

Beyond the Purview of Recordkeeping: A Response to Paul Macpherson

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By addressing the absence of formalised access standards in Australian archives legislation, Paul Macpherson sheds light on a collection of access problems archives are facing today. The relationship between access and primary archives functions such as appraisal, records management, reference and outreach should be explored. Recordkeeping models tend to imply access as part of other conventional archives functions beyond the scope of recordkeeping. This article shifts attention from Macpherson's argument to include the user at the point of creation to protecting the records creation stage itself, recognising appraisal as a means of formal user input and blending reference and future access to current recordkeeping models.

It is easy to get the wrong impression on a first reading of Paul Macpherson's article, 'Theory, Standards and Implicit Assumptions: Public Access to Post-current Government Records' in the May 2002 issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*.¹ At points, the grim details sound as if Macpherson himself is in favour of separating the end-user and public access from the purview of recordkeeping practices altogether. One quickly discovers this couldn't be further from the truth. This helps to point out a current problem recordkeeping is facing. It is that recordkeeping and records management are so far displaced from end-

users and public access that not many positive things can be stated. The two are so distinctly separated, and in need (and worthy) of academic representation and analysis that an introductory article exploring this topic is likely to rely heavily on the negatives. Macpherson's short discourse is not so alarming but in fact, it is a new way to look at the reference problem in general. Many reference advocates may even overlook this article seeing it as a relatively obscure call for support of Australian national access standards beyond interest to the rest of the profession. However, it is not simply a report card of the Australian public access condition.² The depth of the matter extends much farther, helping to expose a series of problems within the information profession more broadly than just archives.³

The crux of Macpherson's call for action is easily identified. It is that the recordkeeping continuum must readily and easily identify and incorporate public use as part of the entire recordkeeping process:

If recordkeeping is a continuum, either public access must be part of the entire recordkeeping process and be encompassed in the standards deriving from the theory, or the theory should explicitly exclude public access to post-current records from the purview of recordkeeping and by extension from recordkeeping standards.⁴

Macpherson does not suggest the latter as a viable solution nor would many information professionals. Furthermore, it is not simply enough to have a standard in writing but not in practice, which is the point at which current conditions differ from the prescription:

Indeed, in any disinterested reading of the words (in reference to the concept of the continuum) public access has to be seen as equally as important as any other part of the recordkeeping process. The inferiority comes from the way the words are understood and from a hierarchically prioritised reading of the theory.⁵

Why is reference and access a lower priority to the profession while the existence of archives is at its most simplified form because of the intention to use them? 'Archives are tools; like all tools, they are kept to be used,' said Mary Jo Pugh in her introductory paragraph of *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*.⁶ This is where a rationalisation of the reference point of view should be extended and

certainly where access advocates would benefit in raising overall awareness in the archival community.

Appraisal and access

Much like the records continuum, the records life cycle concept (especially familiar to those caring for United States government records) has similar problems in incorporating public use. The life cycle of records, although defined as cyclical in concept, drops off at the transfer point to archives. Once archives accession records, they generally drop out of the domain of the life cycle. Access becomes an implied task of the model. However, without formalising access, the model is not truly an accurate representation, in that it does not properly follow records through their entire life beyond their primary business need.⁷

One place the concept of public use appears is in determining the disposition of records having enduring or scholarly value, deeming them permanent in nature, and setting them apart from other records as being 'archivally' worthy of preservation. This process is conducted as an appraisal. It is determined on behalf of many parties, stakeholders and categories of future users. An appraisal is conducted by a records manager, an archivist appraiser, or even a group of stakeholders in consultation about the records' perceived use, as compared to other corresponding permanent records and the existing universe of documentation.

Appraisal is the one truly unique contribution that distinguishes the profession. It is unique only to archives.⁸ Not everything can or should be saved as Macpherson points out and even if it were possible, or plausible, then nothing saved would contain any significant value in comparison to the greater whole.⁹ Therefore, appraising takes account of those redeeming values that would otherwise in the minds of the records creator or records manager go unnoticed.

Appraisal, however unrealistic in its attempt, is currently the one place in the life cycle where use and future use is being determined in conjunction with enduring or continuing values. The solution to the access problem is not an 'up-front' model for user input to determine access strategies. In fact, access is really a collection of problems. Complicating the situation is the lack of user studies. Measuring use and determining the significance of that use is a weak point for archives.

Much of what is attributed to the notion of perceived use is simply conjecture. Reference stakeholders at best guess in an attempt to address what topic or secondary use records may contain. Without valid data based on surveys and observable results, determining significant use becomes a process that is based on experience and amounts to only subjective estimation. The call for user studies and scientific approaches to determining significant use has long been made.¹⁰ It is a current problem, which affects all the functions of archives.

The concept of appraisal is an area within recordkeeping that is growing in prominence and practice. Academic evaluations, models and best practices of appraisal are being adopted and improved upon to supply a means to better select the records that help shape future memory. The records that are selected for permanent retention are saved because their loss would significantly diminish the historical record (or leave missing pieces in the record of the human experience).

Systematic approaches to appraising records have been developed with a variety of criteria. For example, the documentation strategy is one approach to appraisal that systematically creates a plan by gathering a group of stakeholders including future users as part of the documentation group. This allows for future research community involvement in active decision-making in developing the products of the strategy and influencing records creators to insure that proper documentation exists.¹¹ It is very much in line with Macpherson's call for earlier influence in recordkeeping. Additionally, approaches for appraisal like the documentation strategy can very well serve to support the outreach function in archives. Historically, outreach has been fixed to reference and access activities but having future users of archives present at the table during appraisal assists in promoting use and should be of high consideration when appraisers determine dispositions for records.¹²

While no one model has emerged as the 'one size fits all' strategy for appraisal, it is important that decisions are consciously made and are highly documented. The first step in appraisal is accepting the responsibility of selection. When compared to attitudes and perceptions of records selection in the past (that somehow the right records containing the greatest values survive on their own while the records containing little or no value do not survive), there is reason to consider the change. As professionals we know those prior perceptions have

failed, as evident in the amount of unused records prevalent throughout many government archives in the United States.¹³ The right records did not 'somehow' survive and the remnants remaining suggested a shaped culture or memory that didn't accurately reflect the society it was serving. The result is what Howard Zinn called the under-documented or under-represented groups in our government archives: missing from our 'world of documentary material . . . [are] the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people'.¹⁴

Of even greater concern in the area of appraisal is the suggestion that archives as institutions themselves will become the focus of attention for the decisions they make during records selection.¹⁵ This point is inescapable as it fits into Macpherson's suggestion that 'community understanding of citizen rights is expanding and rights of access to government records are only going to grow over time'.¹⁶ Thus, the archives will come more under notice as an institution of public accountability and inevitably, as records continue to be perceived as part of a system of an accountable government, those decisions affecting accountability will increasingly come into question. Only with such a body of knowledge acting as the documentation surrounding records retention decision-making will archives institutions be able to defend their decisions.

Perceived use and public access is only one part in the overall role of appraisal. Macpherson argues that appraisal hinders access because the primary approach has focused solely on evidence and accountability. As Macpherson has suggested, appraisal has been limited to 'purposes linked to these transactions and their context'.¹⁷ This suggests a separation from the predominant, traditional role appraisal played in the early stages of the American life cycle concept of records management: that is, appraising records for their scholarly informational value. Now, the focus has changed to evidence and accountability to records creators and those affected by the records themselves. This is the central problem Macpherson has with current appraisal practice and where the future public user is often unseen. To a certain extent Macpherson is right to focus on this change, but then some of the greatest, most successful research stories have been achieved by using appraised records to document an aspect other than one originally intended by the creator. Researcher success stories using records in this way can be heard almost daily throughout archives reading rooms.¹⁸ This evidence suggests that researchers are well served by a regime

that focuses on records as evidence and for accountability, rather than simply their secondary scholarly and informational values.

At which stage will we view access?

Macpherson's argument suggests that public access should be incorporated into the continuum at an even earlier point, present at the beginning of records creation. For instance, archivists should specify metadata to be captured at the creation of a record in order to provide a more robust system of retrieval, meeting needs for efficient management and administrative use and also public access and future research.

While this approach would improve both current and future access, some archivists would argue that front-end archives intervention would corrupt the concept of archives as unique and organic byproducts of their creators. The practice of actively affecting the creation of a record would be problematic.¹⁹ Their basic premise is that those in the business of preserving records should not alter the natural creation, accumulation and organisation of records. So it would seem two very basic principles of archives: records integrity and equal access are competing forces. Adherents to this tradition would be concerned by the suggestion that archives would become a 'fast-food' approach to the creation of records, changing its menu to whatever perceived taste a particular user group might have at any given time.²⁰ Archives could become susceptible to political influences catering to user groups with the greatest lobbying efforts. Instead of stressing user input up-front, advocates of this school of thought would encourage records to continue to be responsible to their primary values. Current and business uses would remain the first priority as the records' primary value is to their creator, providing evidence and accountability and at the same time providing for whatever secondary uses emerge. It is by happenstance of creating and setting up sound records management programs that additional and future research needs are met. This seems to be a happy medium between fundamental archival principles and actively engaging the system of recordkeeping in order to provide for future use.

I would suggest that it isn't the need to introduce the concept of access at the records creation stage which is the most pressing issue, but actually protecting the records creation stage itself. It is the records themselves, as adequate and proper documentation of their creator, that are being

called into question. Are records even being created? The assurance that a record is produced (with all the characteristics that have traditionally made up a bona fide record) out of a routine legal, fiscal or administrative necessity is no longer a given.²¹ Instead, convenience is the primary appeal in the digital world. Information is being retained indiscriminately, with no authority for creation, and at a voluminous rate and in ever-changing formats.

Records created in the present may be of little use to future scholars, absent of structure and divorced from context. More importantly, it is clear that records are often not able to consistently serve the creator, who cannot properly produce materials that provide permissible evidence in a court of law.²² As an alternative to somehow changing the creation of records, in order to include the future researcher, the emphasis of the archival community should be placed on the creation of adequate and proper records to begin with. Safeguarding the creation of records in the present, meeting the traditional standards and notions of records and preserving their 'recordness', should become the greater concern to guarantee there is a record to meet whatever future use comes about. As information professionals we should put our resources into ensuring the creation of adequate and proper documentation (especially in government records) by assigning the responsibility for records creation to the highest level of authority within an administration and by clearly defining a record by its function and inherent makeup, not by its endless possibilities of form and characteristics.²³ The notion of a record at its most elementary level will facilitate both immediate and future research needs.

A continuum divided against itself

Macpherson is calling for a final determination, an ultimatum, by suggesting we are at a point at which continuing along the same path, at the same pace, will not meet the mission of archives in the future. His foreshadowing is timely. The divide between records managers, archivists and information providers is further defining itself, so that it is no longer useful to talk about the value of records in terms of primary or secondary. This only continues to split the profession, further dividing the work of the continuum into competing forces, and spheres of influence. Macpherson cleverly points to collective memory and institutional memory as values that completely blur the notion of

primary and secondary values. Additionally, the work of appraisal can be considered both the work of an archivist and a records manager.

These concepts do not fit well within the traditional aspects of recordkeeping. As managers of the lifecycle or of the continuum (depending on your walk of life) our purview as Macpherson suggests should extend beyond passively transferring records deemed permanent to archives. This concept extends beyond simply providing access and input into the selection of records (appraisal), to following through by measuring the success of access programs within the continuum. A complete evaluation must consider records' eventual and continued use. Currently, we have no such 'built-in' measures or facilitators in place. Identifying this area in records management as a need for improvement in practice is noted.

Likewise, not only would records managers be concerned with the disposition of their records but also with what happens after. Archivists and similar information providers should see their role as a continuation of recordkeeping, as acting on behalf of the records managers and original creators. They should maintain the means to continue to provide and preserve context-driven approaches to the records being accessed, recognising there will always be uses for records not originally intended. The life cycle and continuum fail in this way to carry through to the sphere of future public access. Rather than being an implied task, reference and future access should be fully integrated in these models and reflected in practice. Too often our procedures, training and processes leave this concept out.

There is a notion deeply rooted in the continuum that records are 'always in a process of becoming'.²⁴ It is an applicable notion here, in the sense that records will always be in that perpetual process. Our systems for keeping and preserving them should reflect this.

Endnotes

1 Paul Macpherson, 'Theory, Standards and Implicit Assumptions: Public Access to Post-current Government Records', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 30, no. 1, May 2002, pp. 6–17.

2 Additionally the topic has been the subject of recent discussion as described by Ted Ling, 'Acts of Atonement: Recent Developments in Australian Archival Legislation', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 23, no. 2, Winter 2002, pp. 209–20.

3 While the inspiration of this article focuses around access to government records in the light of appraisal it has been relatively challenging to conceptualise. I recognise the fundamental problems of using terms such as life cycle and records continuum interchangeably. While there has been much diverse writing in this area I relied on the notion that the similarities of each of these concepts outweighed their differences. In the United States the life cycle concept of managing records is indeed paramount, as is the records continuum concept in other parts of the world. However, in comparison, beyond the initial beginnings of life cycle in practice today, one finds the activities and resulting goals parallel to the continuum's concept.

4 Macpherson, p. 6.

5 Macpherson, p. 8.

6 Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*, Society of American Archivists Basic Fundamental Series, Chicago, 1994, Introduction. The call to bring reference and access activities to the forefront of the archives profession is not new. It gained momentum in the late 1980s with reference advocates like Janice E Ruth, in 'Educating the Reference Archivist', *American Archivist*, vol. 51, Summer 1988, pp. 266-76 and Elena S Danielson, 'The Ethics of Access', *American Archivist*, vol. 52, Winter 1989, pp. 52-62.

7 New electronic description techniques and access catalogues are beginning to pick up on some of the data elements that have been gathered throughout the life cycle, thereby merging the two out of necessity. An example of this is the US National Archives and Records Administration, Archival Research Catalog and future Electronic Records Archives. It has incorporated many description elements from the data gathered at the appraisal stage in the life cycle. See National Archives and Records Administration, *Lifecycle Data Requirements Standards*, 12 September 2002.

8 Richard C Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1983, p. 5.

9 Macpherson, p. 16. See objection point, 'That we can't keep everything'.

10 For example, Paul Conway, 'Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives', *American Archivist*, vol. 49, Fall 1986, pp. 393-407.

11 Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, 'The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study', *American Archivist*, vol. 50, Winter 1987, pp. 23, 25 and throughout article.

12 Catherine Nicholls, 'The Role of Outreach in Australian Archives Programs', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 29, no. 1, May 2001, p. 68.

13 Lenorard Rapport, 'No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records', *American Archivist*, vol. 44, Spring 1981, p. 143.

14 Howard Zinn, 'Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest', *Midwestern Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1977, pp. 26-7.

15 Subject of a forthcoming dissertation tentatively titled *Appraising for Accountability: A Comparative Study of Appraisal Documentation at the National Archives and Records Administration, the National Archives of Canada, and the National Archives of Australia* by Jennifer Marshall, University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Science, 2004.

16 Macpherson, p. 9. Richard Cox makes the prediction that 'at some point in the future, scholars mostly will study archives for what they represent in society rather than for the specific records they hold'. See Richard Cox, 'The End of Collecting: Towards a New Purpose for Archival Appraisal', *Journal of Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 3-4, 2002, pp. 287-309 and a forthcoming chapter in *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal*.

17 Macpherson, p. 9.

18 For example, using the Veterans Administration graves registration database to track the effects of acid rain or using 18th century surveyor plat maps to reconstruct environmental history.

19 See Luciana Duranti, 'The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory', *American Archivist*, vol. 57, 1994, pp. 328-44 for example.

20 Terry Cook, 'Viewing the World Upside Down: Reflections on the Theoretical Underpinnings of Archival Public Programming', *Archivaria*, vol. 31, Winter 1990-91, pp. 126-7 and William Landis, 'Nuts and Bolts: Implementing Descriptive Standards to Enable Virtual Collections', *Journal of Archival Organization*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2002, p. 84.

21 For example researchers of the InterPARES 1 project Task Force attempting to analyse current electronic recordkeeping systems were faced with the problem of finding actual identifiable electronic records. Instead they found that the networked environment created information systems that contained a diversity of raw and multipurpose data used under a variety of conditions and functions according to individual users needs. See Anne J Gilliland-Swetland, 'Testing Our Truths: Delineating the Parameters of the Authentic Archival Electronic Record', *American Archivist*, vol. 65, 2002, p. 203.

22 Tom O'Connor, 'Not All Documents Are Created Equal', *Law Technology News*, 28 August 2002.

23 Ling, p. 210. Also, within the US recordkeeping code the head of each agency is assigned the responsibility for the creation and preservation of records containing accurate and complete documentation of the organisation, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, and essential transactions of the agency. See 44 USC 3101.

24 Sue McKemmish, 'Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice', *Journal of Archival Science*, vol. 1, 2001, pp. 335, 359.