Addressing the Messiness of Electronic Records Acquisition: Discussion of Methods and Proposed Professional Directions

Cal Lee
School of Information and Library Science
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

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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.
What are the **implications** of these trends for the place of archivists 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

- To whom might I hand these things off 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 \textit{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.
So what specifically are the roles we can play as professionals?
Get, Grab, and Guide
Get
(On Removable Media)
Many archives have received entire computers from record creators & donors.
Even more common is the “disk in a box” – floppy disks, CDs and other removable media among the physical materials obtained along with primarily analog collections.
The media will inevitably become unreadable (if they haven’t already).
Archivists must extract whatever useful information resides on the media, while avoiding the accidental alteration of data or metadata.
The field of digital forensics is a source of expertise, principles, methods and tools for archivists, including...
1. Recovering data when layers of technology fail or are no longer available:

- Reading, analyzing and manipulating hex dumps of files
- Recovering data from temporary, unallocated and slack space
- Identifying file types through automated analysis of file content (e.g. headers & file signatures)
- Guessing passwords & breaking encryption
2. Capturing evidence from places on a computer system that are not always immediately visible, e.g.:

- User account information
- Files on disk used for virtual memory management
- Temp files
- Various caches
- “Recent documents” in Windows
- Cookies
- History files
- Configuration files (often from Registry in Windows)
3. Ensuring that actions taken on files don’t *unintentionally* make irreversible changes to essential characteristics
Examples of Irreversible Changes

- Lossy compression (e.g. JPEG)
- Lower-quality surrogate (e.g. thumbnail image, access copy of video)
- Format conversion (e.g. Word to PDF/A, Excel to CSV)
- Character encoding (e.g. EBCDIC to ASCII)
- Normalization of data values (e.g. date values in a database to a common date encoding)
- Rewriting pointers (e.g. links in a web site from absolute to relative or vice versa)
- Overwriting older versions files or values with newer versions
- Pulling files out of their native file system
Strategies for Avoiding Accidental Manipulation of Volatile Data

• Use write-blocking equipment when first reading from a medium (hardware, if possible)
• Make bit-level images of storage media
• Create checksums before and after file transfers and transformations
4. Attending to Order of Volatility

• Some types of data change much more quickly & often than others
• Important to recognize in order to recover data from a computer system or media, while ensuring that actions don’t make irreversible changes to their record characteristics
• Example: If the contents of the browser cache are important to you, capture the cache before using the browser
5. Taking advantage of a wide array of tools & techniques already available

• Digital forensics literature, training & events
• Free & open-source tools (e.g. AFF, The Sleuth Kit)
• Commercial packages (e.g. EnCase, Forensic Tool Kit)
6. Adopting established practices for documenting what we do, so others will know what we might have changed
Guidelines for Evidence Collection & Archiving (RFC 3227) – Some Highlights

- “Keep detailed notes.”
- “Minimise changes to the data as you are collecting it.”
- “Do collection first and analysis later.”
- “Proceed from the volatile to the less volatile.”
- Computer evidence should be: admissible, authentic, complete, reliable, believable
7. Recognizing & confronting the **ethical** implications of obtaining & providing access to data that reside at various levels of representation.
Grab
(From the Internet)
With the adoption of highly interactive Web technologies (frequently labeled “Web 2.0”), forms of individual documentation and expression are often also inherently social and public.
Such online environments do allow for personal documentation that is comparable in many ways to previous forms of personal documentation.

But...
They also engage external audiences in ways not previously possible.
Many individuals now rely significantly on “cloud” services for creating, managing & sharing records.

This poses numerous risks.
Sustainability Risk factors of Reliance on web Service Providers

• Expiration of service
• After a period of user inactivity, data deletion is triggered
• Changes in service offerings
• Companies going out of business
• Take-down based on complaints from other parties
• Mergers resulting in major displacement or complete loss
• Accidental loss due to drive failure & insufficient backup
• Purposeful destruction of data by malicious attackers
So “grabbing” at-risk records from the Web is one important approach.
Completely seamless access and management of all one’s personal information is neither probable nor desirable.
So get used to the idea of *fonds* that are impartial, inconsistent, unintegrated, and otherwise downright *messy*, but also...
inundated with traces of individual lives, can be rich sources of meaning and are likely to be at risk.
Parts of someone’s *fonds* can build on each other.
For example, if given some a person’s digital “papers,” one could find pointers to more of her online presence from the Web, her email or the storage media used by her computer, especially the hard drive.

See:

Guide
Archivists will only ever have custody of a tiny sliver of the documentary traces of individuals.
So helping them to curate their own materials can be just as important as taking custody of them.
So maybe we should get in on things like this:
HOW TO: Take Your Data Back From Google’s Claws
February 2nd, 2009 | by Stan Schroeder

We’ve all pretty much become accustomed to the notion that Google is this invincible internet giant which will always be there for us, but it’s not always true. A good example was this weekend’s fiasco, when (due to human error) Google’s search engine reported all websites on the internet as unsafe.

Let’s face it: every web service, Google included, can mess up, and sometimes it means losing your data. So, when was the last time you backed up the data on the various Google services you use? I thought so. Let’s look at some easy solutions for extracting and backing up your data on popular Google apps and services.

Google Docs

http://mashable.com/2009/02/02/google-backup/
And this:
Hello
Learn About TOSBack
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Highlighted Policies
Blizzard World Of Warcraft Terms Of Use
EBay User Agreement
Facebook Privacy Policy
GoDaddy Universal Terms Of Service

Organizations
Amazon
Apple
Automattic
Blizzard
Craigslist
Data.gov
DoubleClick
EBay

TOSBack keeps an eye on 44 website policies. Every time one of them changes, you'll see an update here.

Facebook changed its Privacy Policy
June 2 around 5pm PT

TOSBack started tracking a new policy.
It's the Google Blogger Terms Of Service.
June 2 around 2pm PT

TOSBack started tracking a new policy.
It's the Automattic WordPress.com Terms Of Service.
June 2 around 2pm PT

TOSBack started tracking a new policy.
It's the Data.gov Privacy Policy.
June 2 around 12pm PT
And this:
Preserving Digital Memory Files

Jannette Hanna and Dandan Burge

In the digital age, photographs are no longer captured as negatives. Digital cameras capture images directly to computer files, which are then stored on a memory card or directly to a computer. Traditional "analog" materials such as photographic negatives and prints can also be scanned to create digital image files. The advantage of digital image files is that they allow for easy editing of images, simplified copying, and electronic sharing. However, the goal of preservation will always be to ensure the long-term accessibility of the images.

Because digital image files do not require processing in a photo lab, and because camera memory cards can hold so many photos, the number of pictures being taken has dramatically increased. There is no longer a concern about the cost of film and processing, so users tend to take more pictures. They don't have to be as careful and methodical about which pictures they take. This has resulted in enormous collections of digital image files. And, because of these larger collections, users need to be organized so they can find the images they want, when they want them.

Organizing image files is particularly important, because scrolling through large numbers of directories — or worse, opening and visually checking files one by one — can take an enormous amount of time. Stacks of prints can be flipped through and sorted rather quickly. So the first step in organizing the files is to develop a file and directory naming system and consistently adhere to it. Most cameras assign a name to each picture file as it is taken — for example, IMG001, IMG002, and so on. However, this generic name provides no information as to what the picture is. Also, with some cameras, each time you put a new memory card in the camera, the counter goes back to IMG001 again. If you store all of your images in just one folder you may accidentally overwrite the older pictures with newly downloaded images.

Example of an unorganized file directory. The file and folder names are the default camera settings. It will be impossible to find a specific image without opening all the files and folders individually.

If you have a common naming convention, such as using the date, event, and location (e.g., 2005_Memorial_Chicago) to name a folder, then it will be easier to find the picture you’re looking for, and you will be less likely to overwrite or delete a file accidentally. Naming the folders in your directories by year, as shown in the figure below, will help limit the number of files stored in each folder, and it will make the folders easier to sort through. Ideally, each image file would be given a descriptive filename; however, this is labor-intensive.

http://www.archivaladvisor.org/shtml/art_presdidgemem.shtml
Something to read (soon):
I, Digital: Personal Collections in the Digital Era

I’m editor, Society of American Archivists is publisher
Something to join:
Personal Digital Archives Working Group (PDAWG)

• Currently coming together
• Representatives from across the globe
• Focus:
  – Documentation & development of common toolsets for **curators** of personal digital collections
  – Documentation & development of common toolsets for **individuals** to manage & gain better control over their own personal digital collections
  – Collaborative authoring of several guidance documents
  – Engaging research communities that are most directly impacted as users or potential users of personal digital materials