



Appraisal and Custody of Electronic Records: Findings from Four National Archives

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Debates about appraisal

- InterPARES I (2000): consensus about the appraisal of electronic records: “electronic records must be appraised from the same theoretical and methodological standpoint as traditional records.”
- Luciana Duranti (2002): although the values and criteria of appraisal remain the same for electronic records, the methodological changes are quite radical. Four fundamental changes in the appraisal of electronic records:
 - must assess the authenticity of the records; must determine the feasibility of the preservation; appraisal decision must be made very early in the life of the records; must constantly monitor the records and revise the appraisal decision.



Debates about custody

- Traditional custody model
 - archival repositories take on custody of electronic records
 - post-custody model: “the transfer of the inactive records to an archives may be delayed or deferred for much longer periods than in the past; in some cases, the records may actually remain indefinitely in the custody of the originating office.”



Purposes of the study

- Gather empirical evidence about the appraisal and custody of electronic records and understand the debates better



What I did?

- From August to November 2011, I explored the websites of four national archives
 - National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Library and Archives Canada, National Archives of Australia, and the National Archives of the United Kingdom.
 - Analyzed their appraisal policies, records disposition guidelines, and other documents that guide records management for government agencies.



Findings: common appraisal methods

- The four national archives all essentially use a combination of macro and micro appraisal methods and evaluate both the evidential and informational values of records.
- These common appraisal methods are largely media neutral except micro-appraisal
 - macro-appraisal is media neutral.
 - Micro-appraisal: appraisal of records, including their content, format, and media. There are differences between the micro-appraisal of traditional and electronic records only when the unique characteristics of electronic records, e.g. fragility, manipulability and shorter life span of storage media, are a concern.
 - Evidential values: can either be assessed using a macro approach or based on records content. In either case, the appraisal of evidential value is media neutral.
 - Informational value: value of the information in the records, so media neutral.



Findings: early appraisal

- Early appraisal exist but not unique to ER
 - At UK National Archives: records are appraised twice: first at 5 years from closure and second at 25 years from creation. In the future, UK National Archives will maintain this timing for paper records but will allow for earlier second reviews. For electronic records and hybrid records, merge the two reviews, and conduct appraisal before creation through file plans or at creation by filing records into folders with disposal already determined.
 - Records schedule enable early appraisal before records creation, apply to both ER and traditional records.



Findings: authenticity

- not unique to ER
 - Definitions provided by NAA and LAC are media neutral.
 - NARA does not include authenticity in its Appraisal Policy and its General Appraisal Guidelines, but includes authenticity as a concern in the appraisal of observational data, which are usually digital format.



Findings: Preservation Feasibility

- For paper records: storage cost
- For electronic records: feasibility of preserving readability and authenticity
- For all records: poor physical condition of records
- Not unique to electronic records



Findings: Monitoring Records and Updating Appraisal Decisions

- Rationales 1: changes in legislation or policy, business needs, organizational structure, functional structure, or other records creating and using environments. Media neutral.
- Rationale 2: unique to electronic records, technological obsolescence and media decay.



Conclusions about appraisal

- None of the four “fundamental changes” is unique to electronic records.
- Yet the four fundamental changes may be especially relevant to electronic records.
 - E.g., electronic records “must” be appraised early because of technology obsolescence. Technology obsolescence issue creates an additional push for the monitoring and updating of appraisal decisions for electronic records. Although media decay is also a concern for paper records, the shorter life span of digital storage media makes assessing preservation feasibility particularly urgent.



Usability

- A major criteria of the NAA, NARA, and LAC.
- not unique but is relevant for electronic records.



Conclusions about appraisal

- Appraisal theories and methodologies for traditional records still apply to electronic records.
- But new appraisal methods need to be created to deal with the unique characteristics of electronic records.
 - E.g., archivists use hash values to verify the authenticity of electronic records, and they assess the suitability of file formats for long-term preservation of electronic records. These methods do not exist in the appraisal of traditional records.



Findings about custody

- Custody model dominates:
 - The four national archives not only accept and preserve electronic records, but also accession electronic records earlier than paper records, if not at the same time.
- post-custody model is implemented in special circumstances
 - NARA: research and developmental records with long-term value are most appropriately maintained by the creating agencies because these agencies usually possess the scientific expertise essential for providing effective access to the data.
 - NAA: “best prospect for preserving access to some digital records is to retain them within their original technological environment.”
 - LAC listed some situations where records should stay with government agencies: high cost of transfer or other technical considerations (software copyright, data complexity, software and hardware dependency, etc.), etc.



Findings about custody

- A variant custody model
 - National archives have legal custody and intellectual control of the archival records, but the physical custody is transferred to a trusted repository that has the specialty to manage specific kinds of records.
 - E.g. In the UK, many electronic datasets selected for permanent preservation are transferred to the UK Data Archive and the National Digital Archive of Datasets. Films selected with archival value go to the Imperial War Museum or the National Film and Television Archive. Sound recordings selected for permanent preservation are transferred to the British Library's National Sound Archive.



Thanks!