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

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!