

9. I value, you value, we value... but what's *the* value?

Value assessment as a tool to manage sound and image collections

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Today, audiovisual collections account for a large portion of the world's memory. They are part of museums, serve as research documents for various types of scientific institutions, register history and provide us with a tangible witness of our most precious memories. Even though sound and image collections are generally accepted as being part of our cultural heritage, determining how to open such collections to a large audience is far from simple. Although value and significance assessments are increasingly used as collection management tools, they are labour intensive and organizationally demanding activities for collection managers and institutions. Nevertheless, such assessments are vital to ensure proper collection management today and in the future. Likewise, they provide us with an excellent tool for communicating about audiovisual collections, prioritizing in case of digitization and rendering their management comprehensible. This paper outlines a three-step methodology designed to facilitate assessing value in audiovisual collections.

Not only are sound and image records of great scientific value for various kinds of research, but their social significance is just as important. These collections present us with an unsurpassed tool to tell stories and strengthen human relations. However, archives, museums, libraries and other institutions around the world are struggling to conserve these collections in both analogue and digital formats. Despite the development of multiple tools, methodologies such as risk assessment and value analysis, international guidelines, ISO standards and so forth, their efficient management remains a complex task for collection managers and archivists.

One of the main reasons for this is the sheer size of most collections. Collections of more than 1 million physical items are not rare, but that number is easily surpassed by digital collections. Another element is the complex nature of most audiovisual objects; photographic objects can be unique (such as daguerreotypes or Polaroids) or reproducible. Both photography and film use a positive/negative technology – leading immediately to two different carriers of the same content. Video can be easily reproduced, and in the digital era it is even possible to create sound and image content that is indistinguishable from the 'original'. And in a virtual world are there still any originals or not?

These and other aspects render the management of audiovisual collections immensely complex. Consider the process for digitizing photographic images: Do we digitize the negative carrier or the positive? Or do we wait until another institution digitizes the same or a similar image and not invest in digitization at all?

Managing a collection is a constant decision-making process. We decide which objects to put on display, which ones to prioritize for digitization and which to deaccession. Currently, value and significance assessments have become part of the toolbox of the collection manager. They are an essential step in, for instance, risk assessments. "Value has always been the reason underlying heritage conservation" (Mason, 2002, p. 7).

If we consider an object to have value we select it for preservation and safeguard it in a museum for future generations. Exhibitions exploit the value of collections, conservation treatments safeguard their value and research enhances their value (Versloot, 2013, p. 9). When assessing risks it is the value (and the potential loss of value) in a specific context that plays a definite role in the outcome of such analysis. For instance, for a biological research institute, a beetle of which only 50 percent is preserved is still usable, which is not the case for a natural history museum whose main aim is to put the beetle (as a whole) on display. Identifying the value of an object is thus essential in the identification and mitigation of the risks to which the collection is vulnerable (Ashley-Smith, 1999, pp. 175–182; Meul, 2008).

We use our expertise to analyse the risks to our collections and to safeguard those collections for future generations. Although this rationale is quite often an organic process, to justify collection management plans it is nonetheless important to push the analysis and identify clearly the type of values on which we base our decisions. As such it is necessary to investigate this notion of ‘value’ further. Nonetheless, it is critical to identify not only the value and significance of a collection but also to whom it matters. No matter the method, such assessments are fraught with difficulties (Mason, 2002, pp. 5–6). For instance, besides artistic and economic factors, audiovisual collections are assigned other, less quantifiable values. Most of the currently used methodologies in the museum field rely on so-called statements of significance which are in most cases labour intensive. Moreover, the relative value and importance of our collections are subjected to many shifts that are both time and context dependent (Eastop, Bülow and Brokerhof, 2012; Racine *et al.*, 2009). Many collections have undergone a change in use since their creation. At the same time our view on heritage and what falls within its scope has changed.

For example, many photographic collections had their creation within the framework of the building of reference collections of research documents. Over the years, these collections have proven to be more than just research documents and carriers of information. Especially in the case of historically assembled collections, research sources comprise a large variety of photographic processes and technologies. Moreover, the physical manifestation of those processes and technologies offers new reference points that provide us with a better understanding of the image content. Likewise, many of these documents are proof of the origins of the collection. They often contain annotations on the back of the print, for instance, which adds value to the image content, as well as to the photograph as an artefact itself. A photograph collected by Aby Warburg, one of the founders

of modern art history, for example, is thus of greater significance than the same image outside this context (Löffler, 2014). As such, the value of many of these research collections lies in what is called their ‘ensemble value’ and the context-specific physical manifestation of the photographs.

When awareness of such values arises, a collection often undergoes a change in status. Such change has a huge impact on the way this heritage is both accessed and preserved. Nevertheless, many of these collections still have an active use as research collections, and preserving them as objects with intrinsic value is a difficult task. The only way forward is thus to find a feasible compromise between the collection in terms of its historical and research value and the collection in terms of its active use as a documentation source.

Furthermore, assessing the value of a collection is a complex discussion, and experts often have difficulty reaching a consensus. In most cases there are many justifications as to why something has value, but these are formulated from different viewpoints, and there is no common basis or method for comparing the various assertions (Arijs, 2014).

There is thus a need for a consistent methodology which can be used in different contexts. This should respect institutional traditions and take into account the unique and specific elements that define audiovisual collections. Likewise there is an overall need for more specific definitions of the value criteria – for example, how historical value can be assessed for photographs.

Defining value concepts for image collections (photography)

Well-known concepts such as historical, social or cultural values make up the pillars of our proposed methodology. Next to these main criteria, ‘comparative criteria’ – such as uniqueness, ensemble quality and state of conservation – are used (Reed, 2012; Russell and Winkworth, 2009; Versloot, 2013). As photographic collections are common in archival collections as well, we also employ concepts that are widely used in this field. Here the notion ‘intrinsic value’ is often used to describe the external formal features of items. Intrinsic value is ascribed to “permanently valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical form the only archivally acceptable form for preservation” (National Archives and Records Administration, 1982; see also Menne-Haritz and Brubach, 1996).

In the same way that archives make a distinction between intrinsic and informational value, a similar differentiation can

be made between the image content and the photographic object itself. A photograph can have an important historic value as far as the image is concerned, but when we consider the photographic support as an independent entity, the historic importance might be valued less. Likewise an ‘uninteresting’ image might have a historically significant type of support. Some repositories will tend to focus on the image content while others will give equal importance to both the material and image-related components of a photograph (Arijs, 2014, p. viii). For some photographic collections much of the value is represented by the physical artefacts; for others, for instance documentary collections, it might be the other way around. As such, a proper analysis of the value of a photographic object should allow for this sort of detailed differentiation.

Three main groups of assessment criteria and evaluative elements provide us with the base for our approach:

- *Characteristics/potential.* These are criteria used in determining the value of a specific photograph or subcollection at collection level. Most are closely related to the nature of the photographic object and allow judgements to be made in terms of the technical quality and state of conservation of the collection. Several of the proposed evaluative elements can also be used independently by collection caretakers to prioritize certain items when planning conservation and digitization campaigns.
- *Use values.* Subdivided into six categories, this set of criteria is used to analyse the research value of both the image and the photographic object, the legal elements linked to the photograph, the photograph’s informational value, the frequency of use, the current institutional use and the stakeholders on which the collection could have an impact.
- *Heritage values.* The main criteria here are historical, socio-cultural, ecological, aesthetic and more specific

photo-historical values. The first four types are consistent with the value criteria already used in the museum-and-heritage-sites field, although they are further defined to allow in-depth analysis according to the nature of the photographic collection.

The first group of components relating to the physical object are quite straightforward and can be assessed by the collection manager. They are to an extent fixed, save where the collection is subject to various kinds of risk or changes, as in the case of the collection being moved or items being added. Semi-fixed are those values we associate with use. They are subject to changes at the institutional level, changes in use and changes in access. A collection becoming more accessible can thus translate into the discovery of new values that add to both the initial use values and to such intangible values as the historical and socio-cultural. In this respect, consequently, large-scale stakeholder consultation is required, subject to the degree of accessibility, but even more so to the level of awareness about the collection, which in turn is also related to the collection’s topical significance (Fig. 1).

We value!

Being a complex discussion that often leads to heavy debating, it is important to begin from the same position. This allows participants to have an equal starting ground in terms of information, etc. Also it is essential that the purpose and context of the assessment is clearly stated and understood. To defuse possible misunderstandings between experts the methodology proposes a preparation step where the context of the collection and the repository’s expectations towards the collection are described. For this we ask three fundamental questions:

- *Who?* What is the mission mandate of the repository, and how does this relate to the collection?

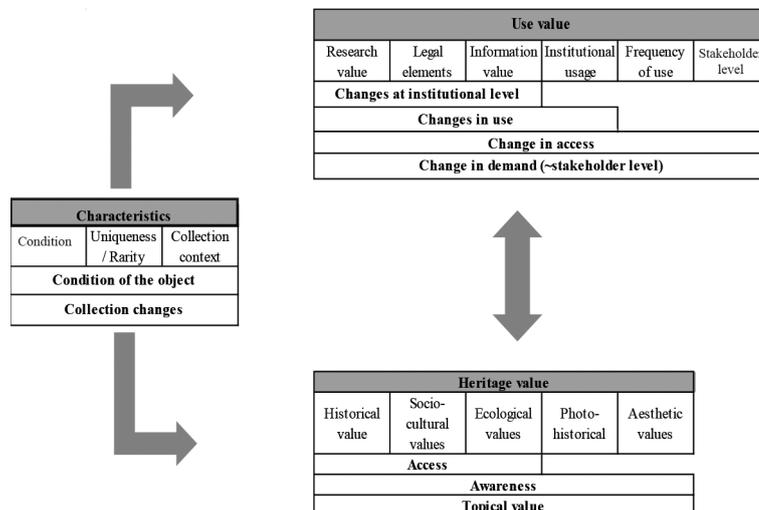


FIGURE 1. Interrelation of the different value components.

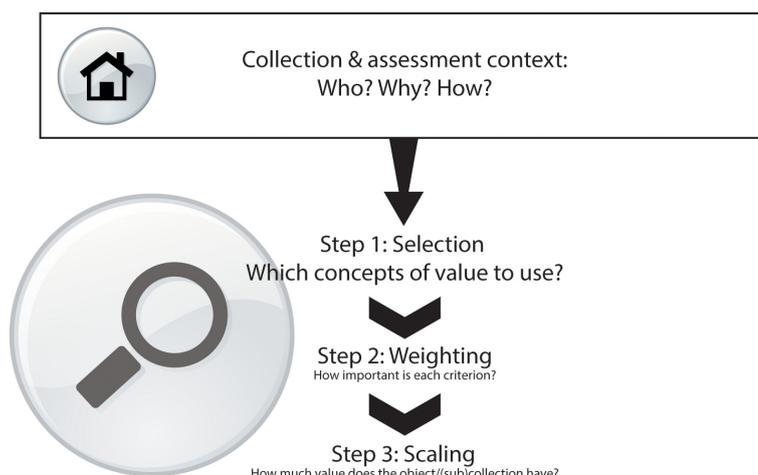


FIGURE 2. Schematic overview of the methodology.

- *Why?* In what way is the collection important for the repository? What is the role of the collection? Is it primarily an archival collection? Is it still actively used? Is there an active use foreseen in the future within the institution’s mandate?
- *How?* Has the repository the (legal) means to preserve the collection? Should the repository conserve the collection?

- Step 1: selecting the criteria. Which concepts of value to use?
- Step 2: weighting the criteria. How important is each criterion?
- Step 3: scaling each object/(sub)collection. How much value does the object/(sub)collection have?

When defining the context of the assessment and the collection, the available information plays an important role in the outcome of the analysis. As such it is important that mission statements, policies, mandates, an overview of the collection and its contents, its use and similar documents are accessible. Quite often the mission mandate of the institution does not fully overlap with the personal feelings of the experts assessing the collection. In that case there is a risk that the assessment will not correspond with the institutional mission of the repository. Likewise it is crucial to establish who will assess the collection and to state why these experts were chosen.

Selecting, weighting, scaling

Having taken care of the essential preparation – describing the collection and assessment context (who, why and how) – there follow three steps for assessing value (Fig. 2):

The first step in the methodology is to define the different value criteria in accordance with the information compiled in the preparatory phase. As well as selecting which components to use, participants are also asked to rank these according to their importance for the repository.

For instance a photography museum might find the aesthetical component to be equally important to the research value, but this might differ for a library. The principle of the proposed method is that all the components together represent 100 percent of the potential value of the collection. When assigning a weight to each of the criteria, the user defines how much of the total value is represented by each criterion. To allow for complete transparency, participants should offer some examples. This way statements such as ‘not important’ and ‘very important’ are less abstract.

TABLE 1. Definition of the different rankings of the assessment criteria

Not important	This criterion is not mentioned or supported in the mission mandate of the repository and does not have an impact on any of the activities of the institute.
Slightly important	This criterion has a moderate impact on some of the activities of the institute.
Moderately important	This criterion is in some way (but not formally) supported by the mission mandate of the repository and has an impact on some of the activities of the institute.
Important	This criterion is supported by the mission mandate of the repository and has an impact on the mission of the institute.
Very important	This criterion is central to the mission mandate of the repository and has an impact on the daily operation of the institute.

TABLE 2. Overview of the scales per component

Very high value	Twice as valuable as 'high value' and 100 times more than 'low value'.
High value	Five times more valuable than 'moderate value' and 50 times more than 'low value'.
Moderate value	Ten times more valuable than 'low value'.
Low value	Ten times less valuable than 'moderate value' and 100 times less valuable than 'very high value'.
No value	

Evaluation scales should be defined for each component.

A proper description is vital in order to establish what 'high' and 'low' value exactly mean.

Once the framework for the assessment has been created, collections or items can be assessed. Participants analyse to what extent the collection matches the criteria defined in step 1.

What's the value?

If used on a large scale, this methodological approach can enhance our understanding about *why* a certain object is more important than another, and help us to map some of the shifts in value to which image collections are subject. The framework also permits collections to be seen independent of their different contexts, allowing their common values to be identified. In this way, different institutional contexts open up to each other, enhancing the significance and value of the various collections. After all, identifying the value of image collections is the key to their preservation.

Conclusion

Although value assessment is widely recognized as an essential tool in the management of cultural heritage, for most sound and image collections this can be an overwhelming task for their caretakers. Nonetheless, if we want to preserve our audiovisual heritage, defining and analysing its value is key to its preservation. The proposed three-step methodology allows institutions to communicate clearly about the complexity of their collections by (1) clearly identifying the scope and starting position of the analysis, (2) selecting specific predefined criteria that represent the priorities of the repository and (3) evaluating each object and/or subcollection according to the framework determined in the previous step.

One of the main advantages is that this approach visualizes how we think about our collections and allows us to objectively explain why we prioritize one item or aspect over another. Likewise it offers a means to allow future generations insight into the decisions we make today. Furthermore, this methodology provides different institutions with a common language. In this way, discussing value becomes a way of actively *adding* value to collections.

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