

Chapter 4:

Plural, Changeable and Dynamic: Values of the Archive

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Introduction: Defining Value

“Values are the embodiment of what an organization stands for [...]”²² as Mark A. Greene states. That is why we have to look at the values that modern archivism holds in high esteem and the kind of values associated with the archive. Defining the term value is not an easy task. The Cambridge Dictionary gives three principal meanings for the word “value”²³:

1. the monetary worth of something, or an amount of money,
2. the importance or worth of something for someone, and what they consider important,
3. the ideals people believe in.

What does this mean for archives? Is there a way of measuring the value of memory, for instance the degree of importance people attach to collections and archives? Can the ethical and moral beliefs of archives and archivists be seen as values?

These are the questions addressed in this chapter. We first of all discuss the archive’s capitalist appraisal, secondly, its sociocultural value and, thirdly, the archivist as its key figure. We argue that the value of the archive depends on the adopted perspective and hence not only differs but is also changeable and as dynamic as the archive itself.²⁴ We see values in this case best defined as the ethics of archives but also as the meaning and purpose of the archive in society.

I. The Capitalist Appraisal

Although the financial worth of the archive is not the key value by which it is appraised, it is nonetheless a dimension to be considered when painting the whole picture. Money is a measurement of value and frequently used to assess the worth of cultural institutions. In the UK, for example, governmental funding for archives is justified by a so-called “cost-benefit-analysis” (CBA), whereby the cost of an institution is weighed up against its impact on and meaning for society. In most countries a visit to the archive is free of charge, whereas people

²² Sarah Davy, “When good archivists go bad: the role of ethics and values in everyday archival decision-making,” *Archifacts* (October 2013): 16.

²³ *Cambridge dictionary*, s.v. “Value,” accessed March 22, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-german/value>.

²⁴ See the chapter on dynamics.

are required to pay for admission to a museum or an art gallery.²⁵ Public archives are often governmental institutions and funded by tax-payers. The CBA asks about the willingness of archive customers and visitors to pay for a visit to the institution, in this case: “What would you like to pay if you had to visit the archive?” Some economists question this approach, however, since the hypothetical fee would not match the real fee if this strategy were executed.²⁶

The financial value of archives can also be estimated by looking at digital heritage research sites such as Ancestry or MyHeritage. Numerous archives have sold their collections to these platforms, around which a “multi-billion-dollar” business has evolved. Across the globe, people pay a monthly fee to use these sites for family heritage and DNA research.²⁷ Another method is to assess the benefit of an archive to expenditure in the area surrounding the institution: whether visitors buy food, coffee or souvenirs during their stay or spend the night at a local hotel. The impact on the local labour market is measured by looking at staff wages. The CBA also takes into account the revenue from a cultural or media product, for example when an archive is used in the research process of a TV series.²⁸

Similarly, the archive itself as a keeper of records provides or secures monetary value. Archives owned by private companies are of value to them as the basis of their legitimization. Here the preservation of important documents guarantees “legal protection” by keeping documentation accessible and allowing the company to refer to this should it be questioned.²⁹ Another starting point would be to evaluate the physical worth of records and artefacts stored in the archive. If sold on the market, rare documents could be priceless. Some might be expensive for their material worth alone, others because they are unique or simply written or signed by some renowned figure. Most public archives are unlikely to sell their records, however, because their value in the body of a collection is far greater. Neither do records belong solely to the archive itself. They are of interest to the public and kept in the archive for use by interested parties. Which is why this measurement as an indicator – for the most part – is highly improbable.³⁰ Having said that, the monetary value of the archive can be assessed in one particular field: entertainment. Archival information is the basis for cultural productions such as documentaries, TV programmes, films and books, whose impact and financial value can be measured. In the UK, for example, historical TV shows and films, as well as other cultural

²⁵ In some, however, a research permit involving a fee is required to visit public archives and in almost all cases of public archives, tax money partially funds their services.

²⁶ Cf. Michael Moss, David Thomas, “Introduction,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), XVII–XX..

²⁷ Swapan Chakravorty, “Memories of the Future: Archives in India,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), 147, 160.

²⁸ Cf. Moss, Thomas, “Introduction,” XXI–XXVI.

²⁹ Paul Limoha, “Valuing Oral and Written Texts in Malawi,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), 26, 27.

³⁰ Cf. Daniel German, “A Search for Truthiness: Archival Research in a Post-Truth World,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), 180, 181.

productions in the same field, are one of the largest national exports. In turn, these are an indicator of archival impact, since they show the degree of public interest in history from a financial perspective and frequently rely on archival collections for research.³¹

In a broader sense, there is also a connection between archives and public health improvement, as in the case of people researching heritage or personal histories. They find out this way about health issues that have been passed on in their family, for example, and can now take action against a potentially impending illness. There is likewise a positive impact on mental health when people find long-lost relatives, siblings or parents. This translates to a benefit to public health expenditure. One way of measuring the impact of archives on health is the so-called well-being indicator that “aims to evaluate a number of factors that contribute to subjective well-being; for example change in income or improved health. Currently there is considerable attention on assessing the contribution that documentary heritage collections can make to the health and well-being of citizens.”³² This is quite a recent and highly interesting approach, since it provides evidence of the financial impact of archives but also of their effect on society as the providers of memory. As we can see, there are many factors to be considered when assessing the monetary value of an archive. That being said, the value of the archive in matters of public interest must be seen in a broader sense beyond the direct link between the archive and the market.

II. The Socio-Cultural Value of the Archive

Today, archives are seen as a means of shedding light on various histories and narratives. As previously mentioned, public interest in history, especially family history, has gained currency in the last two decades. The popularity of archives as the key provider of sources for research on public and professional history has also grown and in the process become more integrated into society and people’s lives, although the place of the archive in society has been questioned.³³

What are the benefits of the archive to society? On the one hand, archives can help society to evolve, to reflect on its own history, to accept the past and to learn what paths it took and should perhaps avoid in the future. On the other hand, if carefully maintained, archives support long-term memory. Archives provide collective memory and resources with respect to past societies. Community archives have been under broader discussion lately, since they allow minorities to

³¹ Cf. Lihoma, “Valuing”, 20, 26.

³² Nancy Bell, Michael Moss, and David Thomas, “Building an Evidenced-based Culture for Documentary Heritage Collections,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), 28.

³³ Cf. Jeannie Hill and Victoria Lance, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? Situating the Archive and Archivist,” in *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping: A Reader*, ed. Jeannie Hill, (London: Facet, 2010), 23.; cf. Cheryl Avery and Mona Holmlund, “Introduction,” in *Better Off Forgetting? Essays on Archives, Public Policy and Collective Memory*, ed. Cheryl Avery (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), XII.

create collective memory and provide the opportunity to form an identity separate from that of the nation.³⁴

The popularity of social media has led to a number of different narratives about a single topic. Researchers have begun calling the twenty-first century the post-factual age. Non-historians have simultaneously started to access archives, turning family research into a multimillion-dollar business, as described above. Archives are a site of knowledge preservation and evidential sources for society, one that people turn to in their search for evidence. Archival records allow both historians and private individuals to view history “through a new lens”.³⁵ Archivists today define their record material as a documented source that may well be evidential. It can “prove rights, confirm obligations, verify events and substantiate claims”.³⁶

Accordingly, records must be secured, and it is the archivists who provide a “safe haven” for the material they preserve. How evidence is interpreted, however, is the prerogative of those who consult the records rather than the archivist. The latter provides material that can be used as evidence by researchers, historians or private individuals. A good example of the importance of preservation is the Hillsborough football disaster of 1989. In 2012, a group of medical experts, researchers and archivists revisited documentation of the tragedy, which in turn led to legal proceedings in 2019 against those held responsible.³⁷ Equally, documents – and the silence of what is not documented – can be evidence of government actions and sometimes oppression. Archives can play a significant role in holding the government accountable and as a basis for law. “The rule of law and natural justice cannot be maintained without appropriate evidence, which is precisely what archives provide,”³⁸ as Michael Moos declares in the introduction to his anthology on establishing and measuring the value of archives. Transparent decisions and the option of being held to account by the people are intrinsic to the legitimacy of a democratic government. Democracy can only be carried out securely if the decisions and actions of those in charge can be retraced. Archives play a huge role in the availability and preservation of government documents. Libraries and archives were and still are funded by legislation, which they also legitimize by defending democracy and creating evidence for state institutions. For example, public archives preserve documents about peoples’ votes and opinions and political occurrences. These documents can provide evidence in case of any misuse of laws or political abuse towards citizens. Archivists are torn between loyalty to their institution, social needs and

³⁴ Cf. Elisabeth Klett, *Creating Value in Archives: Overcoming Obstacles to Digital Records Appraisal* (Sundsvall: Mid Sweden University, 2019), 54, Mid Sweden University Publications eBook; Laura A. Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practices* (London: Facet, 2017), 264. See also the chapter on archives and their actor networks.

³⁵ Millar, *Archives*, 68.

³⁶ Ibid, 67; cf. Richard Ovenden, “And Finally... The Value of Libraries and Archives in Preserving the Truth,” *The Expository Times* 132, no. 3 (2020), 151.

³⁷ Cf. Sarah Tyacke, “Trusting the Records: The Hillsborough Football Disaster 1989 and the Work of the Independent Panel 2010–12,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), 64–69; Millar, *Archives*, 25, 44.

³⁸ Moss, Thomas, “Introduction,” XXVI.

the people. It is they who decide whether the importance and democratic use of a particular document weighs more than the need for privacy of the person concerned in the document.³⁹

Archives not only provide evidence of government activities; they also constitute the basis of identity narratives that emerge from the idea of who we are and who we have been. Consequently, archives take part in creating communities, and their narratives. Records preserved in the archives give people a “sense of identity, locality, history, culture and personal and collective memory”.⁴⁰ Narratives can only be formed on the basis of what is preserved and can be accessed. Which is why, in recent years, interest has been shown in “decolonize[d]” archives, and efforts made to get rid of old structures and provide new, more open ways of accessing documents and arranging collections. Unlike colonial archives, the “decolonized” archive seeks to be more representative of minorities and less a reflection on patriarchal and imperial structures. It has become even more important “[a]s the study of history has expanded beyond that of the “winners” to everyday social and applied histories, including the stories of the marginalized.”⁴¹ Archives can have an impact on people’s personal lives by providing material for research on their ancestry and detangling their family history, and in this way “assist to restate pride in family experiences”⁴²

One example of rendering silenced history visible and creating new narratives based on archival records is the ‘Australian Women’s Archives Project’ established in the year 2000, a joint effort by the National Foundation of Australian Women and the University of Melbourne. Its aim is to preserve and document material referring to Australian women, since “[i]n the same way that women have been marginalized in history, evidence of women, their activities and contributions”⁴³ is often poorly preserved and sources still have to be excavated.

III. Creating Value in the Archive

If archives can be used to hold evidence about history and all that has happened – why can we not just keep everything? An archive utopia for us would be an endless storage hall that registers records automatically, dispensing with decisions on what should and should not be preserved. A perfect archive would store everything. In other words, whenever the need arose, people would find records to question and receive answers. Sadly, this is not the case in reality: space is confined, the time archivists require to take in and look after records is limited, and the financial means are not endless. At some point in the archival process the archivist has to decide what is worth preserving and what is not. Their task is to value the worth, future meaning and

³⁹ Cf. Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Archives: Archivists’ Values and Value in the Postmodern Age,” *The American Archivist* 72, no.1 (2009): 31, 35; cf. Helen Morgan et al., “Value in Fragments: An Australian Perspective on Re-Contextualization,” in *Do Archives Have Value?*, ed. Michael Moss (London: Facet, 2019), 152, doi:10.29085/9781783303342.004.

⁴⁰ Greene, “Power,” 36.

⁴¹ Morgan et al., “Value,” 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 42; Cf. Millar, *Archives*, 44; cf. Greene, “Power”, 36.

⁴³ Morgan et al., “Value,” 44.

significance of the record in front of them. By evaluating this future meaning of a document, an archivist already endows value to the object that is to be preserved. So how do they guard against “throwing out” records that are valuable?

The archive cannot be the site of all the documents ever produced in relation to a particular issue. Some documents are lost, others are destroyed prior to making their way to the archive or have been eliminated by the archivists themselves for the above-mentioned reasons. If, of course, only one record of an event exists and this is known to the archivists, it is more than likely it will be preserved. But what if that is not the case? One parameter to determine whether a record stays or not pertains to its relevance for a specific archive. Archives are frequently established for one specific purpose. If, for instance, they are given an entire collection or inheritance, they may include a number of records out of the archival context. If the inheritor of the material is linked to the institution or archive, they might keep all of it for research. They might also turn down a legacy so that the collection is not disassembled and instead look for an alternative solution. Sometimes, however, a decision to discard irrelevant records and merely keep the core has to be made.⁴⁴

By deciding to keep a record, archivists assign a (non-monetary) value to the said record. This decision creates immediate value, whereas other records in the same process are stripped of their estimated meaning. Records preserved in the archive are proof to the archivist – even a hundred years later – that the content had value for the archivist back then. Measuring the value of a record for current audiences is a difficult task. But then again, what about future audiences? What will things look like in two-hundred years? Think of a shopping list, for example. Today historians learn a great deal about people in the past from the items they bought one or two hundred or even two thousand years ago. In the same vein, what seems unimportant to us now will provide our descendants with information about what we ate and the ingredients we combined or the status certain items had. If, on the other hand, you were to send last week’s shopping list to a random archive today, they would probably thank you politely and send it back.⁴⁵

The value of a record does not take monetary worth into account but focuses instead on three main factors: content, context and structure. If you were a famous person whose inheritance was given to an archive, things might be different and maybe the archive would make it part of its collection. And if you handed a shopping list over with a menu, saying you had “dinner with Julie Andrews”, the record could suddenly gain currency.⁴⁶ Value sometimes accumulates in the collective. One record alone might not be very powerful but have a certain value within a collection when other records provide the context. A single photograph of an unknown person somewhere on the streets of Berlin in the early nineties, for example, might not be valuable on

⁴⁴ Cf. Millar, *Archives*, 55, 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 59; cf. Morgan et al., “Value,” 39.

⁴⁶ Cf. Millar, *Archives*, 9–12.

its own. If, on the other hand, it is part of a collection dealing with the “Wiedervereinigung” and aligned with a dozen other photographs of people at that time, its value will be assessed differently. It is therefore vital to ask what goal the archive pursues. Does it want to be a source of evidence or a provider of historical and antiquarian material and information?⁴⁷ A decision has to be made as to whether, and if so, when a record is to be released and made accessible to the public. Due to personal information or their relevance to recent events, records can be held back for up to fifty years. In this case, the archivist is often legally bound to refuse or at least limit access to the records. Under certain circumstances, archivists have a choice when it comes to releasing a record. They can allow access to the general public or merely to those in a specific field of research. Likewise, they may see it fit to only allow access to parts of a collection in order to protect those involved.⁴⁸ In Germany there is a blocking period of ten years following the death or one hundred years after the birth of the person concerned.⁴⁹

Archivists look at numerous perspectives and consider the criteria before deciding the fate of the records: “what is to be kept and what is destroyed, what is to be remembered and what is forgotten.”⁵⁰ The selection, or *appraisal*, process itself gives meaning and value to the records that are kept – or abandoned. This value may be above and beyond the monetary value of the document under review.

IV. The Archivist as Key Figure⁵¹

“Values are the mental concepts that make meaning possible; they provide us with motivation to act and a framework for decision-making.”⁵² This quote by Michael Henderson demonstrates the importance of ideals in professional archivism. In recent decades, the archivist has undergone a shift from passive observer to recognized shaper of the archive. Mark A. Greene defined the archivist as “someone who identified, appraised, preserved, arranged, described and provided access to historical material”.⁵³ In his view, archivists hold enormous power in their hands. They decide and influence how, when, if and to what extent researchers access a record, in what light they see it – physically and metaphorically – and how they work with the material. Derrida and others questioned the archive being seen as a reflection of reality, which it had been considered for the best part of history, claiming that the archive was heavily influenced by the archivists themselves.⁵⁴ In this “new” position, archivists – like most professionals – must

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43; cf. Morgan et al., “Value,” 37.

⁴⁸ Cf. Millar, *Archives*, 98.

⁴⁹ Cf. “Bundesarchivgesetz: Gesetz über die Nutzung und Sicherung von Archivgut des Bundes,” Absatz 11: Schutzfristen, Bundesarchiv, accessed March 22, 2021, https://www.bundesarchiv.de/DE/Content/Artikel/Ueberuns/Rechtsgrundlagen/rechtsgrundlagen_bundesarchivgesetz.html.

⁵⁰ Morgan et al., “Value,” 39.

⁵¹ See also the chapter on archives and their actor networks.

⁵² Davy, “Good Archivists,” 15.

⁵³ Greene, “Power,” 18.

⁵⁴ Cf. Millar, *Archives*, 43; cf. Hill, Lance, “Where Do We Come From,” 5; cf. Greene, “Power,” 26.

always strike a balance between personal values and professional decisions. They risk making unprofessional choices if they “prioritize our personal human needs [...] over safe professional boundaries.”⁵⁵ This concept is challenged when archivists face political pressure or are part of political change. One example in this area of conflict is Johannes Papritz, the founder of the Marburg Archive School, who also established the Herder Institute in Marburg and was the leading lecturer on archival studies in the early days of post-war Germany. Papritz had been the head of multiple archives from 1938 to 1945 in the Third Reich. During his time in Nazi Germany he legitimized the state and was responsible for the registration of so-called “Others”. He supported the dictatorship by keeping its archives and after World War II trained generations of young archivists in the newly established Federal Republic of Germany.⁵⁶ In other words, he taught the people who were to become the future keepers of the West German archives, and supporters of democracy. This example shows why archivists today hold value and work ethics in high esteem, in order to prevent such misuse of archival work in present and future. But values are not set in stone. “They need to constantly be thought about, discussed, reviewed and reflected”⁵⁷, as Sarah Davy declared. Archivists have a duty to be self-reflective about their own power and how they influence the archive. Personal values should never cross their professional decisions. They are required to constantly improve their work, learn about new theories and, if necessary, seek the help of other professionals: “The best archivist will keep her mind active, his or her knowledge current and skills sharp”^{58, 59}

Like Derrida and several archivists in the twentieth century, Natalis de Wailly (1805-1886) called for changes in archival practices as early as 1841. According to his ministerial report for the royal archives of France, archivists should always keep the individual collections of different agencies together and not take them apart. Nor should records produced by different agencies be grouped together and stored in one drawer because they happen to fit the subject. Furthermore, archivists should maintain the order of the collections themselves. Intermingling and destroying collections in archives is still seen as a violation. Respect for the rights of past, living and future persons in the records must be guaranteed, and at the same time the law has to be followed. In this regard, archivists always answer to two leaders: the public and the institution or nation they work for. The two will occasionally come into conflict. If, for example, someone wants to view a document not yet released to the public because it is still a matter of current diplomacy or events, the archivist is legally bound to hold it back, although it may provide crucial knowledge. Archivists must also decide whether a person’s safety is of greater

⁵⁵ Davy, “Good Archivists,” 13.

⁵⁶ Cf. Fritz Wolff, “Johannes Papritz,” *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 20 (2001): 56–7, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd116157585.html#ndbcontent>.

⁵⁷ Davy, “Good Archivists,” 16.

⁵⁸ Millar, *Archives*, 96.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

importance than opening a files, such as that of a politician.⁶⁰ They are obliged to balance the two sides while trying not to “cover too many sins with calls to protect privacy”.⁶¹ The question at the heart of each archivist decision should be: “What serves the records best?”.⁶² Personal values should be kept apart from the values of the institution in which they are active. The overall goal should always be to estimate the importance of each record and make informed decisions. Archivists should constantly bear in mind that they, in Mark Greene’s words, “hold too much power not to be humble”.⁶³ They have the opportunity to step up against the cultural chauvinism of future generations when they put the security and integrity of their records at the core of their work and thus provide evidence of their time for future records, while at the same time serving the needs of the present.⁶⁴

Conclusion: The Value of the Archive

So, what is the value of the archive? Archives are providers of income to their staff, hold evidence, right past wrongs, present lost narratives, and are a window to the past for almost anyone who wants to take a closer look at it. In this position “principles and theories provide a valuable map, helping us find our way to some destination. But that is all they are: the map, not the destination.”⁶⁵ In fact, the value of the archive depends on the adopted perspective. For an auctioneer, archives might be seen as a source of countless treasures. For archivists, on the other hand, the monetary value of the archive is secondary. They must first of all value and assess the meaning of their records for an audience they may never meet. After all, they possess considerable power, since “archives in their many guises remain our primary tool for documenting what happened.”⁶⁶

The value of records for historians lies in the story they tell about the past. They are the material that allows us to explore times gone. For human rights activists, an archive can provide material to hold a government accountable. For society, the archive and its records can legitimize its national identity and, at the same time, keep the door open for the creation of new narratives if it is kept with due diligence. Finally, for private individuals with no political agenda, the archive is a site where they may discover a long-lost friend or relative, or the answers to questions that have haunted them their whole life. Consequently, the archive has not one and the same value, but several. The closest we can come to answering our concluding question is possibly how archivists define the archive for themselves. As its keepers, they must always find a balance between their own personal ideals and their professional decisions, and evaluate the importance of a record for current and especially future generations.

⁶⁰ Cf. Millar, *Archives*, 45, 50, 97; cf. Greene, “Power,” 32–35.

⁶¹ Greene, “Power,” 38.

⁶² Millar, *Archives*, 96.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶⁶ German, “Search for Truthiness,” 188.