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4-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Beaudoin, J.E., Esteva, M., and Japzon, A. (2009). Digital curation vignettes: personal, academic, and organizational digital information. In H.R. Tibbo et al, eds. *Proceedings of DigCCurr2009 Digital Curation: Practice, Promise and Prospects*. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: 87-89.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/slisfrp/103>

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Digital Curation Vignettes: Personal, Academic, and Organizational Digital Information

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ABSTRACT

This panel presents variations on the theme of digital curation by examining the digital information management and preservation practices of three different populations. Personal digital information management, personal collections transferred to institutional repositories, and a digital archiving case in a private organization, offer a wide view of the types of contexts in which digital material is being produced "in the wild." Across the cases we found that digital record-keeping and preservation practices are not well understood or established, and that a vast amount of digital content created currently is at risk. Other issues, such as an individual's perception of digital information value, and the feasibility of preservation beyond an individual's or organization's lifetime, surfaced as determinants of the current situation. The findings have important implications for appraisal and post-custodial archival strategies. They are also useful for identifying critical decision points when digital curation issues are best addressed.

Keywords

Digital curation, institutional repositories, post-custodialism, hybrid archives, digital images, digital preservation, information value

1. PERSONAL DIGITAL INFORMATION

Libraries and other memory institutions are aware of the crisis in digital preservation and are taking steps to preserve our collective cultural heritage [1, 2]. In contrast, the research of Marshall et al. [3] suggests that individual consumers are much less aware of the impermanent state of their digital possessions, or if they are aware they feel disempowered to do anything about it. As a result, valuable representations of personal memories intended for future generations will be lost through ignorance and/or benign neglect [4], and representations of family and social histories will be lost to what has been called the "digital dark ages" [5].

Findings from a qualitative research study on the behaviors that contribute to the preservation of personal digital information,

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DigCCurr2009, April 1-3, 2009, Chapel Hill, NC, USA



involving 26 participants recruited from public library friends groups will be presented. The theory of information source horizons is used to explore the continuum of physical and digital information, and to elicit the criteria participants use to determine the value of their personal information [6, 7, 8].

Discussion will include what types of personal digital information individuals are saving, where they save it, and why. The value given by individuals to their personal digital information is explored in relation to information management behaviors, tangible versus intangible information, and storage location selections. This research will contribute to the understanding of affective and cognitive interactions with personal digital information; the values associated with it; and the gaps in the knowledge possessed by individuals regarding digital preservation.

2. DIGITAL IMAGE COLLECTIONS OF ACADEMICS

It is broadly understood that visual information is critical to the pedagogy and scholarship of many academic disciplines. Therefore it seems reasonable to expect to find coverage of the digital image collections amassed by faculty to support their teaching and research in the literature surrounding digital curation and preservation. While discussions of the archival and preservation practices surrounding digital images are present [9, 10, 11] the importance of these images as documents of our greater cultural heritage and an institution's curriculum and its faculty's scholarship remains unacknowledged. By and large institutional repositories have been concerned with scholarly and institutional publications, with collections of images and other teaching materials assuming a sometimes uneasy place within the repository. This is an unfortunate situation considering these collections will provide future research opportunities [12] as well as providing much needed faculty interest and support for traditionally under-utilized institutional repositories [13, 14, 15, 16, 17].

A qualitative study examines the preservation practices connected to the personal digital image collections of six academic art historians and six archaeologists at several academic institutions. Through semi-structured interviews and observations the participants' attitudes toward their digital image collections will be presented alongside the preservation strategies they employed. The participants' self-perceived technological skills and their awareness of institutional support for their efforts are also discussed. How faculty view the role of the institution in maintaining their image collections is explored through topics

such as their awareness of institutional repositories and the availability of staff to help them manage and preserve their images. The research provides an account of the preservation needs and current practices surrounding the digital image collections of art historians and archaeologists. The findings of this study have implications for the development of curatorial practices to cope with personal academic digital image collections maintained by individuals.

3. ARCHIVING THE ELECTRONIC RECORDS OF A PRIVATE ORGANIZATION

A four year experience archiving the records of a philanthropic organization in Argentina revealed the possibilities and limitations of post-custodial approaches, in which the archive creator is responsible for the long-term custody of his archive, and the archivist guides the archiving process [18]. The case study archive originated in mid 1980's as a centralized paper record-keeping system, evolving over the years into a hybrid of networked databases, a semi-centralized paper file, and electronic records stored in a shared directory. Research of local legal and archival regulations highlighted a dearth of recommendations concerning what electronic records to retain in the context of hybrid information systems, and of digital preservation best practices to follow during the retention period that precedes the closure of private organizations. Access and preservation were further complicated by lack of systems administration documentation and electronic record-keeping consistency. All of this created doubts for the administration about the feasibility of preserving the digital information and pointed instead toward keeping only the paper files.

To address the problems presented above, the archiving process included designing a post-custodial digital preservation strategy and discerning the functions of the paper and the digital information systems. Studying the archive's formation process [19] allowed recovering information about the technologies used over 20 years to create and manage electronic records. The study suggested a digital preservation strategy based on archival acquisition protocols, system's administration best practices, migration on demand [20], and virtual migration [21].

The functions of the paper and electronic records were explored with text mining, animated visualization, social network analysis, and staff member's ethnographies [22]. Results suggest that the electronic records can show work-processes and organizational dynamics, and that the paper records best reflect the institution's actions and accomplishments. It was concluded that both information systems should be preserved.

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