Personal Digital Archiving

Digital Preservation Topical Note 6

DPC DigitalPreservationCoalition

What are personal digital archives?

Personal digital archives refer to any digital content created by individuals in their day-to-day lives. These might include emails, Word documents, calendars, music, websites, or social media interactions. In the case of politicians or authors or other public figures, personal digital archives might be given or sold to an archive. Everyone's personal documents, photos, and videos, however, will be valuable to families and friends in the future.

Key Term: **Benign Neglect**

Leaving something without taking any action on it for a long period of time, expecting it to be in the same condition months or even years later

When is action required to preserve personal digital archives?

Unlike paper and analogue formats, which can be put aside for generations and remain intact, digital records will not survive the same *benign neglect*. Without active management, personal digital content could become inaccessible within only a few years, or even sooner, due to the rate of technological change and the fragility of some digital formats.

The increasing number of records created solely in digital form require new techniques for ensuring that people in the future will be able to find and open them. Preserving these records in their native digital form maximises how those records can be used in the future. When digital records are printed to paper, they lose valuable features like relationships between files, functionality, and formatting. For example, some types of digital files support full-text search, a function that can make a huge difference when it comes to finding information in a large text file. Taking action now will allow us to maintain both these characteristics and ongoing accessibility.

What technical issues threaten long-term preservation of personal digital archives?

Over time, people update their technology to newer machines, devices, and software. If content is not transferred (or 'migrated') from the older technology to the new technology, the files may not be readable in the future (see Key Term *obsolescence* in note What Is Digital Preservation?). Other technical challenges include a lack of secure storage or back-up. Similarly, if someone loses the ability to pay for an account with a cloud storage provider (such as Dropbox) or if a cloud-service provider disappears, content may be lost. Sadly, if someone dies, it may be difficult to access their digital archives, especially password protected content.

What legal issues threaten the long-term preservation of personal digital archives?

An individual's personal digital records will likely contain personal information not only about themselves, but about others, including names, addresses, and possibly even sensitive legal or financial information. While data protection legislation does not affect records while they are in the possession of individuals, knowing where your personal information is stored and whether it is secure is important. Similarly, personal digital records often include content under copyright owned by third parties. While having copyright protected content on a personal device does not violate copyright law, sharing or distributing it will. Being aware of this material is smart practice for anyone, not just the public figures who donate their records to archives.

Recommendations: a few steps towards better management of personal digital records

Facing the management of personal digital archives can be daunting, especially if an individual has a large amount of content or content stored across many different devices and removable storage. The good news is, there is a wealth of high-quality advice available to help. The list of actions below suggests some general approaches for organizing personal digital archives. However, other sources listed at the end of this note provide more detailed guidance.

File-naming (see note on File Naming and Formats): name files using a uniform or similar formula that includes descriptive information about the file.

Delete Duplicates: digital technology makes it very easy to create copies of files and to move them around to different locations on a computer or between different devices. Occasionally deleting duplicates of files will prevent confusion and free up storage space.

Email Management (see note on Preserving Email): email has a particular tendency to grow very quickly – from newsletters to spam our inboxes fill up very quickly. Not all emails will have long-term value, therefore, emails of little or no importance should be deleted immediately or within a short span of time.

Back-up and Storage (see note on Back-up and Storage): Just like institutional records, personal records need to be stored on stable, reliable storage and backed up on a regular basis. External solid state drives, for example, provide plenty of space for most people and are much more reliable than CDROMs or USB sticks.

Other sources

Paradigm project 'Guidelines for creators of personal archives': http://www.paradigm.ac.uk/workbook/appendices/guidelines-tips.html

DPC Technology Watch Report 'Personal Digital Archiving' by Gabriela Redwine: http://www.dpconline.org/docman/technology-watch-reports/1460-twr15-01/file

For more information on Digital Preservation visit the DPC Website: https://www.dpconline.org