

Putting PDA in Context

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Introduction

The growing area of personal digital archiving (PDA) promotes collaboration between information professionals and their publics, with the shared goals of supporting digital information fluency and assisting individuals in their efforts to preserve their own personal digital materials. In many ways, PDA has grown out of and in response to previous movements and theoretical paradigms in archival and information science history. This chapter sets out to introduce some of these areas – namely early archival theory, personal information management, digital curation, and the digital record lifecycle – in order to situate current PDA practices and scholarship within a larger historical and theoretical framework. A contextual understanding of PDA is especially helpful for us as we begin to imagine how this growing area of focus may impact the larger field of information science, and those of us working within it, as we move forward.

Information professionals have a stake in the PDA discussion not only because any number of the digital records currently being created by private individuals could one day be acquired by our repositories, but because we ourselves create vast and diverse personal digital archives of our own. As a result of this dual perspective, it has been observed that the ways in which our own personal practices often deviate from our professional standards.¹ With a foot firmly planted in both worlds, we are uniquely positioned to see that the best practices we adhere to in professional

¹ Devin Becker and Collier Nogues, "Saving-Over, Over-Saving, and the Future Mess of Writers' Digital Archives: A Survey Report on the Personal Digital Archiving Practices of Emerging Writers," *The American Archivist* 75, no. 2 (2012), 499.

settings simply do not always comply with the myriad ways we create, use, and save records in our day-to-day lives. The current PDA landscape creates a space for considering issues of personal information management in conjunction with professional archival and records management practices in new and interesting ways.² Exploring collaboration and conversation across these disciplinary areas of focus is increasingly necessary as information professionals from different areas find themselves at the same table – and often, occupying multiple seats at that table.

It is, of course, impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of each of the various approaches to and influences on this work in a single chapter. Rather, what follows is intended to serve as a brief introduction to the professional literature in several areas that are particularly relevant to the current personal digital archiving landscape in order to place current PDA efforts in context, and to point to opportunities for further learning. This chapter begins with the treatment of personal papers in early archival theory and practice, and moves into practices associated with personal information management and digital curation, followed by discussions around the record lifecycle and points of archival intervention. It ends with some observations about how PDA, which has grown out of the aforementioned areas of focus, may be signaling changes in the information professions, with particular emphasis on archival outreach, interdisciplinary collaboration, and conceptions of objectivity in the archives.

Personal Papers in Archival Theory

The personal papers of individuals and families from periods throughout history can be found in many archival repositories today. But personal papers have occupied a somewhat

² Christopher A. Lee and Robert Capra. “And Now the Twain Shall Meet: Exploring the Connections between PIM and Archives,” *I, Digital: Personal Collections in the Digital Era* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 29-77.

tentative position in archival theory and practice throughout the history of the profession. Before elaborating further, it is helpful here to define what is meant by personal archives or papers, and what has distinguished them from other archival records. Public archives refer to collections comprised of records from government and other public institutions, ranging from the federal to the local. These are defined as being systematically created and collected in the course of regular operations, often using mandated, consistent conventions.³ Personal archives, which have often been defined as a subset of the broader category of private archives, have historically been defined by what they are not; which is to say, by their failure to meet the criteria of public archives as set forth by early archival theorists.⁴ An accepted professional definition identifies personal papers simply as:

(also personal records, private papers), n. ~ 1. Documents created, acquired, or received by an individual in the course of his or her affairs and preserved in their original order (if such an order exists). – 2. Nonofficial documents kept by an individual at a place of work.⁵

Traditionally, the private archives of an individual or family have been made up of such record types as diaries, correspondence, commonplace books, manuscript drafts, scrapbooks, photographs, and all variety of ephemera. Today, individuals continue to create these familiar records, but it has increasingly become the case that personal archives are hybrid, consisting of both analog and digital materials. These personal archives might then also include email, social media profiles, multimedia files stored on hard drives or cloud storage accounts, personal websites,

³ Richard Pearce-Moses, “Archives,” *A Glossary of Archival & Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).

⁴ Mikael Korhonen, “Private Digital Archives – Lost Cultural Heritage?” in *Essays on Libraries, Cultural Heritage and Freedom of Information*, ed. Dorrit Gustafsson and Kristina Linnovaara (National Library of Finland, 2013), 84.

⁵ Richard Pearce-Moses, “Personal papers.”

and so forth. The introduction of these materials to the archives has required that archivists rethink traditional approaches to the appraisal, preservation, and access of personal papers.

Influential archival scholars Hilary Jenkinson and T.R. Schellenberg considered personal records to fall outside of the purview of proper archives (“proper archives” being those generated in the course of government or corporate activity) for a variety of reasons, tellingly referring to them instead as personal manuscripts, a term that persists to this day.⁶ Both Jenkinson and Schellenberg considered these collections to be better suited to the custody of libraries, museums, or historical societies, and indeed, personal archives are still to be found in any of these institutions. Though as Rob Fisher has written, by distinguishing private from public records, and explaining the exclusion of the former from archival theory, both Jenkinson and Schellenberg did have their fair share to say, if implicitly, on the subject of personal papers.⁷ This distinction between the public and private archive has continued to impact modern archival theory and practice, as archivists have had to formulate new approaches to personal records. While personal papers have long been collected by a variety of cultural heritage organizations, the exclusion of these materials from early literature has resulted in a disconnect between archival theory and the actual professional practices of archivists working with personal collections.⁸

For Jenkinson, the primary reasons for excluding these types of personal records from archival theory and practice were their potentially faulty provenance and the subjectivity of the records themselves.⁹ Personal collections could pass through the hands of many creators before making it to the archives, and the collections could consist of records of whom the creator was

⁶ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A manual of archive administration* (London: P. Lund, Humphries & Co., 1937); T.R. Schellenberg, *The management of archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

⁷ Rob Fisher, “In Search of a Theory of Private Archives: The Foundational Writings of Jenkinson and Schellenberg Revisited,” *Archivaria* 67 (2009), 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

unverifiable; these factors, in addition to the unreliable nature of personal narrative, threatened the objectivity of the historical record produced by the personal collection. For Schellenberg, a primary reason for excluding private records from archival repositories was that of evidence, which personal papers, in his estimation, could not adequately provide.¹⁰ Professional conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity – of archivists as well as of archives – have changed significantly in the history of the archival profession. Modern approaches to archives increasingly reject the notion the objectivity or neutrality in the archives are either possible or desirable, but for Jenkinson and Schellenberg, archival records were intended to reflect, objectively, the activities of public administrations. Sue McKemmish revisits the idea of evidence in her work on the value of personal records in “Evidence of Me,” connecting personal records with the establishment of collective memory, placing greater historical value in the very subjectivity of the personal record. The subjective accounts of many individuals provide a more nuanced (and perhaps more truthful) perspective than does a single dominant narrative of history.

In part, it can be challenging for contemporary information professionals to theorize personal archives because they are so unique to their creators. Where public archiving practices can be as standardized according to terms of government or corporate records management, personal archiving practices may be orderly and consistent, entirely chaotic, or anywhere in between, depending on the practices of the individual.¹¹ Yet in spite of the diversity of records and their organizational structures, personal archives are not simply a haphazard assemblage of disparate materials; they reflect the life and context of the creator.

¹⁰ Riva A. Pollard, “The Appraisal of Private Archives: A Critical Literature Review.” *Archivaria* 47 (2001), 139.

¹¹ Korhonen, “Private Digital Archives – Lost Cultural Heritage?” 84

Today, many – if not most – archives have adopted what is referred to as the “total archives” approach – one that assumes custody of both public and private archives within the same institution. And for some archivists and researchers, it may be these private or personal collections that drew them to the archives in the first place. These collections have, as Catherine Hobbs as written, an “intimacy...not present in the collective, corporate, formalized record-keeping system.”¹² And while in the past, a paucity of literature focused on personal archives has been lamented, scholarship on this area has flourished in recent history.¹³ In addition to the richness and intimacy of personal archives, the rise of born-digital records can be credited with contributing to the increased interest in personal archives.

Personal Information Management

The increasing rate at which records are created in hybrid and digital forms has required information professionals to reconsider traditional approaches to archival processes and procedures. Often, personal collections, while still in the custody of their creators, have been subject to a form of benign neglect that is often explained by way of the shoebox metaphor.¹⁴ As the name suggests, the shoebox metaphor is a model in which an individual might personal papers or records that they consider valuable in a shoebox, perhaps under a bed or in a closet. Untouched, these items remain stable and are generally in good physical condition when the box is eventually accessed, even if years have passed (provided, of course, the box was not stored in damaging environmental conditions like high heat or humidity). However, two important aspects of the

¹² Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” in *Archivaria* 47 (2001), 127.

¹³ Rodney G. S. Carter et al., “Perspectives on Personal Archives,” *Archivaria* 76, no. 0 (2013): 1–5.

¹⁴ Amber L. Cushing, “Highlighting the Archives Perspective in the Personal Digital Archiving Discussion,” *Library Hi Tech* 28 (2010), 305.

shoebox metaphor are complicated by the presence of materials created and stored in digital forms: first, in the shoebox model most, if not all, items are collocated in a single physical space; and second, fragile physical items benefit when left alone, not subjected to the wear and tear of regular use. But a personal digital archive is likely to be distributed across many locations: perhaps on email account servers, hard drives, old computers, and multiple social media platforms, to name only a few of the myriad possibilities. And as scholarship in digital preservation has demonstrated, if digital objects are left alone for too long, with neither updating nor migrating, they stand to be significantly degraded, if not lost completely.¹⁵ In thinking through the complications posed by the introduction of digital records to the shoebox metaphor, we begin to see how personal information management (PIM) and digital preservation methods stand to benefit PDA.

Some scholars have suggested that “archival literature about personal archiving mainly revolves around the management and care of personal papers [that have been acquired by collecting institutions] and thus lacks the individual focus” of PIM behaviors associated with archiving.¹⁶ PIM is defined as “the practice and study of the activities people perform to acquire, organize, maintain, retrieve, use and control the distribution of information items such as documents (paper-based and digital), web pages and email messages for everyday use to complete tasks (work-related or not)” and is primarily concerned with the relationship between the creator and the record, rather than the relationship between the record and the archives.¹⁷ PIM scholarship examines the information-seeking, -storing, and usage of individuals working with active records.

¹⁵ Williams, Peter, Jeremy Leighton John, and Ian Rowland, “The Personal Curation of Digital Objects: A Lifecycle Approach,” *Aslib Proceedings* 61, no. 4 (July 5, 2009): 354.

¹⁶ Amber L. Cushing, “Highlighting the Archives Perspective in the Personal Digital Archiving Discussion,” 302.

¹⁷ William Jones and Jaime Teevan, eds., *Personal Information Management* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 3.

Considering PIM alongside archival practice, then, enables us to take a more holistic view of the record in all stages of its lifecycle, considering creation and active use as well as preservation.¹⁸

Intersectional work across the areas of archives and PIM creates a space to address more comprehensively the challenges of managing and preserving personal digital archives in a variety of contexts. While private or personal papers are now considered to be significant to collecting archives, it is also important to bear in mind that for many individual creators of records, the imagined or intended publics of their personal collections are not necessarily the archives and researchers; rather they may be relatives, friends, or community members. Regardless of the intentions for future use, the knowledge and skills of the information professional nonetheless remain important factors for the preservation of personal collections. The more a collection's imagined uses and users are understood, the easier it will be to tailor a situation-specific preservation strategy. Emphasizing education and outreach around PIM for individuals and communities preserving collections for their own purposes relieves those interested in PDA of the notion that accession into a professional archives is necessarily the end goal of preserving personal records.

As personal archives have been created more frequently in digital formats, and in greater quantities, information professionals have been given cause to reimagine traditional approaches to their work in order to meet the needs of personal digital collections, including the incorporation of PIM scholarship and methods and the inclusion of citizen archivists.¹⁹ In this reimagining, archivists are encouraged to learn about and work with record creators, assisting them in the

¹⁸ Lee and Capra, "And Now the Twain Shall Meet: Exploring the Connections between PIM and Archives."

¹⁹ Zastrow, Jan. Crowdsourcing cultural heritage: 'citizen archivists' for the future. *Computers in Libraries* 34, no. 8 (October 2014).

creation of stable, well-organized, and accessible personal digital collections. In this area, the work of researchers like Catherine C. Marshall has been extremely revealing, particularly in regard to better understanding how private individuals store, update, and migrate their digital files, or, in many cases, how they don't.

Record Lifecycles and the Archival Intervention

In some respects, just as archival theory began with public records and has been adapted to suit private records, practices related to digital archives and preservation have been developed for institutional or public records and subsequently adapted to meet the needs of the everyday digital assets of private individuals.²⁰ Richard J. Cox has written that growing concerns around digital preservation would likely direct increased attention to personal papers.²¹ Indeed, this does appear to be the case. Cox uses the examples of digital photographs and camera phones to illustrate this point. As the practice of using digital or cellphone cameras has grown, so too has the availability of software designed to help individuals store, manage, and share their personal digital photographs. Likewise, information professionals and technologists have developed and maintained digital image preservation standards that continue to address emerging equipment and file formats.²²

As discussed above, PDA workshops and tutorials create a space in which information professionals can communicate those standards and best practices to users based on their current PIM strategies and level of comfort with technology. This increased emphasis on public outreach

²⁰ Catherine C. Marshall, "Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 1: Four Challenges from the Field," *D-Lib Magazine* 14 (2008).

²¹ Cox, Richard J. *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections and Ruminations*. Duluth: Litwin Books LLC, 2008, 178.

²² Library of Congress Recommended Formats Statement, <http://www.loc.gov/preservation/resources/rfs/>.

and education has underlined a professional debate about the proper point in the record lifecycle at which information professionals ought to intervene for preservation purposes. For those new to the concept, the records lifecycle comes from records management and digital curation. It has been illustrated with a cradle-to-grave metaphor, encompassing creation, classification, use, storage, and disposal.²³ This concept serves as a critical reminder that digital records are almost constantly in flux; they are created, used, edited or revised, saved, and sometimes deleted. Using the record lifecycle model, we can consider the specific features and requirements of our records at each stage more precisely. In this framework, records are not static or stagnant; rather, they occupy many forms and may have many different needs between the time when they are created and the time when they are either preserved or destroyed.

Archival records, for the most part, arrive at a repository at an inactive stage in their lifecycle, and in some cases, at specific points designated prior to their creation. Those inactive records are then maintained and often made available to researchers according to predetermined schedules. Personal records, which may be acquired at a greater variety of stages in the records lifecycle, and may have any number of privacy or legal restrictions based on the materials themselves and the instruction of their creators. And as previously noted, with digital records in particular, “if archivists waited for the individual creator to approach the archive, records would be lost, a collection would be incomplete.”²⁴

For this reason, many have advocated for intervention earlier in the lifecycle of the personal record. This, early-intervention advocates suggest, will better ensure the long-term viability of the digital object. Some go further, suggesting that it is important to intervene prior even to the creation

²³ Gordon E.J. Hoke, “Records Life Cycle: A Cradle-to-Grave Metaphor,” *RIM Fundamentals*, September-October 2011.

²⁴ Cushing, “Highlighting the Archives Perspective in the Personal Digital Archiving Discussion,” 304

of digital records. If digital materials are created with preservation in mind, creators will choose the most sustainable file formats, documentation practices, and storage solutions. The idea of early intervention recalls Marshall's assertion that archiving must be intentional, not merely a side effect of record creation and use.²⁵

Some researchers and practitioners of archives have warned against early intervention on the part of the archivist, however, as it has the potential to influence or altogether change records in unanticipated ways, compromising the integrity of the evidence they provide.²⁶ This was of particular concern to Jenkinson, who put considerable stock in the objectivity of archival records.²⁷ Similar arguments have been made about the very existence of the archive itself, suggesting that if we know about the archive, we create and self-edit with posterity in mind. In fact, this is a concept that persists beyond any formal sense of the archive, much less the digital archive. Thomas Mallon has written of diaries, for example, that perhaps we always write in our diaries with some reader in mind, even if that reader is an unknown figure in the future.²⁸ While debates about the optimal points of intervention will likely continue, it is likely safe to suggest that those engaged in PDA see the value in providing the public with the skillset required to create personal digital records that will be accessible at least during their own lifetimes, if not beyond.

Implications for Students, Educators, and Practitioners

The growth of the personal digital archiving movement poses a number of potential questions and opportunities for current and future information professionals. Building upon the

²⁵ Marshall, "Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 1: Four Challenges from the Field."

²⁶ Rachel Onuf and Tom Hyry, "The Personality of Electronic Records: The Impact of New Information Technology on Personal Papers," *Archival Issues* 22 (1997), 43.

²⁷ Jenkinson, *A manual of archive administration*.

²⁸ Thomas Mallon, "A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries," (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1984), xvi.

theoretical frameworks, methods, and skills described in this chapter will be not only useful but necessary for librarians and archivists moving forward within a new paradigm of digital and hybrid personal collections.

One significant implication of the growing emphasis on PDA outreach is that librarians and archivists will likely work more and more in direct collaboration with their publics. Librarians and archivists, as both creators of digital personal records and professionals trained in information behavior, digital preservation, and archival management, are uniquely poised to work with members of the public, and to assist them in making the best possible choices for saving their own personal digital collections. This gestures toward a continuing shift from historical models of the librarian or archivist as a “gatekeeper” of information toward a more user-focused approach to collections.²⁹ Providing public outreach and education is, of course, far from being a new responsibility for many information professionals; nonetheless, the nature of PDA workshops, labs, and instruction sessions thus far demonstrates a very open form of communication between archives in particular and their publics. In these settings, individuals may learn strategies and techniques from the professionals, but at the same time, the professionals have an invaluable opportunity to learn directly from individuals how they create, use, and save the digital objects that matter to them. If the preservation of digital objects begins at their point of creation, as has been suggested, a comprehensive PIM-archival approach is especially beneficial, as it considers all stages of the record lifecycle.

PDA also requires information professionals to take a flexible, scalable, and collaborative approach to their work. Collaboration with researchers and practitioners from other disciplines and information professionals from other areas of focus is a critical component of an effective outreach

²⁹ Korhonen, “Private Digital Archives – Lost Cultural Heritage?” 87.

strategy. Information professionals in these roles must meet people where they are and help them develop practical, tailored strategies that will work for them. In other words, the best PDA strategy is not necessarily the same preservation policy adhered to within professional archives, but rather the preservation policy that an individual can consistently implement and sustain. This may mean incorporating new skills and technologies that are geared toward the casual individual user rather than the professional archivist into information science curricula or continuing education workshops where they are not already taught – for example, creating a digital oral history, personal photo management, or community organizing. Preserving the digital records of many individuals with many disparate goals requires not only a solid grasp of current and past personal computing technologies, but a variety of soft skills, from public speaking to asking helpful questions to presenting information in a clear, concise manner.

Work in the area of PDA also has, perhaps most meaningfully, the potential to continue to challenge professional notions of the objectivity and neutrality of both archivists and archival records. The notion, supported by Jenkinson and other early archival theorists, that archivists should assume a professional position free of subjectivity has been largely rejected by modern archival scholarship. Working directly with record creators and potentially influencing their processes is a departure from the more passive, neutral custody described in early professional manuals. As Sue McKemmish has written, through preserving the records of individuals, we collaboratively build the record of a community.³⁰ The more we know about our publics, the better we are able to meaningfully partner with and support them. As we work with and learn from our constituents, we stand to learn more about our personal and professional practices and biases.

³⁰ Sue McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” *The Australian Library Journal* 45, no. 3 (January 1, 1996): 174–87, doi:10.1080/00049670.1996.10755757.

Through this work, we may begin to better identify and address existing gaps and silences in the archives.

Conclusion

While we can't predict what the future holds for the personal digital archiving labs, workshops, and tutorials that have begun to emerge at institutions throughout the country, turning to previous moments and movements in the history of archives and records management, PIM, and digital curation gives us some insight into the evolution of professional practice and theory. Thinking about PDA as one area of focus within a dynamic, evolving field lends us a framework for considering how current practices may lay the groundwork for new developments in libraries and archives. Through this lens, we can see PDA workshops and labs as a current iteration of the archival profession's ever-evolving treatment of personal archives. We can also see how archivists continue to expand our practice to incorporate concepts and strategies other subsets of information science. PDA provides us with opportunities to reconsider personal digital archives from the perspectives of individual record creators as well as those of professionals in many specialized areas of information science, and to make new meaning in the middle ground of these points of view.

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