a multinational enterprise, is transferred to another country from time to time. The first time she took all her belongings with her. She gradually realized, however, that by moving her belongings she also moved the burden of her past. They were a symbol of who she was rather than who she was planning to become. The last time, then, when moving to Strasbourg, she did away with all her belongings: her furniture, her books and her papers, She even donated the jewelry of her mother to her granddaughter.

The role I would like to play as an archival consultant is the role of a professional coach, specialized in assisting you as a private person to become who you are by means of creating, preserving or deleting records. In this coaching role, I would help you in deciding what records could and what records could not help you in becoming the person you are. Generally speaking, I would certainly not favor preservation to destruction. I would certainly notice that two years ago you posted on Facebook a sexy picture of yours on the beach with a few empty bottles. The hiring official of the company where you will apply for the position of sales manager will also see it. Therefore, I certainly would refer you to services offered on the internet to delete social media profiles and other private data: SexySocialMedia, DeleteMe, AccountKiller or the Internet Suicide Machine. (How glad would my aunt Mary have been if there had been such a machine for destroying personal records a few years ago!).

Compared with staff members of archival institutions, I would pay more attention in my consultancy activities to non pragmatic reasons for keeping and destroying records. From my experience with aunt Mary's papers I have learned that private papers are kept for their emotional rather than for their informational value and I have also experienced that such papers can obtain this value through the appraisal process itself: when they have become scarce by the destruction of other records or when the decision to destroy has to be taken. I would also place more emphasis on not keeping than keeping records. Traditional appraisal approaches of archival institutions are primarily aimed at keeping information in order to remember. I would follow the new trend by shifting the emphasis to the destruction of information in

order to forget or be forgotten. Our information society tends to get overdocumented as a result of the urge of its members to document themselves as individuals, particularly on the internet. In this abundantly selfdocumenting environment I would try to raise public awareness of the potential misuse of private data and of the role Facebook and other internet communities play in freezing the live stories of their members and preventing them from growing up.

By lack of interference of archival consultants like me, changing our lives and appraising our records are rarely parallel processes. Most of our records get lost behind a chest, in a dark basement or on an old PC, get forgotten or thrashed in a shredder or a garbage bin when we move to another house or get lost when we buy a new computer. The remaining records are dead materials; they only become materials for our lives stories or for the life stories of our children when we reactivate them. In that case they even may become cultural heritage or historical source.

When advising private persons on appraisal, would I apply all archival principles I used to apply when I was still dealing with records transferred to an archive? Generally speaking, I think so. Archival theory and methodology claims to cover not only the whole records continuum, but also the records creating and recordkeeping activities of all organizations, communities, families and private persons, in all physical and electronic environments. But it would be very helpful to me if these theories and methodologies would be further elaborated in order to help me in better understanding how people by means of creating, keeping and destroying records create the stories of their lives. From this psychological or anthropological perspective, I might understand better why government agencies act in the same way or quite differently. Generally speaking, it might add to the analytic, explanatory and predictive power of our discipline if archivists could consider records primarily as the fragmentary representation of the records creators last life, accompanied by traces of their earlier lives, rather than representations of the records creators' activities, if they would not focus on ordering things, but on representing archives as incomplete collections of jig saws that for the greater part don't fit. I don't know if such an approach would have discouraged me to reshape the remaining records of my aunt Mary into a neatly arranged and described archive, stored in eleven acid free boxes, but at least I would have been aware right from the beginning that by doing so I was doing anything except reconstructing the story of her life.

I certainly would apply archival principles, but I would be hesitant in applying general descriptive standards or general standards of any kind. In advising individual records creators on appraisal issues, I would have to consider any archive as unique as its creator and the decision to keep or destroy personal records primarily as a personal choice, affecting the story of one's life and one's life as such. My teaching experience would certainly be helpful in taking this point of view. When I was a teacher at the Archives School in The Hague, the first thing I asked my inexperienced students to do was describing their own archive by describing the records, the chests, drawers and other furniture in which they were stored and the rooms and spots where this furniture was placed. When these descriptions were discussed in class, the students were astonished to see how much the descriptions of these records and the references to the localities they were stored, revealed of their histories, their private lives and their personalities. The exercise made them understand how cultural specific any arrangement and how arbitrary artificial classifications and generic retention schedules are.

In order to help them to understand classification as a social construct, I was used to tell these students the story told by Borges in his 1942 essay 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins'. In this essay, Borges refers to a Chinese encyclopedia entitled 'Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge', in which the world of the animals is divided in fourteen categories: those that belong to the emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, suckling pigs, mermaids or sirens, fabulous ones, stray dogs, those that are included in this classification, those that tremble as if they were mad, innumerable ones, those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, et cetera, those that have just broken the flower vase and those that, at a distance, resemble flies. How would we, archivists, deal with this subject? I am quite sure that we, suffering from a neurotic drive to standardize, could not wait to replace it by an arrangement in three groups: animals in general, specific animals, and phenomena which do not fit in this classification. In this third class we would include the fabulous animals and the mermaids or sirens, since we are culturally unable to consider them as animals in the first place. And even if we would not decide to have the mermaids killed, we would destroy the classification and by doing so the culture in which this arrangement was meaningful and relevant. No, I would not be very fond of applying standards, since standards always destroy to a certain extent the individuality and the specificity of archives and the persons by whom they were created, by imposing on the life of individuals the views, beliefs and ideologies of the group.

Neumayer and Rauber describe appraisal as paternalism over generations to follow, severe censorship, a process which actively favours mainstream values, whilst subcultural influences are effectively eradicated, and a process that will skew future generations perceptions of our society. If this severe criticism of archival appraisal approaches is valid – and I think it is at least to certain extent – does it also apply to the appraisal advice I would offer my customers? I would not be obliged to follow other appraisal objectives and criteria than those agreed upon with them. Of course I would not be able to serve them fully unbiased: no archivist can avoid that his selection objectives and criteria reflect his own views on society, norms, beliefs and ideologies, but I would not have to negotiate these biases with all the members of the world wide archival community. I could subordinate them to the rightfully subjective choices and representation systems of my customers, who would be paying for my services in the first place. It is not unlikely, that this service oriented attitude would help my customers to control their live stories and their lives more than a standard approach would.

It sounds so easy: when you appraise personal papers, just follow the subjective choices and the representation system of your customers. But my customers are not records creators all by themselves. They share this role partly at least with their families or their surviving relatives. Children as much as their parents need to construct a story about where they come from in order to know who they are or who they can become. And they should be able to satisfy this need not only on the basis of their own recordkeeping activities, but also by preserving, recontextualising and destroying records created by their parents, records of which they as family members to a certain degree can be considered co creators. When I would help private persons in appraising their records, I would have to balance the needs of both parents and children, leaving the final decision to the records creators themselves: the parents, the children, the family.

Everybody should have the right to be who he wishes to be, provided that he doesn't prevent others to do the same. But like memory, identity is always contested. The question "Whose history is it, anyway?" is a question central to all appraisal activities. Both on the individual and the societal levels, this question will be answered differently in different circumstances. Just like an individual, a society is the story it tells about itself; just like an individual a society can feel the need to appraise and re-appraise its records in order to become who it wants to be. Appraisal has been instrumental to changing the story of a traumatized society, but no society changes its story in the same manner. Greece destroyed the personal files related to its civil war of 1945-1947, because it chose for amnesty which comes, as Derrida has put it, to a total effacement of the deed and its consequences. Germany carefully preserved the Stasi files, in order to offer the individual citizens as well as society at large the opportunity to reconstruct the story of one's life from a perspective of freedom and democracy. In South Africa representatives of the Apartheid regime and their victims jointly documented the atrocities, because it chose for clemency, which is forgiveness without forgetting. Being specialists in the power relations between records, memory and identity, archivists should play an important advisory role when such major political decisions are taken, but in a democracy the decision on preservation and destruction at this level is a decision not to be taken by archivists, but by representatives of the people in parliament.

Could I extend my consultancy activities to government agencies and try to apply there the same service oriented approach I use in serving my private customers? My answer is yes. Yes, I would stick to the same principles and yes, I would apply the same bottom up appraisal strategy.

In government administration records managers have to deal with the problem that staff members do not follow the recordkeeping and retention procedures implemented in order to enable the records manager to control the business and information processes. For decades now, these staff members are used to manage their own email system and to decide which message to delete, which to keep locally and which to transfer to the record-keeping system. They are used to ingest only those records that meet formal obligations and regulate compliance, and to keep much of the information used to enable and support actions and decisions on their hard discs and usb-sticks. Following their own informal appraisal procedures, they have taken their measures in the appraisal process on the basis of value judgment and in doing so have taken over part of the core duties of the records manager. I would advise this records manager not to consider this as a problem but as a solution and to facilitate rather than to prevent the self-appraising activities of those staff members. Better than any records manager, they are qualified to understand the complex processes that create the records they deal with. I would advise the records manager to move from a top down to a bottom up approach in appraisal and take the various needs and habits of staff members and their networks into consideration, to bother not about the way in which staff members document the execution of their tasks, but to focus on the way in which advises or proposals, together with only those records that meet formal obligations and regulate compliance, are communicated to a higher echelon.

The answer to the question if it would be interesting for me to have government agencies among my favorite customers might be less positive. My private customers are free to follow my advices, but government agencies are not. While the structure of their business processes related to policy preparation is already moving to a

horizontal network structure, the accountability structure of government agencies is still vertical. A minister can be called to account for any activity executed or statement issued by all his staff members, even the lowest in hierarchy. Consequently, any scrap of paper or email message that documents these activities or statements must be kept. This problem asks for a political, rather than an archival or an organizational solution, since it directly affects the system of the constitutional state. Reducing the amount of documents to be preserved comes to distributing appraising responsibilities, which in its turn comes to redefining political responsibility. This goes far beyond my competencies as an archival consultant.

From the point of view of a private consultant, I would finally ask my colleagues employed in the public archives system to exercise some restraint. I would suggest them to rephrase appraisal objectives for public records in terms of documenting formal business transactions rather than documenting society at large, to renounce from including private archives papers in a general acquisition strategy, to focus on enhancing the awareness of all records creators, public and private, of the functions of the records they create and consequently of appraisal needs and demands, to move from a policy of controlling the creation, preservation, arrangement and appraisal of records to a policy of advising records creators on these issues and of stimulating the development and distribution of handy tools to create, preserve, arrange and destroy these records.

I would be very keen in maintaining my professional independence and autonomy. It must be absolutely clear for my private customers that I am serving their interests and not the interests of the state or other so called stakeholders. At the same time, they must be well aware of the fact that I can only guarantee the requested high level of quality when allowed to do my job on the basis of archival theory and methodology and on the basis of the archival code of ethics or - to put it more accurately - the code of conduct of the archival profession. This code, then, is a professional statement on the quality of archival services and not an expansion of the ten commandments or a professional expression of morality, as Verne Harris or Randall Jimerson seem to think.

I would finally ask my colleagues employed in the public archives system not to interfere in my business activities by imposing their archival missions upon me. I do subscribe to democratic values and I am convinced that social memory, cultural heritage and the identity of the community, the people and the nation should be safeguarded, but I cannot put "Pillar of democracy" or "Safeguarder of social memory" on my business card. Public archives may and probably should strive for having archives reflect the broad spectrum of human memory rather than privilege the official narratives of the state and the powerful in society, and give voice to the people who have been silenced in the archives. But a profession and its members must be independent and should not subordinate their professional competencies to politics, ideology or morality of any kind.

Current archival mission statements do not distinguish between archives and archivists. They seem to reflect the self image of archivist from the past, the image of the staff member of a public archive. Nowadays, however, archivists, like all professionals, must be identified in terms of the scientific discipline they monopolize rather than in terms of the institutions by which they are employed. Organizations have their missions, indicating the reason of their existence, preferably formulated in

terms of the role they claim in society at large. Archival institutions are no exception to this. Their mission statements differ according to the mandate they have, the type of material they keep, the political system in which they operate etcetera, and in some or maybe most cases this mission is based on the power, as Terry Cook puts it, entrusted to archives by society. But the missions of archival institutions are not the missions of the professionals they employ. It is reasonable to expect from archivists that they support the mission of their employing organization, but this kind of support is part of their duties as employees, and not of their duties as professionals. One of the characteristics of a profession is its independence and the professional autonomy of its members. Whether they are employed by public archives, private archives, memory institutions, heritage centers, government agencies and private companies or are self-employed, whether they work under democratic and non democratic regimes, as keeper of mediaeval archives, as records managers, as policy makers, as advisers in archival matters or as scholars and teachers in archival science, they have only one common professional obligation to their employers, their customers and society at large to fulfill: being competent archivists.

When can you call yourself a competent archivist? Having have successfully completed a summer course on appraisal certainly helps, but generally speaking you are a competent archivist when you have mastery of archival theory and methodology, the ability to apply these in practice and behave according to the code of conduct of the archival profession, which focuses on quality and not on morality.

Mission statements address employees, codes of conduct professionals.

Governments have established public archives for a number of reasons: in order to preserve valuable documents, to demonstrate government legitimacy, to support power claims, to construct social memory or even to ensure accountability and social justice. Private persons, families, societies or companies have their own reasons for preserving and destroying their records, be it misleading tax law administration, presenting a specific view on their lives or become immortal. Archivists who work for governments and archivists who work for families and societies both have the moral and professional obligation to establish whether the goals of their clients are compatible with their own personal and professional values or not. But even when they subscribe to them, they never may confuse corporate missions with professional obligations. The only mission of archivists is being competent and independent professionals.

Conclusion: challenges

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for allowing me to tell for thirty minutes another story about myself. Not without some hesitation I will leave my unemployed position, but not after having presented – as a genuine archival consultant - a glimpse of the bright future of the involvement of archivists in archival appraisal. I am pretty sure that you as archivists or future archivists will continue to develop appraisal theory, methodology and practice as well as your critical awareness of political and ideological bias and manipulation. It is the only way to maintain our expert status and our ability to deliver high quality services to society. I am also quite sure that you will make amazing progress in enhancing the public awareness in the IT industry, in popular culture, everywhere, of the importance of appraisal, for business reasons, reasons of privacy, personality building, national and family history or whatever. In

organizing appraisal you will certainly help changing the focus of the profession on co-operation rather than on control and stimulate staff members and other lay users of records to partly taking over the appraisal process. You will increasingly act as consultants of public and private records creators; help them to solve their appraisal problems and to design their own appraisal criteria and to empower them by providing appraisal supporting instruments. You will certainly succeed in convincing the iPod producers that they should add an ability to decide what tracks you want to delete. You will jointly enable every person in this world to make well balanced decisions on the preservation and destruction of records as means for remembering and forgetting. Through transparent appraisal methods you will play a crucial role in safeguarding free interpretation and preventing any group or organization, including government, to exclusively appropriate archives as its own heritage.

In *The Art of Travel*, Francis Galton, who was not very fond of physicians, wrote: "Though there is a great difference between a good physician and a bad one, there is very little between a good one and none at all". Happily, archivists are not physicians. Let us go home and destroy.