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# **The role of the archivist in appraisal**

(short summary)

**The Archives and Records Challenges in the Digital Information Society (ARCHIDIS)  
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My essay on the role of the archivist in appraisal is written in Norwegian as part of the ARCHIDIS (Archives and Records Challenges in the Digital Information Society) intensive program 2012. In the essay I discuss the role of the archivist in appraisal in light of the current national situation and what I have found to be relevant theoretical discourse.

The national regulations for appraisal in public sector bodies are currently being revised by the archives authorities in Norway<sup>1</sup>. The new regulations suggest that each public sector body should create their own rules for appraisal of the information gathered in the areas of the sector body's expertise. What should be preserved and what should be discarded can be difficult to determine because of the inherent subjectivity of the concept of value. It is largely up to the archivist to determine what may have value in the future and what will never become valuable, when material is selected for preservation or disposal. This places great demands on the archivist's ethical awareness and understanding of his or her professional role.

Jenkinson viewed the archivist as a custodian of the archive whilst Schellenberg argued that the rapidly growing amounts of information create a need for appraisal as a means to make the material continuously accessible to those who need it. Schellenberg viewed the archivist as an interventionist, someone whose duty it is to actively take part in the creation of the historical heritage. While Hans Booms proposed that the power of the role of the archivist should lead society to see the need to control the archivist's actions in order to prevent unlawful or biased destruction, Howard Zinn suggested in 1970 that all archivists should rally to collect "a whole new world of documentary material about the lives, desires and needs of ordinary people"<sup>2</sup>. His reason for this suggestion was that he recognized that the archives in the USA were biased and incomplete, and that society's marginalizations were being reinforced in the archives. Zinn's concept of the activist archivist is still relevant, and was recently used in a New York Times article on the archivists trying to preserve the documentation from the Occupy Wall Street-movement in the USA<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives of Norway (2012) <http://www.arkivverket.no/arkivverket/Aktuelt/Nyhetsarkiv/Hoering-om-revisjon-av-regelverk>

<sup>2</sup> Johnston, I. (2001) in "Whose History is it Anyway?"

<sup>3</sup> I discuss this, and Johnston's article on my blog; <http://trinenesland.com/2012/05/28/archidis-whose-history-is-it-anyway-article-review/>

The archivist's main task is to preserve information, not destroy it<sup>4</sup>. However, there is a need in society to control the growing amounts of information in ways that will make it useful and accessible both today and in the future. I believe that the archivist's own perception and ethical understanding of his or her power, is of critical importance. We need to be able to reflect on the fact that our dispositions have consequences, anticipate these consequences and describe our understanding of the consequences in ways that make our personal affiliations and choices available to the users of the archive for critical review.

I conclude my essay with a reference to Norwegian archivist Gudmund Valderhaug who has stated that the only way to preserve the archive's integrity and authenticity when performing appraisal, is to provide the archive's user with accurate accounts of the material that has been destroyed, including the basis for the destruction<sup>5</sup>. In essence, we need to tell the archive's user what we have done to and with the material, and this will inevitably lead to the archivist becoming more visible, as Kate Theimer explains: "...putting a human face on the person who previously existed only behind the scenes."<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Norwegian archivist Arne Skivenes (2006) in "Arkiv og samfunn – det som har vært og det som kan bli".

<sup>5</sup> Norwegian archivist Gudmund Valderhaug (2011) in his book "Fotnote eller tekst? Arkiv og arkivarer i det 21. hundreåret".

<sup>6</sup> Theimer, K. (2011) in "Interactivity, flexibility and transparency: social media and Archives 2.0".