

Separating the wheat from the chaff with the winnowing fork

The eeny meeny miny mo appraisal approach of digital records in South Africa

Mpho Ngoepe and Marcia Nkwe

*Department of Information Science, University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa*

Abstract

Purpose – Appraisal of records to separate the wheat (records of enduring value) from the chaff (ephemeral records) is one of the most important functions of the archives. In terms of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) Act (No. 43 of 1996) (the Act), “no public records may be transferred to an archives repository, destroyed, erased or otherwise disposed of without the written authorisation of the national archivist”. In implementing this section of the Act, the NARSSA issues a disposal authority, which emanates from the appraisal process explained in the policy guidelines of 2002. The purpose of the study is to analyse the appraisal policy guidelines on the approach of NARSSA in relation to preservation of digital records.

Design/methodology/approach – This study has used qualitative data obtained through content analysis and literature to review the appraisal policy guidelines and approach of NARSSA in relation to preservation of digital records. The 2002 approved appraisal policy, as well as the directives issued by NARSSA in terms of Section 13(4) of the Act, is examined to determine the criteria, the process and the methodology adopted in the appraisal of records. Content analysis data are augmented through interviews conducted in person with the head of the records management unit at NARSSA and the archivist responsible for appraisal of government records.

Findings – The study has established that, in terms of the approach, records are appraised two years after the implementation of records classification systems in governmental bodies and those of archival value are then transferred to an archives repository after a period of 20 years. Twenty years is a long period as records might be lost, especially in digital environments. Furthermore, the appraisal policy guidelines limit the powers of records managers in governmental bodies in deciding on records of enduring value, as this responsibility is assigned to archivists at NARSSA. It is clear that the policy was written with paper records in mind.

Research limitations/implications – This study may go a long way in influencing policy review to embrace appraisal of digital records in South Africa. This in turn will help in determining the feasibility of preservation technology for digital records.

Originality/value – This study is useful to ensure participation of the public in the appraisal process. This study has triangulated content analysis data with interviews to examine appraisal criteria, process and methodology, followed by NARSSA.

Keywords South Africa, Archives, Appraisal, Appraisal policy, Digital records, Disposal authority
Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

The title and sub-title of this paper were inspired by the scriptures from the gospel according to Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17, as well as a children’s counting rhyme. The preaching by John, the Baptist, in the scriptures can be used as an analogy to explain the process of disposal of records that result from appraisal. In the scriptures, we are told about

Jesus (appraiser) with his winnowing fork in his hand (appraisal) clearing his threshing floor to gather the wheat (records of enduring value) into the barn (archives repository) and burning up the chaff (ephemeral records) with unquenchable fire (method of disposal). In our view, the sub-title based on a children's counting rhyme depicts the appraisal approach that is followed by archives repositories in South Africa. The rhyme "eeny meeny miny mo" is used by children to select a player in games such as tag or hide and seek. In this selection method, the child who is pointed to by the chanter on the last syllable is either "chosen" or "counted out" In this regard, the selection is based purely on the position of the child when the counting starts. In this paper, we examine the appraisal policy guidelines of National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) in relation to preservation of digital records. We are of the opinion that the appraisal approach followed is similar to the selection approach in the children's counting rhyme. Archival appraisal is the assessment of a group of records to determine what is of value for permanent preservation (wheat) and what can be destroyed (chaff). This is the process that determines what is worth remembering or forgetting (Harris, 2007a, p. 104). The term embraces the theory, rationales, policies and procedures for identifying, acquiring and selecting records in all media deemed to have lasting value and authorising destruction of those which are ephemeral (Craig, 2016, p. 17). In other words, appraisal has traditionally been guided by either what should or should not be preserved. Key themes in appraisal include impartiality, evidence and continuing memory (Craig, 2016, p. 17).

According to Kenosi (2000, p. 20), the appraisal process is not without controversy. The problem lies with the power of archivists to sanction the preservation or obliteration of a record. Kenosi (2000, p. 20) analogised the appraisal of records with the administration of euthanasia in medicine. The relevant question he asked was:

[...] should the archivist whose chief mandate is records custodianship end up destroying the same records he has been sanctioned to keep or, similarly, should doctors whose principal responsibility is to preserve human life, assist in its termination?

These are tough questions to answer but in archival discourse, a lack of space will certainly compel archivists to decide the fate of certain records. Indeed, given the enormous volumes of records, especially in the digital era, it is not feasible to preserve every public record. There are still more pressing questions than answers. For example, who should make the appraisal decision, the creator, archivist, users or a combination of all? Furthermore, as Craig (2016, p. 17) would question, what should the focus of appraisal be; on the record or the function it arose from? In this study, we look at the appraisal guideline of NARSSA to examine the methodology and approach adopted, and determine the responsibility of appraisal in South Africa.

We believe that NARSSA also faces the above dilemmas in relation to appraisal of records. According to Harris (2007b, p. 305), it is estimated that NARSSA preserves about 5 per cent of the total volume of records in governmental bodies. Then the question is "What informed only 5 per cent of the total volume of records?" Even though the NARSSA Act requires governmental bodies to transfer records of enduring value to archival custody, Archival Platform (2015) reported that this has not happened with the records of democratic South Africa. It has been over 20 years since South Africa was liberated from the shackles of apartheid and the NARSSA Act requires governmental bodies to transfer records of enduring value to archives repository for permanent preservation. It is hoped that this study will stimulate policy review in relation to the appraisal of digital records. First, a brief background of appraisal approach at NARSSA is provided.

2. Background to appraisal of records at National Archives and Records Service of South Africa

Historically, since the period of the Dutch East Indian Company (1652-1795), the first British Occupation (1795-1803), the Batavian Republic (1803-1806), the second British rule (1806-1909) to the Union of South Africa (1910), the records of the state were managed by the four colonies themselves, which were the Cape Colony, Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal. The appraisal of records and issuing of disposal authorities were entrusted to the Archives Commission, which was appointed in 1876 and operated until the 1950s (Archival Platform, 2015). Ngoepe (2008, p. 64) reported that at the end of the Second World War, there was enormous growth in the generation of records due to post-war expansion of government institutions in South Africa. This resulted in a greater need for the destruction of ephemeral records (Ngoepe, 2008, p. 64). As a result, a special section known as the Liaison Section with a staff complement of three was created to perform appraisal of government records (Archival Platform, 2015). The responsibility for this section was transferred to the State Archives Services in the 1950s, and steadily developed capacity in this crucial area of archival endeavour. This section acquired the necessary experience in advising government offices in records management and its name was changed to the Records Management Section, a name that has been retained until today (2017). Although, initially, attention was exclusively directed at appraisal, the officials also had to cope with investigating file plans. Because the maintenance of an effective file plan and the granting of standing disposal authority go hand in hand, the section was increasingly approached for guidance and support when new file plans were compiled in government offices (Ngoepe, 2008, p. 65).

From the onset of professionalising archives, the State Archives Services was relying heavily on the 1898 Dutch manual by Muller, Feith and Fruin to equip the employees for the job (Vos, 1992, p. 65). With regard to the appraisal approach specifically in South Africa, it was shaped, moulded and influenced by the writings of Schellenberg until it was reviewed in the 1990s (Harris, 1996, p. 5). By the late 1980s, it had become obvious that the State Archives Services' appraisal programme required a major overhaul. However, it took the post-1990 winds of change, the emergence of a transformation discourse in archives and new leadership to effect the changes. From 1992, with apartheid barriers beginning to crumble and international isolation ending, the State Archives Services' leadership began to engage colleagues within and outside the country in discussions around appraisal. By 1994, there was agreement that a new approach was required which would:

- draw on cutting-edge practice in the international arena;
- mesh with new technological realities; and
- be appropriate to new societal realities in South Africa.

An investigation was launched that thoroughly reviewed existing policy engaged broader transformation processes in South Africa, studied appraisal programmes in other countries and secured training for State Archives Services staff in the macro-appraisal programme of the Library and Archives Canada (Cook, 2006, p. 101; Harris, 1996, p. 6). Macro-appraisal is a:

Canadian way of archival appraisal that assesses the societal value of both the functional-structural context and work-place culture in which the records are created and used by their creators and the interrelationship of the public (Cook, 2006, p. 101).

This was influenced by the thinking of Terry Cook, a Canadian archival diva. This approach has been adopted in South Africa for appraisal of records. This process developed a symbiotic relationship with the parallel consultative process, which had

been put in place to draft new national archival legislation for South Africa. At the end of 1996, the National Archives of South Africa Act became law and the State Archives Services was replaced by the National Archives of South Africa, which launched a transformed appraisal programme ([Republic of South Africa, 1996](#)). The policy guidelines for this programme are contained in the document the Appraisal Policy Guidelines of the [National Archives and Records Service of South Africa \(NARSSA\) \(2002\)](#). The introduction of the new appraisal system, i.e. macro-appraisal, was aimed at redressing the shortcomings in the Schellenbergian approach ([Mtshali, 2001](#)). However, the implementation of macro-appraisal in South Africa has been problematic because of the shortage of staff at the NARSSA. Furthermore, in South Africa, the process of appraisal excludes input from records creators and members of the public. This resulted in the loss of material relating to the history of black South Africans ([Archival Platform, 2015](#), p. 29). The situation is the same in other African countries, as [Adu \(2016, p. 27\)](#) reported that in Ghana, appraisal of records has not been given serious attention even though archival legislation requires timely disposal of records. The delay according to [Adu \(2016, p. 69\)](#) is caused by bureaucratic agreement that has to be reached between the head of public body and archives repository before the process of disposal can begin. Furthermore, [Moatlhodi and Ramokate \(2010, p. 69\)](#) indicated that in Botswana, the records centres have been receiving more records, which were not appraised in time because of staff shortage resulting in appraisal backlog.

3. The problem

The concern with the NARSSA appraisal policy was raised by [Harris \(2007c, p. 87\)](#), which stated that the approach was not planned or based on a strategy, archives repositories were overwhelmed by holdings due to space problems and the policy was concentrating on the Western values. Furthermore, according to the [International Records Management Trust \(1999\)](#), traditionally, paper records were appraised long after they had been created, used and stored. Indeed, it was common to wait 20-50 years or longer after records were created before deciding whether or not to retain them permanently ([International Records Management Trust, 1999](#)). Fortunately, paper-based records are “neglect tolerant” and, within reason, can withstand the environmental dangers associated with storage ([Katu, 1999, p. 70](#)). On the other hand, digital records are unlikely to survive neglect and it is not possible to wait decades before deciding what to keep and what to destroy. The technology used to create the records may become obsolete in one or two years, if not sooner, and so it is imperative that decisions be made about which digital records should be kept at the time they are created, if not before ([International Records Management Trust, 1999](#)). Furthermore, appraisal policies in Africa tend to concentrate on Western values and neglecting the indigenous way of archiving ([Hatang, 2002, p. 82](#)). Such policies cement the marginalisation of oral history, which ends up not being part of archives. The purpose of this study is to examine the appraisal policy of NARSSA in relation to preservation of digital records. The specific objectives are to:

- examine the appraisal criteria followed by NARSSA in identifying records of enduring value;
- determine the appraisal process and methodology followed by NARSSA; and
- determine the responsibilities in appraising public digital records in South Africa.

4. Methodology

This qualitative study used content analysis and literature to review the appraisal policy guidelines and approach of NARSSA in relation to preservation of digital records. The 2002 approved appraisal policy, as well as the directives issued by NARSSA in terms of Section 13(4) of the Act, was examined to determine the criteria, the process and the methodology adopted in the appraisal of records. The two directives (D4 – Application for disposal authority 2003 and D6 – General disposal authority 2003) were examined. Interviews were conducted in person with the head of the records management unit at NARSSA and the archivist responsible for appraisal of government records to augment document analysis data. It is worth noting that at the time of writing this article, only five staff members at NARSSA were responsible for the entire records management mandate, which includes determination of classification systems in governmental bodies, records audits in governmental bodies through inspections, appraisal of records and training of records management officials in more than 4,000 governmental bodies. Of those five officials, two were interns, one was a recalled retired archivist, the third one was the head of the section and the fifth one was an archivist who has resigned and was serving notice. Data from document analysis and interviews were organised thematically according to the objectives of the study.

5. Findings and discussions

Findings are presented according to the objectives of the study.

5.1 Appraisal process at National Archives and Records Service of South Africa

The NARSSA Act charges the national archivist with the proper management and care of public records in the custody of governmental bodies. In terms of the Act, “no public records may be transferred to an archives repository, destroyed, erased or otherwise disposed of without the written authorisation of the national archivist.” In implementing this section of the Act, NARSSA issued a disposal authority which emanated from the appraisal process explained in the policy guidelines of 2002. According to [NARSSA \(2007\)](#), a disposal authority is a “written authority issued by the national archivist that enables government institutions to dispose of records by either destruction, transfer to national archives or by alienation from the government”. Furthermore, the Act firmly brings all digital records created by governmental bodies under the authority of the national archivist. This allows NARSSA to insist that mechanisms and procedures be put in place to ensure that archival records are identified while still functional and then preserved appropriately. However, although this is reflected in the policy, in reality, this is the opposite as [Ngoepe \(2017\)](#) reported that, in practice, many governmental entities destroy digital records when records are no longer needed for their current needs. This is so because NARRSA and the provincial archives in South Africa do not have the necessary infrastructure to ingest digital records of enduring value into archival custody ([Ngoepe, 2017](#)). Although NARSSA propagates for the earliest possible transfer into archival custody of digital records with enduring value, this is not happening as alluded to above. [Katu and Ngoepe \(2015, p. 63\)](#) reported that even before the emergence of new technologies such as cloud computing and social media, the transfer of digital records from public institutions into archival custody has not happened in any systematic manner. This is due to a number of factors, such as lack of manpower, skills and infrastructure at NARSSA.

In terms of the guideline, the object of the NARSSA appraisal methodology is to identify for acquisition the richest 5 per cent (archival) of public records. However, the results of individual appraisals may vary considerably; for example, in some cases, 90

per cent of a cabinet minister's records might be preserved, but in every appraisal, the archivist uses the 5 per cent goal as a signpost. Significant deviations are required to be justified. However, conversations with the head of the records management unit indicate that the focus is being shifted from 5 to 45 per cent. This might lead to the policy to be amended and submitted to the National Archives Advisory Council for approval. This raises the issue of space constraints. At the moment, the NARSSA building is full to capacity and the institution has not been accepting records of archival value that are due for transfer. Accepting 45 per cent of the records from governmental bodies would exacerbate the problem. The extension of the NARSSA building had not been completed by 2017.

With regard to the target of 5per cent, NARSSA fulfils this by issuing the general disposal authorities and by dealing with the disposal authority applications submitted by government offices. General disposal authorities are those issued on "common" or "standard" public records, for example, a category or categories of record used by more than one government office, such as financial records, contract files, tender records and staff personal files (NARSSA, 2007). On the other hand, disposal authority applications are received from a single government office and when the authorities are issued, they apply strictly to the offices that applied for them. Such authorities fall into two categories: standing authorities that apply to approved records systems (filing systems, records control schedules, microfilm projects and electronic system) in current use and limited authorities that apply to records systems or categories of records which are terminated. Such an authority covers a defined accumulation of actual records and cannot be used again after these records have been disposed of in accordance with the authority.

With regard to applications of disposal authority, the process followed is that a governmental body will first develop and implement a file plan and two years after the implementation, the same file plan would be submitted to NARSSA requesting a disposal authority, and NARSSA would appraise the file plan and issue a disposal authority. The concern with this approach is that two years is too long for digital records. The timing of appraisal of digital records is important. Unlike in the paper environment, timely appraisal and disposal arrangements are essential in the digital environment if the loss of permanently valuable records is to be avoided. Paper records no longer of functional use are moved to strong rooms, empty offices, basements and attics. Waiting for 20 years to transfer digital records into archival custody can be futile owing to the unstable nature of these records. By the time a period of 20 years has lapsed, records might be unreadable or lost forever owing to technological obsolescence (Ngoepe, 2017). There is a danger that digital records no longer of functional use can be deleted or stored in formats that render them unintelligible when new technologies are introduced. Clearly proactive identification and archival analysis of electronic applications in governmental bodies are essential. However, NARSSA's reactive approach to appraisal and the inadequacy of its contextual analyses condemned the institution to touching only the tip of the digital record iceberg that might never even reach NARSSA. The challenge is compounded by the appraisal backlog at NARSSA.

A study by Ngoepe and Van der Walt (2010) revealed that one governmental body applied for a disposal authority in 2005 from NARSSA but had not been issued by 2010. In the study, NARSSA cited a shortage of staff as the reason for the delay in issuing disposal authorities. NARSSA indicated that only one official was responsible for issuing disposal authority (Ngoepe and Van der Walt, 2010). One person could not cope with assisting over 4,000 governmental bodies; hence the delay in issuing disposal authority. In another study, Ngoepe (2017) reported that one governmental body requested a disposal authority from NARSSA in 2010, but received acknowledgement only in 2014. Another example by

Ngoepe and Jiyane (2015) indicated that during the 2007-2008 financial year, only 19 disposal authorities were dealt with and, out of a total of 149 applications to be examined, 126 appraisals were still outstanding. This poses risks, as no records should be disposed of without proper authorisation. The risks include that records with archival value may not be in the archives and therefore may not be accessible to the public or governmental bodies might destroy records without written authority by the national archivist. Moatlhodi and Ramokate (2010) reported that the Botswana National Archives has also experienced an appraisal backlog for a long time until 2000 when the repository dedicated two archivists for a year to address the problem. This resulted in a total of 490 boxes of records being appraised. This was followed by an appraisal project to clear the backlog in 2003 in which ten archivists were assigned to the project. The project resulted in 3,379 boxes being appraised (Moatlhodi and Ramokate, 2010).

5.2 Responsibilities of appraisal

The NARSSA Appraisal Policy (NARSSA, 2002) indicates that traditionally in South Africa, “appraisal and disposal activities were divided, with the records manager determining the time frame for semi-active retention and the archivist determining the final disposal.” However, in the digital environment, it is practical for the records manager, archivist, information technology specialist and records creator to work as a team to bring a range of expertise to the process of deciding which records need to be kept and which can be destroyed. In this regard, the records creator brings knowledge of the day-to-day use of the records and their importance to the organisation’s business (International Records Management Trust, 1999). In this regard, the information technology specialist can advise on changes to electronic systems and best practices in IT operations. The records manager supports the ongoing evidential and informational needs of the organisation and can balance the user’s needs for records against the resources available to make solid judgements about records retention. Archivists have the long-term management of the records in mind and are responsible for ensuring authentic and reliable records remain accessible over the long term. Lawyers, auditors, compliance specialists and other subject experts can also contribute important insights during the process of appraisal. These stakeholders – along with any other appropriate representatives of the organisation – should be involved in any appraisal exercise (International Records Management Trust, 1999). They can play a role in certifying the process, advising on content and legal issues.

The responsibility of appraisal of digital records in South Africa is left to the archivists at NARSSA. However, a school of thought associated with the English archivist, Hilary Jenkinson, emphasises that the creator is best suited to determine the value of the records. In this regard, Bailey (2008, p. 95) is of the view that in the digital environment, the records creators should be involved in the appraisal process. Although the appraisal process was traditionally the sole responsibility of the records manager, it now also requires the contribution of employees, if only as a method to distribute the workload of managing the increasing volume of digital information. In present-day digital work environments, creators and users “are not passive bystanders” in the appraisal process, as they represent the “first wave” of decision on the value of information (Vellino and Alberts, 2016, p. 295).

Another school of thought associated with Theodore Schellenberg advocates for the involvement of archivists. Schellenberg argued that the appraisal of public records is the task of archivists, and that archival value is a composite of what he called informational and evidential values (Craig, 2016, p. 16). Informational values are

determined by records' usefulness to researchers in all kinds of disciplines – a record containing information of potential value to a researcher has informational value. Evidential values, on the other hand, are identified without reference to potential research use. Records with these values are preserved because they provide an accurate and appropriate documentary reflection – evidence – of the structure, functions and functioning of the body that created them. Schellenbergian appraisal then seeks to identify for permanent preservation records high in either informational or evidential values (Tough and Tough, 2012, p. 4). His approach possesses fundamental flaws. Harris (2000, pp. 39-40) was of the view that appraisal should be left to the creators of records. To summarise, in theory, NARSSA consults with the governmental body concerned to determine value of a record. However, this is not always practised, as NARSSA is short staffed. With regard to digital records, Ngoepe (2017) indicated that the following three options are available for governmental bodies:

- (1) the transfer of archival digital records to an appropriate archives repository for permanent preservation as soon as possible after creation, or at such time as specified by the National Archivist;
- (2) the transfer of digital records with archival value to an appropriate archives repository for permanent preservation in a proven archival medium such as paper or microform; and
- (3) the office of origin being required to preserve the archival digital records and maintain their functionality permanently.

6. Criteria for appraisal of records

NARSSA's appraisal policy is firmly rooted in the core archival principle of provenance, that is, records have meaning within the contextual circumstances of their creation and contemporary use. Records are the products of processes involving complex interactions between creators of records (structures, agencies and people), socio-historical trends and patterns (functions, activities and programmes) and clients/customers/citizens. All these elements constitute the dynamic contextual milieu in which records are created. According to the archivist at NARSSA, when doing appraisals, the archivists look at the anticipated usefulness and long-term accountability that the record can ensure. To determine this, based on the appraisal policy guideline (NARSSA, 2002) and the information provided by the head of records management unit at NARSSA, the appraisal decision operates at four levels:

- (1) The broader societal and governmental processes, which shape the operations of the government office being appraised. Here the archivist attempts to determine the importance of the office in its broadest context.
- (2) The governmental body's functions and structures. The analysis at this level attempts to assess the relative importance of internal branches and divisions. Branches/divisions with archival potential are targeted.
- (3) Targeted branches/divisions are analysed in terms of their functions and structures. At this level, the archivist attempts to identify the records systems with archival potential.
- (4) Records systems: The goal here is to identify systems with the richest archival potential.

Having illuminated the entire context of the records to be appraised, the archivist turns to the records themselves. The appraisal hypothesis formulated during the preliminary analysis is tested (and modified if necessary) and the records are subjected to the tests of age, uniqueness, authenticity, completeness, extent, fragility, manipulability and all the other relevant tests elaborated on elsewhere in the policy guidelines. Archival value, then, in the first instance is located not in records but in the processes that underlie their creation. First, the archivist must identify the key elements of the contextual milieu (appraisal of processes) and then seek to document them (appraisal of records). In the appraisal of processes, the archivist not only targets the records with archival potential but also identifies processes or aspects of processes, which are poorly documented by the records and which need to be supplemented by collecting activities (private papers, publications, oral history, etc.).

NARSSA's shaping of appraisal into a tool for academic researchers, particularly historians, resulted in the experience of "ordinary people" and especially the experience of the under classes, being poorly reflected in the records chosen for preservation. Attempting to anticipate research trends is an exercise in futility. According to [Harris \(2007a, p. 106\)](#), archivists can never be properly equipped to meet the requirements of every discipline. If the requirements of every research discipline are taken into account, the majority of records have potential research value. Clearly, an approach built on this definition of archival value is unworkable. Furthermore, if the target is narrowed to encompass only "important" research, how does one begin to define such a concept? What the State Archives Service did was to identify "important" research with academic, particularly historical and research value.

The appraisal policy concentrated on Western values leading to oral history, not constituting part of archives. In this regard, the policy cements the marginalisation of indigenous narratives. Valuable materials relating to the social history of black South Africans, for example, have been lost because of ideologically informed decisions. For example, court cases involving black people, even the most notable churches such as the Zion Christian Church, Nazareth Baptist Church, St John's Apostolic Church and International Pentecostal Church to mention just a few are conspicuous in their absence in the archives repositories in South Africa ([Ngoepe and Ngulube, 2014, p. 37](#)). Similarly, extensive records suitable for white genealogists exist but few similar records exist for blacks. As [Harris \(2007c, p. 100\)](#) attested, even when presented with a powerful opportunity to transform, refigure and re-imagine archives, the practice is still shaped by the Western foundation. Perhaps, the assertion of [Ketelaar \(1992, p. 5\)](#) that "the cruel paradox in many revolution is that what is left post-revolution resembles the past" is true. This results in missed opportunity to turn archives into archives of the people, by the people, for the people, in the digital era.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

While the process of appraisal is clearly defined at NARSSA, the study established that the programme for appraisal in South Africa is neither transparent nor accountable to the public, as citizens are not involved whatsoever. Furthermore, in terms of this approach, records are appraised two years after the implementation of records classification systems in governmental bodies and those of archival value are then transferred to an archives repository after a period of 20 years. Twenty years is a long time, as records of enduring value might be lost, especially in digital environments. Public archives continue to authorise the destruction of the vast majority of records through appraisal processes without independent monitoring in the public interest

([Archival Platform, 2015](#)). The programme does not ensure accountability and transparency of the appraisal process, resulting in an opaque process. The public is not involved and might not know how decisions are made. Furthermore, the appraisal policy guidelines limit the powers of records managers in governmental bodies in deciding records of enduring values, as this responsibility is assigned to the archivists at NARSSA. It is clear that the policy was written with paper records in mind, whereas the current record-keeping process is primarily digital. The appraisal backlog at NARSSA has also compounded the situation as government entities resort to the “keeping or deleting everything syndrome” with no control of digital records as users delete records at their own discretion or when IT section instructs them to do so.

As [Harris \(2007a, 2007b, 2007c, p. 104\)](#) attested, society should find ways of holding archivists accountable for appraisal decisions. It is recommended that digital records to be preserved should be identified at the moment of their creation by the records managers with the assistance of archivists and the involvement of the public through tabling of disposal authorities at parliament and subsequently publishing in national media to invite public comments. When the appraisal decisions are made, these can be published in newspapers so that members of the public can make comments. This in turn will help in determining the feasibility of preservation technology for digital records. Involvement of the public and tabling of disposal authorities in parliament will ensure that the process is transparent. It may also help in raising the profile of archives repositories, as [Archival Platform \(2015\)](#) reported that archives are not known and used by few members of the public. Members of the public who have interest in archives can provide inputs on the archivalisation of records that reflects their needs. As the situation is transformed, it may lead to more people using the archives and even attracting new set of users. As [Ketelaar \(1992, p. 5\)](#) reckoned, archives repositories would then “become archives of the people for the people by the people”. Indeed, citizens will only use archives when they are considered relevant to them. Furthermore, citizen involvement might bring public goodwill, support and demand on behalf of NARSSA. Parliament on the other hand will continue to invest on the activities of NARSSA.

The 2002 appraisal policy guideline should also be updated to accommodate digital records. Furthermore, archival involvement in digital preservation cannot be delayed until systems are terminated. Moreover:

[. . .] archival involvement at an early stage can ensure that the contextual information required to give validity to the records is included, especially in correspondence systems (e.g. addressee, sender, reference number, subject, date) ([Archival Platform, 2015](#)).

Apartheid grossly distorted the acquisition of records and access to records.

Ideally, appraisal and disposal activities should be built into the normal practice of records management, becoming as routine a procedure as possible ([International Records Management Trust, 1999](#)). [Duranti \(2012\)](#) advised that “archivists should position themselves at the beginning of the record life-cycle, taking the role of ‘designated’ trusted custodian.” In this regard, archivists can then assess the authenticity of the records and monitor it throughout their existence, and work with all stakeholders and competent professionals: creator, designated preserver, IT and law specialists and:

[. . .] identify the records in systems containing different kinds of information, and, if records do not exist, but should exist, collaborates with the creator in addressing the issue and identify the records to be preserved at the moment of their creation ([Duranti, 2012](#)).

During appraisal, the focus should be on the creator and its functions: appraising the same records or digital objects from different viewpoints at the same time and many times before

the disposal action. This will enable archivists to select the most appropriate form of the record in accordance with the creator's and archives' priorities, as well as to monitor the transformation of the creator's records through time and determine the feasibility of preservation on the basis of the archives technological capacity. Even though the process of appraisal can be equated to separating the wheat from the chaff, we believe that the approach taken by the NARSSA is tantamount to the "eeny meeny miny mo" rhyme. The overview given in this study has obvious limitations, as records creators and government departments were excluded. A further study that covers the entire public sector, including provincial archives and governmental bodies, is recommended.

References

- Adu, K.K. (2016), "Framework for digital preservation of electronic government in Ghana", PhD thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, available at: <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/20118> (accessed 26 October 2017).
- Archival Platform (2015), "State of archives: an analysis of South Africa's national archival system", available at: www.archivalplatform.org/news/entry/executive_summary/ (accessed 4 April 2017).
- Bailey, S. (2008), *Managing the Crowd: Rethinking Records Management for the Web 2.0 World*, Facet Publishing, London.
- Cook, T. (2006), "Macroappraisal in theory and practice: origin, characteristics, and implementation in Canada, 1950-2000", *Archival Science*, Vol. 5 Nos 2/4, pp. 101-161.
- Craig, B. (2016), "Appraisal", in Duranti, L. and Franks, P. (Eds), *Encyclopedia of Archival Science*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, pp. 14-18.
- Duranti, L. (2012), "Continuity and transformation in the role of archivist", paper read at 1st Unisa Archives Lecture, Pretoria (South Africa), 1 November 2012, available at: www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=22494 (accessed 20 April 2017).
- Harris, S. (2000), *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa*, National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Harris, V. (1996), "Appraising public records in the 1990s – a South African perspective", *ESARBICA Journal*, Vol. 16, pp. 5-10.
- Harris, V. (2007a), "Postmodernism and archival appraisal: seven theses", in Harris, V. (Ed.), *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, The Society of American Archivists, Chicago, IL, pp. 101-106.
- Harris, V. (2007b), "They should have destroyed more: the destruction of public records by the South African State in the final years of apartheid, 1990-1994", in Harris, V. (Ed.), *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, The Society of American Archivists, Chicago, IL, pp. 305-336.
- Harris, S. (2007c), "Exploratory thought on current state archives service appraisal policy and the conceptual foundations of macro-appraisal", in Harris, V. (Ed.), *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, The Society of American Archivists, Chicago, IL, pp. 87-100.
- Hatang, S. (2002), "Jonas swallowed by the whale: the challenges faced by the archives in archiving orality, with a special focus on national oral history pilot project in South Africa", *ESARBICA Journal*, Vol. 21, pp. 82-86.
- International Records Management Trust (1999), *Principles of Records and Archives Management*, International Records Management Trust, London.
- Katuu, S. (1999), "Appraisal of electronic records: the path for African archivists", *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 69-74.
- Katuu, S. and Ngoepe, M. (2015), "Managing records created in networked environments within South Africa's legislative framework", in Barbara, E.P. (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 3rd International*

-
- Conference on Cloud Security and Management ICCSM-2015*, University of Washington, Tacoma, pp. 59-70.
- Kenosi, L. (2000), "The paradox of appraisal and archival theory: an uneasy marriage relationship. Is there a case for divorce?", *SA Archives Journal*, Vol. 41, pp. 20-28.
- Ketelaar, E. (1992), "Archives of the people, by the people, for the people", *SA Archives Journal*, Vol. 34, pp. 5-16.
- Moatlhodi, T. and Ramokate, K. (2010), "Battling the appraisal backlog: a challenging professional obligation for Botswana National archives and records services", *ESARBICA Journal: Journal of the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 67-86.
- Mtshali, S.F. (2001), "A strategic approach to the management of the National Archives of South Africa", Masters of Arts Dissertation, University of Durban-Westville, Durban.
- National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) (2002), *Appraisal Policy Guidelines*, NARSSA, Pretoria.
- National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) (2007), *Records Management Policy Manual*, NARSSA, Pretoria.
- Ngoepe, M. (2017), "Archival orthodoxy of post-custodial realities for digital records in South Africa", *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 45 No. 1, pp. 31-44.
- Ngoepe, M. and Jiyane, V. (2015), "Growing your own timber:" mentoring and succession planning in national and provincial archives repositories in South Africa – implications on access and preservation of archives", *Innovation*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 65-84.
- Ngoepe, M. and Ngulube, P. (2014), "Eternal memory or holy amnesia? Preservation of, and access to records and archives of African independent churches in South Africa", *ESARBICA Journal*, Vol. 33, pp. 36-45.
- Ngoepe, M. and Van der Walt, T. (2010), "A framework for a records management programme: lessons from the department of cooperative governance and traditional affairs in South Africa", *Mousaion*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 83-107.
- Ngoepe, M.S. (2008), "An exploration of records management trends in the South African public sector: a case study of the department of provincial and local government", MINF Dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, available at: http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2705/dissertation_ngoepe_%20m.pdf?sequence_1 (accessed 15 May 2017).
- Republic of South Africa (1996), *The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act, No 43 of 1996*, Government Printers, Pretoria.
- Tough, A. and Tough, Y. (2012), "Accountability and records appraisal", *ESARBICA Journal*, Vol. 31, pp. 3-23.
- Vellino, A. and Alberts, I. (2016), "Assisting the appraisal of e-mail records with automatic classification", *Records Management Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 293-313.
- Vos, H. (1992), "National diploma: archival science – past, present and future", *SA Archives Journal*, Vol. 34, pp. 65-69.

Further reading

- Carvalho, C. (2001), "Appraisal based on organic functional analysis: a case study in an electronic records environment", *Records Management Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 175-205.

About the authors

Mpho Ngoepe is a Professor in the Department of Information Science at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Prior to his current position at Unisa, Prof Ngoepe has worked for the United Nations Children's Fund, Auditor-General South Africa and the National Archives of South Africa. Prof Ngoepe is serving in the national committee of the South African Society of Archivists (2009-2019)

and the board of Eastern and Southern Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (2009-2019) as the editor of the journals. He also serves on the advisory council of the National Archives of South Africa in his capacity as the Chairperson of Gauteng Provincial Archives. He is the Director of the African team for the multi-national, interdisciplinary research project exploring issues concerning digital records called the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES Trust) (2013-2018). Mpho Ngoepe is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ngoepms@unisa.ac.za

Marcia Nkwe is a Master's Student in Archives and Records Management at the University of South Africa. She holds an undergraduate qualification in public administration from the University of Pretoria. Her research interests are in appraisal, outreach and advocacy, digital records management and preservation.