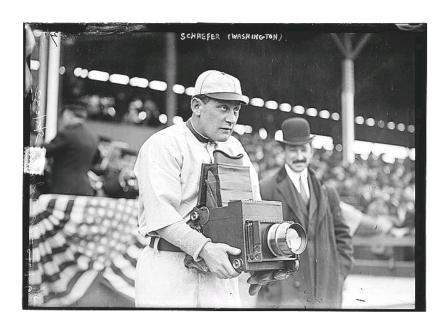# USE, VALUE, VIABILITY:
Criteria for Choosing Effective
Processing Levels for Visual Materials

Helena Zinkham, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Div. (hzin@loc.gov)
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Herman A. "Germany" Schaefer trying out the other side of the camera during the Washington Senators' game against the New York Highlanders, *April 1911.*
LC-DIG-ggbain-09131

1. **Connect a collection's characteristics with different kinds of processing actions** by assessing 3 criteria (**Use, Value, Viability**) and assigning a rating (**Low, Medium, High**).

   Criteria

   Use: who benefits—who will use the pictures and how often
   – General researchers
   – Creators and donors
   – Existing and future audiences
   – Archives or library itself

   Value: beneficial or important qualities of the visual material
   – Informational (subject matter)
   – Intrinsic (aesthetic, physical, associational)
   – Evidential   (info about creator's origins, functions, activities)
   – Monetary (market price)

   Viability: circumstances that limit actions or cause high processing costs
   – Legal status (access/reproduction rights; privacy concerns)
   – Preservation needs   (intensive housing/treatment/reformatting)
   – Competing priorities   (within an archives or country)
   – Available resources   (few staff, little storage space)

Scenario A: Civil War Glass Negatives

Scenario 1: Historic photos

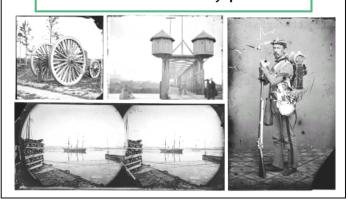U.S. Civil War Negatives

1860-1870

7,000 items

By Mathew Brady's firm

Interior of L.C. Handy Studio, Washington, D.C., in 1954, with piles of glass negatives dating back to Mathew Brady and U.S. Civil War.

Scenario 1: History photos

Verbal Snapshot

When Library of Congress staff went to pick up the famous Mathew Brady glass negatives in 1954, the physical situation was daunting. But excitement ran high over the visual content and potential usage for about 7,000 photos from the American Civil War era. In 2001, staff revisited the collection for a high-resolution digitizing project.

Use

Tremendously popular images with a wide range of users–general public, teachers, re-enactors, TV shows, and more. Many images were frequently published, while some had rarely been seen–very exciting for Civil War historians.

Value

Information-rich photos featuring military activities but also daily life. Powerful artifact values: these negatives were at the war in Antietam, Gettysburg, and Atlanta. There's also a high intrinsic value–strong visual image communication by gifted photographers.

Viability

Some positive aspects, such as no reproduction rights issues. Digital surrogates are costly to produce but can also end the risks of printing from rare, fragile wet collodion plates. Another kind of risk: the original caption info is far from complete and not as accurate as users would wish–very expensive to verify and flesh out even basic things like the names of places, people, and regiments. Expert partnerships needed.

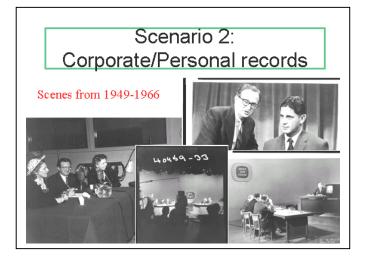## Scenario 1: Rating

Uses:

Values:

Conditions:

Add your own ratings.

Scenario B: Meet the Press Collection

Scenario 2: Corporate/Personal records

- NBC and Spivak
- Meet the Press TV and radio show photos
- 1945-1980
- 6,000 items

Scenario 2: Corporate/Personal records

Scenes from 1949-1966

Verbal Snapshot

When Lawrence Spivak donated his "Meet the Press" TV and radio show records, the photos were appraised as supporting illustrations for the study of the moving image footage and textual transcripts. The approx. 6,000 8x10-inch prints and contact sheets feature stock portraits of Spivak with his guests and studio scenes with panelists.

Use
Regular usage is expected. Not all of the people appear in other collections and early TV equipment is visible. It's a once a year situation.

Value
The intrinsic value is modest given the many similar scenes and repeated subjects. There's documentation of early TV production, but overall more evidential than informational value. A few autographed portraits have high monetary value; a few portrait subjects are unique to the library. But it's a small proportion among the 6,000 images.

Viability
Many of the photos arrived well organized in clearly labeled manila office folders and in good physical shape. Rights status is known, but time-consuming to get reproduction permission. Negatives are hard to match to prints.

Scenario 2: Rating

Uses:

Values:

Conditions:

Meet the Press--Martha Rountree, Lawrence Spivak, May Craig ..., 1949

Add your own ratings.

2. **Scoring chart**.
   Optionally, set up a reference table to identify the most promising or beneficial collections to process—collections rated at a certain numeric level or higher. (Idea adapted from NFPA 909 fire risk analysis grids.)

   Each repository could determine its own cut-off score for "most promising processing candidates." In the example below, collections that score 7 or higher are shaded to indicate the different combinations of Use, Value, and Viability that could fall into a "process me first" bucket. The chart could also help you spot low-scoring collections where limited kinds of processing activities suffice.

<p align="center">Low = 1   Medium = 2   High = 3</p>

Use	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
Value	L	L	L	M	M	M	H	H	H
Viability	L	M	H	L	M	H	L	M	H
Total	3	4	5	4	5	6	5	6	7

Use	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Value	L	L	L	M	M	M	H	H	H
Viability	L	M	H	L	M	H	L	M	H
Total	4	5	6	5	6	7	6	7	8

Use	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
Value	L	L	L	M	M	M	H	H	H
Viability	L	M	H	L	M	H	L	M	H
Total	5	6	7	6	7	8	7	8	9

Variation 1: You could **weight the criteria that matters most** to your repository. For example, weight "use" by doubling its score. Here's an example of the "Medium Uses" chart, shown above, with the score for "medium" multiplied by 2. (A "medium use" counts here as 4 points instead of 2 points.) Five more collections now make the cut as the "most promising candidates" from a usage perspective.

Use x 2	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
Value	L	L	L	M	M	M	H	H	H
Viability	L	M	H	L	M	H	L	M	H
Total	6	7	8	7	8	9	7	9	10

Variation 2: You could **add a fourth criterion, like a trump card, to identify collections to process first due to a great preservation need, a donor demand, or an external project deadline**. For example, take any individual collection's score and add 10 points because the donor provided money to process the photographs as long as the work starts within a year.

Variation 3: You could give an entire collection one rating, or, when the criteria vary widely among parts of a collection, you could **assign different ratings to special series or selected items**.

3. **Processing Levels**

Develop three degrees of arrangement and description: Baseline, Standard, and Premium. Naming distinct levels of attention makes it easier to recognize what kinds of processing are appropriate for collections with different combinations of Use, Value, and Viability. The specific goals and actions for each level would be determined through community-wide discussion or local agreement. (The examples below are provided only to test the concept of variable processing levels for visual materials.) Ideally, a set of community-wide principles might be established first to guide the appropriate goals and actions.

BASELINE

All collections receive this minimum, basic care. "Baseline" may be the first phase in fuller processing work, or the last stage for a relatively low use and low value body of material.

Goals
- Invest in accessioning (this may be your only description for a while)
- Emphasize safe handling preservation measures
- Survey all holdings before processing selected collections in depth

Actions
Possible examples:
- **Accession record** has 11 elements (the 9 minimum *DACS*[1] elements + 2 for collection management):
  - Title
  - Date(s)
  - Extent/Media
  - Creator
  - Scope/Content
  - Access status
  - Language
  - Repository
  - Ref. code #
  - Source info
  - Physical condition
- **Safe handling** training provided for staff and users alike
- Archival boxes, but **little re-foldering or sleeving**
- Arrangement schemes are simple
- Photos stay interfiled with textual materials
- Box-level container list (not folder-level)
- Description: include the word 'photographs' or 'visual materials'

STANDARD

The path to take for most collections, because the actions are effective and "good-to-go." The actions can also vary among series, folder, and item-level attention according to the Use, Value, Viability.

Goals
- Invest in full inventory control
- Provide special storage environments (cold)
- Use archival housings and containers (as needed)
- Consider arranging photos in detail (to folder-level)
- Offer selected item-level access with digital surrogates
- Optimum description, with some subject access points (see *DACS*)

Actions
Possible examples:
- Automated collection management system
- Cold storage for photos (film, color, prints)
- Negatives housed separately from prints
- Archival folders and (as needed) polyester sleeves
- Some folder-level & item-level finding aids
- Description features subject access + digital images

PREMIUM

The most highly used and valued collections, or parts of collections and selected items, fall here.

Goals
- Invest in maximum collection life cycle management
- Achieve top line preservation goals
- Facilitate off-site access through frequent digitizing in advance of user requests
- Added value description with numerous physical condition and subject notes (see *DACS*)

Actions
Possible examples:
- Collection management system integrated with online catalog. Lots of elements for preservation, inventory, and other life cycle status tracking.
- Cold/cool storage with different temperatures for color photos, b&w, and glass/metal
- Item-level housing for each photo (sleeve or mat) made with ideal materials
- Item-level or folder-level description with many digital image surrogates
- Correlate negatives and prints at frame-level and mark with unique ID numbers

NEXT STEPS

o Keep making choices. Rely on a 'fitness for purpose' approach to processing.

o Talk and write more about physical processing techniques for photos and other visual materials.

o Keep going beyond preservation and connoisseurship to work at the heart of 'access' for users; provide at least baseline physical processing and description for lots of visual materials.

CONCLUSION. Key activities for visual materials in archives and libraries:

o Accession new items with care.

o Prioritize processing according to criteria such as use, value, and viability.

o Seek cool and cold storage as primary preservation tool.

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[1] *DACS* is *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004)