Convergence or Collision? Archival Appraisal and the Expanded Role of Special Collections in the Research Library

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INTRODUCTION

The deadpan comedian Steven Wright has a joke I have always been fond of. "You can't have everything. Where would you put it?" My role today is to give perspective from special collections and archives within the research library as we consider the future of library collections writ large. Although I work increasingly in a library context, my professional roots are as an archivist and as I have thought more and more about what I might contribute to our discussion that won't be represented elsewhere, I have found myself returning to archival appraisal. I recognize that archival appraisal theory has not been a fashionable topic in the profession for at least the last 15 years and that there may be some misunderstanding and misconception about it, so I'm entering this territory with trepidation. But I will ask you to trust me as I venture into this valley, as I argue that archival appraisal theory can contribute to our thinking about research library collections as a whole in the era of the collective collection. We need to address the main concerns raised and confronted by archival appraisal as the research library pivots more directly toward special collections and archives, a trend I will also discuss at some length.

CONTEXT

Very early in the education of an archivist, one learns something counterintuitive: the theory and practice of archives are not about saving records as much as they are about acknowledging and managing loss. When considering the universe of published materials, vast and growing as it may be, it is not difficult to imagine a network of libraries capturing and preserving almost every work. Now consider for a moment the totality of human experience recorded every moment of every day traditionally in letters, diaries, photographs, home movies, and many other forms and more recently in email; digital documents, photographs, and video; social media, websites, etc. All individuals, families, groups, communities, governments, and institutions create and accumulate these records and the proliferation of new devices has been accompanied by an inconceivable volume of recorded information. How do we make decisions about what should be acquired and preserved over the long run? Which records are most important and why? I am personally grateful to live in an era in which

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[2] http://library.harvard.edu/hazen-symposium

social history, cultural history and other intellectual, socio-political, and professional turns, including recently the dialogue around community archives and "documenting the now," have challenged us to consider how we ensure the documentary record represents the greatest diversity of human experience and empowers the broadest set of individuals and groups. And how do we do all of this while working within the constraints of the resources we can bring to this endeavor?

These questions are difficult because the blunt truth is that not all documentation of human experience can or even should be kept for posterity let alone be made available for research. The South African archivist Verne Harris has described the archival endeavor as "a sliver of a sliver of a sliver," by which he means that only a sliver of human experience becomes part of the documentary record, of which only a sliver can be captured by an archive or library, of which only a sliver will enjoy an unlimited preservation life span along with more than a partial treatment that will afford discovery and access.[3] So the fundamental objective of archives lies in employing judgment to the selection of the relatively small percentage of records that can be preserved into perpetuity. Articulating mission in this way tends to be more prosaic than romantic; when one emphasizes how a potential acquisition of personal papers fits into an articulated strategy and policy, weighing opportunity cost as much as opportunity, it runs the risk of appearing technocratic. The best curators, archivists, and special collections librarians work with inspiration and an even temperament to balance an intense passion for adding materials to collections with an understanding of the costs and responsibilities of stewardship and the lifecycle of information. Responsibly saying "yes" to some collections requires us to say "no" to others, even those that could prove important for scholarship and teaching.

Archival appraisal theory has been debated and developed formally over the course of at least the past century as a way to help with this fundamental problem. A full review of this thinking would extend well beyond the boundaries of this talk, but I offer the following quick overview as the way to situate a discussion of how archival appraisal theory can apply to today's environment.[4] One can think about the history of archival appraisal as boiling down to two schools of thought, with competing first principles. They get at the fundamental question of whether archivists should be passive receivers or active shapers of the documentary record of society. Sir Hilary Jenkinson was probably the first advocate for the idea of the objectivity of the archival record, wherein the archives and archivists should be passive receivers and neutral custodians of the records offered to them by records creators and the organizations they serve. While on a theoretical level, these ideas have fallen out of favor, in practice this tradition is alive and well and can be commonly seen to justify acquisition decisions in many different contexts. A common expression of this "keeper" mentality might be "who are we to say what future researchers will find relevant?" leading us to receive all acquisitions opportunities that come along and to preserve them at all cost. One also still hears arguments that archives are neutral spaces and, more importantly, many

[3] Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2, 2002. Available at http://www.nyu.edu/pages/classes/bkg/methods/harris.pdf (last accessed October 28, 2016).

[4] Frank Boles provides an overview of the history of appraisal theory and practice covered in the following three paragraphs, as well as an extensive bibliography of writings on this topic, in his *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists), 2005.

of our processes and products obscure the reality that judgment, whether passive or active, underlies so much of what we do.

Beginning with Theodore Schellenberg in the 1950s, a second tradition bloomed, designed to give archivists tools and concepts for navigating an era of records abundance, rather than scarcity. During the period between the 1970s through the 1990s, we experienced a golden age of appraisal theory in which it became generally accepted that appraisal was archives most important function. Much of this work was exhorted by Gerald Ham, who led off his provocative 1974 Presidential address to the Society of American Archivists with the following: "Our most important and intellectually demanding task as archivists is to make an informed selection of information that will provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time. But why must we do it so badly? Is there any other field of information gathering that has such a broad mandate with a selection process so random, so fragmented, so uncoordinated, and even so accidental?"[5] At least in part, Ham's provocation sparked two decades where archival appraisal was at the forefront of writing and thinking in the field. This was a romantic period of archives, during which professional thinkers and leaders were obsessed with why records were important and trying to develop big ideas and practices that would help us embrace a more active role in shaping the documentary record and tackle the central and very difficult questions: what records should be acquired and kept for posterity? Which records in an archives should be kept, processed, and preserved and to what level? And more recently, what do we digitize and why?

Many of these ideas assumed an institutional archives setting, making them less relevant to repositories collecting archival documentation from other parties through gift and purchase but some theories deserve passing reference. **Functional analysis** and its Canadian cousin, **macro-appraisal**, stress understanding the various functions and structures of an institution, organization, or even a community or individual and making value judgments about documentation based on these functions before or even in place of an analysis of the content of records themselves. This strategy enables an archivist within an institutional setting to navigate more effectively an immense volume of records that cannot be read and assessed individually. Macro-appraisal further urges archivists to value what Terry Cook called "hot-spots," valuing areas of conflict and disagreement within society and culture. **Documentation strategy** takes as its starting point that individual institutions cannot possibly take on the task of documenting society on their own and that the only possible way of accomplishing this is through cooperation. This theory provides an idealistic but compelling vision for inter-institutional collaboration for documenting a particular subject, region, or other area, also incorporating the expertise of users of archives into the process. As a way of getting institutions away from what David Gracy termed the "vacuum cleaner" approach to acquisition, **collection policies** emerged and persist as a method for articulating the goals of a repository's program, considering institutional mission, types of programs and users supported by the collection, resources available to effectively steward the collection, and the external environment, which explicitly compels us to consider the work of other institutions in a given area. An articulated policy provides a framework for pro-active outreach to various individuals, organizations, and communities to discover and acquire records and, very often, to refuse offers of

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[5] Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist*38:1 (Winter 1975).

materials that do not fit into it. This last point is key, in that refusing a potential acquisition, or more radically, deaccessioning materials that do not fit into a repository's policy, often represents a source of conflict and misunderstanding between archivists and librarians working within a broader research library context. Frank Boles believes these theories reached their zenith in the mid-90s with the development of Mark Greene and Todd Daniels-Howell's "**Minnesota Method**," which blended portions of all of the above work into a single framework of measured steps and actions used to pursue and appraise the records of the business sector in the state of Minnesota. This work has been adopted to help guide other challenging areas of appraisal practice, such as faculty papers.[6]

Although not necessarily articulated explicitly as archival appraisal theory, we have seen recently the very promising development of theory and practice surrounding **community archives**. Michelle Caswell writes that "community-based archives serve as an alternative venue for communities to make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, to shape collective memory of their own pasts, and to control the means through which stories about their past are constructed."[7] These are, essentially, appraisal activities and the growth of community-based archives provide at once an opportunity for broadening the range of documentary resources that can be preserved, along with a critique and acknowledgement of the limitations of archival repositories which benefit from and are beset by the power dynamics of the institutions in which they are situated.

The theories of archival appraisal covered here embrace the idea that choices need to be made regarding materials to be accessioned into the archive and acknowledge the powerful and active role we play in this process. Appraisal theory posits that serious forethought about a repository's collecting goals, documented in a policy, provides a necessary framework for decisions about what we actively pursue, what we passively acquire and what we turn down or deaccession at later stages, balancing with the resources necessary to appropriately steward collections. In the grand dream, these policies could join with those of other repositories to make an overall map that will document society in its broadest sense.

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There are two reasons I spent the first part of my talk this morning engaging with the concepts and history of archival appraisal. First, many of these concepts are directly relevant to the current moment in research libraries. As I have waded into collections issues outside of archives and rare book and manuscript libraries, I see a familiar challenge, the tension of abundance and scarcity. In terms of abundance, there is more libraries could potentially collect, either alone or collaboratively, than any program could hope to reasonably capture. In using phrases such as "massive accumulations of raw

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[7] Michelle Caswell, "SAADA and the Community-Based Archives Model: What is a Community-Based Archive Anyway?" South Asian American Digital Archive, https://www.saada.org/tides/article/20120418-704.

data" Dan Hazen describes this dynamic well in the 2009 article we read for this Symposium.[8] We have seen an explosion of the digital as well as traditional print and we receive feedback from our patrons that they wish for us to have both print and electronic copies of books – and they want to have local access. While there is abundance in what we could potentially collect, we are operating within the limits of our resources, whether collections budgets or of staff required to steward collections, where we have often seen reductions in recent years. That is to say, we could describe the current collections context as one in which there is growing misalignment between our appetite to collect, and our ability to do so. This context echoes the abundance and scarcity dialectic archivists have faced for decades, leading me to reconsider archival appraisal theory and suggest that it offers an especially useful and compelling framework for the current collections environment in general and special collections alike. Greg Eow has made this same point in viewing shared print management within the Ivy Plus network as fundamentally an archival appraisal challenge. As we abandon the idea of the comprehensive collection once and for all while at the same time expand the types of materials we acquire, preserve, and make accessible, we need methodologies for decision-making.

CONVERGENCE

The second reason I have focused on archival appraisal, is because I would like to establish and develop a shared understanding of what we are trying to do with rare and unique materials as we venture into a new era for research library collections, in which archives and special collections play a more central role in the overall endeavor. I would like to suggest that there are commonalities and convergences between general collections and special collections and archives, and we need to think through these opportunities and challenges if we are to contemplate working more closely and harmoniously across these communities and traditions.

Before exploring this convergence between general and special collections, I draw this dichotomy a bit sheepishly at a symposium in honor of Dan Hazen, who, rather than simplifying, reveled and excelled at representing problems and situations at their fullest complexity. For the sake of expediency, clarity, and argument, I am intentionally using the terms such as "general" "special" and "archival" collections as abstractions as I make an argument that the missions of these traditionally separate parts of the library are beginning to move closer together.

I am by no means the first to make the argument that archives and special collections have moved from the margins into the center of the research library. Our host Sarah Thomas has argued convincingly that special collections have moved "from Siberia to Shangri-la" within the research library, writing "special collections were once marginal and elitist; now they are at the heart of what we do and they are

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[8] Dan C. Hazen, "Rethinking research library collections: A policy framework for straitened times, and beyond," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 54 (2) 2010. Available: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4111039.

opening and welcoming."[9] The Association of Research Libraries' Working Group on Special Collections has put a heightened emphasis on the importance of special collections, writing, "In an environment where mass digitization of books and periodicals for Web access is accelerating, and electronic journals and aggregated databases are part of the shared landscape of scholarly communication, it is their accumulated special collections that increasingly define the uniqueness and character of individual research libraries."[10] Rick Anderson has posited a general shift away from what he calls "commodity collections" to rare and unique materials, traditionally housed in special collections.[11] Thomas Hickerson has compelled us to "incorporate special collections, staffing, and expertise into the common asset base of the library."[12] Following this compulsion, ARL produced an entire issue of Research Library Issues on "Mainstreaming Special Collections," which explores different case studies of activities that bring rare and unique materials and those with the expertise to work with them into the work of the library as a whole.[13] Rare and unique holdings comprise an important part of Lorcan Dempsey's concept of the "inside-out" collection. In short a consensus has emerged that we need to be putting more resources into special collections and seeing them as central to the future of the research library as a whole.[14]

Less has been written on this movement in the archives and special collections literature, although at least two recent publications have shared archival theory and practices as key lessons for libraries facing new challenges and opportunities. Megan Sniffin-Marinoff, Donna Webber, and Jeanette Bastian, have recently published an important and very relevant monograph *Archives in Libraries: What Librarians and Archivists Need to Know in Order to Work Together*.[15] In addition, Jackie Dooley's OCLC Research report "The Archival Advantage: Integrating Archival Expertise into Management of Born-digital Library Materials" highlights ten areas where archival expertise can be harnessed by research libraries navigating the complex set of variables necessary when working with new forms of digital content that

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[9] Sarah E. Thomas, "From Siberia to Shangri-la" in Hirschorn, Arnold, Robert H. Jackson, and Melissa Hubbard (editors), *Forging the Future of Special Collections* (American Library Association), 2016.
[10] "Special Collections in ARL Libraries: A Discussion Report from the ARL Working Group on Special Collections" http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/scwg-report-mar09.pdf (last accessed October 28, 2016).
[11] Rick Anderson, "Can't Buy Us Love: The Declining Importance of Library Books and the Rising Importance of Special Collections," Ithaka S+R Issue Brief #1, 2013. http://www.sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/SR_BriefingPaper_Anderson.pdf
[12] H. Thomas Hickerson, "Rebalancing the Investment in Collections," *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC,* no. 277 (Dec 2011). http://publications.arl.org/rli277/2
[13] *Research Library Issues No 283 (2013): Special Issue on Mainstreaming Special Collections*: http://publications.arl.org/rli283/.
[14] Lorcan Dempsey, "A New Information Management Landscape: From Outside-In to Inside-Out." *New Roles for the Road Ahead: Essays Commissioned for ACRL's 75th Anniversary* (2015): http://acrl.ala.org/newroles/?page_id=255.
[15] Jeannette Bastian, Megan Sniffin-Marinoff, and Donna Webber, *Archives in Libraries: What Librarians and Archivists Need to Know in Order to Work Together* Society of American Archivists, 2015.

diverge from print analogs.[16] These writings suggest a future where the missions and approaches of special and general collections can become more closely aligned in more productive ways.

In addition, special collections and archives have adopted perspective and outlook more associated with general collections over the past generation. We have seen a shift in how we value our collections; rather than defining our libraries and departments primarily by what we have, we now see an emphasis on how they can be used. Extensive efforts have been placed in processing backlogs, digitizing holdings, and other activities designed to promote broad access to collections. More importantly, archives and special collections now see outreach and instruction as a central part of our mission. Undergraduates increasingly find a home in archives and special collections with staff driven to help them find materials, formulate research questions and topics, and understand the power of primary source research and experiential learning. At Houghton Library, I often trot out the statistic that we are hosting three times as many undergraduates in their courses than we did a decade ago. We have even begun to incentivize use of special collections and archives on the undergraduate level. Over the course of the past two summers, we funded and hosted nine undergraduate fellows to complete their own research projects, with the hopes that they will serve as ambassadors to their peers to invite even more students into our midst, and we are nearing completion of a publication targeted at undergraduates that highlights ways each of the 49 concentrations at Harvard can utilize our library to further their studies. Archives and special collections conferences and publications are filled with presentations, sessions, and articles that report on similar initiatives in other settings. The zeal with which we are promoting access, outreach, and instruction looks and feels much more like a general collections approach than something our predecessors, who focused their energies to a greater degree on the advanced researcher, would have recognized or likely supported.

When sharing an earlier draft of this paper with my colleague Christine Weideman, director of the Manuscripts and Archives department at Yale, she pointed out to me various areas in access services, cataloging, archival processing, metadata creation, preservation, teaching, and administration in which she sees convergence between archives and special collections and the main research library, highlighting this shift as the most important transition she has seen over the past generation.

COLLISION

Despite these ongoing transitions, there continue to be differences between general and special collections, and these differences, which most saliently occur in collections development and stewardship, present serious barriers that we need to thoughtfully address and work through if we are to continue to bridge our traditional gaps. These differences matter, in that while we have theorized and actualized some convergence of mission and activities, they can serve as the source of ongoing misunderstanding and even frustration.

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[16] Jackie Dooley, "The Archival Advantage: Integrating Archival Expertise into Management of Born-digital Library Materials" OCLC Research, 2015. http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/2015/oclcresearch-archival-advantage-2015.html.

At heart, I would identify three concerns where friction remains between general and special collections: 1) the lingering aspiration for comprehensiveness; 2) the degree to which awareness of lifecycle costs have been incorporated into the selection process and 3) how we view partner institutions.

Again over-simplifying for rhetorical purposes, the traditional collection development goal within general collections at the major research libraries was comprehensiveness, to build, piece by piece, "collections of record" that contain, or at least aspire to contain, the full printed record of human endeavor. While even at Harvard we have moved away from the goal to "have everything," we still want to build broad and deep local collections that support the wide-ranging and diverse research interests of all of our faculty and students. Since these interests are voracious, we have generally believed more is better. Even in vestige form, these approaches do not map as well onto special collections and archives, where the approach to building and stewarding collections is significantly different. Building broad and comprehensive collections has never been the goal, but rather to build strategically and selectively, at times working to tremendous depth but without the assumption we can or should cover all bases. This represents less of a concern when it comes to rare books or manuscripts acquired individually or in small allotments, but can be more challenging in the areas of ephemera collections, collections compiled by collectors, and especially modern archives, which can all carry significant stewardship costs.

Speaking of stewardship, in the general collections tradition, the acquisition decision tends to be a one-time activity. Although bringing collections and technical services staff more closely together in administrative structures has become more common, there often exists a division between those bibliographers who make selection decisions and those responsible for the full stewardship lifecycle that includes preservation, access, and support of research and teaching using collections. While curators or archivists who make an acquisitions decision may or may not be personally responsible for the work of preserving, arranging, describing, or providing front line reference for a collection, the best of them internalize that the decision to acquire a collection or archive represents only the first, and often the easiest, part of the series of activities necessary to ensure it can be effectively preserved and used. The underlying assumption for a curator is that he or she has broad oversight responsibility for collections in their area. At minimum, they contribute expertise to processing and cataloging, as well as judgment to conservation and preservation decisions, expert research and teaching support for faculty, students, and other researchers who need it, and interpretive activities in the form of exhibitions and publications when necessary or opportune. While certainly standard approaches are utilized, rare book cataloging and archival processing usually has to counter the unexpected and judgment of individual archivists and catalogers must be employed on a regular basis to navigate appraisal decisions and appropriate levels of arrangement, description, and preservation. While we have made remarkable progress processing hidden collections over the past decade, many repositories still carry significant backlogs. Moreover, especially with gifts but also with some purchases, curators take on a long-term relationship with an individual, organization, or estate seeking to transfer collections to a repository. Like all human relationships, these can be complex and time consuming, with ups and downs and require us to consider longer term implications on our time and psyche with every decision. All of this work can be labor intensive and I fear adding more individuals with the mandate to acquire collections without careful acknowledgment of and planning for growth will create a new era of backlogs filled with records of uneven value.

Finally, a note about competition vs. collaboration. In general collections, we looked at holdings at peer institutions in a competitive, rather than complementary way, with the collecting goal traditionally being to not only hold all of the volumes at peer institutions, but go above and beyond this to have the largest collections. ARL rankings have traditionally incentivized this model, whereby the strength of collections was measured by the sheer size and scope of our collections and materials budgets. We have, of course, seen powerful use cases of collaboration on the collections front, notably interlibrary loan and the Borrow Direct lending service within Ivy Plus and the whole concept of the "collective collection" provides an inspiring collaborative vision. I'm concerned, however, that when we discuss the turn to conceiving of a research library's special collections and archives as the way we distinguish our collections from one another, we will advance in a needlessly competitive way.

While size and scope are often used as bragging rights in special collections and archives, we traditionally also build collections with a keen awareness of those at peer institutions. I have spent most of this paper considering archives but I would use an example of rare book acquisition to illustrate this principle. Rare book acquisitions are increasingly informed by searches, often provided by dealers, to determine which, if any, other libraries own a copy of a specific volume. While this is partially motivated by a desire to distinguish one's library from others, it can also be seen as a collaborative gesture to spend one's own resources to add to the overall corpus of materials we preserve and make available. It is not uncommon for a curator at one institution to refer an item to another where it may have a better home and in fact this behavior reflects principles articulated in the very first tenet of the Society of American Archivists Code of Ethics, which explicitly encourages us to "cooperate and collaborate with other archivists and respect them and their institutions' missions and collecting policies."[17] Following these ethics can be a challenging endeavor, especially when tempted by a valuable opportunity and/or pressured by local concerns attracted by the prestige and utility of a specific acquisition, and our landscape is littered with examples of collections split between repositories. The marketplace can breed competition as well, when it can be common to participate in auctions that involve peer institutions, dealers, and private collectors. And certainly there are areas, such as the archives of and collections related to writers, artists, and other public figures, whose pursuit can be characterized by competition, rather than collaboration though as prices for these continue to skyrocket, one wonders whether a more collaborative approach in these arenas would be better for all as well. While we would probably not want to eliminate competition entirely, even if it were possible, we should define these areas as exceptions to the rules of collaboration.

[17] http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics

We selectively and strategically build collections that acknowledge our part in a larger constellation of collecting institutions for another important reason: external users of archives and special collections have always been encouraged to utilize these holdings. For instance, at Houghton, roughly two-thirds of researchers in our reading room over the past year had no Harvard affiliation. We sometimes harbor concerns that our own faculty don't make enough use of collections at home and that we may come under pressure from short-sighted administrators taking an our-university-first perspective. But these concerns pale in the understanding that our repositories exist within a broad network supporting scholarship in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. When we host a scholar from Yale studying transcendentalist literature, we know Yale will welcome our faculty and students to study the Harlem Renaissance and in fact many libraries and archives have developed research fellowships designed to support travel to encourage these uses of our collections. This focus on serving internal and external audiences represents another way in which archives and special collections model an inside-out approach to collections. We should be prepared to deflect collections and materials that do not fit into local frameworks, with the confidence that other repositories can provide a good home.

These three areas, embracing the need for selection, thinking collaboratively with other institutions, and fully weighing and understanding and sharing long term stewardship costs, represent the way forward for more general collections to participate in enhanced acquisition of archives and special collections materials. Success in this endeavor will give us a greater impact on research, teaching, and learning on campus and to the preservation and understanding of cultural heritage now and into perpetuity.

CONCLUSION

Within this framework, the convergence of general and special collections can be seen as a healthy and welcome transformation. More importantly, our divergences are not intractable, but opportunities to learn from each other and create a holistic view of the collective collection. Engaging the resources and manpower of the general library in archives and special collections work will allow us to work at a greater scale and impact and help build capacity for processing, cataloging, preservation, digitization, reference, and instruction. The moment calls for us all – general collections and special collections alike - to have open and honest discussions about what we are trying to achieve with our collecting program overall, set goals, and build strategies. We should develop broader policy frameworks and rationale for the areas we will and will not cover and work proactively and strategically to execute them.

I would like to conclude with a final concern and an opportunity, returning to the themes in the earlier part of this paper. With the discourse around community archives a notable exception, questions of archival appraisal have faded in prominence over the past two decades. This ebb in appraisal theory has corresponded with the greatest explosion of recorded information in the history of humanity and I fear we have abandoned appraisal theory at a time when we most needed it. Not only have ubiquity of personal computers, tablets, smartphones and other devices enabled unprecedented creation of records in volume and of type, we have also seen a period where the laser printer, photocopier, and other technologies have created more paper records than ever before. The challenges of the digital age have created circumstances where we desperately need appraisal theories to be developed for a new era. Perhaps a rebirth of appraisal can be something we work on within the context of a new era of research library activity, in which special collections and archives become part of the core and not on the margins.