

Stefano Allegrezza¹

"WE ARE WHAT WE CHOOSE TO KEEP": REFLECTIONS ON APPRAISAL PRACTICES IN PERSONAL ARCHIVES

Abstract

The paper aims at presenting some reflections on appraisal practices usually adopted in personal archives, and in particular in born digital personal archives. In these types of archives people put into practice different appraisal strategies; in some cases they delete as much as possible and probably also what should not be deleted, in other cases they keep everything without deleting anything; in still other cases they put in place intermediate approaches. These different types of approaches are particularly evident when we consider two types of archives that are very important in personal archives: photo archives and email archives. What is delivered to posterity is particularly influenced by the choices made by the creator during appraisal practices not only on the basis of his understanding of the records' value but also on the basis of completely subjective decisions. In other words, the choices on the appraisal of records heavily affect the transmission of the archive to the heirs or to archival institutions: only what the producer (or his descendants and collaborators) decides to transmit will be transmitted. In conclusion, the personality of the producer that emerges from the archives heavily depends on the decisions taken during appraisal practices.

Keywords: personal archives, personal digital archives, personal records, appraisal, disposal

SIAMO QUELLO CHE SCEGLIAMO DI MANTENERE": RIFLESSIONI SULLE PRATICHE DI VALUTAZIONE NEGLI ARCHIVI PERSONALI

Sintesi

Il contributo si propone di presentare alcune riflessioni sulle pratiche di valutazione solitamente adottate negli archivi personali, ed in particolare negli archivi personali nativi digitali. In questi tipi di archivi le persone mettono in pratica diverse strategie di valutazione; in alcuni casi cancellano il più possibile e probabilmente anche ciò che non dovrebbe essere cancellato, in altri casi conservano tutto senza cancellare nulla; in altri casi ancora mettono in atto approcci intermedi. Questi diversi tipi di approccio sono particolarmente evidenti quando si considerano due tipi di archivi molto importanti negli archivi personali: archivi fotografici e archivi di posta elettronica. Ciò che viene consegnato ai posteri è particolarmente influenzato dalle scelte compiute dal creatore durante le pratiche di valutazione non solo sulla base della sua comprensione del valore dei documenti ma anche sulla base di decisioni del tutto soggettive. In altre parole, le scelte sulla valutazione degli atti incidono pesantemente sulla trasmissione dell'archivio agli eredi o alle istituzioni archivistiche: verrà trasmesso solo ciò che il produttore (o i suoi discendenti e colla-

1 Ph.D., University of Bologna, Italy, e-mail: stefano.allegrezza@unibo.it

boratori) deciderà di trasmettere. In conclusione, la personalità del produttore che emerge dagli archivi dipende fortemente dalle decisioni prese durante le pratiche di valutazione.

Parole chiave: archivi personali, archivi personali digitali, atti anagrafici, valutazione, scarto

"SMO TO KAR ŽELIMO OBDRŽATI": REFLEKSIJE O PRAKSAH VREDNOTENJA V OSEBNIH ARHIVIH

Povzetek

Namen prispevka je predstaviti nekatera razmišljanja o praksah vrednotenja, ki se običajno uporabljajo v osebnih arhivih, zlasti v digitalnih osebnih arhivih. Pri tovrstnem arhiviranju ljudje izvajajo različne strategije vrednotenja; v nekaterih primerih izbrišejo čim več in verjetno tudi tisto, česar se ne sme izbrisati, v drugih primerih obdržijo vse, ne da bi karkoli izbrisali; nekateri pa uporabljajo kombinirane pristope. Te različne vrste pristopov so še posebej očitne, če upoštevamo dve vrsti arhivov, ki sta zelo pomembni v primeru osebnih arhivov: arhiv fotografij in arhiv elektronske pošte. Na to, kar se shrani za naslednje generacije, vplivajo predvsem odločitve, ki jih ustvarjalec pri vrednotenju sprejema ne le na podlagi lastnega razumevanja vrednosti zapisov, temveč tudi na podlagi povsem subjektivnih odločitev. Z drugimi besedami, izbire o vrednotenju gradiva močno vplivajo na ohranjanje arhiva za dediče oziroma za arhivske ustanove: ohranjenost bo le tisto, kar se ustvarjalec gradiva (ali njegovi potomci in sodelavci) odloči/jo posredovati. Skratka, osebnost ustvarjalca arhivskega gradiva močno vpliva na odločitve, vezane na hrambo gradiva in ocena kaj ohraniti.

Ključne besede: osebni arhivi, osebni digitalni arhivi, osebni dokumenti, vrednotenje, izločanje

INTRODUCTION

In archival science appraisal is defined as the «assessment of records to determine their value as primary source material providing evidence of the history of the organization, family or individual» (Crockett, 2016). Appraisal or selection of records for permanent or archival value is widely considered by archivists as one of their most important tasks (Boles, 2005). Usually when we think of appraisal we refer to the process carried out by a member of a memory institutions (often a professional archivist) in which a body of records is examined to determine its value for that institution for the purposes of inclusion in the holdings of the repository.

In the case of personal archives², the typical scenario is that of an archivist working at a memory institution that receives the personal records of a notable person (a writer, a poet, an artist, a scientist, a politician...) and needs to evaluate the archival value of those records. However, personal archives are not transferred in their entirety to the memory institution because before the transfer they undergo another appraisal, possibly with the disposal of a part of the records, by the records creator himself/herself (or by the heirs if he/she is deceased). We can therefore say that appraisal of personal records is usually delivered in two levels: at a first level, there is the appraisal conducted by the creator, who decides what he/she wants to keep before the transfer to the preservation institution; and, at a second level, there is the appraisal conducted by the memory institution. The process of appraisal at the first level is an important one, and it deserves more studies and thoughts by archivists.

In this paper I will focus on the appraisal function from the point of view of the creators instead of the point of view of the archivists of the memory institution, and in particular on personal digital archives, that are one of the most underrepresented areas of archival theory and practice despite their importance for a large variety of scientific studies (Bass, 2012). With the ubiquity of digital phones and cameras, our memory institutions are beginning to ingest an increasingly large number of born-digital media, much of it coming from personal digital archives (Besser, 2011).

The field of personal archives has long been neglected by professionals, and most of the literature on the appraisal of records has focused on records created by public administrations and government bodies. A similar debate have not occurred concerning personal records. Business functions or corporate transactions have also been emphasized as the key unit of analysis in methods created for the archival management of digital data. It is worth considering that "the administrative or government focus of much archival thinking has been especially evident in recent debates about records appraisal and records acquisition. Personal archives require a different appraisal approach than do administrative or government records" (Hobbs, 2001). Hobbs wrote his paper in 2001 but things haven't changed much since then. If we look at the literature that has been published on the subject of personal archives, we see that the function of evaluation is often only hinted at and in some cases completely ignored. On the contrary, appraisal is one of the most important functions, especially in personal archives in a digital environment, as we will point out below. Furthermore, the appraisal of personal records made by the records creator himself is a topic that has quite never been focused on. The scientific debate has not produced specific retention and disposition schedules for per-

2 Personal archives usually consist of personal records such as letters, diaries, address books, postcards, telegrams, photo albums, loose photographs, records relating to studies (degree thesis), records relating to the state of health (reports, iconographic documentation, copies of medical records) and legal-economic-patrimonial records such as deeds of sale, wills, accounting records, invoices, bills, bank statements, plans, maps, projects, tax documentation.

sonal archives, nor are there any classification schemas or guidelines that can help the creators to correctly manage their archives.

WHERE PEOPLE KEEP THEIR PERSONAL RECORDS?

In a digital environment, traditional methods of appraisal need to be revised to take into account the need to archive objects before they become obsolete (Paradigm Project, 2008). But before a creator can begin the appraisal process he/she needs to find his or her personal records. It is important to have a clear idea of what is in the personal digital archive before starting any appraisal process. So, the first reflection is about the issue of finding creator's personal records.

Working out where all the digital stuff is can be difficult. Many people tend to scatter personal digital records across multiple devices, across multiple storage media, across multiple platforms and services, a habit that is most often justified by the fear of losing records (so multiple copies are made and the same records are duplicated, tripled, quadrupled on multiple storage media) but that inevitably generates disorder and confusion. Creators might have messages and pictures on social media platforms or websites (Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest), textual documents on their computers or on cloud platforms (Google Docs, DropBox), videos on their phone or on social media (such as Vimeo or YouTube), emails on webmail sites (such as Gmail, Hotmail, etc.), not to mention material of all kinds spread across different cloud storage services such as Amazon Drive, Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive, etc. As a consequence, today it has become difficult to even give an answer to the simple question "where is that particular photo?" or "where did I put that particular document?". Moreover, there is the risk that the creator ends up forgetting where the records are, and they often end up being abandoned to themselves. Perhaps he/she has uploaded photographs or audiovisual recordings to a virtual space and then forgotten about them. Or he/she has shared records with someone on a cloud space and he/she can no longer remember where or what the access link is. And we must also consider that, unfortunately, cloud services providers, after a certain period of time from the last access (which depends on the policies that each provider adopts, but usually does not last more than one or two years), provides for their final removal without any possibility of recovery. This is a completely unintentional form of appraisal that leads, however, to the complete loss of the records. So the first question to answer is "where are my records"?

Finding and accessing digital material on the creator's *computer* should be relatively straightforward. First you need to check your desktop and default folders such as 'Documents', 'Pictures' and 'Downloads' along with any synced folders such as OneDrive or iCloud Drive. But there may be records that are difficult to locate on your machine.

Mobile devices can be one of the more complicated places to access your digital material for archiving (University of Westminster Library, 2021). This is because we frequently access our content on mobile devices through apps. We normally don't need to know or care where the files that make up that material are stored when we use mobile apps (on our device, the cloud or both)³. However, in order to keep our data safe, we must be able to copy everything off of our mobile devices and onto other devices such as a computer or external hard drive. You can have problems getting your item out of the program or hardware that's storing it once you've located it.

3 Some common places to look include the DCIM folder for pictures and video and the Download folder for content you've saved from the web. You can also look in folders named after individual apps so, for example, images you've sent over WhatsApp will be in WhatsApp\Media\WhatsApp Images.

Don't forget to check *other hardware* where you might have stored your files. This could include USB flash drives, external hard drives, memory cards, optical media such as DVDs or CDs (Bass, 2013).

Many *cloud storage providers*, such as Amazon Drive, OneDrive, Dropbox, Google Drive, and iCloud Drive, will already have a local copy of your files in the appropriate folder on your computer. If not, you can do so by installing a tiny synchronization software. You can also download individual files and folders from the cloud service's website.. Many cloud storage providers will also make material available to download in bulk. As well as personal accounts, people should remember to look at institutional shared drives or Google accounts, such as those provided at work. They should be aware that if they move jobs or finish their courses, they will lose access to their work or university accounts. For example, they will only retain access to your work or university account for up to a limited period of time.

People should be able to download individual pictures or videos from *social media* sites from within their website or app. Most social networks and other online services will also provide some ability to bulk download your personal data as part of their obligations under data portability legislation in force in each Country.

If the creator has lots of records it might be useful to make a list of what they are (see fig. 1), where you can find them, how you can access them, whether you want to keep them and whether you want to pass them on to the heirs. This is a sort of digital assets inventory that will be very useful in case the creator dies suddenly (or he loses his/her memory!) for the heirs to recover his/her personal archive (University of Westminster Library, 2021). Creators should not forget to also write down the authentication credentials needed to access those records. This is an absolutely essential step: in order to ensure that your records are safe and that you can take care of them, creators need access to the files themselves, which is impossible without login credentials.



Fig. 1: Common types of digital assets (Levine, 2018)

WHY PEOPLE APPRAISE THEIR RECORDS

Usually, appraisal in personal archives is not driven by the desire to select for permanent preservation records that have a cultural or historical value, because normally few people have the perception that their archives could be transferred to a preservation institution in the future⁴.

Generally, creators appraise their records for very concrete reasons. In many cases they make appraisal when they realize that the amount of material they have accumulated has reached a size that is no longer manageable (Marshall, 2008). Although the transition to the digital world seems to provide the illusion that it is possible to store everything and that there are no limits to the amount of storage available, actually things are not exactly like that. For example, storage is finite and costs money: for security reasons creators will need to keep multiple copies of their files, this will soon add up if you decide to keep everything. There is also an environmental cost to digital storage.

In other cases there are technological reasons: for example, the mailbox of the creator could have limitations on the storage size (such as 1 GB, 2 GB, etc.) and when the mailbox is full he/she needs to delete the oldest messages. There may also be other reasons. For example, accounting or tax records are discarded after a certain period of time (usually after 3, 5 or 10 years, depending on the regulations in place in the various Countries).

You can't keep everything. While the percentage varies, and can never be proven with finality, the usual estimate is that between 1 and 5 per cent of all institutional records created are retained for permanent preservation in archives (Cook, 2011). This is true of all archives but this is particularly true for personal digital archives. If the amount of material grows beyond certain limits, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find the records you need at the right time, even if you rely on the search functions that modern systems allow you to use. *Keeping everything is like keeping nothing!*

In some cases the creator, when he begins to have the perception that his/her archive could be acquired in the future by a memory institution (or could pass to his/her heirs), deliberately deletes records that could put him in a bad light or reveal unpleasant personality traits. In some cases creators appraise and dispose records containing sensitive or personal information about themselves and others and they don't want them to fall into the wrong hands. This is a first level of appraisal followed by disposal or segregation. In other words, what is transmitted to posterity is decided not so much by the archivist when acquiring personal fonds to the preservation institution but is decided by the creator in an earlier phase so it is the creator who decides what to leave and what not to leave of his records. In this sense the "we are what we choose to keep" maxim explains well what happens in personal archives⁵, because the creator (or the heirs) make more or less voluntary appraisal to safeguard his or her figure by eliminating inconvenient records and so delivering to posterity a figure different from the actual one. Therefore, personal archives are 'self-representations' in which the will of the creator plays a very strong role (Giorgi, 2019; Douglas, 2009).

4 In fact, many people are recognized as important persons not while they are alive but several years after their death!

5 This maxim recalls the theme of the annual conference of the Society of Archivists (U.K.) that was held in 2010: "We are what we keep: challenging tradition in appraisal and acquisition".

DECIDING WHAT TO KEEP: THE APPRAISAL DILEMMA

Once the creator has a good idea of what he/she has, and where it is, he needs to start thinking about what to include in his/her personal digital archive. Unfortunately, unlike the archives of public administration and organizations, the archivists' community has not proposed tools for personal archives that can guide the creators in the activities of creation, management and preservation of their archives: there are no classification schemas, no appraisal and disposal plans, no guidelines, no best practices, no specific software to use. Personal archiving differs from archiving in an organization or government department in that the individual's daily life does not revolve around a set of tasks within a narrowly defined mandate. Nor is the creator of a personal archive governed by broadly imposed document management strategies (Paradigm Project, 2008).

So how do people decide what to keep? Ultimately this is a personal decision but there are a few things they can think about to help them. Archivists often talk about records having primary and secondary value (University of Westminster Library, 2021). *Primary value* refers to a record's value to the creator, for example for administrative, legal or financial purposes. You could apply this idea to your own records, thinking about things you need to keep because they are important for your studies, job applications, or financial transactions such as a tenancy agreement. *Secondary value* refers to the wider historical value that records might have for researchers. You could use this idea to think about records that document important events in your life, or work that you think is of lasting value. Perhaps you have been involved in cultural or political movements that you think should be recorded. If something doesn't have primary or secondary value, it probably doesn't belong in your personal digital archive.

In personal archives, apart from subjective evaluations (such as the administrative-legal or historical-cultural or even emotional value that records may have), there are also appraisal actions that are based on objective considerations.

For instance, you might want to consider removing duplicate files, albeit this can be time consuming, so just get rid of those that are useless; delete drafts (probably you only need to keep final versions): if you do want to save some drafts, for example in order to show how a piece of work has developed, just pick a few representative examples; saving email or other messages along with the work they relate to can be useful, but you probably don't need every single email and you could delete those emails whose value is equivalent to a phone call or a SMS or WhatsApp message. There is a degree of subjectivity in these actions as well, but having rules to follow can be very helpful.

HOW PEOPLE APPRAISE THEIR PERSONAL RECORDS

People put into practice different appraisal strategies; in some cases they delete as much as possible (and sometimes also what should not be deleted), in other cases they keep everything without deleting anything; neither the first nor the second strategy is perfect and probably it is better to put in place an intermediate approach.

The different types of approaches are particularly evident when we consider two types of records that are very important in personal archives: photos and email.

A typical example is that of photos we take during our life. In the past, when people went on holidays, they carried with them an analogue camera and a few camera rolls. Therefore, the photographic documentation that was produced on an 'average' holiday consisted of a few hundred photos. Today the situation has completely changed: when people go on holiday, they carry with them an equipment consisting of a digital camera (or a smartphone) and some memory cards and it is not uncommon to come back from

a short vacation - even one week - with some memory cards completely full and tens of gigabytes of photos (but also of audio and video recordings). It has been estimated that more photos have been taken in the last five years than in all previous years combined. In addition, a sort of 'shooting frenzy' has set in: people often take hundreds or thousands of photos, trying to capture every moment of their life, and often they take several photos of the same subject that are very similar between them. A typical example is when you take the classic picture of a group of people in front of us: instead of taking just one picture (or at most two), you take several pictures to be sure of getting a picture in which everyone has the 'most beautiful smile'. But once back home, you should find the time to select the best picture and delete all the others, but this almost never happens, whether out of laziness or lack of time, and the photos all remain in the archive (even if they are practically identical).

Another example of how the methods of appraisal in the personal archives deeply change from a creator to another is that of email. Email has become one of the most ubiquitous, commonly accepted, and easy-to-use means of communication of the modern age. Every professional worker, government official, student, and grandparent and parent rely on email for daily communication. More email messages are being sent than handwritten letters or postcards, and few think it is unusual to be daily or hourly checking communications or even, in a bit of sleeplessness, to be sending messages to friends, relatives, and co-workers in the middle of the night (Cox, 2008). There are different methods for appraising emails: there are some people who archive all emails indiscriminately, while others decide to delete oldest emails when the space when the storage space is reaching its limit and there is no more room for new emails. So there are basically two extreme habits: on the one hand, those who keep all the emails without making any type of appraisal and, on the other hand, those who delete all the mails and therefore keep absolutely anything.

In some cases, appraisal is a random process, neither sought nor desired, but imposed by external factors. This is the case, for example, of personal records that remain forgotten in the cloud storage services and are deleted by service providers after a certain period of time. Or those that remain inaccessible when the creator suddenly dies and has not revealed authentication credentials to anyone else (the so-called digital legacy problem). In all these cases appraisal (or rather: destruction) does not occur due to the creator's will but due to causes completely independent of his/her will.

CONCLUSIONS

In the transition from the analogue to the digital world there has been an enormous growth in the number of records every single person creates, but this has not been matched by a similar growth in appraisal practices.

In many cases people want to archive and keep everything, trusting that digital 'doesn't take up space' and therefore they can accumulate as much as they want without having to worry about initiating appraisal operations. In the paper-based world, the situation was very different: paper had its own precise physical dimension, it took up physical space and therefore creators had to contrast the accumulation of paper records through appraisal operations at least.

Today, there are also extreme situations, where everything is irretrievably deleted to cope with the amount of material that quickly becomes unmanageable or due to technological limitations (e.g. available space in mailboxes). In some cases, appraisal processes are put in place to try to provide a representation of oneself different from that which might emerge in the future if all records were retained. However, both situations

(retaining everything, without disposition; or retaining nothing, disposing everything) are not effective and put at risk the future of personal archives. *Retaining everything is like retaining nothing.*

Personal recordkeeping raises a series of new «issues and concerns about records and their management and preservation, the mission of professional records managers and archivists, the nature of the role of the institutional archives, and the function of the individual citizen as their own archivist» (Cox, 2008). Archivists need to develop a new partnership with people, and this is particularly important in the digital environment. People need to learn from the archivists the importance of the proper management of personal digital archives and the essentials of creation, management and preservation of their digital records. People need to raise awareness on these issues before it is too late and many of the personal digital archives they are creating in this era are lost before they reach the threshold of archival repositories.

A new archival future is in front of us and whether it will be good or bad greatly depends on how well archivists will be able to interact with the new "citizen archivists".

REFERENCES

- Bass, J. L. (26. 03. 2012). *Getting personal: confronting the challenges of archiving personal records in the digital age* (Master Thesis). Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg. <http://hdl.handle.net/1993/5206>
- Bass, J. L. (2013). A PIM perspective: Leveraging personal information management research in the archiving of personal digital records. *Archivaria*, 75, 49–76.
- Besser, H. (2013). Archiving aggregates of individually created digital content: Lessons from archiving the occupy movement. *Preservation, Digital Technology and Culture*, 42(1), 31–38.
- Boles, F. (2005). *Selecting & Appraising Archives & Manuscripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists.
- Cocciolo, A. (2016). Email as cultural heritage resource: appraisal solutions from an art museum context. *Records Management Journal*, 26(1), 68–82.
- Cook, T. (2011). 'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 32(2), 173–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00379816.2011.619688>
- Cox, R. J. (2008). *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections and Ruminations*. Duluth, Minn: Litwin Books.
- Crockett, M. (2016). *The No-Nonsense Guide to Archives and Recordkeeping*. London: Facet Publishing.
- Douglas, J. (2013). What We Talk About When We Talk About Original Order in Writers' Archives. *Archivaria*, 76, 7–25.
- Douglas, J. and MacNeil, H. (2009). Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives. *Archivaria*, 67, 25–39.
- Giorgi, A. (2019). Se peindre pour ne pas se perdre. Some thoughts on the archive as a self-representation. *Italian Journal of Library and Information Science*, 10(3), 59–70. <https://www.jlis.it/issue/view/792/showToc>
- Hobbs, C. (2001). The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals. *Archivaria*, 52(February), 126–35. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12817>

- Levine, J. (2018). RUFADAA And The Importance of Digital Estate Planning. August 8, 2018. <https://www.kitces.com/blog/rufadaa-digital-estate-planning-rights-three-tiers-online-tool-fiduciary>
- Marshall, C. C. (2008). Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 1: Four Challenges from the Field. *D-Lib Magazine*, 14(3/4). doi: 10.1045/march2008-marshall-pt1
- Paradigm Project. (2008). <http://paradigm.sers.ox.ac.uk/workbook/appraisal/index.html>
- Pollard, R. A. (2001). The Appraisal of Personal Papers: A Critical Literature Review. *Archivaria*, 52(February), 136–150. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12818>
- University of Westminster Library. (2021), *Managing your personal digital archive*. <https://libguides.westminster.ac.uk/personal-digital-archive>

Typology: 1.02 Review article