

Primacy of Paper: The Importance of the Medium in Records Management

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ABSTRACT

This poster presents findings from a group ethnographic study of records managers at four different sites. At the site that is the focus of this analysis, research participants' tasks primarily consisted of examining individual case files to determine if the files should be kept or destroyed under the relevant rules set by records managers. Close observation of work practices showed that application of records management rules varied depending on the medium of the records. This study begins the work of bridging a gap between archival and records management policies for interactions with records across varying media, and empirical research on how people interact with objects on varying media.

Keywords

Records management, archives, records medium, ethnography, digital objects.

INTRODUCTION

Records management is the “field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records...” (ISO 15489-1:2001, clause 3.16). In practice, the job of a records manager is to provide guidance for their organization regarding the retention and destruction of records. This guidance is based on legal requirements for records retention, and may range from development of organizational policy to advising individual employees on recordkeeping practices. The research described here was part of a group ethnographic study that examined records management practices at four different research sites. The kinds of tasks described above were typical for records managers at most of the sites investigated in this study. One

site, however, was quite different. At this site, four records clerks (supervised by a manager) applied records management rules for retention and destruction of records on a large scale. These records were case files created by case workers in offices around the state, and were sent to external long term storage facilities once they were not in regular use. During this fieldwork, the research site office was at the beginning of a multi-year project. The purpose of the project was to sort out records that were in storage but were past their destruction dates, and destroy them (so that the state was not paying to store records that it was not required to keep). Records from the storage facility would be brought to the office for the clerks to review. This poster discusses findings from that site, an office under the purview of the state Department of Children and Family Services, or DCFS.¹

LITERATURE REVIEW

Records are created on various types of media, and the shift from paper to digital as the primary medium of creation for business records has received serious attention from scholars in the field of archival science (e.g. Galloway 2003, Yeo 2010), as archives are often the eventual recipients of records determined to have long-term value by records managers. Duranti has done extensive work on the authenticity of records in the archival and records management contexts. Her work has primarily had the aim of guiding policy rather than investigating human behavior. For instance, in findings from the first phase of the InterPARES project², she and Thibodeau determined that

¹ The actual name of the state department has been replaced with a common name for this type of department in several states for purposes of confidentiality. Names of participants have also been changed.

² InterPARES (International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems) is an SSHRC-funded project focused on “developing the knowledge essential to the long-term preservation of authentic records created and/or maintained in digital form and providing the basis for standards, policies, strategies and plans of action

“the medium is not a relevant factor in assessing a record’s authenticity,” and that transfer of a record from one medium to another does not affect the authenticity of the record (Duranti & Thibodeau 2006, 18). The perspective that the medium is not salient as a limiting characteristic in defining a record is also reflected in the definition of records management provided by ARMA International, the leading records management professional organization. They define the field as the management of: “any recorded information, regardless of medium or characteristics, made or received and retained by an organization in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business” (ARMA International 2014). It is not clear, however, that everyday human interactions with records actually align with these guidance statements.

The human-computer interaction (HCI) community has recently begun to investigate differences and similarities in human interactions with digital and physical objects (see Gulotta et al. 2013, Kaye et al. 2006, Kirk & Sellen 2010, Odom et al. 2011, Petrelli & Whittaker 2010). In a study on the comparative “cherishable”-ness of digital and physical objects, Golsteijn et al. found that “Participants indicated... some difficulties thinking about ‘digital objects’: ‘you don’t see [digital media] as objects. From the start they are not objects... Even though most things are ephemeral, these are even more... I mean there’s no solid” (2012, 7). A study of how people talk about digital possessions that are in Cloud storage found that “people’s feelings about digital ownership are better described as either uncertainty or uneasiness” and that “possession becomes a difficult concept when the thing possessed has no geographic locale” (Odom et al. 2012, 788). This quote illustrates how, when an object is perceived as not having a physical location, it becomes harder to think of that object as stable and reliable. These sentiments reflect the perceived immateriality of digital objects, a topic that has been recognized by many (e.g. Blanchette 2011, Dourish & Mazmanian 2011, Hayles 1999), although not often investigated empirically until recently.

Further research is needed to bridge the gap between the empirical perspective taken by the HCI studies and the workplace setting to which the archival and records management work applies. The study discussed here seeks to address that gap.

METHODS

The complete study, designed as a broad investigation of the profession of records management, was carried out at four different records management offices by twelve researchers. Each researcher observed work practices at one site four times over a period of two months in 2013. Observation sessions were three to four hours long. For

capable of ensuring the longevity of such material and the ability of its users to trust its authenticity.”

each observation session, a researcher shadowed one participant, observing work practices, interactions with colleagues, and the work environment as a whole. During observations, researchers took detailed notes and audio-recorded conversations between multiple participants. Photographs, hand-drawn maps of offices, and copies of forms used in work practices supplemented these notes and recordings. There were four clerks and two managers, ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties, at the DCFS office during the fieldwork. Participants were Latino/a, African-American, and white. One participant had a college degree; the rest did not. Participants were trained for their positions on the job, and were not required to have previous records management experience. At the DCFS site, four researchers observed participants for a total of 39.5 hours (averaging 3.5 hours per observation). These observations yielded 227 pages of notes (including transcribed audio recordings). After observations were complete, each researcher conducted short (1/2 hour) interviews with two participants, asking follow-up questions and checking their interpretations of data.

Researchers analyzed data individually. During the time when researchers were active in the field, the author took notes on themes that arose during observation and reviewing notes. Post-fieldwork, researchers used ATLAS.ti qualitative coding software to code their own and others’ notes, thereby confirming or rejecting the potential themes that arose during observations. The theme of the medium of the records, and variances in participant behavior related to records medium, was strongly present in researcher notes from the DCFS.

This research is not intended to be generalizable, but instead uses close observation over a relatively long period of time to provide the “thick description” (Geertz 1973) for which ethnography is known.

DISCUSSION

Age, not medium, is the official determining factor for decisions about keep and destroy categorizations of records. The clerks investigated each record carefully to determine its age and proper destruction date, frequently poring over individual pages of a case file or looking up potentially related cases to determine whether that record should be kept or destroyed. Categorization of a record as a keep record was a determination that the state is still responsible for the record, and categorization as a destroy record was a determination that the state’s responsibility had ended.

Responsibility

The clerks recognized an institutional motivation for their responsibility for the records in their care. As employees of the state, it was their job to fulfill the requirements of the state, and they could be held personally responsible for not doing their part in fulfilling those requirements. This kind of motivation for responsibility was what Max, the clerks’ supervisor, referred to when he told a DCFS case worker at

one of the offices that the site provided service for, “That way you can have peace of mind that we took care of your records.” There was another motivation for responsibility in addition to this institutional motivation. Louisa, a clerk, made statements to multiple researchers along the lines of, “These are people’s lives we’re dealing with here.” She was referring to the fact that these records were case files from a family services agency, and sometimes documented abuse cases. Louisa talked about the extremely personal nature of the records, saying, “It’s heart-wrenching.” Louisa also spoke about an incident that occurred when she was at a different job within the DCFS,

“I remember I dealt with this one particular child, who was 18 or 19, who was trying to get some benefits, I think disability. But he needed his records to prove that he was in care to get those. But his records were lost, and he was understandably upset... I never heard anything from him, but I hope that worked out, because that’s sad.”

Louisa and the other clerks were clearly aware of the direct impact that improper destruction of records could have on individual lives.

Medium

The attention to detail that clerks took in determining the age of paper records was not typically applied to records on other storage media. Several types of non-paper records (referred to as “memorabilia” at the DCFS office) were often included in case files, including VHS tapes, CDs, DVDs, and floppy disks. A clerk might note the obvious age of some paper records he or she was dealing with when pulling a hardened rubber band off of a folder, but this was not a reason to abandon the normal process for checking the age of the records. But if a record was stored on a medium that was considered old and was not easily accessible, that could be a reason not to investigate further. Media obsolescence was considered to be potentially a good enough reason to determine that a non-paper record was a destroy record, as discussed in an interview with Daryl, a clerk:

Daryl: I have come across a couple floppy disks, I’ve never had to insert them, and even if I did we don’t even have slots for them anymore.

Interviewer: You don’t have floppy drives.

D: So, that’s a pretty good sign that that’s going to be destruction.

I: Yeah.

D: We can just toss that right away.

I: Just because it’s –

D: – And the same with VHS tapes, if it’s that old, like, that’s just a good sign that it’s not active anymore.

With paper records, while apparent age contributed to the categorization of the records as destroy records, it was never the deciding factor. The clerk would still look for further evidence of age within the paper record. Certainly this is at least partially because paper records are easily accessible, whereas records on a floppy disk or VHS tape are too difficult to check. The ease of access to the information in the paper record reinforces its primacy as the most legitimate medium for original records.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that it is not enough to state in policy that records are equal across media: as shown in the HCI literature as well as at the DCFS site, people do not typically treat objects (or records) on different media similarly. The medium of the record changes how people think of it and how they interact with it.

Examination of work practices at the DCFS site revealed that although clerks there felt an intense and personal responsibility for the paper records that documented the lives of families and children, records that were not on paper were treated differently. Although in theory, both paper and other types of records were all equally records material, the clerks did not feel the same responsibility for non-paper records as they did for paper records. This has implications not only for policies and practices in records management, but much more broadly, particularly for the preservation of cultural heritage.

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