

MODULE 15
COLLECTING
DIGITAL
MANUSCRIPTS
AND ARCHIVES

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SOCIETY OF
American
Archivists

Case Study 2: Interview with Marcel Caya, Regional Director and Appraiser for the Canadian National Archival Appraisal Board (NAAB)

Marcel Caya served as director of the Archive and university archivist at McGill University from 1977 to 1996, before leaving to teach archives and records management at the University of Québec at Montreal until his retirement. He served as chair of the National Archival Appraisal Board (NAAB) in Canada for a number of years and is currently vice chair as well as regional director for the Québec region. NAAB is a Canadian association created in the 1970s to help Canadian institutions produce good monetary appraisals for archival donations, which now include born-digital materials. The following interview was conducted by phone.

What is your general approach to appraising a collection that includes digital media or born-digital files?

Most of the time I do appraisals as a member of a committee of the NAAB. We are usually three people (more rarely four): a rare book merchant who has experience with archival material, a researcher, and an archivist. I sometimes do appraisals on an individual basis—a private appraisal—and in that context I act alone.

My general approach to appraising a collection is usually to appraise the documents, whatever the format. Digital is just one other format that we have to appraise. But we do not appraise the format as such; we appraise the documents. My experience with born-digital material has mostly been with photographs. In appraising these digital collections, we try to replicate the conditions that would prevail if the material were, for instance, the usual physical material. We try to come up with a value.

Even if similar materials have not sold before, there can still be a value. It can be a research value. And when we appraise a collection for an archival institution we know the primary drive there is that it is research material. Therefore the material has value as a research collection. Starting from that, we begin to establish comparatives. I know there are very great differences with the U.S., which insists a lot on previous sales of documents of a similar nature.

How do you assign monetary value to digital media, such as floppy disks, CDs, laptops, flash drives, etc.?

As a matter of principle, I never appraise what I cannot see. Therefore, if the material is on a Macintosh floppy disk and I cannot see the content, we will simply ask the institution to revive the content or make it accessible. The theory here is that if as an appraiser I cannot have access to it, the researchers will not have access to it; therefore I cannot put a value on it as a research collection.

So, when you do appraisals, are you doing them after a collection is already at an institution? Do you ever appraise before the materials arrive at an institution?

Very rarely we do it for the individual before it has been accessed and processed by the institution.

Does that change your approach?

Well, it has consequences because the institution has done some processing and tried to have access to the contents. Then we know what the use will be and can compare it with other collections with research criteria.

How do you assign monetary value to digital files not on media (e.g., cloud-based email)? Would you approach them based on content rather than format?

I have not had to appraise materials in the cloud yet, but as far as born-digital materials are concerned, we basically try to compare them with conventional collections and try to see if the research potential is justifiable to start with, and whether there would be other markets for the same materials. For instance, if you have manuscripts of a literary figure in digital form, you would want to compare it with another comparable literary figure.

Are most of the appraisals you do for tax or insurance purposes?

Mostly for tax advantages/benefits to the donor. This is why sometimes material is donated for which we have no exact comparative, so we have to come up with some kind of justification of the value.

Do you consider the paper and digital materials together when appraising a collection?

We appraise them together. Some paper collections are very extensive, and they are not necessarily more valuable because of that. If the material is repetitive or very routine it does not add very much to the value. The same factors that we use for all collections, like uniqueness, rarity, interest, and many others, would prevail whether it is paper or digital. When the digital material is a copy of the paper material, it generally does not add value.

You mentioned uniqueness and rarity as key factors in determining the value. With digital materials, does the fact that they can be reproduced, which can make it difficult to know what is original, affect value?

Yes, we usually consider that, but for archival material we rarely appraise document by document; we appraise the whole, and look at the provenance of the whole, and look into the possibility that that would be multiplied by a certain number of copies if [the born-digital materials were reproduced]. I did an appraisal for a museum of cartoons that were in a digital format. Prior to the donation, the donor had to certify that no copies had been made for any other institution or any other buyers. In other words, the material that had been bought by an individual or a collector had to be removed from that collection, so it was not considered in the appraisal.

With paper manuscript collections, the developmental progress of a work often contributes to the value of the paper archive. How do you determine whether a digital archive contains in-progress works or draft versions of files?

Most often we can compare versions. And we can compare what is presented as a draft or as a version with the printed copies. We can see if it is actually a real draft or not a draft. We do that visually. If necessary we could do it with software—with Word we could compare versions of different files. Usually we look at the beginning and end of a chapter and the number of pages; it is quite easy to spot certain paragraphs and see whether there have been modifications.

Have you ever appraised a collection that was totally digital? If so, how did you go about doing it? What types of things helped you determine the value?

No, I have not yet appraised a completely digital collection. I have a friend who has appraised a database of polling results for elections. I do not quite know how they came to a result, but I know they had to use some comparisons. It is not an exact science, and to have very rigid principles is very difficult. In Canada, as well, most of our appraisals are revised before they are accepted for certain tax advantages. They are revised by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board, which looks at the appraisal reports and sometimes says we are too low, or too high, and they can modify the appraisal. So we are not free to come up with any kind of figures until the reports are looked at. If someone on the committee has certain expertise they can say, no it is worth more or less. They have the power to do that.

The problems of digital media are of great concern to us because it is increasingly showing up in the material we have to appraise. So many people dream of a grid in which you put in a category and you have a quantity and the years and then you come up with a straight value. It's just not possible. It's just a big dream.