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The Appraisal of Modern Public Records

T. R. Schellenberg

Modern public records are very voluminous. Their growth in volume corresponds closely to the increase in human population since the middle of the 18th century. This population increase has made necessary an expansion of governmental activity, and this expansion has had as one of its concomitants a tremendous increase in record production. As modern technological methods have come to be applied to the production of records, their growth, in the last several decades, has been in a geometric, rather than an arithmetic ratio.

A reduction in the quantity of such public records is essential to both the government and the scholar. A government cannot afford to keep all the records that are produced as a result of its multifarious activities. It cannot provide space to house them or staff to care for them. The costs of maintaining them are beyond the means of the most opulent nation. Nor are scholars served by maintaining all of them. Scholars cannot find their way through the huge quantities of modern public records. The records must be reduced in quantity to make them useful for scholarly research. "Even the most convinced advocates of conservation in the historical interest," according to a pamphlet issued by the British Public Record Office, "have begun to fear that *the Historian of the future dealing with our own period may be submerged in the flood of written evidences.*"¹ The scholarly interest in records, for that matter, is often in inverse ratio to their quantity: the more records on a subject, the less is the interest.

In the reduction of modern public records great care must be exercised to retain those that have value. In the long run the effectiveness of a record reduction program must be judged according to the correctness of its determinations. In such a program there is no substitute for careful analytical work. Techniques cannot be devised that will reduce the work of deciding upon values to a mechanical operation. Nor is there a cheap and easy way to dispose of records unless it is one of destroying everything that has been created, of literally wiping everything off the board. Such a drastic course would appeal only to the nihilist, who sees no good in social institutions or in the records pertaining to them. The difficulties

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¹Great Britain. Public Record Office, *Principles governing the Elimination of Ephemeral or Unimportant Documents in Public or Private Archives* (London, n.d.), p. 1.

in appraising recent records are so great that it is small wonder some archivists were at one time inclined to shut their eyes to them and take no action at all. Like Louis XV before the French Revolution, they seemed to feel that "the old regime will last our time, and after us the deluge."

DISTINCTION BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY VALUES

The values that inhere in modern public records are of two kinds: primary values for the originating agency itself and secondary values for other agencies and private users. Public records are created to accomplish the purposes for which an agency has been created—administrative, fiscal, legal, and operating. These uses are of course of first importance. But public records are preserved in an archival institution because they have values that will exist long after they cease to be of current use, and because their values will be for others than the current users. It is this lasting, secondary usefulness that will be considered in this bulletin.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN EVIDENTIAL AND INFORMATIONAL VALUES

The secondary values of public records can be ascertained most easily if they are considered in relation to two kinds of matters: (1) the evidence they contain of the organization and functioning of the Government body that produced them, and (2) the information they contain on persons, corporate bodies, things, problems, conditions, and the like, with which the Government body dealt.

For purposes of discussion, the values that attach to records because of the evidence they contain of organization and function will be called "evidential values." By this term I do not refer to the value that inheres in public records because of any special quality or merit they have as documentary evidence. I do not refer, in the sense of the English archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, to the sanctity of the evidence in archives that is derived from "unbroken custody,"⁵ or from the way they came into the hands of the archivist. I refer rather, and quite arbitrarily, to the value that depends on the character and importance of the matter evidenced, i.e. the origin and the substantive programs of the agency that produced the records. The quality of the evidence *per se* is thus not the issue here, but the character of the matter evidenced.

For purposes of discussion, also, the values that attach to records because of the information they contain will be referred to as "informational values." The information may relate, in a general way, either to persons, or things, or phenomena. The term "persons" may include

either individuals or corporate bodies. The term "things" may include places, buildings, physical objects, and other material things. The term "phenomena" relates to what happens to either persons or things—to conditions, problems, activities, programs, events, episodes, and the like.

It should be emphasized that the distinction between evidential and informational values is made solely for purposes of discussion. The two types of values are not mutually exclusive. A record may be useful for various reasons. The value that attaches to it because of its evidence of government organization and functioning may occasionally be the same as the value that is derived from its information on persons, things, and phenomena. A government's actions in the fields of diplomacy and war, for example, are the main objects of inquiry in regard to those fields. Here the evidential value coincides to a marked degree with the informational value, for the historian is as much interested in a government's actions in regard to diplomatic and military happenings as he is in the happenings themselves.

EVIDENTIAL VALUES

REASONS FOR TEST OF EVIDENTIAL VALUES

There are a number of reasons why we should consciously and deliberately apply the test of evidential value in the sense in which this term has been defined and why records having such value should be preserved regardless of whether there is an immediate or even a foreseeable specific use for them.

An accountable government should certainly preserve some minimum of evidence on how it was organized and how it functioned, in all its numerous and complex parts. All archivists assume that the minimum record to be kept is the record of organization and functioning and that beyond this minimum values become more debatable. By a judicious selection of various groups and series an archivist can capture in a relatively small body of records all significant facts on an agency's existence—its patterns of action, its policies in dealing with all classes of matters, its procedures, its gross achievement.

Records containing such facts are indispensable to the government itself and to students of government. For the government they are a storehouse of administrative wisdom and experience. They are needed to give consistency and continuity to its actions. They contain precedents for policies, procedures, and the like, and can be used as a guide to public administrators in solving problems of the present that are similar to others dealt with in the past or, equally important, in avoiding past mistakes. They contain the proof of each agency's faithful stewardship of the responsibilities delegated to it and the accounting that every important public official owes to the people whom he serves. For students of public

⁵Great Britain, P.R.O., *Guide to the Public Records, Introductory* (London, 1949), pt. 1, p. 6. See also Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Administration*, p. 11 (2d ed., London, 1937).

administration who wish to analyze the experiences of an agency in dealing with organizational, procedural, and policy matters, they provide the most reliable source of what actually was done.

The test of evidential value is a practical one. It involves an objective approach that the modern archivist is especially trained to take; for his training in historical methodology has taught him to look into the origin, development, and the working of human institutions and to use records for the purpose. The test is not easy, but it is definite. It will bring to view first the records on which judgments of value can be made with some degree of assurance, the degree depending upon the thoroughness with which the records have been analyzed. It can be applied by all archivists, for no archivist is likely to question that evidence of every agency's organization and functioning should be preserved. Differences of judgment will arise only as to the completeness with which such evidence should be preserved. The test of research value, on the other hand, brings to view records on which judgments are bound to differ widely.

The information obtained by an archivist in applying the test of evidential value will also serve to evaluate the significance of records from other points of view. The archivist must know how records came into being if he is to judge their value for any purpose. Public records, or, for that matter, records of any organic body, are the product of activity, and much of their meaning is dependent on their relation to the activity. If their source in an administrative unit of a government or in a particular activity is obscured, their identity and meaning are likely also to be obscured. In this respect they are unlike private manuscripts, which often have a meaning of their own without relation to their source or reference to other manuscripts in a collection.

In applying the test of evidential value the archivist is likely to preserve records that have other values as well—records that are useful not only for the public administrator and the students of public administration, but also for the economist, sociologist, historian, and scholars generally.

APPLYING THE TEST OF EVIDENTIAL VALUES

At the outset it is important to emphasize that appraisals of evidential values should be made on the basis of a knowledge of the entire documentation of an agency; they should not be made on a piecemeal basis. The archivist must know the significance of particular groups of records produced at various levels of organization in relation to major programs or functions. In many Federal agencies, offices at various organizational levels build up their own files, which are usually related to and often duplicate, in part at least, those of offices below or above. In the central organizations of such agencies departmental records may be

related to bureau records, bureau records to divisional, and divisional to sectional. In field organizations records of regional offices may be related to those in State offices, and records of State offices to those in subordinate offices. The use of modern duplicating devices, moreover, may lead to an extensive proliferation of records in any particular office.

In reviewing the entire documentation of an agency, the archivist's decisions on which of its records he should preserve depends on a number of factors, the more important of which are embodied in the following questions:

1. Which organizational units in the central office of an agency have primary responsibility for making decisions regarding its organization, programs, policies, and procedures? Which organizational units carry on activities that are auxiliary to making such decisions? Which field officers have discretion in making such decisions? Which record series are essential to reflect such decisions?

2. To which functions of an agency do the records relate? Are they substantive functions? Which record series are essential to show how each substantive function was performed at each organizational level in both the central and field offices?

3. What supervisory and management activities are involved in administering a given function? What are the successive transactions in its execution? Which records pertain to the executive direction, as distinct from the execution of the function? To what extent are such records physically duplicated at various organizational levels? Which records summarize the successive transactions performed under the function? Which records should be preserved in exemplary form to show the work processes at the lower organizational levels?

While an archivist dealing with modern public records will have great difficulty in reducing them to manageable proportions, he will nonetheless often find that the records he wants were not produced at all. The records on important matters with which he is concerned are often not so complete as records on unimportant matters. It is a curious anomaly that the more important a matter, the less likely is a complete documentation of it to be found. While modern technology has aided the making and keeping of records in many ways, it has also made unnecessary the production of many documents that once would have become part of the record of Government action. Much that influences the development of policies and programs never makes its way into formal records. Important matters may be handled orally in conferences or by telephone, an instrument that has been referred to as the "great robber of history."³

³Paul Hasluck, "Problems of Research on Contemporary Official Records," *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 5, No. 17, p. 5 (Nov. 1951).

Records on important matters are often handled much less carefully while in current use than are records on unimportant matters. This lack of care is not intentional. Policy documents cannot always be identified as such when they are first created. Policies usually arise in respect to particular transactions, and so the records pertaining to them may be interfiled with others of no lasting moment on the transactions with which they were initially associated. Records on policy and procedural matters—on general as distinct from specific matters—are difficult to assemble, to organize into recognizable file units, and to identify in such a way that their significance will be apparent. Records of routine operations, on the other hand, are easily managed in a routine way.

The important policy documents are also difficult to schedule for retirement. Important records on policy and procedure do not become obsolete, or noncurrent, as soon as the transactions in connection with which they may have been made are completed. The policies and procedures they establish often continue in effect. And even if those policies and procedures are superseded, the records of them serve to explain and give meaning to the change. Such records are thus difficult to retire because the period of their administrative utility is difficult to establish. Records evidencing only the execution of policies and procedures, on the other hand, usually become noncurrent when action on the particular case has been completed. The termination of routine actions is usually definite and clear. Important records, moreover, are difficult to assemble for preservation in an archival institution because many of them must first be segregated from the mass of trivia in which they may have been submerged. And at the present time this segregation commonly has to be made after the records have lost their significance for current operations and their identity has become obscured, although more effective management of current records could greatly improve this situation over the years.

INFORMATIONAL VALUES

Informational values derive, as is evident from the very term, from the information that is in public records on the matters with which public agencies deal; not from the information that is in such records on the public agencies themselves. The greater proportion of modern public records preserved in an archival institution are valued less for the evidence they contain of Government action than for the information they contain about particular persons, situations, events, conditions, problems, materials, and properties in relation to which the question of action comes up. Most of the larger series of records in the National Archives, for example, were accessioned primarily for the information they contain relating to other matters than the action of the Government

itself. Among such series are the voluminous census schedules, military service records, pension files, passenger lists, land-entry papers, and various kinds of case files. In most instances such series shed light on the activity of Government agencies, but so little in proportion to their bulk that this is not an important factor in their selection for preservation; it is presumed that other records show the activity of the agencies more effectively.

TESTS OF INFORMATIONAL VALUES

In appraising the value of information in public records, the archivist is not greatly concerned with the source of the records—what agency created them, or what activities resulted in their creation. The concern here is with the information that is in them. There are a number of tests by which informational values of public records may be judged. These are (1) uniqueness, (2) form, and (3) importance.

Uniqueness

The test of uniqueness must be carefully defined if it is to be meaningful. In applying the test the archivist must consider both (1) the uniqueness of the information, and (2) the uniqueness of the records that contain the information.

The term "uniqueness," as applied to information, means that the information contained in particular public records is not to be found in other documentary sources in as complete and as usable a form. Information is obviously unique if it cannot be found elsewhere. But information in public records is seldom completely unique, for generally such records relate to matters that are also dealt with in other documentary sources, and the information they contain may be similar or approximately similar to that contained in the other sources. To be regarded as unique for appraisal purposes the information need not be completely dissimilar from all other information. But it should pertain to matters on which other documentary information does not exist as fully or as conveniently as in public records.

In applying the test of uniqueness to information in records, an archivist must bring into review all other sources of information on the matter under consideration. These sources encompass materials produced outside as well as within the Government. The materials produced outside may be published or unpublished: they may consist of private manuscripts, newspapers, books, nearprint materials, or any other form of documentation. The Government materials are the various record series relating to the matter under consideration. The archivist must understand the relation of such series to each other and must be able to identify the particular series that should be preserved. To determine if a

body of records is the sole adequate source of information on a given matter, he needs to be a real expert in the subject—acquainted with all outside resources and the products of research as well as with the other records of the Government dealing with the subject in question. The Federal archivist should know of all the significant documentation that relates to his field of specialization; the State archivist should ordinarily know of all the significant documentation relating to the history of his State.

In applying the test of uniqueness to the form of the records rather than to the information contained in them, the matter to be considered by the archivist is the physical duplication of the public records. In the Federal Government of the United States, as is well known, there is a great and perhaps an unnecessary proliferation of records. Not only are records duplicated from one administrative level to another, but within a given Government office several copies of a particular record may exist. While records having informational values are not likely to be found in as many forms or as many series as are records having evidential values, it is nonetheless necessary to carefully compare records containing information on any particular matter to avoid retaining more than one copy of them. To illustrate: records containing economic data filed by various business firms with the Office of Price Administration to obtain price adjustments were physically duplicated, to a certain extent at least, in the regional and national offices, and within the national office in the Enforcement and Price Departments of the agency. A collation of the price adjustment records was necessary to avoid keeping duplicate copies.

Because of the greater technical difficulties our ancestors faced in publishing or duplicating information and because of the inevitable loss of many records through the centuries before archival care became general, records of the remote past are likely to be the only remaining source of information on many matters with which they deal. This fact led the German archivist Meissner to formulate a maxim that "old age is to be expected"⁴ in records. Archivists of various countries have set chronological date lines before which they propose that all records shall be kept. In Germany the date is 1700, in England 1750, in France 1830, and in Italy 1861. The Italian date corresponds fairly closely, by historical coincidence, to that adopted by the National Archives of the United States, where almost all surviving records created before the Civil War, which began in 1861, are being preserved.

While public records are likely to be more valuable as a source of information when other kinds of documentary materials are scanty, the converse of this statement is also true. The proportion of public records

⁴Leesch-Brenneke, *Archivkunde*, p. 40.

requiring permanent retention diminishes as other kinds of documentary materials increase in quantity. It is doubtful if governments are justified, in the face of other forms of recent documentation, in keeping more than a small proportion of the voluminous contemporary public records. But an archivist's job of appraisal increases in difficulty as the documentation of society increases in quantity. He must apply standards of selection with constantly greater discrimination as he deals with more recent records; in particular, he must apply the test of uniqueness to them with great severity. For "of the making of many books"—and of many other types of documentary materials—"there is no end," to paraphrase the Preacher.

Form

In applying the test of form the archivist, again, must consider both (1) the form of the information in records and (2) the form of the records.

As applied to information, the term "form" relates mainly to the degree to which the information is concentrated. Information may be concentrated in records in the sense that (1) a few facts are presented in a given record about many persons, things, or phenomena, or (2) many facts are presented about a few persons, things, or phenomena, or (3) many facts are presented about diverse matters—persons, things, and phenomena. In the first case, the information may be said to be extensive, in the second intensive, and in the third diversified. Census schedules and passenger lists, for example, provide extensive information in the sense that each schedule or list pertains to many persons. Case files of various labor boards and other adjudicative, investigative, or regulatory bodies serve as examples of records containing intensive information about a limited number of particular matters. Reports of county agents of the Agricultural Extension Service and of the consular and diplomatic agents of the State Department serve as examples of records containing information about diverse matters. In their pamphlet the British archivists expressed their ideas about the concentration of record information in their criterion that business records should be preserved which "affect, name, or touch by inference a large number of persons and/or things or topics," and particularly "if both persons and things are involved in quantities." In general, records that represent concentrations of information are the most suitable for archival preservation, for archival institutions are almost always pressed for space to house records.

The term "form" as applied to the records rather than to the information contained in them relates to the physical condition of the public records. Physical condition is important, for if records are to be preserved in an archival institution, they should be in a form that will enable

others than those who created them to use them without difficulty and without resort to expensive mechanical or electronic equipment. Chemistry notebooks, for example, are not likely to be intelligible to others than the chemists who recorded the results of their experiments in them; while punchcards and tape recordings are commonly unusable without resort to expensive equipment.

Arrangement is also important. Certain record series may be preserved by the archivist simply because they are arranged in a particularly usable manner. If he has a choice among several series relating to a given matter, he will choose for preservation the series whose arrangement most facilitates the extracting of information. For example, reports of American agricultural agents and attachés, though duplicated in the files of the State Department, are being preserved as a separate series accumulated by the Foreign Agricultural Service of the Department of Agriculture because their arrangement makes it easier to use them than the copies of the reports embodied in the classified filing system of the State Department.

Importance

In applying the test of importance, the archivist is in the realm of the imponderable, for who can say definitely if a given body of records is important, and for what purpose, and to whom? An archivist assumes that his first obligation is to preserve records containing information that will satisfy the needs of the Government itself, and after that, however undefinable these needs may be, private scholars and the public generally. He should take into account the actual research methods of various classes of persons and the likelihood that they would under ordinary circumstances make effective use of archival materials. He will normally give priority to the needs of the historian and the other social scientists, but he obviously must also preserve records of vital interest to the genealogist, the student of local history, and the antiquarian. He should not, however, preserve records for very unlikely users, such as persons in highly specialized technical and scientific fields, who do not use records extensively in the normal exercise of their professions and are not likely to use archival materials relating to them.

Public records may have a collective, as well as an individual significance. Research values are usually derived from the importance of information in aggregates of records, not from information in single items. Records are collectively significant if the information they contain is useful for studies of social, economic, political, or other phenomena, as distinct from the phenomena relating to individual persons or things. Records of the General Land Office, for example, collectively show how the public domain passed into private hands and how the West was

settled: individually, the land-entry papers also have value for biographical studies and for studies of family history. In his article on "The Selection of Records for Preservation" in *The American Archivist* for October 1940, Dr. Philip C. Brooks has correctly observed that "... most records having historical value possess it not as individual documents but as groups which, considered together, reflect the activities of some organization or person or portray everyday, rather than unique, events and conditions."

Records relating to persons and things may, of course, have an individual research value in relation to particular persons or things. Normally, the more important the person or thing, the more important is the record relating to it. Such records may also have sentimental value because of their association with heroes, dramatic episodes, or places where significant events took place. Usually such values are attached to single record items, such as the Emancipation Proclamation, though extreme sentimentalists sometimes attach them to all records relating to the objects of their reverence, no matter how voluminous or trifling they may be. Utility for determining significant facts is with such persons only a secondary consideration. But archivists must exercise their sense of proportion in judging sentimental value.

Before applying the test of importance, an archivist should be sure that records meet the tests of uniqueness and form. The test of importance relates, as has been noted, to imponderable matters—to matters that cannot be appraised with real certainty. The tests of uniqueness and form, in contrast, relate to ponderables—to matters that are capable of being appraised on the basis of ascertainable facts.

An archivist normally brings to his task a general knowledge of the resources and products of research, which he acquired during his academic training. In the discharge of his duties he normally acquires a specialized knowledge of subject-matter fields pertinent to the records with which he works. And while performing reference service he learns to know of genuine research needs. He will also acquire a knowledge of the documentation produced by the agencies with which he deals so that he can reduce to manageable proportions the quantity of records that must be used for research. But if he does not have such knowledge, he should deliberately seek it by searching out and comparing the documentation available on various matters; and if his investigation fails to yield an answer he should not hesitate to consult subject-matter specialists.

CONCLUSIONS

Several general observations may now be made regarding the appraisal of modern public records, to wit:

First, the considerations that should be borne in mind in ascertaining values in records cannot be reduced to exact standards. Our standards can be little more than general principles. They can never be made precise, though, of course, the series or types of records produced by a particular public agency that meet certain general standards may be precisely identified. The standards should never be regarded as absolute or final. At best they will serve merely as guidelines to steer the archivist through the treacherous shoals of appraisal.

Secondly, since appraisal standards cannot be made exact or precise, it follows that they need not be applied with absolute consistency. Archivists may use different criteria in evaluating records of different periods, for what is valuable for a past age may be valueless for the present. The American historian Justin H. Smith (1857-1930) observed that "a great deal is said by some people about 'rubbish,' but one investigator's 'rubbish' may be precious to another, and what appears valueless to-day may be found highly important tomorrow."⁵ Archivists of different archival institutions may also use different criteria in evaluating similar types of records, for what is valuable to one archival institution may be valueless to another. Complete consistency in judging informational values is as undesirable as it is impossible of accomplishment. Diverse judgments may result in records on particular matters being preserved at particular places, although the records are not deserving of general preservation. Diverse judgments may also spread the burden of preserving the documentation of a country among its various archival institutions, making one preserve what another may discard. Certain Federal records may thus be more appropriately preserved in regional depositories than at the National Archives because the information they contain is in such detail that it can be preserved only in concentrated form at the national level or because the information they contain is predominantly of a local or regional rather than a national interest.

Thirdly, since appraisal standards cannot be made absolute or final, they should be applied with moderation and common sense. An archivist should keep neither too much nor too little. He should follow the Aristotelian precept of "moderation in everything, excess in nothing." This precept, for that matter, is similar to two of Meissner's standards, which are "extremes are to be avoided," and that "too great an abstraction is an evil."

Fourthly, appraisals of records should not be based on intuition or arbitrary suppositions of value; they should be based instead on thorough analyses of the documentation bearing on the matter to which the records pertain. Analysis is the essence of archival appraisal. While

⁵Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of Archivists," American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1910, p. 312.

appraising the evidential values of records the archivist must take into account the entire documentation of the agency that produced them. He should not make his evaluations on a piecemeal basis or on the basis of individual organizational units within an agency. He should relate the particular group of records under consideration to other groups to understand its significance as evidence of organization and function. His appraisals, it is apparent, are dependable to the degree to which he has analyzed the origins and inter-relations of records. Similarly, while appraising the informational values of records, the archivist must take into account the entire documentation of society on the matter to which the information relates. He must determine if the particular group of records under consideration contains unique information and if it has a form that makes it valuable as a source of information, and only after he has done this should he enter into the realm of the imponderable—into questions of research importance. His appraisals of records, again, are dependable to the degree to which he has analyzed all other available documentary sources on the matter to which the records pertain.

Fifthly, if his analysis does not yield the information that is needed in the appraisal of records, the archivist should seek the help of experts. Obviously an archivist cannot be expected to know the research needs of all scholarly disciplines. Occasionally he will be called on to evaluate records that involve a knowledge beyond his sphere. In evaluating records needed for disciplines in which he is not trained he should, if necessary, seek the help of specialists in those disciplines. If the archival institution is a very large one, a number of subject-matter specialists are likely to be found on its staff whose special competencies can be brought to bear on the evaluation of special groups of modern public records. If the institution is small, the number of staff subject-matter specialists will be limited, and the need for outside help will be greater. In the National Archives a panel of experts was used to help evaluate the records of the General Accounting Office, an agency of the legislative branch of the Government that audits the fiscal operations of agencies of the executive branch.⁶ The records offered by this office spanned the years 1776-1900 and comprised over 65,000 cubic feet. They obviously had very little value for the evidence they contained of organization and function; but since they covered the whole of the national history of the United States, they were likely to contain incidental or accidental information on important historical, economic, and social phenomena. Appraisal of these records was an onerous task that could not very well be accomplished by any one person, no matter how comprehensive his knowledge of research resources and research needs might be. After the records

⁶Lyle J. Holverstott, "The General Accounting Office Accession: Its History and Significance," *National Archives Accessions*, No. 52 (Feb. 1956), p. 1-11.

were reviewed by various subject-matter specialists on the staff of the National Archives, therefore, help was obtained from specialists in the fields of military history, western history, and public administration.

Sixthly, before seeking the help of experts the archivist should do the basic analytical work that is preliminary to the appraisal of records. He should first accumulate the data about the records in question that are essential in determining the uniqueness and form of the information contained in them. He should describe the various series to be appraised, indicating their form and volume, the types of information available in them, their relation to other groups or series that contain similar information, their relation to published sources, and the like, in order that the scholars consulted may more quickly get at the business of determining which particular series or groups contain information valuable for investigations of various matters and which contain this information in the most usable and condensed form.

Seventhly, while exploring the interest of scholars in particular groups of records, the archivist should assume the role of moderator. An archivist dealing with modern records realizes that not all of them can be preserved, that some of them have to be destroyed, and that, in fact, a discriminating destruction of a portion of them is a service to scholarship. He is therefore inclined to agree with the observation that "too great an abstraction" in the appraisal of records "is an evil," for he knows that any scholar with a little intellectual ingenuity can find a plausible justification for keeping almost every record that was ever produced. In evaluating certain of the large series of records that are useful for social and economic studies, therefore, he must take into account the practical difficulties in the way of their preservation and bring these to the attention of the scholars who are interested in preserving them. He must show that a careful selection of the documentation produced by a modern government is necessary if he is not to glut his stacks with insignificant materials that will literally submerge those that are valuable. He must call attention to the fact that a government has only a limited amount of funds for the preservation of its documentary resources and that these funds must be applied judiciously for the preservation of the most important of these resources.

Appraising Machine-Readable Records

Charles M. Dollar

Machine-readable records are defined as records created for processing by a computer. While this definition encompasses a wide variety of storage media including punched cards, magnetic discs, cassettes, and paper tape, the vast majority of machine-readable records are stored on magnetic computer tape. It is reasonable to anticipate that, over the next decade, on-line storage and retrieval devices with random access capability will replace magnetic tape as the primary storage medium. This suggests the possibility that new computer storage technology will radically alter the appraisal of machine-readable records.

Current appraisal practices of machine-readable records differ in significant ways from those for textual records; and as computer technology progresses these differences will become even more pronounced. Indeed, it is likely that current practices and standards will be obsolete and irrelevant with a decade. It is quite costly to accession and preserve properly a single reel of computer tape. The proliferation of on-line data base management systems will make this process even more expensive, and costs will receive even greater consideration in appraisal decisions. As a result, the consequences of the rationalization (in the British sense) of the records retention process will become more evident, to the discomfort of archivists and researchers.

These possibilities suggest or imply a number of points that merit consideration. The standards and practices now employed in the Machine-Readable Archives Division of the National Archives and Records Service, with attention to the changes likely to occur within the next decade, provide the context for this consideration.¹

Since 1969 the staff of the National Archives has appraised machine-readable records and thereby contributed to the refinement of certain concepts and criteria that comprise the present "state of the art," as it were. A delineation of the sequence of decisions involved in the appraisal of machine-readable records can convey the current state of the art.

¹Reprinted with permission from *The American Archivist* 41 (October 1978): 423-430, with slight revisions by the author. The author wishes to thank Thomas E. Brown for his assistance.

²For an earlier study see Meyer Fishbein, "Appraising Information in Machine Language Form," *American Archivist* 35 (January 1972): 35-43.