

Working with personal digital archives

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PARADIGM project

Manuscripts Matter, Electronica panel

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Summary

- Why manuscripts matter
- Some background - what is the **PARADIGM** project?
- Collection development - early-intervention *or* wait and see what turns up
- Use - impact of the digital on researchers
- Next steps

Why do manuscripts matter?

- Evidence of social networks and interactions
- Personal perspective on private and public life
- Demonstrate the path to an idea
- Uniqueness
- Individuality
- Exhibit personality
- Inspiring
- Honest
- ...

Manuscripts that matter are now digital (and analogue)

- Word-processed documents, websites, spreadsheets, email, address books, diaries, chat, photos, etc.
- More complex than traditional manuscripts
 - easy to copy and alter
 - many relationships between items to be preserved
- Archives wishing to collect them require:
 - additional approaches
 - additional skills
 - additional tools
 - additional knowledge

PARADIGM

- Oxford University Library Services & John Rylands University Library, Manchester (JISC funded)
- Exploring digital preservation from 'personal' and 'collecting' perspectives
- Testing an early-intervention approach to collecting
- Developing strategies for preserving digital private papers – using politicians' manuscripts as sample materials
- Technical issues (tool, repositories and standards)
- Cultural issues (creator attitudes, legal issues, etc.)
- Results – in-house expertise, an online workbook for curators and a prototype digital repository

<http://www.paradigm.ac.uk>

Q. Why early intervention?

A. Technological obsolescence

- Digital archives are dependent on environments. These environments consist of several dependencies:
 - computer + drivers + peripherals + operating system + software libraries + application software
- Obsolescence of one or more of the above can render a digital manuscript virtually inaccessible
- Using typical collection development strategies (acquisition at end of active life), digital manuscripts are often obsolete before reaching the archive
- early intervention offers best chance of long-term survival

Q. Why early intervention?

A. Changes in working practice

- Use of web services - digital archives are distributed across the world's servers
- Digital archives can be encrypted
- Tendency to overwrite changes in documents, rather than keep drafts
- Users are concerned with access and functionality now, not long-term preservation
- Computers and media fail
- Many users have no IT support and are unfamiliar with backup procedures
- Tendency to keep more – storage cheap; appraisal time-consuming

Early intervention: opportunities for archivists

- Acquiring material sooner after creation, allows the archivist to process it with contemporary technology
- Providing guidance and support to creators can help them to manage the short- medium-term preservation of their own archives
- Surveying material to be accessioned later allows archivists to plan for its arrival
- Working with the record creator allows the archivist to record valuable contextual information about the creator, their work and their means of working.

Early intervention: A plausible solution?

- Worked well in a project context, but could it be implemented as a collecting strategy?
- Identifying individuals to work with at an early stage in their career is challenging
- Archivists and creators must decide how often manuscripts should be surveyed and accessioned
- Archivists and creators must find time to talk
- Can the archivist offer guidance without shaping the archive?
- How does the selling of manuscripts fit with the early-intervention approach?

Wait and see what turns up An alternative?

- Early-intervention not always possible; things will always 'turn up'
- Archivists require skills, tools and knowledge to process older digital materials
- Work with forensic and data recovery software and computer history societies and enthusiasts
- Need to acquire and retain some older hardware to process collections (in collaboration with other heritage institutions) and its documentation
- Not ideal. Expensive and unpredictable
- Older digital archive sales: archivists may require proof that an older digital archive contains valuable research material

What to do?

- Combine approaches
 - Use early-intervention where appropriate
 - Work with older digital materials when necessary
 - Encourage use of open formats

Impact of digitality on researchers

- Ability to search full text and to pick out key words and phrases – within and across collections
- Ability to rearrange material - will facilitate the answering of some questions
- Likely to be working with digital surrogates – migrations of manuscripts into contemporary formats
- May be some compromise in the look and feel of the original
- Repositories will maintain an audit trail of manuscript migrations to ensure that researchers have confidence in the digital manuscripts they use

Next steps

- More technical work on repositories, digital archive extraction and format migration
- Embedding some of the project's outcomes into the work of the departments at the Bodleian and the Rylands
- Working with other kinds of individuals – writers, scientists, academics, etc.
- Developing mechanisms for accessing open digital archives in reading rooms
- Currently working with Barbara Castle's digital archive, which is being catalogued.

Questions?

Questions later... susan.thomas@bodley.ox.ac.uk