

Business Archives Council Conference – ‘Born this way’

London, 8th November 2012

About the event

The Business Archives Council organised a conference in London in November 2012 with the title ‘Born this way: Business Archives and the Digital Record’. The event attracted an audience of around 100, mostly business archivists from the London area. WK represented the DPC and several other DPC members were present: Simon Rooks (BBC), Emma Markiewicz (TNA), Valerie Johnson (TNA), Oliver Morley (TNA), Maria Castrillo (NLS), Stephen Rigden (NLS), Annabel Welsh (TNA), Fabiana Barticioti (ARA) and Marie Steiner (TNA).

These notes are intended to provide an informal briefing for members of the DPC not able to attend in person. They only represent the sessions that WK was able to attend. For an authoritative and comprehensive report, readers are encouraged to contact the organisers or speakers directly.

Presentations and discussion

David Hill, (Bank of England) – Records management at the Bank of England

BoE has a lot of background in records management with paper collections – and has come to the realisation lately that putting electronic resources in a EDRMS is not enough to deliver the technical or strategic functions. BoE needs to know where our key information is, need to be able to delete or recover statutory records. It’s been doing this with paper records since at least 1930 when the archive was set up, and documents go back to 1694. There are a lot of external users for the archive, a popular online catalogue, and a selection of digitised material being made available online.

Records management systems were rolled out organically from about 2005. It included a detailed classification and all staff were trained in using this system. The system was upgraded subsequently with a more intelligent and automated workflow and document lifecycle approach with a series of online tools for the records managers. The benefits were to reduce risk, encourage use and to complete a records management process. Next steps are about improvement, dealing with legacy backlogs, extending records management practice for ‘line of business’ systems, electronic archives and supporting organisational change – the BoE is changing and will be absorbing staff and data from the FSA. BoE has a policy of ‘least effort for user’. Maybe this user-centric approach is not appropriate – the LIBOR case has shown that people don’t always create the right records for the fiduciary record. Telephone calls and text messages are missing from the records management / archive policy and we know that these contain important traces for decisions and records.

Simon Rooks (BBC) – Multi-media archiving at the BBC

Simon was given the job of sound archivist and, like many archivists, was presented with a large, valuable and technically complex archive with relatively little technical background. This was daunting but the reality is that no matter how complex the technological questions, the basic functions and values remain important and help you make sense of the ever-changing technological

challenges: preservation, access, cataloguing, authenticity etc are the places to start any discussion with a technologist. BBC has a core responsibility to maintain an archive of its output written into its DCMS agreement, which is the basis for the existence of the archives. BBC has huge collections in every form that the 20th century invented. It mostly has BBC IP, though the gramophone collection and other parts have different rights management challenges. Key change in recent years has been to break down the distinction between sound archiving, TV archiving and records management. Staff now all simply work together to emphasise the ‘archiving’ rather than the ‘media’. The functions have been referenced against OAIS as a way to think through the issues though wouldn’t claim to be an OAIS compliant repository and isn’t aiming for ‘compliance’. Real challenges for preservation have been culture and people through a change management process; technology doesn’t exist fully yet; proliferation of content creates real problems one hour of broadcast derives from about 200 hours of shooting.

Oliver Morley, The National Archives – Taking Stock and Moving Forward

Defining what constitutes a digital historical record is a difficult thing to do: we can be sure that it is historical but it’s hard to know what constitutes the object is more complicated. The core tasks of an archive are collection, preservation and access and these remain true. We can expand on these to think about the future. For example, there is broadly legal clarity of what to collect, physical media have standardised, digital formats have largely standardised, and web archiving can sort collecting for the digital published formats. The real problems are elsewhere – volume, email, sensitivity and collecting social media (while filtering out the irrelevance and keeping up with the ever-changing APIs). Arguably email is the worst of these because the technology is fundamentally duplicative and there is very little evidence that filing helps make sense of this. When it comes to preservation we need to focus on simplicity, and ‘separate the warehouse from retail’. Keep the whole thing as simple as possible. In terms of access there are three basic ways to achieve this – search and browse, crowd-sourcing, and open-data. Archives are difficult to search and page ranking really doesn’t work for the long tail of archival holdings. Other approaches such as mapping and classification are important for enabling people to see into the very large collections. So in the round, base every decision on how records will be used, and build systems that can be maintained.

Other papers

- **William Kilbride (DPC)**
- **Vicky Stretch (Network Rail)**
- **Clara Harrow (The Baring Archive)**

About this document

Version 1	Written at conference	8/11/2012	WK
Version 2	Distributed	8/11/2012	DPC members