briefing paper

digital preservation europe

Appraisal of Digital Resources in the Public Sector: A general introduction from a Delos Report

This paper is based on research being undertaken to produce a report within the DELOS project as part of the work package dedicated to the digital preservation function. The main principles and recommendations of the report are summarised here with specific reference to the public sector, the increasing need for public services in the preservation processes and the strict interrelationships between preservation and appraisal in the digital environment. The paper will discuss the goals, the critical questions related to appraisal from a general point of view and the preliminary findings.

The function of appraisal, even if considered crucial in the domain of recordkeeping systems and specifically in the public sector environment, is still lacking a systematic and consistent approach both for traditional and digital resources. The digital environment creates new complexity, requires a well defined methodology and demands better tools in all areas of the documentary disciplines. In addition, the relevance of digital appraisal is not commonly recognized, particularly outside the archival and the record management communities.

In the course of the Delos project specific attention has been dedicated to this topics with the aim of analysing the activities and requirements necessary to enable appraisal/selection and disposal to take place effectively in the digital environment with specific reference to:

- definition of the function as part of the chain of activities within a digital preservation process,
- attribution of appropriate appraisal/selection/disposal metadata to the digital object,
- development of an automatic approach based on the extraction of information/metadata about the digital objects.

The last two points can be addressed if the first one is adequately clarified and investigated as recognised by the archivists and records managers which have dedicated more efforts to this analysis. On the basis of recent analyses, the main questions could be refined as the following:

- Is appraisal to be restricted mainly or only to a question of limiting digital redundancy or minimising the risk of overall control over the lives of individuals?
- Will creators of digital resources keep more or everything only because creation, storage and discovery technologies are improving while appraising and disposing of material will still remain a largely manual and tedious activity?

Accordingly, the automation of appraisal and the easy definition of rules and implementation of electronic systems functionality can be designed as a crucial part of any information system (specifically in the case of a qualified recordkeeping system for public administration) able to play a relevant role to transform the evil and costly necessity into an easy and effective task for all the domains involved.
What is not avoidable concerns the "estimation or judgment on the worthiness of continued preservation" of digital resources (as expressed by InterPARES 1).

The more we preserve, the more complexity we have to confront in order to first govern in the preservation environment and second be able to evaluate the accuracy, reliability and authenticity of information. The appraisal function, therefore, must be addressed as a question of preservation rather than as a tool for controlling proliferation, specifically in the case of public sector, where the archival function plays a crucial role for the accountability of public authorities.

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Notes

1 The article is based on the ideas presented in the Delos report: Maria Guercio, Gillian Oliver, Seamus Ross, Automating and Constructing Rules for Appraisal in the Digital Environment. An introduction (in print).

2 See www.dpc.delos.info/rethinking_appraisal.

3 Terry Eastwood, "Keynote Address" Conference on Appraisal in the Digital World". Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 15-16 November 2007 (in print).

Further information and resources

PREMIS The main sources investigated by the Delos report have been, from the archival point of view, the ICA report elaborated in 2005(International Council on Archives, Committee on Appraisal, Guidelines on Appraisal, Strategic approaches to appraisal, Tom Mills ed., 2005), available at http://www.ica.org/en/node/30417 (accessed 27 January 2008); the outputs of InterPARES 1 and 2 (see in particular InterPARES Project, The Long-term Preservation of Authentic Electronic Records: Findings of the InterPARES Project, Appraisal Task Force Report, p. 2. Available at: http://www.interpares.org/book/interpares_book_e_part2.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2007); the proposals approved by the National Archives of Australia (National Archives of Australia, Whole of Government Functional Analysis – and – Macro appraisal Project, result of consultation - July 2006, available at http://www.naa.gov.au/recordkeeping/disposal/appraisal/Macro -appraisal-report.pdf (accessed 11 November 2007) ; the National Archives of United States (National Archives and Record Administration, Strategic directions: appraisal policy, May 2006, available at http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/appraisal.htm (Accessed 11 November 2007); the ISO standards in the sector of record management (ISO RM 15489, ISO/TS 23081, specifically -2:2007 Information and documentation - Records management processes - Metadata for records - Part 2: Conceptual and implementation issues,available at http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/catalogue_tc/catalogue_de tail.htm?csnumber=43390 (Accessed 27 January 2008); the Paradigm project under development by the initiative of the UK National Archives (Paradigm Project. Introduction to appraisal, available at http://www.paradigm.ac.uk/workbook/appraisal/index.html. (Accessed 11 November 2007) and the active and continuing efforts supported by JISC, with specific reference to the Digital preservation and records management programme, available at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_prese rvation.aspx (Accessed 27 January 2008) Codata-ERPANET workshop, The selection, appraisal and retention of digital scientific data, Lisbon 15-17 December 2003. Final report, p. 9, available at www.erpanet.org

Up to now universal guidelines or criteria have not sufficiently developed the capacity required to identify parameters and procedures able to support through automation, problems related to the quantity and the quality issues in the selection process without losing the relevant meaning of the context. However, any solution to be effective and credible should take into account existing:
- legislation, standards and policies,
- customs and values as manifested through functional classification and business procedures and kept in systems in the form of metadata and documentation,
- standardized procedures in carrying out actions,
- relationships between creators and preservers as part of the appraisal and selection management.

In the case of electronic records/documents created within an EDRMS regime we have sufficient control and information to define a process (and eventually its automation) for appraisal based also on the capacity and the existence of mechanisms to evaluate – even in the system design - the quality of the preservation process. Classification tools based on business functions and integrated with preservation/retention plans, and the identity and integrity elements (as present in a registry system or as part of the document/record form), all together with a controlled technological environment are the basic existing components of a strategy for appraisal when the resources/records are created as part of governed and standardized recordkeeping/information systems.

For a systematic approach it will be crucial to identify what factors affect appraisal in digital environments. The list should include the impact of:
- the quality of recordkeeping practice,
- appraisal timing: the need to create and maintain a huge amount of metadata for the description and preservation of digital objects at the point of creation to ensure a correct acquisition from the digital repository implies new procedures and a change of the chain of the responsibilities; it could be necessary to develop a re-appraisal strategy in the repository,
- appraisal methods: for instance, in the case of a snapshot for the websites the appraisal policy should be in place jointly with a preservation strategy,
- financial and staffing constraints.

According to this analysis we can identify some initial conclusions.
1. Selection is essential in the digital environment not only to ensure sustainability but also to guarantee the quality of the preserved heritage.
2. Appraisal in the case of non-custodian institutions could be linked to user analysis while in the case of custodial institutions the guiding principles have to be defined at a more general level as "neutral" as possible.
3. The capacity to transform the appraisal function into a routine activity is a goal not yet explored with sufficient energy and software tools do not exist.

In any case appraisal should be defined as a practical activity to evaluate the "significance and continuing value of the materials". In this last meaning it is necessary to identify on a scientific basis parameters/criteria which allow the definition of both significance and continuity of the values to be appraised.

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