

# Pondering the Professionalities: Curating the Personal

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Professionals have a special role  
within society.

Professional status affords unique privileges (e.g. lawyers give legal advice, doctors write prescriptions, pilots can step behind the cockpit door).

There are two fundamental justifications for these privileges:

(1) Their activities and decisions are based on a distinct body of expertise.

(2) They have agreed to use their professional status to act in the public interest.

Historically, individuals and families  
have accumulated and managed  
personal archives.

Most of these collections have been relatively small and haven't left the homes of the collectors.



Collections of a few prominent individuals and families made the transition into collecting institutions.

Many cultural institutions were initially seeded by personal collections of influential people.

Over the past half century, **four trends** have radically changed the nature and status of personal collections.

First, work within collecting institutions has become increasingly **professionalized**.

# Specialization

Professional education and  
training (available and  
expected)

# Conferences

# Journals



**Professionals associations**

# Specialized language and secret handshakes

Second, individuals have gained more **ability to create and store** materials that they find meaningful, useful, or simply more convenient to keep than to discard.

Third, **researchers** have placed considerably more emphasis on the importance of personal stories, voices and perspectives.

Finally, previously distinct communities have come to recognize that they **share challenges**, associated with long-term care of digital resources...

Digital objects are created and perpetuated through physical things (e.g. charged magnetic particles, pulses of light, holes in disks), but...

They are **not** quite like spatio-temporal objects (regular, physical things).

Digital objects are sets of  
**instructions** for future interaction



Interactions require numerous technological components to **come together** at the right place and time.

“But, Cal,” I heard you saying.

“So far, so good.”

“My computer works quite nicely, thank you.”

“Why are you going on about  
this?”

Here's why:

Resources are limited, and  
meaning is expensive.

All transfer of meaning across contexts has **costs**.



Since we're on the subject, why  
not posit a universal law of  
meaning?

**Richness and Internal  
Complexity of Meaning  
Being Transferred**



**Degree of Difference  
between Contexts**

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**Total Cost to Transfer Meaning  
Across Contexts**

This is a claim about **meaning**, not  
just something about bits.

But it's ever-more important, as we face increasing demands for both **internal complexity** and **diversity** of contexts.

What are the **implications** of these trends for the place of digital curation professionals in the realm of personal digital archives?

Remember: We trust professionals  
to do special things, because...

(1) They have (or should have)  
**special expertise**

(2) They promise to act in the  
**public interest**

So how about that distinct body of  
expertise?



What's required to “do” digital  
curation?

Reflecting **purposes** –  
understanding and attending to  
intentions of creators and “primary  
users”

# Avoiding Unnecessary Lock-In

- “How do I get this stuff out when I stop using this particular system?”
- Hint: “No worries. You’ll always be using this system.” is **not** the right answer

# Unlocking from Lock-in

- Getting files off removable media without doing irreversible harm
- Dealing with obsolete formats and platforms

# Promoting **Discovery** through Intellectual Control

- Description
- Naming conventions
- Mappings across inconsistent terminologies

# Promoting **Sensemaking**

- “Now I have it, but what am I looking at?”
- Creating, capturing, or extracting information for making sense of things being used

# Acting Locally, but Thinking Globally

- Who might I hand these things off to in the future?
- How would that work?
- What are the likely motivations and needs of the recipient?

Ok, those sound like good things.



But what will it mean to act in the  
public interest?

Make sure that these things **get**  
**done** in socially responsible ways

This is not the same as doing all of  
these things

Don't assume – *a priori* – who will  
be doing particular things

Strive to continually push the **frontier** of what's possible, but...

**Honestly** disclose what we believe  
we're really able to promise each  
other.

Practice “respectful and informed  
ignorance”

Will Rogers said, "Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects."



We need to bring our own answers  
and **informed** questions to the  
conversation

Learn to love the process

We're lucky to be doing this!