

Appraisal and description of photography in Israeli archives in the light of archive's post-modern paradigm / Karin

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Abstract

The current study explores the appraisal and description of photography in Israeli archives in the light of paradigmatic changes in archival theory. The review of the field's literature focuses on current attitudes towards the appraisal and description of photography in archives. There has been significant criticism of the custodial, history-centric attitude of photography archivists. Alternative attitudes to the current trends, influenced by postmodern thinking, place an emphasis on the context of record creation instead of on the record itself. Moreover, the postmodern approach provides archivists with a more active role in constructing collective memory, in addition to preserving evidence. In addition, some methods that attempt to deal with the complexity of the photographic record, such as the new diplomatics for photography, have been referred to in the literature review.

This study traces the perception of photography as an archival record, the treatment approach to photographic records in practice, and attitudes towards postmodern theories. The research was conducted in 2015 with the participation of nine senior Israeli archivists. A qualitative method was used, including semi-structured interviews and content analysis of descriptive records of photography in the same archives.

Transcripts from the interviews were formulated into 17 content analytical units, while the descriptive records were expressed as 16 units. The units were then reduced to four main themes: the perception of archivist identity as a neutral mediator and the photographic record as historical evidence; the approach to the photographic record as a text-image; the approach to the photographic record as special material; and the attitude towards postmodern paradigm – the photographic record as narrow evidence that applies to a wide audience.

The results show a gap between theory and practice as suggested in the literature review. It seems that the popular approach to appraisal and description of photography in archives is still very much a custodial one, influenced by a bibliographic approach. The study indicates that the archivists focus their work on the preservation of photographic evidence, identifying historical details, single photograph content descriptions, and on copyrights, without referring to the specificity of photography as a media. On the other hand, the results show that elementary processes in turning materials into archival records, including the documentation of the photograph's context and original form – are applied sparingly or not at all. In other words, it seems that, in the archives studied, the content of photographic records was the most important element of description, while context and form were marginal. The study also indicates that archivists are not trained in an organized and extensive manner in the field of visual communication, photography and visual literacy.

Nevertheless, it seems that there are some tendencies which reflect the changes depicted in the literature review. For instance, both interviews and analysis of descriptive records show a "hospitable" approach towards users, and therefore may provide a social justification for archives. Moreover, the results indicate the existence of total archive in all the cases that were studied, both in terms of types (a mixture of public and private archives) and media (a combination of visual materials, such photography, and textual collections). This finding also supports the social justification of archives and their importance to collective memory. Results also show that there is a professional tendency regarding the standardization of description, including the use of international descriptive standards, usually with adaptations to local needs.

Few recommendations stem from this study. It is recommended that archivists undergo training to study the subject of appraisal related to photography, which can help in dealing with large numbers of photographs in the future. It is also recommended that specific methodologies be used for the appraisal and description of photographs, which will contribute to preservation of their meaning. On the other hand, it is important to document in the descriptive records of photography the fundamental principles of archival documentation, especially the

principle of provenance. Broadening the knowledge of archivists in the field of functional description is also recommended, in order to clarify the concept of function in the context of photography and to learn and assimilate the International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF). This would enable better understanding of the context in which photographic records were created. Finally, it is recommended that the training for archivists include visual communication and literacy.

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