

PARADIGM

**Academic Advisory Board
Meeting 1**

Monday, 18 April 2005
Theberge Room, St. Peter's College, Oxford

Final version
Susan Thomas
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Introductions

Dr Lawrence Goldman opened proceedings by welcoming everyone to the meeting and asking participants to introduce themselves. Present were:

- **Michael Popham**
Head of the Oxford Digital Library and Project Director
- **Dr Lawrence Goldman (Chair)**
Editor in Chief, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
- **Richard Ovenden**
Head of Special Collections, Bodleian Library, and Project Director
- **Helen Langley**
Curator of Modern Political Papers, Bodleian Library
- **Dr Martin Conway**
Lecturer in Modern History, University of Oxford
- **Simon Bailey**
Keeper of Oxford University Archives
- **Dr Alex May**
Research Editor, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
- **Professor Steven Fielding**
Professor of Contemporary Political History, University of Salford
- **Dr Kevin Morgan**
Department of Government, International Politics and Philosophy, University of Manchester
- **John Hodgson**
Keeper of Manuscripts and Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester
- **Janette Martin**
Part-time Digital Archivist, John Rylands University Library of Manchester
- **Susan Thomas**
Project Manager and Digital Archivist, Bodleian Library

Dr John Davis, Lecturer in Modern History, University of Oxford, and **Dr Stella Butler**, Head of Special Collections at John Rylands University Library of Manchester, and Project Director, were also invited, but could not attend on this occasion.

Session 1: Introduction and Overview

Richard Ovenden opened the first session of the day by introducing the Paradigm project and its origins. Helen Langley and John Hodgson then talked about the politicians approached thus far; and Susan Thomas provided a demonstration of the first tranche of material accessioned by the project.

Richard Ovenden

Personal Archives Accessible in Digital Media, Introduction & Background to Project

Richard gave an overview of the different curation needs of paper and digital materials. He described how, once accessioned and processed, paper archives may be preserved passively, and in bulk, by controlling various aspects of their management, such as the physical environment of storage areas. Unfortunately, digital materials will not necessarily survive unless a more active curation regime is adopted throughout their life-cycle.

Outlining the growth in the creation and usage of digital materials across the HE sector, where the arts and humanities are beginning to keep pace with the sciences, Richard noted that researchers are becoming more and more interested in electronic access ('anywhere, anytime') to digital full texts of primary sources. This increase in digital activity raises concerns not only about the vulnerability and potential scarcity of digital materials, but conversely about what Roy Rosenzweig calls 'digital abundance' – a scenario that might see academics swamped by digital information.¹

Richard described the role of the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) of the Joint Funding Councils, and its interest in systems, known as 'institutional repositories', designed to manage the now 'abundant' digital information created within academic institutions.² JISC invited bids in 2004 for a programme on Institutional Digital Preservation and Asset Management which awarded 14 projects with funding: one of these projects was Paradigm.³

Recounting the origins of the Paradigm project, Richard highlighted that both Oxford and Manchester are major centres for political and personal papers and need to develop the capacity to manage, and provide long-term access to, the digital equivalents of these unique research materials. Whilst much attention has been paid to published digital information within HE (e.g. subscriptions to databases and journals) comparatively little has been afforded to digital preservation, and almost none to the preservation of personal

¹ Roy Rosenzweig, 'Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era', *American Historical Review* (vol. 108, no. 3, June 2003), pp. 735-63.

² Richard pointed to an article by the Executive Director of the Coalition for Networked Information: Clifford A. Lynch, 'Institutional Repositories: Essential Infrastructure for Scholarship in the Digital Age', *ARL Bimonthly Report* 226, February 2003. The article is available at <<http://www.arl.org/newsltr/226/ir.html>>.

³ See the Programme homepage <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_404>.

digital material. The Bodleian Library holds the papers of 6 Prime Ministers, over 100 Cabinet Ministers, Diplomats and Civil Servants whilst also managing the Conservative Party Archive. Manchester's collection of political papers is also strong, and the archives of the Labour Party have been administered by the John Rylands University Library. As important research libraries with similar missions in an evolving digital environment, the two institutions responded to the JISC call with a bid to address the issues associated with personal digital material within the context of existing collecting and curatorial responsibilities.

Richard introduced the project's personnel: the Project's directors are Richard Ovenden, Michael Popham (Oxford) and Stella Butler (Manchester); Lawrence Goldman is Chair of the Academic Advisory Board; Susan Thomas, based at the Bodleian, is the Project Manager and Digital Archivist, and Janette Martin is the part-time Digital Archivist at Manchester. The project also plans to recruit a full-time Software Engineer, who will assist with the technical aspects of the work. Running for two years (from January 2005) the project will focus on working with politicians from the Conservative and Labour parties, taking advantage of existing communication channels established with those parties by Oxford and Manchester.

Broadly speaking, the aims of the project are to pilot a system for selecting, taking-in, managing, cataloguing, and providing long-term access to digital personal material; in doing so, Paradigm will compare and contrast these operations in the digital and traditional archival environments. Richard stressed that the project is going to be realistic about the difficulties (probably several!) involved. The project will be an exemplar for other institutions concerned with the preservation of digital personal materials, and will come forward with workable 'best-practice' guidelines. Another major outcome will be the establishment of a digital archive that can serve as a platform for future work at both institutions.

Richard outlined the role of the Academic Advisory Board as described by the Terms of Reference below:

1. To advise the Project Directors and more broadly the project staff as a whole on matters relating to the academic requirements of personal archives in digital form. Specifically:
2. To advise on the policies relating to the selection of materials, also giving an indication of the relative academic value of different materials.
3. To advise on the policies and applications relating to the usability and access regimes surrounding personal archival material in digital form both from the viewpoint of the researcher, and from the viewpoint of the academic tutor/supervisor.
4. To advise on matters relating to promotion of the project, and advocacy relating to the issues surrounding digital archiving.
5. To advise on other matters as requested by the Project Directors.

A copy of Richard's presentation can be downloaded from the project website.⁴

⁴ Richard Ovenden 'Personal Archives Accessible in Digital Media, Introduction and Background to the project' <http://www.paradigm.ac.uk/about/aab/ro_introtoparadigm.pdf>.

Helen Langley and John Hodgson

Politicians Recruited by Oxford and Manchester

Interesting presentations were given by Helen Langley and John Hodgson on the careers of the politicians who had agreed to participate in the project. Both referred to the benefits of drawing the attention of politicians to the issue of digital preservation, and described the reactions the project had encountered from politicians approached so far: these ranged from refusal to participate to surprise that their records might be worthy of permanent preservation.

Susan Thomas

Demonstration of Digital Material Accessioned from One of the Project's Participants

Susan Thomas described the first tranche of material accessioned from the Portcullis House office of one of the politicians participating in the project. The materials were copied from a PC used by the politician's Chief of Staff, and a laptop used by another member of office staff. Material has not yet been accessioned from a computer used by the politician. Covering only the period ca. 2001-5, the material does not include records documenting earlier phases of the politicians career, although the project may ask about the existence of such records in due course.

Created on behalf of the politician by his office staff, the records are evidence of the professional activities of the politician, and as such they possess a more corporate than personal flavour. Intermingled are some records created by the politician's Chief of Staff during the course of his own activities for the party, such as writing speeches for other politicians.

Images of the principal directories were shown so that the Board might get a feel for the kind of record types and policy issues that the accession covers. Record types include speeches where, similarly to paper records, sometimes drafts are kept and other times not. There are also minutes, policy research documents (for potential policy as well as legislation put before the Commons), central party briefings (on policy issues, the government's record, etc.), strategy documents (including some for the 2005 general election), publicity materials, as well as records documenting the general administration of the office and its personnel.

The records accessioned also include emails, but not as many as hoped for. Most emails are deleted due to the very limited space available on the Virtual Parliamentary Network. Emails deemed to be of importance are saved as *HyperText Markup Language (html)* or *Rich Text Format (rtf)* files in folders alongside other record types. This means that the series of correspondence which researchers expect to find within private papers is absent, and cannot be re-created. Of the politicians the project has spoken to, many use private

email accounts to supplement email provided by parliament, and the emails saved in the folders derive from private and parliamentary accounts.

Other materials accessioned by the project include snapshots of the websites and blogs of select politicians harvested directly from the web during the general election campaign. Two pieces of software have been piloted for this purpose: *Adobe Acrobat* and *HTTrack*.

Adobe can capture a website and produce various outputs, including *html* and *Portable Document Format (PDF)*. The project has experimented with the *PDF* output, and the Board was shown what this looked like. The software is simple to use and can be instructed to capture *n* levels of a website. Disadvantages include some loss of the original's 'look and feel' and, perhaps, functionality: webpages are re-sized to fit A4, and often run over the page. The principal advantage may be that the website becomes a single file, which is easier to manage and is already in a format which some recommend for preservation purposes.⁵ For simple websites, and the websites of most UK politicians are not *yet* complex, this is a very usable option.

The project is also piloting *HTTrack*, a website copier designed to mirror websites so that they may be viewed offline. Although not designed to archive websites, *HTTrack* works rather well. It has more options than *Adobe* and can be automated using scripts which instruct the software to capture pages in a certain way, with a specified frequency and to put them in a particular directory. Greater expertise is required to take advantage of this functionality, but once scripts are written and in place less manual intervention is required.

Finally, Susan asked the Board to consider which record types were missing from the material accessioned thus far. The most 'personal' personal papers are altogether absent: letters from family or friends, journals, family photographs, etc. Of records documenting professional activities, the office diary is missing; there are no records accessioned from the politician's own computer; and the accession contains nothing created prior to 2001.

⁵ It is worth noting that some experts feel that the proprietary nature of the *PDF* standard makes it unsuitable for long term preservation and recommend the use of open formats instead.

Session 2:

Open Discussion - The Future of Digital Political Papers

A lively discussion about the future of digital modern political papers was had. Many issues were raised, and I very much doubt that all are represented here; I hope to have conveyed the essence of the discussion, although part of what follows are my own reflections on what was said.

Intervene in the record life-cycle, or leave record survival to posterity? Digital abundance or digital black hole... or is there a third way?

It was lamented that many of the digital records which replaced paper records on a large scale during the 1990s have been lost. The result is something of a primary source black hole, where the obsolescence of hardware and software have rendered records that *have* survived difficult and expensive to access. The black hole exists because creators, information professionals, and researchers alike failed to appreciate readily the significance of digital records, and because all three were inexperienced in managing the digital medium. The loss of digital materials has prompted archivists to consider new 'interventionist' approaches to the acquisition and management of archival collections, and the differences between these 'interventionist' approaches and the more traditional (Darwinian?) approaches were discussed.

Intervention in the processes used by record creators is more usual in a corporate environment where records managers can put systems, some of them electronic, in place very early on in the record's lifecycle. Whilst collecting archivists have long selected the archives which will survive for the historian's usage, they have more typically been approaching, or been approached by, individuals at the end of their careers, or lives, when it is easier to ascertain the record creator's potential historical significance.

The traditional passing of time between the creation and accession of records has also meant that records are likely to have been weeded by their creator, though this is dependent on personal record-keeping behaviours. If archivists regularly accession material earlier in the record life-cycle, and begin doing so earlier in the career of an individual, it is possible that 21st century collections of private papers will be far greater in size than is currently normal, and the question of 'digital abundance' raised by Richard in the first session may be a real problem for future researchers.

'Digital abundance' may be generated by an increase in the number of collections as much as in the number of records therein: theoretically archivists could cast the net wider in the hope of acquiring more of the early records created by significant individuals. But how do we predict the potential significance of individuals, and is it possible to begin accessioning early without conferring the significance we are trying to predict? The very idea of early selection, or working with record creators and historians, would be anathema

to Sir Hilary Jenkinson, and quite possibly worries many archivists (British and otherwise) schooled in his thinking.⁶ However, it must be remembered that Jenkinson operated in a systematic government archive, where it is considerably simpler to achieve his dispassionate approach to the selection and processing of archives; private papers must be selected somehow, sometime, and for digital materials there are good reasons for archivists to intervene more actively in the whole record life-cycle, rather than waiting passively at the cycle's end for the records to land in our laps.

There seemed to be a general consensus that the interventionist approach, in one guise or another, is necessary to ensure that select digital private papers both survive and remain accessible. The routine deletion of emails due to the lack of space on the Virtual Parliamentary Network was of particular concern to Board members: sometimes correspondence which seems trivial at the moment of creation, is very significant in time, and in losing the series, one also loses the context which gives meaning to individual items of correspondence. The preservation of email is a subject which the project needs to discuss with its participants; perhaps we can prevail on participating politicians to alter their practice in this area.

Appraisal

The possibility of a greater volume of records naturally led to a discussion of appraisal. Current practice for appraising traditional private papers at both the Bodleian and the John Rylands University Library is to limit weeding to the elimination of duplicates, material accessible elsewhere and ephemeral material. Board members also wanted to know how much weeding had been done by the staff of our politician in advance of the project's first accession. This is an interesting question, and though it is impossible to say for certain, we don't think the material was heavily audited. Of course, the weeding of papers by creators, or their families, prior to deposit also takes place in the paper environment.

Managing relationships with record creators

Much time was spent discussing how best to manage relationships with politicians, and to what degree we could, or should, expect to influence record-keeping behaviours. The project staff at Oxford envisaged visiting politicians every few months and taking 'snapshots' of their records. This approach presents some issues, including how to identify and deal with material duplicated across snapshots. It was noted that the approach required for managing a relationship with a politician, including the frequency of snapshots required, may be dependent on: the type of politician; the volume of material being generated by the politician and their staff; the record-keeping behaviours of both; and the stage of the politician's career. In any case, the frequency of snapshots piloted by

⁶ Sir Hilary Jenkinson (1882-1961) was Deputy Keeper of the Public Records from 1947 to 1954. Jenkinson remains one of the most significant archival theorists, especially in the English speaking world; his most well known work is the *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922).

the project may well be different to that presented in the project's final recommendations. Furthermore, in the 'real world', the resource implications of sustaining a relationship with a politician throughout his or her career would need to be considered.

The idea of politicians presenting records, in a trickle, as they are created was proposed. Politicians could potentially directly upload materials to a digital repository, but this approach would require more effort on the part of the politician and might entail responsibilities for the politician's current and semi-current records which neither Oxford or Manchester would want to shoulder.

It was put forward that the interventionist approach to collecting private papers puts archivists in the unusual, and advantageous, position of being able to discuss the provenance of records with their creators. Whilst impractical on a record by record basis, a discussion with politicians and their offices which included a survey of general authoring processes might considerably enhance the quality of information available to researchers about the creation context of private papers. These kinds of questions might be incorporated into a records survey which is being developed by the project.

The Board also discussed the selection of participants and concluded that a better balance of Conservative and Labour politicians was desirable, and that perhaps Oxford ought to consider recruiting a constituency MP, and Manchester a Labour 'insider'. Should Labour win the forthcoming general election, it was suggested that Manchester could approach a Minister leaving Cabinet following the inevitable post-election reshuffle. This is a time when potentially significant research materials are vulnerable, but also a very sensitive time to approach a politician.

The project has attempted to recruit a variety of politicians, and has approached politicians who have retired from mainstream political life in addition to active politicians. These are significant figures, whose papers are very likely to be historically valuable; politicians whose records will mainly be 'inactive', rather than 'current' or 'semi-current'. This is a more traditional approach to selecting private papers, but it is still a valid one, because it will happen and it does have different preservation implications. The interventionist approach to selection has to be used alongside traditional approaches because there will be many instances where archivists and curators fail to identify significant individuals during the early stages of their career, and must approach individuals about their papers later on. It is therefore important that archivists are able to deal with digital records created without record-keeping guidance, and with older technologies; records which may require some 'digital archaeology'.

Which record series ought the project to accession?

In terms of selecting series to accession, it was felt by many that a *desiderata* list of records would be very useful. In particular, it would be helpful if the Board's historians and political scientists could produce a list of records that would make up the ideal collection of political private papers, together with suggestions of what kinds of research

the records might be used for. Lists of this nature would be useful in convincing potential depositors of the historical significance of their everyday records.

The potential historical value of constituency records was discussed. The project originally intended to accession materials from the constituency and London offices of politicians, as well as from their private premises. The scope of personal papers accessioned from constituency offices would consist of policy papers, and strategy documents, but not records created during the course of constituency business. The volume of such records, as well as the Data Protection issues associated with managing and providing access to them, was seen as problematic. The Board concluded that constituency records were potentially very historically valuable, especially for local and social history, but are they personal papers, and do they fit with the collecting policies of either library?

Project outcomes

The outcomes of the project were also discussed. It was agreed that the Workbook on Digital Private Papers should be applicable to other kinds of digital private papers, including the papers of literary figures and those of academics. The project will also endeavour to produce some records management guidance for politicians and their offices; it was noted that these guidelines would have to be realistic if they were to be adopted.

Related work

The Board asked what other work was being done to preserve the digital private papers of politicians, and suggested that archivists in other countries might also be grappling with the issue. This is certainly worth exploring, and the project has been trying to contact Adrian Cunningham, an Australian archivist who has written on the issue of collecting and preserving personal records in electronic form. It may be, however, that Australian and American politicians are better resourced than British ones, and that the conclusions arrived at by archivists in those countries will not necessarily be applicable here.

It was noted that much work had been done by Australians and Americans on the preservation of corporate digital records, where record managers could intervene more readily at the creation stage using Electronic Records Management systems. There is less research available concerning digital personal papers. One very recent development is 'Ourmedia', an open source personal digital archive open to anyone who wants to preserve their personal digital materials, be they audio, video, text or image files. The catch seems to be that contributors must be willing to publish the materials submitted; this means that the service cannot possibly replace existing provision within archives and libraries for the curation of private papers.⁷

⁷ The partners involved include the Internet Archive, Bryght, Creative Commons and Wikipedia. See <<http://ourmedia.org>>.

Next steps

It was agreed that Susan Thomas would provide the Board with access to the digital archives in the next few weeks with a list of questions to consider. Among the questions will be a request for the Board to identify the record types they feel to be worthy of permanent preservation, and to outline the kind of research purposes that different record types support.

When discussing politicians' attitudes to records and archives, the archive of Tony Benn was mentioned,⁸ and the Board thought it would be very interesting to hear Mr Benn speak on this. The project will invite Mr Benn to speak at the third meeting of the Board which will be held in Oxford next Spring.

A date for the next meeting was agreed. The meeting will be held on the 19th of September 2005 at the People's History Museum in Manchester. The project will invite the Labour politicians to the next meeting.

⁸ More information about Tony Benn's archive is available on his website <<http://www.tonybenn.com/archive.html>>.

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD and UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

**Personal Archives Accessible in Digital Media project (PARADIGM)
Academic Advisory Board Meeting**

**Meeting 1, 18th April 2005
Theberge Room, St. Peter's College, Oxford**

Programme

11.00-11.30	Arrival and coffee
11.30-12.00	<p>Introduction and overview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background to the Project (Richard Ovenden, Head of Special Collections, Bodleian Library) • Politicians recruited by Oxford (Helen Langley, Curator of Modern Political Papers, Bodleian Library) • Politicians recruited by Manchester (John Hodgson, Keeper of Manuscripts and Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester) • Demonstration of digital material accessioned from the London office of a politician (Susan Thomas, Project Manager, Paradigm)
12.00-12.30	<p>Discussion: the future of digital modern political papers A discussion of the future of digital modern political papers considering issues such as selection and access.</p>
12.30-13.00	<p>Next Steps Next steps for the project team and the academic advisory board.</p>
13.00-14.00	Lunch