

# Public archives determination of social memory in appraising local government records in South Africa

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## Abstract

A hybrid version of macro-appraisal is used by South African public archivists when separating records of enduring value from ephemeral records. This appraisal function should occur immediately after the filing systems have been approved by the national and provincial archivists. However, in most cases, this function only occurs two years after the filing system has been approved. In the 1990s, the South African National Archives changed its traditional appraisal methodology from a Schellenberg approach to formulate a sound appraisal policy based on the macro-appraisal model. One of the key elements identified was the need to identify gaps in the written records that could be filled during the appraisal process. These gaps could be complemented by the collection of oral history. This study used qualitative data obtained through content analysis and literature to review the appraisal policy guidelines and approaches of the National Archives and the Gauteng Provincial Archives in relation to the process of appraisal, issuing of disposal authorities and capturing of oral history projects in relation to Gauteng local governments. This study used a case study design and specifically focused on the appraisal of Gauteng local government records. Interviews were held with officials of the National Archives and Gauteng Provincial Archives involved in the function of appraisal of public records. This study indicated that there were gaps in archival collections, which should be supplemented by the collection of oral history testimonies. The oral history testimonies collected from individuals and communities affected by socio-economic and socio-political events are not captured by the country's public archivists. These narratives of post-apartheid South Africa are being lost and may not be captured by the national and provincial archives services. The key recommendation of this study is that there should be clear policy guidelines relating to the process of appraisal and transparency on how these processes are undertaken in South African public archives.

**Keywords:** Appraisal, macro-appraisal, local government, disposal authorities, oral history, postmodernism

## 1. Introduction

South Africa continues to operate with a positivist approach when it comes to the management of records held in the custody of governmental bodies (Schellnack-Kelly 2017:273). Ngoepe and Nkwe (2018:139) contend that “apartheid grossly distorted the acquisition of records and access to records”. The authors contend that the appraisal process in South Africa is based on a haphazard system rather than a scientific method which would be beneficial for both paper and electronic records.

The main focus of this article is on local government records and how the provincial archivists in Gauteng issue disposal authorities to this sector of government. It is contended in this article that South African provincial archivists are largely concerned with approving filing systems and issuing disposal authorities on contemporary records. A portion of local government records dating back to before 1994 would largely have been based on records classification systems approved by the state archivist, renamed to the national archivist from 1996 (Schellnack-Kelly 2014:35). In addition, these same offices would have obtained permission to destroy records or transfer them into archival custody from the state archivist (Schellnack-Kelly 2014: 36). These pre-1994 collections of public records need to be re-examined by the archivists and determine the gaps that exist in these collections. Efforts should then be undertaken by the national and provincial archivists to collect information from communities and individuals as part of oral history collections to supplement existing collections.

The neutrality and objectivity of the archivists particularly with regard to the process of appraisal as well as the language used to label and index records have been challenged by scholars such as Ketelaar (1992:5-16), Brothman (2002:311-342), Harris (2007:25), Nesmith (1999:35-37) and Derrida (1996:42). One of the pioneering international archivists to post-apartheid South Africa was the Canadian archivist, Terry Cook, who encouraged archivists to redefine their roles in order to remain relevant and actively participate in discussions, debates and processes involving the management and care of records, and more specifically electronic records (Cook 1997:17-63). Gaps identified from filing systems that have been appraised were issues such as basic service delivery as guaranteed by the South African Constitution, high levels of crime and corruption and social imbalances relating to social matters such as xenophobia experienced in many areas of the provinces.

## 1.1 Background

According to Schellnack-Kelly (2014), the role of the public archivist under the apartheid dispensation was essentially characterised as co-narrators and the roles of the records managers, records officials and the information management systems were well defined. Records-keeping systems, referred to as filing systems, were approved by the head of the archival institution. Any changes that were made to the systems were discussed and formally approved by the state archivist (Schellnack-Kelly 2014:1). Public bodies were required to obtain permission, referred to as disposal authorities, for what records could be destroyed or transferred to the public archival facilities (Schellnack-Kelly 2014:1). Despite the transition to a democratic dispensation in 1994, South Africa's public archival practices largely remain intact, where public bodies are required to have their filing systems used for both paper and electronic records approved by the national archivist, and permission must be obtained from the national archives to destroy public records or transfer them to the custody of a public archival facility (Allan 2009).

In the writings of Allan (2009) and Harris (2007), it is contended that unauthorised destructions occurred during South Africa's transition to a democratic dispensation. Records related to security and the administration of justice were destroyed without authorisation from the national archivist. According to Schellnack-Kelly (2017:274), records not deliberately destroyed have been used to shed light in attempts to address past imbalances and address issues such as land claims, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and miners affected by asbestos and silicosis. Schellnack-Kelly (2014) established that there were many collections of public records that were occupying spaces in public bodies, and that, in spite of the collections having received disposal authority from the national and provincial archivists, these collections have not been transferred to the national or provincial archives facilities. As contended further,

these records are gradually deteriorating and will probably never find their way into archival custody.

This article discusses how the macro-appraisal methodology was required to be implemented by the national and provincial archives in South Africa. The article also illustrates how macro-appraisal could be undertaken, what steps should be in place to enable the archivists conducting the appraisal function to identify what records have archival value and to identify the gaps in the records that could be supplemented through oral history projects.

## **1.2 Problem statement**

In order for the appraisal process of public records to be trusted by members of the public, it is essential that the methodology applied be based on a scientific method. As suggested by Ngoepe and Nkwe (2018), the appraisal process cannot be based on a random selection of records. The macro-appraisal methodology provides a scientific-based approach that aims to identify the most focused and succinct records that illustrate and discuss the main functions and activities of the entity being appraised (Schellnack-Kelly 2014). According to the macro-appraisal methodology, one of the most important elements of the process of conducting appraisal on archives and records is the ability of the archivists to identify gaps in the narratives displayed in the archives (Harris 2007). These gaps should be supplemented by oral history collections or the collection of other narratives that can supplement the official records (Cook 1997).

## **2. Purpose of the research**

The purpose of this paper was to discuss how social memory is determined by public archives when appraising local government records. It discusses the macro-appraisal methodology that is used to appraise South African public records. During the discussion, it highlighted the importance of oral collections and other collections that can complement the official records related to local governments. As an important function of appraisal in archival practices, it should be conducted in such a way that recommendations can be made for collections of oral histories, archives from community-based organisations or individuals involved with ground-breaking projects undertaken by local governments affecting local communities in South Africa.

## **3. Objectives of the study**

The objectives of this study was to establish the practices of appraisal by the national and provincial archives in South Africa and the efforts that are undertaken by the public archivists to supplement their collections by identifying gaps in collections and conducting oral history projects to fill those gaps. Specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- i) To identify tools utilised by the public archivists to conduct the function of appraisal.
- ii) To establish responsible people for determining records with enduring value from those regarded as ephemeral in value.
- iii) To determine how the records appraisers identify gaps in the collections that could be supplemented by oral history collections.
- iv) To determine efforts undertaken by the provincial archivists to fill the identified gaps in addressing socio-economic and socio-political matters.

#### **4. Literature review**

This section presents the literature review of the study in line with objectives.

##### **4.1 Macro-appraisal methodology**

According to Harris (2007:85), the South African public archives service was apprehensive about its “traditional appraisal methodology” and its legitimacy within South Africa’s constitution, which requires all spheres of government to provide effective, transparent, accountable and coherent government (Republic of South Africa 1996: section 41(1)(c)). The appraisal methodology utilised by the service had no formal strategic framework and based its judgement on individual appraisers’ assessments of historical value (Cox 2005:7). However, researchers use various information sources to trace past events, including those recommended for destruction during the appraisal process (Pickover 1994:354). Historian John Laband (1996:39) states that it is impossible for records appraisers to be able to accurately predict research trends and presume the interests of future researchers. Nevertheless, the South African archives service was concerned about the excessive volumes of support function-related records, such as human resources, financial and procurement records being preserved (Harris 2007:92), although, in recent years, these records were used to investigate allegations of mismanagement and corruption. These records resulted in masses of duplicated records being transferred to archival holdings from all levels of government. In addition, the challenges emerged from the country’s political transformation such as the constraints of financial, human and logistical resources; costs associated with inadequate storage facilities and the tsunamis of government records quickly engulfing archival repositories (Harris 2007:93-94).

During the appraisal process, it was estimated that 15 percent of public records from each national, provincial and local government structures were identified as having archival value and, consequently, were recommended for eventual transfer to state archives repositories (Harris 2007:87-88). Several kilometres worth of space of records belonging to the apartheid dispensation had to be transferred to the government archival holdings in order to create space for the post-apartheid dispensation. Furthermore, unlike the 1962 State Archives Act, the archival legislation now incorporated parastatals, alongside national, provincial and local government structures, as the client offices of the national and provincial archival services, whose records would also be eligible for related archival and records management services (Schellnack-Kelly, 2014:59). The South African National Archives tried to formulate a sound appraisal policy based on the macro-appraisal model, distancing itself from their Schellenbergian paradigm (Harris 2007:97-98). The incentive for this appraisal approach was, as a methodology, to address the challenge of preserving too many records, reduce the number of duplicate records, quell the critics viewing appraisal as an obscure process based on “fuzzy value judgements rather than a clear methodology” (Ngulube 2010:250) and reduce the loss of permanently valuable electronic records being deleted or stored in formats unreadable under new technologies (Kirkwood 1994:12).

##### **4.2 Appraisal of electronic records**

In the article compiled by Ngoepe and Nkwe (2018), the concern about appropriate methodologies to address the appraisal of electronic records is considered. These scholars highlighted the symbiotic relationship between the “societal value of functional-structural context and the work-place culture” of records that are created and used by the creators and the interrelationship of the public (Ngoepe & Nkwe 2018:132). These scholars contend that the approach of the South African national and provincial archives has several shortcomings when it comes to the appraisal of public records. The shortcomings indicated by these scholars

included the failure of the national archives to consider the shortage of staff at the national and provincial archives, the appraisal process excluding input from records creators and members of the public and the appraisal process not giving serious attention to the management and disposal of electronic records (Ngoepe & Nkwe 2018:133). They further contend that, traditionally, with paper records, it was common to wait 20 to 50 years after records had been created to determine whether the records needed to be retained. However, this is not possible for electronic records, which are unlikely to survive neglect. The technology used to create the records will become obsolete in one or two years. It is imperative that decisions are made about the electronic records at the time they are created. Ngoepe and Nkwe (2018:133) argue further that appraisal policies in Africa tended to be based on Western values and neglected the indigenous methods of archiving.

### **4.3 Appraisal in democratic societies**

In an article by Terry Eastwood (2002:59), it is contended that appraisal in democratic dispensations should be based on the concept of governance and the mechanisms that should be in place to consider the role of appraisal in democratic societies and the difficulties in achieving that goal. Eastwood (2002) argues that the appraisal must serve the goal of retrospective understanding of the actions of government. It must also attend to the needs of pluralistic democratic societies to foster recognition and identity of cultural communities. This article highlights the importance of supplementing archival collections with oral histories, particularly in newly established democracies where communities were sidelined by the previous dispensations. Eastwood (2002:60) highlights three strains of thinking concerning appraisal.

## **5. Methodology**

The methodology applied for the purpose of this article was a postmodernist qualitative study that used the case study design to focus specifically on the appraisal practices of public archivists on local government records and the collection of oral histories from local communities. Open-ended questions were formulated to discuss the aspect of appraisal with archivists from South Africa's national and provincial archives. This study reinforced the appropriateness of the methodology to the archival discipline, as advocated by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Iacovino (2004). Interrogating, understanding and contextualising information management processes, role-players and sustainable development endeavours is crucial when determining the fate of records related to local government in post-apartheid South Africa (Schellnack-Kelly 2014:72). South Africa has nine provinces, each with its own provincial archivist, and 283 local governments, seven of which are located in Gauteng (Schellnack-Kelly 2014:74). The reason for focusing on the provincial archives is that the issuing of disposal authority for local governments is the responsibility of the provincial archivists.

### **5.1 Data collection and analysis**

The research was conducted on officials in the national and provincial archives services involved with records management functions and specifically those undertaking projects relating to appraisal and disposal of records in public offices. Specific attention was paid to officials involved in the issuing of disposal authority to local governments in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. The sampling technique employed by the researcher was non-probability sampling that enabled the use of a specifically selected sample. Purposive sampling was viewed as appropriate for this qualitative study. This sampling involved the selection of organisations and individuals that enable the collection of information relevant for the purposes

of the research. The purposive sampling method enabled the acquiring of in-depth understanding of the appraisal process, issuing of disposal authority and the identification of gaps in archival collections supplemented by oral history projects. The archivists from the Gauteng Provincial Archives were selected, because this province is regarded as the economic hub of South Africa. Gauteng attracts people from diverse areas in Africa, all seeking employment, and its population consists of people living in extreme poverty to wealthy individuals and companies (Schellnack-Kelly 2014:78-79).

## **6. Research findings**

During an interview with the Gauteng Provincial Archives in October 2019, the following were revealed concerning the process of appraisal, the disposal of records and the oral history projects the institution have embarked on. The Gauteng Provincial Archives has a staff complement of eight archivists and seven administrative clerks. Only two archivists were assigned the duties associated with appraisal projects. These archivists were also involved in tasks associated with outreach, oral history, arrangement and description.

### **6.1 Appraisal process as described by public archivists**

Objectives (i) and (ii) were covered by enquiring about the process of appraisal and how it is conducted at both the provincial archives and the national archives. A group of records is assigned to an archivist who does all the investigations to understand the office of origin and the content of the different records. The archivist then makes decisions on whether the material is ephemeral or archival in value. After this, report is compiled and forwarded to more senior staff who comment and advise on it, and give recommendations on the different records. The decision whether records have archival value ephemeral value is based on a general disposal document that identified all the records likely to be held by local governments in South Africa. This general disposal authority has been the disposal tool since the 1990s and has not been revised since the mid-1990s, when the process of records appraisal was still conducted on the Gauteng local governments by the national archives. The dynamics of local government have changed quite significantly since the election of the democratic dispensation in 1994. In spite of these changes, the disposal authority tool has not been updated or amended.

As suggested, one of the problems regarding the disposal of local government records is that the provincial archivists still use the general disposal authorities that has existed from the 1990s, even though things have changed, the disposal authorities have not been updated or amended. There is a need to check the value of the disposal authorities and determine whether all of the records recommended as having archival value did indeed have research value. Secondly, in many instances, the individual disposal authorities granted to the different local governments cannot be found at the national archives, which hampers the ability of the provincial archives to correctly verify whether local governments are disposing of records according to the decisions of the national archives.

Thirdly, the disposal authorities have not been transferred to the provincial archives. The Gauteng Provincial Archives requested the municipalities to transfer their records to the new archives building, but many of the municipalities do not have disposal authority from either the national archivists or provincial archivist. Records of municipalities from 1994 onwards should be transferred to the new Gauteng Provincial Archives. The provincial archivists believe that a service provider is needed to deal with the transfers of archival records. Furthermore, consultants with skills in records management and appraisal are needed. It is very important that appraisal be conducted and lists be compiled. These then need to be recommended to the

provincial archivist for approval. In addition, a service provider is needed to help the municipalities and the provincial departments. These consultants have to determine whether disposal authorities exist and have to obtain this information from the national archives. A tender for this was in the pipeline at the time of writing this article. The provincial archivists also noted that the disposal authorities issued after 1994 by the national archives need to be given to the provincial archives so follow-ups can be conducted, and the archival records should be transferred to the provincial archives building.

Fourthly, electronic records were not managed by records management components in the Gauteng province but rather by ICT. Records managers were not able to ensure their offices were compliant. Many offices in the province could not retrieve any documents, as the documents have been stored haphazardly. Migration of data was not addressed. Offices complained about the loss of information when they implemented new systems. The Gauteng Provincial Archives were not able to accept the electronic records as no systems were in place to accept electronic records.

Lastly, offices in Gauteng were fearful of disposing records. Offsite storage was used for ephemeral records. Thousands of documents were being stored at offsite facilities with many offices battling to pay for these facilities. In addition, offices were required to pay a fee to have records released from these offsite areas. Many of the records in these facilities were not arranged according to the prescribed filing systems and the storage conditions did not always comply with procedures determined by the national and provincial archives.

## **6.2 Oral history projects to fill gaps**

Objectives (iii) and (iv) were addressed as follows: The Gauteng Provincial Archives have embarked on an oral history project to focus on sport in the province and to specifically capture the voices of unsung heroes. Some of the challenges associated with this project are an appropriate budget be allocated, the project plan needs to be well formulated and archivists appointed to do the oral history project need to be advised of the way forward. The Gauteng Provincial Archives identified a gap in the records being the provision of sports opportunities to persons living in previously disadvantaged areas of the province. The provincial archivists noted how the Soccer World Cup in 2010 impacted on the City of Johannesburg, yet there were no records or archival footage belonging to South Africa, as they contended that the video footage of the world cup all belonged to FIFA. The intention of the oral history project is to collect information from people themselves rather than rely on obtaining any footage from FIFA.

The provincial archives also noted that service delivery would be another theme to consider in the capturing of oral history accounts from different communities in Gauteng. However, disagreements frequently occur on whether the oral history projects belong under the information knowledge department or the provincial archives.

## **7. Conclusion**

Under the pre-1994 dispensation, South African public bodies were meticulous in creating and managing records, particularly those related to the construction of dams and related infrastructure (Tempelhoff 2015:162-163). Since 1994, the management and care of public records has been assigned a low status and the importance of managing records as evidence of governance, transparency and accountability is largely ignored, as has been indicated by scholars such as Makgahlela (2020), Ngwenya (2020), Ngoepe (2008) and Schellnack-Kelly

(2014). It is the contention of Ngoepe and Nkwe (2018) that the appraisal of public records by the national and provincial archivists is largely based on paper-based records. These authors further contend that little consideration has been given to considering electronic records and little efforts have been made to fill identified gaps with collections of oral history from different communities (Ngoepe & Nkwe 2018:139-140). These scholars state that the National Archives Appraisal Policy Guideline is an “eeny meeny miny mo” rhyme and is not based on scientific principles. However, it is the contention of this article, that if the macro-appraisal policy was effectively implemented by the South African national and provincial archives, the decisions made on what records have archival value from those that are regarded as ephemeral in nature would be based on a scientific model of trying to find the “best, most succinct, most focussed evidence” (Blouin & Rosenberg, 2005:175). If the national and provincial archivists conducted the appraisal projects immediately after the filing systems have been approved, it would mean that the appraisal of records classification systems would be based on contemporary concerns and would enable the archivists to identify gaps that may result from the collections of records being largely electronic. Contemporary concerns and developments at local government level on matters such as service delivery, matters related to land and housing, provision of basic services and interactions between different local communities may enable the archivists to identify themes that could be substantiated by including oral histories.

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