

Why Appraisal is not ‘Utterly’ Useless and why it’s not the Way to Go either.

A Provocative Position Paper (PPP)

[This is one in a series of thought provoking and controversial position papers on a range of issues surrounding digital preservation. It is our intention that these papers will promote vigorous debate within the digital preservation community and encourage people to think about digital preservation in new and innovative ways by exploring and challenging the received wisdom. These papers do not necessarily represent the views of DigitalPreservationEurope nor our recommendations on the subject discussed.]

It is more than clear that it will be impossible to keep everything forever. Appraisal is the de facto standard procedure for selecting what to keep and what to throw out in the archival world. A possible definition of appraisal is therefore given in the following:

“Appraisal is the process of evaluating business activities to determine which records need to be captured and how long the records need to be kept to meet business needs, the requirements of organisational accountability and community expectations.”¹

Appraisal therefore consists of the following main building blocks:

- comprehensive analysis of the records in question,
- evaluation of business activities and legal restrictions and their impact on the decision whether to keep the records or not,
- determination of the feasibility of preserving the records, and
- making a final appraisal decision.

Further, the process of re-appraisal plays an important role in the continuous assessment of material held; it is not a momentary decision by any means.

It could therefore be seen, somewhat cynically perhaps, as paternalism over generations to follow, choosing what future generations will have access to. In a way, it could be seen as severe censorship based on reasons seemingly incomprehensible to the vast majority of non-archivists out there. The main point of critique we bring up in this article, however, is the assumption that it is possible to rightfully choose what material is most valuable, particularly for the future, and that single fair-minded persons can make these decisions in a just way.

In trying to keep the most important or most valuable content, appraisal actively favours mainstream values, whilst subcultural influences are effectively eradicated.

This process will skew future generations perceptions of our society so that they might believe that pop music video clips are an adequate reflexion of contemporary life, similar to the idealised view of the middle ages held by many people.

This process works the same way that we, almost by definition, can only look at history tendentially. Rather than the everlasting, tremendous effort to shape the way we will be looked at, concentrating on random selection of material might be the best, if not the only way to reduce the volume of data to be dealt with while still maintaining an authentic and unbiased view of our history. It is important to remember that the decision to submit items to an archive is a form of pre-selection anyway and any further appraisal step can only lead to even stronger distortions. Moreover, like it or not, a certain degree of randomness will occur in every appraisal process anyway. Prominent examples of appraisal will be explored below.

Examples of monumentally successful, biased, or simply outrageously unjustified, appraisal are offered by the most diverse flavours of dictatorships ranging from the extreme right to the extreme left. Many 20th century regimes are very prominent examples of this, albeit virtually every other period of time has seen similar developments. Most certainly public support for them will be severely limited and numerous research endeavours try to alleviate the damage done. By highlighting this most extreme form of appraisal based on the world view of the small number of people in charge at a certain time we are able to show that this is definitely not the right way of handling information and independent thought.

[1] The National Archives of Australia
<http://www.naa.gov.au/recordkeeping/disposal/appraisal/intro.html>



Child pornography might not be worth preserving per se, but the fact that it was there is definitely to be kept for future generations.

Random selection of material will theoretically do this.

In addition to the material itself, random selection in a collection of sufficient size would also include newspaper articles on child abuse illustrating that the vast majority of most modern societies condemn the issue, rightfully so we may add. Similar arguments hold for spam e-mail and other nuisances of our times.

Isn't it true that some of the 'graffiti' found at archaeological sites like Pompei have proven to be the most valuable and scientifically interesting artefacts? Without doubt, these examples are rather eye-catching and bold but make clear one point: acting as a guardian for future generations cannot be justified by reasons of dignity or decency; hushing up simply won't do.

We propose the supersession of appraisal, in favour of a process of random selection to complement the preservation of material in its entirety where completeness is essential. Current appraisal practices feature utterly complex or seemingly complicated appraisal functions that require a vast amount of resources in terms of skilled staff as well as equipment. Rather than this procedure we propose to select material on a random basis. Instead of pedantically examining every single submission, we suggest to simply keep every *n*-th instance submitted. This should, of course, be done respecting an archive's physical size and storage capacity. In other words: 'The larger the archive the larger the percentage of instances kept'. Scalability therefore is a problem handled very easily – in stark contrast to the current appraisal processes.

However, there might still be functional applications for appraisal. The world has changed, and much more emphasis has been placed on 'not keeping' rather than keeping. Privacy issues have been the subject of many political as well as philosophical debates for a long time. Raised public awareness along with prominent cases of the misuse of private data have justifiably made appraisal important for a seemingly different application – namely to forget rather than to keep. So everything's not lost and appraisal can still play an important role in records and data management, even though under quite different circumstances.

Examples of its application are surveillance as well as medical data, information about religious beliefs, and from many other delicate categories.

Again, random selection may offer a surprisingly high level of privacy protection as information deliberately left incomplete, by definition, cannot be abused that easily in a systemic manner.

This, in combination with planned omission in the preservation process (or, if collected, to be disposed of within a short period of time) may provide a feasible and cost-effective solution.

Additionally, appraisal and disposal should not be confused with access provision. Keeping material locked away over long periods of time itself, will further protect the privacy of affected individuals or parties.

To sum up, the main advantages of random selection over appraisal are:

- A fair and unbiased view of contemporary life
- Simplicity and cost effectiveness (yes, appraisal in its current form costs a lot of money)
- Privacy protection
- A futureproof process

We therefore define quality in the context of preservation as providing the fairest and most authentic view of cultural heritage possible. Random sampling from a sufficiently large collection is the least biased way of achieving these goals. In this sense, quantity leads to quality once more.

Taking into account the aforementioned arguments, the only reason left to support appraisal is tradition – one of the last reasons used to retain slavery if we recall. Surely, this is a far cry, but it serves to illustrate that any form of subjective appraisal is an unfair process by design. We propose to break with tradition for rational reasons.

Our cultural heritage is certainly well worth the effort needed to provide a fair, unbiased, and authentic view for future generations.

Having presented all the main points, we draw the conclusion that we should abandon appraisal in its current form. We propose to replace it with a three-fold strategy (partly relying on appraisal as a viable means of providing a realistic and authentic view on our past):

1. Random selection for the largest part of appraisal functions,
2. Manual/traditional appraisal for reasons of completeness, and
3. Access limitations for reasons of privacy protection.

The remaining questions are whether quality in appraisal can be increased with extra effort or whether it has no chance of winning the battle against a purely statistic approach at all.

We say it cannot win; prove us wrong.