

The Management Team and Archival Appraisal¹

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RÉSUMÉ L'évaluation des documents par l'archiviste doit viser une sélection « juste » de l'information organique et consignée, c'est-à-dire, une sélection qui fait correspondre « la justesse » et « la justice », « la mort naturelle » des documents et « l'oubli qu'impose la sélection culturelle », pour employer des termes d'Edgar Morin. L'organisme étant un phénomène qui peut être conçu, bâti et perçu de différentes manières, une sélection « juste » de l'information doit constituer un miroir de l'organisme « modulable » aux différentes manières de le percevoir. C'est seulement grâce à une sélection juste de l'information organique et consignée que la direction d'un organisme pourra trouver dans les archives de celui-ci des « traces signifiantes », qui donnent un sens à l'actualité et permettent de clarifier les chemins de l'avenir.

1 The author was asked to examine the question of archival appraisal from the perspective of managers. In order to represent the management of an organization as an entity and not as individuals identified by their titles (e.g., director, administrator, manager), the author chose to use the term “management team.” “Management team” avoids the difficulties inherent to male/female gender terminology (in French). And using a functional title avoids sexism. More fundamentally, the author also wished to avoid misleading the reader by placing himself falsely in the shoes of another, namely a manager. The author prefers to expound on the role of the archivist, whose duty it is to serve the interests of the organization's management team (among others) and not those of the individual in a management position at any given time, whose personal interests are not always those of the organization or even of the position held. A director with a five-year appointment to a management position may consider the creation of records to be cumbersome or the preservation of proof of a given decision to be useless. Once that director is gone, however, the management team may need, years later, to know why that decision was made. It seems evident to the author that an archivist's loyalties are to the organization and consequently, the management team. Only when the needs of the organization are met can the archivist serve the needs of an individual occupying a management position at any given time. This article was first published in Groupe Interdisciplinaire de Recherche en Archivistique (GIRA), *La mission de l'archiviste dans la société*, 2^{ème} Symposium, Université de Montréal, 8–9 April 1994, pp. 135–47, under the title: “L'évaluation des archives et la direction d'un organisme.”

2 The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent an official position of the Division des archives, Université Laval.

ABSTRACT In appraising documents, the archivist must aim for a “just” selection of an institution’s recorded information. In Edgar Morin’s words, this means a selection which makes the link between “precision,” “fairness,” a document’s “dying a natural death,” and its “being forever forgotten due to cultural selection.” Since an institution can be conceived, built, and perceived in different ways, selection of information should be able to mirror these different views of reality. It is only by a “just” selection of the institution’s recorded information that the management of the institution can find in its archives the “meaningful vestiges” which give a sense to current reality and which inform the road to the future.

Speaking at a GIRA (Groupe interdisciplinaire de recherche en archivistique) symposium on archives in 1990, Jacques Boucher stated that, in respect to the contents of institutional records, managers “cannot, should not, see everything, know everything.” He added that “the volume of information a manager must process invariably causes a critical problem ... and archivists must assume a leadership role to hold in check the wave of paper that engulfs us [managers].”³ That archivists would accept this invitation, which resembles a cry for help, seems self-evident. However, the subject matter discussed in this article is not aimed at defining the precise criteria needed for selecting information as requested by Boucher. Rather, the article will attempt to outline a number of general principles that can be followed in order to ensure a “just” selection of recorded information.

A few years ago during a discussion with Henri Atlan on the subject of the just selection of information, Edgar Morin made the following comments:

A vast number of important documents disappear or disintegrate. This is unjust because it is not right. There are also important works and thoughts that may never come to fruition. This is unjust because it is not fair. Things are unjust from the point of view of rightness and things are unjust from the point of view of equity!

The term “selection” can become atrocious like at Auschwitz. Certainly, sooner or later, all is doomed to be forgotten. However, there is a forgetting that results from natural death and a forgetting imposed by cultural selection.⁴

Archival appraisal for the purposes of selection is necessarily a cultural act because it implies the assigning of value. At the same time, the vast majority of documents created retain, after a period of time, only a theoretical or limited value, at least for their creator; their disposal, from his or her perspective, constitutes a natural death. Natural death and cultural selection are not, there-

3 Jacques Boucher, “L’administrateur et l’archiviste: au-delà de l’accès, l’intelligibilité des documents,” in Groupe interdisciplinaire de recherche en archivistique (GIRA), *La place de l’archivistique dans la gestion de l’information: perspectives de recherche, Symposium en archivistique*, Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal, 2–3 February 1990, pp. 146, 149.

4 Henri Atlan and Edgar Morin, “Sélection, réjection (Dialogue),” *Communications* 49 (Special thematic issue entitled “La mémoire ou l’oubli”) (1989), pp. 125–35.

fore, always mutually exclusive. As well archives should be capable of being, as Felix Torres said of public history, “adjustable mirrors,” adaptable to the needs of those who use or will use them,⁵ because archives have differing and sometimes opposing values for users. In *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan uses various metaphors to demonstrate how the phenomenon we call an organization can be simultaneously conceived, built, and perceived in different manners, even from the inside. “Thus a person in a dingy factory may find obvious credibility in the idea that organizations are instruments of domination, while a manager in a comfortable office may be more enthusiastic about understanding the organization as a kind of organism faced with the problem of survival, or as a pattern of culture and subculture.”⁶

There comes a time, however, when organizations, like societies, as Jacques Mathieu observed, “reach a common point where all stakeholders converge, despite their differing interests in the nature of documents or in the way in which those documents are created or used. Each stakeholder subscribes in varying and changeable degrees to a cultural system. No one can avoid this crossroads. It is here that objectives and current cultural and human preoccupations meet.”⁷

The common cultural system that constitutes an organization, regardless of how the organization is perceived,⁸ must be reflected in the most “just” way possible by its archives. These must serve the function of an adjustable mirror of the organization, flexible to the needs of all users. Finally, it is the potential use of archives – for whatever purpose – which gives them their value. This use must be seen in a very broad sense. As Jacques Mathieu stated: “The relation to the past resembles more a search for meaning than a search for knowledge.”⁹ Among other functions, archives mediate the relation to the past; their use facilitates the search for meaning. Here Jacques Boucher, the administrator, joins with the historian when he states: “We must offer the historian the elements already identified as needed to understand the system, its actors, its dynamics. When making documents available, archivists do not do their work properly if they do not provide the keys that will enable the user to understand

5 Félix Torres, “Retour vers l’avenir: l’histoire dans l’entreprise,” in Maurice Hamon and Félix Torres, eds., *Mémoire d’avenir. L’histoire dans l’entreprise* (Paris, 1987), p. 38.

6 Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization* (Thousand Oaks, CA, c1997), pp. 340–41.

7 Jacques Mathieu, “Les médiations du passé: à la recherche d’un carrefour,” in Jacques Mathieu, ed., *Les dynamismes de la recherche au Québec* (Sainte-Foy, 1991), p. 51.

8 In *Images of Organization*, Morgan may go so far as to say that when there is no real common cultural system, at least none that is identifiable, no organizational metaphor is authoritative. We cannot explore that notion in this article. We can only establish that archives must offer evidence as fairly as possible on the phenomenon known as the organization, regardless of the image conveyed.

9 Mathieu, “Les médiations du passé,” p. 56.

the full meaning of the records.”¹⁰ Any search for meaning arising from the archival record will fail if the researcher cannot make sense of the documents.

Archives, no matter their age, serve to make sense of reality, and for this reason the image of archives as recorded memory is exceedingly suggestive. After all, memory gives meaning to reality and constitutes one of the foundations of identity, a concept that cannot be separated from the notion of meaning.¹¹ Using Edmond-Marc Lipinsky’s identity model, Jacques Mathieu and Martine Cardin identified three components of identity and highlighted their interaction: 1) the person – corresponding to “real objective facts”; 2) the persona – corresponding to “behaviour”; and 3) the personality – corresponding to “the objective, the being, the very essence.”¹² Archival selection should enable the body that creates the documents and its environment to describe that body using those three components and should provide evidence of the interaction between the components. In order to facilitate the “search for meaning” that comprises the use of archives, appraisal should target the selection of documents that best provides three types of benchmarks in relation to the creator of the archives. These benchmarks should correspond to the three components of the creator’s identity (the person, the persona, and the personality)¹³:

1. The nominal benchmarks. These represent the descriptive memory of the creator as person. In the case of an organization, for example, there are physical benchmarks (properties, buildings, etc.), or legal benchmarks (such as its charter, regulations, and other formal documents which they generate) that define its rights. The nominal benchmarks answer the “what” question in relation to the creator of the documents.
2. The functional benchmarks. These represent the functional memory of the creator (organizational charts, policies, standards, and procedures for example). They correspond to the persona and combine in action the person and the personality. Functional benchmarks are used to guide and regu-

10 Jacques Boucher, “L’administrateur et l’archiviste,” p. 151. In this quotation, Boucher is talking about the archives used by historians. Later, we will see how managers increasingly use documents, no matter their age, in order to make sense of events.

11 For a theoretical defence of archives as constituting recorded information, see Jacques Mathieu and Martine Cardin, “Jalons pour le positionnement de l’archivistique,” in GIRA, *La place de l’archivistique dans la gestion de l’information*, pp. 101–126, as well as Martine Cardin, *Archivistique: information, organisation, mémoire: l’exemple du mouvement coopératif Desjardins, 1900–1990* (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Laval, 1992) and her book, based on the dissertation: *Archivistique: information, organisation, mémoire: l’exemple du Mouvement coopératif Desjardins, 1900–1990* (Montréal, 1995).

12 Mathieu and Cardin, “Jalons pour le positionnement de l’archivistique,” pp. 106–107.

13 The description of the three benchmarks is based on Martine Cardin. They were elaborated in her Ph.D. dissertation and in her course entitled “Exploitation de l’information” offered in the Masters of History Program, Archival Section, Université Laval.

late operations. They answer the “how” question in relation to the creator of the documents.

3. The symbolic benchmarks. Consisting of documents such as the organizational history, the mission statement, and statements of founding beliefs and principles, these represent the organization’s personality. They answer the “why” question in relation to the creator of the documents and offer its representations of itself, its reason for being, as well as its basic principles and values.

Using the three benchmarks described above to select archives is resolutely neutral because the process of selecting the body of documents that constitutes the creator’s memory is not done with a view to encouraging their use by one type of user or another. The constitution of memory as a contributing factor to the creation of a sense of identity must be done with a view to facilitating the creating body’s use of its own archival memory. This amounts to selecting archives necessarily on the basis of their evidential value – the only value that an archivist can realistically establish – as opposed to selecting them on the basis of their potential informational value for someone other than the creator.¹⁴ When the creator is a corporate body, the archivist’s neutrality is based on the fact that the constituted memory of the creator – that is, the full range of meaningful benchmarks preserved – is not the memory of only one or another of the groups within the organization. In this manner, the memory of an organization must not be the memory of its management team alone; the identity of the organization transcends this group. Only when this condition is met will the archivist succeed in making the archives “equitable,” that is to say, in making the forgetting imposed by cultural selection correspond with the forgetting resulting from natural death.

In fact, an archivist’s role is to shape the recorded memory of an organization on behalf of the management team, but not simply through the lens of management. Does the neutrality of this kind of appraisal lessen the value of archives for managers? Because the archives selected reflect faithfully the entire organization, the documents become an adjustable mirror, adaptable to the needs of managers certainly, but also to the needs of any other potential user. What questions can the management team ask itself about the organization or an aspect of the organization that have not been anticipated by the archivist during an appraisal process based on a memory perspective that encompasses the what, how, and why questions?

Although an archivist cannot appraise archives based only on the needs of

14 See Jacques Grimard, “La valeur de témoignage: laisser des traces significantes,” in *Les valeurs archivistiques: théorie et pratique*. Proceedings of a seminar jointly organized by the Division des archives and the Programme d’archivistique at Université Laval, 11 November 1993 (Québec, 1994), pp. 77–86.

the management team, sometimes appraisal is based on future needs of that team unknown even to itself. Managers are not always aware that archives have value and are even more rarely aware of *all* the value they possess. Under-estimating archives can sometimes reflect the age and nature of an organization.¹⁵ It may also reflect a failure to recognize the value of memory in the operations and survival of the organization. Like a race-car driver obsessed with the finish line, some managers ignore the rear-view mirror, fix their eyes on the prize, and believe that what is behind them is of no consequence. Obsessed by performance and single-mindedly oriented towards results, these managers may be tempted to preserve documentary memorials to the results they achieve, but they neglect to protect traces of the procedures and processes that produced those results and of the context which ensured their success. A superficial and simplistic perception of the organization prevents them from seeing beyond the organizational “person,” from asking questions other than “what,” or from seeing that to answer *that* question, one must often also ask the “how” and “why” questions that inevitably integrate the past into the present.

Yet, it is clear that, increasingly, managers are realizing the value of integrating the past into the present and into the future. Inevitably, the past is repeated in the present and managers risk being surprised or even overtaken by it if they ignore the rear-view mirror.¹⁶ This danger is especially acute in contemporary organizations, where constant changes in structures and staff can affect performance. Torres believes that “an organization equipped with a strong internal and external memory base and a strong, coherent identity born of good management and rooted in the past, in history,”¹⁷ will thrive and survive. “The archival function and the organizational history it allows must both be integrated into the life of the organization and participate in its development.”¹⁸ Like many other managers, Jacques Boucher seems to assign the value of historical archives only to historians.¹⁹ He does however ask the following question – also relevant to historical archives – about current documents: “How then, all things considered, does one translate into action, or inaction, or change what is initially only a piece of paper?”²⁰

Torres’s answer to Boucher’s question is that archives allow managers to carry out “an historical analysis, which, benefiting from a degree of historical perspective, is capable of posing ‘operational questions’ (Karl Polanyi) and ferreting out, for example, the reasons for a success or a failure and, obvi-

15 Mathieu and Cardin, “Jalons pour le positionnement de l’archivistique,” p. 111; and Cardin, *Archivistique: information, organisation, mémoire*, pp. 499–506.

16 Torres, “Retour vers l’avenir: l’histoire dans l’entreprise,” p. 26.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

19 Boucher, “L’administrateur et l’archiviste,” p. 151.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

ously, the repercussions of either on current strategies.”²¹ An historical study, for example, can help to prevent errors in long-range planning by “integrating the contingent and the irrational into a strategy.”²²

On the other hand, faced with an inherited unsuccessful strategy, the manager would find it useful to be able to go back and discover why this particular strategy was adopted and not another. One of Université Laval’s faculties recently found itself in such a situation. Efforts to discover why a certain strategy had been favoured over another ten years previously were unsuccessful; many of the players had left and those still employed in the faculty could not remember why the current strategy was adopted originally. The “why” had not been recorded in the minutes, and the file documenting the development of the strategy had not been preserved; managers had felt it important to preserve only the result (the decision). Ten years later, a new management team realized the importance of the memory gap. This example has a happy ending however. The faculty now insists that both decisions and their rationale be documented and preserved.²³ Recently, in another case, an investigator looking into a dispute between Université Laval and the Séminaire de Québec on the subject of the division of certain collections could find no document that established rightful ownership. Only through a minute examination of the procedures characterizing the extremely close relations between the two institutions throughout their history was he able to arrive at a justifiable conclusion.²⁴

Preserving the evidence of the process used to reach decisions gives meaning to them. Appraising archives that document the process becomes even more important as we increasingly recognize the significance of the process for the result itself. Thus, for example, education today favours the development of know-how over knowledge and history favours the quest for meaning over the search for knowledge.

From a managerial point of view, archival appraisal must protect the value of the documents for their use in the management of current affairs as evidence of results and of processes. Among other things, archives have a symbolic or representational value that has an impact on the life and development of an organization, for which the management team is ultimately responsible. Torres believes that private enterprise “finds its identity and the principles of its action in its memory, which in turn contribute to the development of a “firm’s culture” – a popular contemporary term with managers.”²⁵ The organization:

21 Torres, “Retour vers l’avenir: l’histoire dans l’entreprise,” p. 30.

22 Ibid., p. 30.

23 Interviews conducted in 1991 and 1994 with Thérèse Laferrière, Dean, Faculté des Sciences de l’éducation.

24 Fernand Gingras, *Observations au sujet de la propriété de certaines collections*. Manuscript text (1992).

25 Torres, “Retour vers l’avenir: l’histoire dans l’entreprise,” p. 28.

... can no longer, with impunity, make a clean sweep of itself, its identity, its people and sub-cultures, or the force of reality that created it, especially when strategic changes are necessary. A policy of development or diversification that ignored the deeper nature, the strong points, and the genuine organizational identity of a firm would likely result in serious miscalculations.²⁶

It is usually during memorial occasions, such as anniversaries, that the management team reaps the rewards of having preserved archives of symbolic value. For example, during the 50th anniversary celebration of the Faculté des Sciences sociales at Université Laval in 1988, the dean of the faculty participated actively in the production of a video. The principal object of the video was to establish a link between the faculty of 1988 and the successes and glories of the faculty of the 1940s and 1950s, led by Father Georges-Henri Lévesque, which had had a profound influence on the advent and the shape of Québec's Quiet Revolution.²⁷ Transcending a simple connection to a celebrated past, the symbolism of the documents used in the video revealed two preoccupations facing the faculty of 1988 which had already characterized that of the 1940s: ensuring that the university was rooted in the community and producing cross-fertilization of disciplines and permeability of structures.²⁸ In the 1980s these preoccupations were imposed on the faculty by academic and economic conditions, and the faculty was, in fact, seeking to legitimize symbolically its reaction to these circumstances by summoning what it considered to be two aspects of its historical identity. As well, a history of the faculty was produced, and although it did not exploit the symbolic value of the faculty's archives to the same degree, it had similar objectives.²⁹

Using Edgar Morin's terminology, appraising archives for their selection should be an exercise in justness, where justness evokes both rightness and equity. Appraisal must reconcile the "natural death" of dated information with the "forgetting that cultural selection imposes." This reconciliation is to some extent idealistic since we can attach at least some minimal value to all information. Only when the archivist strives to reconcile these two factors, how-

26 Ibid.

27 Louise Sasseville, producer, "Une oeuvre, une institution: la Faculté des sciences sociales de l'Université Laval, 1938-1988," (Québec, 1988), 28 minutes.

28 The Faculty espoused the preoccupations of the University as expressed in its *Plan directeur 1987/1990*. In fact, faced with government budget cuts to higher education, the University recognized the need to strengthen its relations with the private sector and the wider community in the hope they would take up the slack. Furthermore, faced with the growing number of disciplines, and consequently, of academic structures, the University saw the need to impose order in their proliferation and to break down academic boundaries. James Lambert, "Le programme des fêtes du cinquantenaire de la Faculté des sciences sociales, 1988," unpublished paper (Québec, 1991).

29 Albert Faucher, ed., *Cinquante ans de sciences sociales à l'Université Laval: l'histoire de la Faculté des sciences sociales (1938-1988)* (Québec, 1988).

ever, can success be achieved in making archives an adjustable mirror, able to respond to the various and unanticipated demands which may be placed upon them. Among those demands, and just as important as any other group's, are those of managers. That being said, the role of an archivist is not to appraise an organization's archives for the benefit of the management team more than for that of any other organizational component. As Morin states, this would not be the "right" thing to do; nor would it be "equitable," since the mirror would be fixed to the needs only of the management team, and its narrow perspective would necessarily offer a distorted reflection of the organization. The inadequacy of this reflection, precisely because it is both wrong and inequitable, would eventually also be recognized by the management team. The archivist possesses one effective way of ensuring that his or her selection will meet current and potential needs (even if those needs are unforeseeable), and that is by preserving "meaningful vestiges,"³⁰ nominal, functional, and symbolic benchmarks. Any search for meaning – which underlies all use of archives by members of the management team or others – will be hampered if these benchmarks are ignored.

30 Jacques Grimard, "Les valeurs archivistiques," p. 77.

