



Appraisal Methodology: Macro-Appraisal and Functional Analysis Part A: Concepts and Theory

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National Archives of Canada
Government Records Branch

Appraisal Methodology: Macro-Appraisal and Functional Analysis

Part A: Concepts and Theory

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Introduction

The general purpose of this document is to provide an appraisal rationale and methodology for archivists in response to the comprehensive, multi-media submissions received by the National Archives under the *Multi-Year Disposition Plans (MYDP)* of the planned approach to government records disposition. The main objective is to encourage greater intellectual consistency in records disposition decision-making and in the logic of its explanation and presentation in *Appraisal Reports (AR)*.

The focus of macro-appraisal must be *comprehensive*. Comprehensive refers to an entire functional or program area (usually a branch or sector), which should include all headquarters, region, and field levels, and all their series, systems, and records collections, in all media. For mid- and small-sized institutions, comprehensive ideally includes all the records of the institution covered in one submission, and thus one appraisal.

The *Appraisal Methodology: Macro-Appraisal and Functional Analysis* deals exclusively with the substance of appraisal, i.e., it does not explain related business or organizational procedures. It is divided into two parts. The first part (*Part A: Concepts and Theory*) addresses the intellectual infrastructure supporting the National Archives of Canada's macro-appraisal strategy for government records. The second part (*Part B: Guidelines for Performing an Archival Appraisal of Government Records*) provides methodological steps for archivists to follow in order to initiate and complete appraisal projects.

The main elements of the *Appraisal Methodology* include:

- an explanation of the strategic goals of the government records disposition program;
- the conceptual and theoretical principles of this program which support macro-appraisal and functional analysis in the identification of the archival record;
- a description of the important connection between business functions and administrative structures and the identification of *Offices of Primary Interest (OPI)* as the primary location of archival records;
- an explanation of the significance of the interaction between citizens and groups with the Government of Canada (through *OPIs*) for the purpose of targetting series of case records for archival preservation, including the acquisition of case records for their informational value;

- clarification of the relationship between the macro-appraisal of business functions and administrative structures and the micro-appraisal of actual records as confirmation of appraisal hypotheses;
- a consideration of the legal requirements for records retention within the context of macro-appraisal;
- a reading list about the concepts and theory of macro-appraisal (Part A) and related case studies (Part B), as well as a limited number of other readings that either complement or which have inspired the approach taken by the National Archives (Part A).

It is important to note that the *Appraisal Methodology*, which broadly outlines the NA macro-appraisal strategy and its processes, reflects the best current thinking and broad institutional consensus about the appraisal of government records. It is intended for the use of NA staff both as an operational guideline and as an appraisal orientation tool. It is also expected that this document will continue to grow and evolve to reflect new insights and experiences in the appraisal of the records of federal government institutions.

In addition, the National Archives must be accountable to the Canadian public for its decisions concerning the preservation of archival records about our national history and collective memory for the benefit and use of future generations. For this reason, the National Archives is publishing its *Appraisal Methodology* to offer the public an explanation of how it makes archival records preservation choices.¹

Archival Appraisal Theory and Macro-Appraisal

Appraisal *theory* explores, in a philosophical sense, the sources or influences upon which archivists base their decisions to assign “value” or “significance” or “importance” to records. If a record has “value,” one is obliged to ask: to whom, using what criteria, and why? Appraisal *strategies and methodologies* are a means whereby such theoretical or philosophical definitions of “value” may be identified and implemented in working reality. Theory comes first, from which strategy, methodology and practice are successively derived. Without a progression of theory, strategy, methodology and practice, there can be no logical or defensible rationale for archival appraisal decision-making.

Macro-appraisal at the National Archives is entirely independent of the medium of the records. It applies explicitly to all records of government institutions subject to the *National Archives of Canada Act*, i.e., textual records in paper form, data and operational program records created and

¹ For a detailed explanation of accountability issues in the context of government records disposition and the role of the National Archives, see the article by the National Archivist, Ian B. Wilson, “The Fine Art of Destruction Revisited”, 49 *Archivaria* (Spring 2000), pp. 124-139.

maintained in an electronic environment, photographs, plans, maps, drawings, audio-visual and sound recordings, documentary art, etc.

Macro-appraisal theory at the National Archives is based on the assumption² that societal values should provide the context for appraisal decision-making. While no one can *objectively* know or state with complete assurance what the elements of societal value(s) are or have been within any given generation, archivists can develop appraisal strategies and methodologies that are most likely to provide a comprehensive documentary memory of what has transpired in society over time. At the National Archives, the primary goal is to offer Canadians sufficient documentary evidence of how government has formulated policy, made decisions, transacted its business and interacted with citizens, leaving researchers and other users the tasks of analyzing and interpreting the meaning of events reflected through archival records. Essentially, NA macro-appraisal is intended to document both the *functionality* of government in its role as the public administrator and the impact of its policies, programs and services have on citizens within the broad context of *governance*³. Of course, appraisal decisions about the value of records created in the private sector should complement and supplement the archival preservation of public sector documentation within a “total archives” framework, but this is beyond the scope of the *Appraisal Methodology*.

Two other major theories of value determination have been advocated by groups of archivists in the 20th century in addition to the societal focus adopted formally in 1991 by the National Archives of Canada:

- One has argued that archival value should be determined empirically and pragmatically by gauging the current or anticipated research use of records. The more records are used by researchers or required for research purposes, the more valuable they are to archives.
- The other maintained that the records creator alone should determine value and thus which records may or could be preserved by archives.

Macro-appraisal differs from the methods used to determine and/or the taxonomies of value developed by T.R. Schellenberg and Sir Hilary Jenkinson, respectively, and their followers.

Macro-appraisal embraces certain aspects of Schellenberg’s and Jenkinson’s approaches as will be explained in Part B. However, it rejects without qualification Jenkinson’s position that *archivists* should not appraise records because this would compromise their role as objective, passive keepers or custodians of a documentary residue left by the creator. Macro-appraisal asserts that *archivists* -- not researchers or creators -- are society’s professional agents appointed by law to form its collective

² The assumption reflects the thinking of Hans Booms, Gerald Ham, Helen Samuels, Terry Cook and Richard Brown.

³ Governance: how government is implicated in or contributes to the development and shaping of societal values through administrative decision-making.

memory. By virtue of their appraisal decisions, *archivists* actively shape the documentary legacy of their own time⁴.

Social theorists and others have found that all societies assign greater or lesser importance to the different dimensions of the interplay between social structures, societal functions, and citizens and groups as social agents. NA macro-appraisal contends that an understanding of the interplay between government's administrative structures, its business functions and the citizenry is critical to determine the archival value of government records. Essentially, in order to preserve a documentary picture of how government operates in society, macro-appraisal requires archivists to research and analyze functional profiles and administrative structures of government as well as its policies and business programs to identify the nature of the impact these have on individuals and groups. By documenting how government conducts its business, organizes itself, delivers programs and services and the manner in which this business is transacted, the NA will provide an accurate and comprehensive view of government's history⁵.

The basic formulation of NA macro-appraisal actually draws inspiration from an insight made some five decades ago by the American archivist Margaret Cross Norton -- records follow, relate to and support business functions. This has long been the case both in the corporate and government environments, and is currently evident in business needs analysis and planning, in computer systems design and methodology as well as in contemporary approaches to business process re-engineering and government restructuring. This kind of *functional* thinking is also at the heart of the macro-appraisal thesis.

In Canada, as in many other countries, public administration is formally assigned responsibilities (*functions*) by an elected body of representatives with constitutional jurisdiction and mandate through the promulgation of laws, regulations, and policies. To perform these functions, the administration organizes itself into institutions (departments, agencies, boards and offices) with particular jurisdictional *mandates*, some exclusive to a single institution, some shared with others. Generally speaking, these institutions are created and organized by government to respond to the contemporary requirements and needs of Canadian society, i.e., to what society "values" and to what society deems to be the obligations of the federal state. By documenting how government institutions meet their assigned responsibilities and accountabilities, by preserving records which illustrate how institutions conduct the nation's public business affairs, the National Archives will preserve government records of enduring archival and historical value to Canadians.

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⁴ For further exploration of these approaches, see the Bibliography of selected readings.

⁵ In many ways, this approach is reflective of Hans Booms' conception of provenance-based appraisal articulated in the 1970s and 80s, which links the archival value of records exclusively to the value of their creator context and their contemporary use, rather than to their anticipated secondary use for research or other purposes (Schellenberg).

Today, the business of government is extraordinarily complex. NA macro-appraisal theory proceeds on the assumption that the best way for archivists to understand government business activity and to make appraisal decisions to preserve records providing a comprehensive archival representation of this activity is through an analysis and evaluation of government's assigned business functions. Macro-appraisal theory divides these functions into two categories: those that are assigned to institutions by Parliament on a government-wide *portfolio* basis through law, regulation and policy; and those that are assigned or delegated to institutions for their internal administrative responsibilities to meet institutional *mandates*. A hierarchical arrangement of government functionality needs to be assessed and evaluated from an archival appraisal perspective.

At the government-wide level, moving from NA macro-appraisal theory into its program strategy and methodology, there are broad *business domains* of responsibility assigned to administrative *clusters* of government institutions. In Canada, these domains or *macro-functions* have remained relatively stable since the 1960s. Essentially, there are basic government-wide domains of functional responsibility which implicate one or more institutions in policy formulation, decision-making, and program and service delivery, such as

- science and technology,
- security and intelligence,
- heritage and culture,
- industry and economic development,
- human resources development,
- foreign relations and trade, etc.

Within these *clusters* at the institution-specific level, various elements of these broader *macro-functions* are normally assigned to the mandate(s) of large departments first, and then to smaller organizations reporting to Parliament. For example, within the broad government business domain of transportation, the Minister of Transport administers and manages transportation policy and regulation in a main department (Transport Canada), but the investigation of transportation accidents is the responsibility of the Transportation Safety Board. Public hearings about transportation safety and other regulations are the responsibility of the Canadian Transportation Agency; the fleet management of the Canadian Coast Guard is the responsibility of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans; and the supervision of Canadian air-space is the responsibility of a not-for-profit quasi-government agency called NAV Canada.

NA macro-appraisal theory holds that the National Archives should *only* acquire records which document the functions on a government-wide or on an institution-specific basis from the information created, accumulated or managed by *Offices of Primary Interest (OPI)*. The OPI is the administrative entity within government which is *exclusively* responsible and/or accountable for formulating policy, making decisions, or delivering a program or service to Canadians by virtue of law, regulation or mandate, and is the location for the best archival record. The identification of the *OPI* within the organization of government relevant to particular functions requires substantial and often complicated research and analysis. This is the main reason why the government records

disposition program supports its macro-appraisal theory with a research agenda. The National Archives through this methodological research will achieve consistent appraisal outcomes to create a more focussed records preservation program.

The macro-appraisal thesis means that the contextual milieu in which records are created and subsequently assessed by archivists using the macro-appraisal approach is broadly determined by a variety of factors: administrative structures, macro-functions, functions, sub-functions, programs, activities, transactions, and client interactions, as well as records-creating processes, records systems, and recording technologies. Macro-appraisal provides a balanced documentary view of government's history by focussing archival appraisal research on the analysis of government's business functions rather than on an analysis of records themselves. Archival over-representation of certain records because they suit contemporary research interests is eliminated and records of lesser importance and duplicates are more easily identified. Most importantly, business domains which have been traditionally under-represented in the archival record are more complete.

Essentially, macro-appraisal shifts the primary focus of appraisal from the record -- including any research characteristics or values it may contain -- to the *functional context* in which the record is created. The main appraisal questions for the archivist are no longer what has been recorded, where it is, and what research value it has. Instead, the archivist uses knowledge gained by a functional analysis of an institution, including an analysis of the interaction of *function and structure*, of organizational culture, of records-keeping systems, and of citizen-client involvement with the institution or function. The key appraisal questions are:

- What are the mandated functions and activities of government institutions?
- How important are these functions and activities across government and within institutions?
- How important are these functions and activities within the broader context of Canadian society?
- What aspects or features need to be documented if a function or activity has importance? What constitutes sufficient documentation from an archival perspective?
- Where in government is the *Office of Primary Interest* for a particular function or activity?
- Is the *Office of Primary Interest* the location of the best archival record which documents the function or activity?

By answering these basic questions, archivists can target records or records series for review in order to verify their research hypotheses concerning the importance of the function or activity under analysis. One of two possible outcomes is obtained by reviewing records:

- a) The examination of the records confirms the research hypothesis. Recommendations are subsequently made concerning their archival preservation. (It is therefore unnecessary for the National Archives to acquire records concerning the function or activity from any administrative site in government other than the *Office of Primary Interest*.);

or

- b) The examination of the records does *not* confirm the research hypothesis. Recommendations are made about how the function or activity, important from an archival perspective, can be appropriately documented.

The main proposition of macro-appraisal is that only *Offices of Primary Interest* create the critical documentation about particular government functions and activities and consequently, the National Archives will exclusively acquire archival records from these administrative sites. Although macro-appraisal has shifted appraisal emphasis from the record to the context of records creation, it retains records review as a critical last step in its appraisal methodology. First, by reviewing records, archivists are able to test their research and assumptions. Second, and perhaps most importantly, archivists must decide which and how many records are required to *sufficiently document* the function or activity. The last thing an archivist does in evaluating records is to review the records. Not all records related to a function or activity deemed to have archival importance or national significance must be acquired by the archives, nor do all functions share equal importance, or have equal impact upon the lives of Canadians. As explained in the *Methodological Guidelines* (Part B), archivists are expected to determine which records adequately and appropriately document the function or activity in question. The archivists should bring to bear their informed judgement, research and knowledge, taking into account the resources of the National Archives. The theoretical focus of macro-appraisal is “societal”: to identify records which provide illustration of *how government operates and affects* Canadian society. The goal is not to provide archival evidence of functions and activities as an end in itself.

Documentation Goals for the Macro-Appraisal of Government Records

The societal focus of macro-appraisal leading to the archival acquisition or protection of government records by the National Archives is guided by the following documentation objectives. The primary goal is to preserve selected records which document the deliberations, decisions and actions of government in relation to its assigned business functions, programs and activities, as well as records which establish the sovereignty, organization and administration of government. Other documentation goals are:

- To preserve selected records which provide government and the public with information about the policies, decisions and programs of government institutions over time for the purposes of review, scrutiny and understanding;

- To preserve selected records which document the impact of government decision-making upon citizens and groups in Canada and the interaction between the Canadian public and the federal state;
- To preserve selected records that are considered essential to protect the collective and individual rights and privileges of Canadians and their social, cultural and physical environment;
- To preserve selected records of national significance which contain significant or unique information that will substantially enrich understanding about Canada's history, society, culture and people;
- To preserve selected records that the Government of Canada is required to maintain for a substantial period of time by law.

The Macro-Appraisal Goal

The macro-appraisal goal is to choose significant and sufficient recorded evidence from Offices of Primary Interest. This recorded evidence should most succinctly reflect, in the best recording medium, the impact of the function or program on Canadians and the public's interaction with the function or program.

The methodological steps conceived to support this strategy are provided in *Part B: Guidelines for Performing an Archival Appraisal of Government Records*.

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