

Digital Curation and the Citizen Archivist

Richard J. Cox
School of Information Sciences,
University of Pittsburgh
614 IS Building, 135 North
Bellefield Avenue, Pittsburgh
PA 15260
412-624-3245
rcox@mail.sis.pitt.edu

ABSTRACT

The increasing array and power of personal digital recordkeeping systems promises both to make it more difficult for established archives to acquire personal and family archives and less likely that individuals might wish to donate personal and family digital archives to archives, libraries, museums, and other institutions serving as documentary repositories. This paper provides a conceptual argument for how projects such as the Digital Curation one ought to consider developing spinoffs for archivists training private citizens how to preserve, manage, and use digital personal and family archives. Rethinking how we approach the public, which will increasingly face difficult challenges in caring for their digital archives, also brings with it substantial promise in informing them about the nature and importance of the archival mission. Can the Digital Curation project provide tools that can be used for working with the public?

Keywords

Archival advocacy, blogs and blogging, citizen archivists, collecting, diaries, digital curation, electronic mail, ephemera, family archives, Internet, personal archives, personal computing, photography, recordkeeping, scrapbooks, World Wide Web

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has transpired with personal information technologies in the past two decades, suggesting that personal archiving, from websites and blogs to digital photograph albums and scrapbooks, is already a prominent feature of our society, as well as a prominent preservation issue.

The present interest in personal archiving represents a major new opportunity for archivists to re-imagine and better communicate their mission in society by aiding individuals who have already developed some interest in the archival enterprise. We need archivists to develop innovative publications, Web sites, and other training materials to assist the public. Archivists now have the opportunity to connect with a growing portion of the public looking for advice about preserving personal and family documents. Archivists may need to alter their mission and priorities, but the possible results may be unprecedented in terms of gaining public support and understanding.

My question in this paper is whether the new interest in digital curation and in developing a multi-faceted curriculum for educating the next generation of archivists has some value for working with the public. This paper is conceptual. It is difficult

to pin down the present digital curation effort because it is in development. However, given the purpose of this project, it is possible to make some proposals for why we need to develop some spin-offs to be used for equipping citizen archivists to work with their own personal and family archives, increasingly created or stored as digital objects.

2. ARCHIVAL APPRAISAL AND INDIVIDUAL COLLECTING

Collecting is a basic human instinct and books and articles pour forth regularly about the history and meaning of collecting. Personal collecting can seem quirky or frivolous, but it always reveals some deeper inner meaning to life's purpose. Traditional and official archival repositories have long operated on the basis of collecting personal and family papers, juxtaposing their public, institutional role against that of individual, private collecting. The nature of this contrast has been exploded by the advent of the digital era, complicating institutional collecting and empowering individual archiving, both possibly at the expense of the work of future historians and other researchers (or maybe not, instead just redirecting researchers to the World Wide Web as an archival repository) (as the number of practical manuals on the topic grows, such as Brown) [1].

One of the continuing promises of our present digital age is the idea that individuals will be able to save every scrap of information about their lives and families and call them forth effortlessly and seamlessly whenever needed. No one will deny that this is an intriguing prospect, or that it is an engaging topic to reflect on. Designers and researchers exploring the MyLifeBits software, designed by Gordon Bell, certainly reveal why digital personal archives can be so captivating. Reviewing the advances in cheap storage, desktop search tools, and metadata development, these software advocates describe a database supporting the range of personal documents each of us is likely to produce in our lifetime (Gemmell, Bell, and Leuder) [2]. What we hear is the mantra, save everything. Then when we examine the uses of FaceBook and MySpace, we hear another refrain, display most everything publicly (with some personal control and restrictions).

3. PERSONAL AND FAMILY ARCHIVES

Whether we consider the use of personal information technology or traditional technologies involving ink, paper, and leather bound notebooks, there is little question that the interest in personal and family archiving is growing. We are witnessing an upsurge in diary writing, journaling, and calligraphy – perhaps part of a reaction to the bits and bytes of the digital world (see Serfaty) [3]. Self-help publications appear regularly to assist individuals in

taking up these pastimes. Attics, basements, and garages, even in the heralded era of cyberspace, often still contain boxes and bags of old family papers. As time passes, however, the kinds of documents we discover in these spaces seem more and more foreign to us.

It is important for records professionals to remember the emotions that might be associated with even the most mundane looking document. And this is certainly the case when we consider personal and family papers, especially in their traditional forms. Sometimes it is easy for archivists to lament the times that they have been forced to watch and listen as someone carefully pulls out documents one at a time and tells a story about each one. Yet, this very human response to interacting with the archival documentation giving them meaning and placement in our age ought to tell archivists something about the value of their work.

While one can read transcripts of such documents on the World Wide Web or their digital counterparts by contemporary writers, the experience between this kind of reading and possessing a physical document is not quite the same. In the past, while there has always been tension between private and public (institutional) collectors, it has been the institutional collectors – archives, libraries, museums, and historic sites – that have won out. In the future, there may be less certainty about this, especially as so many personal papers are digitally born and pose challenges to the public archives. The good news is, however, many private citizens care as passionately about the documents as do the institutional repositories.

People may be increasingly reluctant to turn over their original documents to archives, libraries, and other institutions because of sentimental and emotional meanings not being afforded by the new and emerging digital documents. Before the computer, of course, people worried about the increasing number of technologies encouraging oral rather than written transmission, and their impact on written records. However, there may be less to learn looking backwards because of the remarkable advances in affordable information technologies. Whatever perspective archivists might assume about shaping the documentary heritage through planned appraisal approaches, private individuals will continue to save their own personal and family archives and, different than what has occurred in the past, we might see these documents not hidden away but visibly posted on the Web. Archivists must explain and advise about the basic tasks necessary to maintain archival documentation, requiring new depths of technical and other knowledge, such as intellectual property and personal privacy.

4. ARCHIVING AND EXPERTISE

The world is changing, at least in how it views expertise. It may seem ironic, but the many preservation challenges posed by digital technologies also suggest more empowerment to individuals to administer their own personal papers. Individuals who are not archives and records management professionals may be interested in developing their own expertise to administer their part of the larger documentary heritage (even though solving the challenges cannot occur without some expertise or more resources, public policies, and laws and regulations). We can learn a lesson from the historical development of writing: computers will become so essential that they will become available to all and in ways that are seamless and painless, just as formal scripts were supplanted by the less formal cursives for everyday recording and

communicating (see Fischer series on language, writing, and reading, 1999-2003) [4].

It is worth noting that for all the claims made about digital writing and the World Wide Web that the prospects for preservation seem all the more dim. Those working within the digital curation movement reflect this as their reason for working on technical models and methods. Martin Halbert writes, “CMOs [cultural memory organizations] hold virtually innumerable archives of idiosyncratic material that are rapidly being digitized in local initiatives. This digital content has important long-term value for both research and cultural identity purposes. But CMO professionals frequently lack effective, scalable DP infrastructures. This lack of access to effective means for long term preservation of digital content is aggravated by a lack of consensus on DP issues and professional roles and responsibilities” (Halbert)[5]. This perspective also helps us to understand that the reason people cling to old family papers or try to administer their own records may have little to do with some noble societal cause, but everything to do with personal interests, curiosity, and self-identity – or recognition of the fear of the loss of digital stuff that they read and hear about. Archivists should want to nurture such interests, not diminish them, because they support the mission to preserve our documentary heritage.

Is it no wonder then that even as every home acquires a personal computer the shelves in the home are also being filled with leather-bound, acid-free journals for diaries and commonplace books? The only differences between these earlier revolutions and the present computer era is the amount of time involved; centuries have shrunk to decades, decades to years, years to months (it is often the compression of time in new technical developments that is identified as the main attributes of the present information age). One can practically use and cherish an old fountain pen or camera for decades, but every few years we need to replace our computers (even after they have been upgraded numerous times) (Gleick) [6].

5. THE CHANGING WORLD OF PERSONAL RECORDKEEPING

We have new challenges involving personal recordkeeping. The theft of laptops, identity theft, ownership and responsibility for personal medical records, shifting and confusing notions of personal privacy, and digital documents replacing paper forms and posing new maintenance challenges have all transformed the notion of personal and family papers. How well we do with these personal papers is critical to our identity. We are surrounded by documents marking the activities of our lives, the history of our families, and the unrelenting passage of time. Bills to be paid pile up on our desks at home. Papers from our workplaces can usually be found nearby, or, if we are efficient and organized, in our briefcases, packed and ready to be consulted and worked on. We save certain documents, an interesting letter from a family member or an annotated greeting card from a friend, as mementos of important events in our lives. We assiduously maintain our financial records, carefully organized by accounts and functions, and usually reflecting our sense of how we will tackle the unpleasant annual chore of filing our income tax statements. Photographs, diplomas, and certificates of awards are framed and decorate parts of our houses and offices. Sometimes we use the most routine documents, such as checks, to recreate a life [Mallon] [7].

These witnesses have been with us for a very long time. The impulse to record extends back tens of thousands of years and is seen in the cave paintings, decorated objects, and other material culture remains left us by early humans. Writing systems are, of course, much more recent innovations, but they tell us remarkable things about ancient societies, including what they ate, how they traded with each other, who the rulers were, evil acts perpetrated on people, stories of miracles and great beneficences, natural disasters, wars, what people wore, and how they built residences and public buildings. Although we view our own age as the time when great quantities of information are created, maintained, used, and abused, such recording is endemic to human nature – and that all eras are eligible to be termed “information” ages (Hobart and Schiffman) [8].

Even if one could argue that the impulse to document our activities is not part of our human nature, it is hard to argue that the sources driving writing and recording were not connected to the most basic of human functions. The most mundane of all recordkeeping, tracking financial transactions, is probably the oldest records system known to us. The most common financial record is our checking book. Although many banks have ceased sending cancelled checks back to the customer, there are billions of these checks floating about.

Letter writing has been around since the ancient world, and it shows little signs of disappearing. Most Americans take for granted the daily arrival of mail at their doorsteps, even as their increasing use of electronic mail has affected how, when, and why they choose to write a letter, affix a stamp, and drop it into a corner mailbox. Somehow, however, the letter continues to hang in there. People certainly use short-cuts in our faster-paced world, such as writing long messages in pre-fabricated greeting cards or postcards or mass-producing on word processors what appears to be personalized letters, but the function and allure of the letter remains intact. The major change in letter writing has come in the form of electronic mail, and electronic mail is one of the primary features of our modern networked society, where one can communicate nearly instantly with others where it used to take days or weeks before. The use of digital letter writing poses problems regarding the maintenance of a personal archive.

Most of us, at least those of us at a socio-economic level where we own substantial property, also are cognizant of the need to maintain property records as a form of protection and a manifestation of the responsibility that comes with property. Like financial records, property records extend back to antiquity. As commerce and government developed, the need for documenting the ownership of land and houses emerged, and the nature of marking physical features on the landscape soon proved unreliable as the ownership of property became more complicated (although the earliest records, predating scientific systems of surveying and mapping, often documented immense amounts of these features and that of oral tradition as well) (see Clanchy as an example) [9]. All those old metal document boxes we find in antique stores and flea markets are testimony to the fact that people have been maintaining property and other vital records in safe places for a very long time; examples of the predecessors of such document boxes date back to ancient society, and the storage devices and the function they represent provide an easy to comprehend link between what organizations and governments do with their records and why we manage our personal papers.

The intensely practical merits of financial and property records and personal correspondence ought not to overshadow the equally intensive personal needs to create and maintain records. One historian’s study of Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams, describes her letter writing as having a “therapeutic function.” “Abigail had the rare capacity to express her grief, anger, and fear in words on paper. In doing so, she also helped to raise her own spirits. By transferring her emotions to paper and then mailing the letter, she banished her unhappy temper.” Abigail’s letter writing was a means for her to “unconsciously transform the raw experience of her daily observations into a strongly formulated system of values. Writing to the folks at home about the strange scenes encountered in her travels confirmed their reality in her own mind as well” (Gelles, 26, 102) [10]. Whether one is using quill, ink, and paper or tapping away on a computer keyboard, the therapeutic aspects of personal recordkeeping have not lessened.

6. HUMAN IMPULSES AND PERSONAL ARCHIVING

We have a great need to consult regularly many of our personal archives. We re-examine property records when we are contemplating selling them or refinancing them. We inventory when we are working on a will or updating one. We check financial records when we believe we have been over-charged for a purchase. We pour over old family papers when we need a photograph of an ancestor or a remembrance of a past event to be used in the production of a greeting card, wedding invitation, or renewal of wedding vows. These human impulses to record events and then to save records are reflected in legal matters, societal customs and traditions reflected both in the actual forms of the records and other sources such as etiquette manuals, and in our display of older records – framed and strategically situated – in our houses, workplaces, and our wallets and computers.

New technologies have changed the process but not necessarily the aim of how we interact with our personal and family archives. Digital photography has a more tenuous relationship to reality than that of earlier photographic forms. Now a photograph is information and does not become an image until called up and tinkered with, exaggerating all of the earlier debates about just what a photograph’s image is – art or reality, for example. Critics, historians, and other scholars long ago abandoned thinking of any photographic image as just a frozen moment in time and space, adopting far more complicated concepts of what the image is, but a digital photograph seems more complex by many orders of magnitude, mainly because it is so much more malleable (Mitchell) [11].

Iconography is the study of images and their symbolic role in our lives, institutions, and society. And, as such, it also speaks to the use of documents in displays in our homes and offices meant to interpret our life. Often displayed with the care of a museum exhibit, these spaces tell us much about how and why people want to preserve at least a portion of their private archives. The public display of documents is a means by which we connect with the past. The mere retention and management of our personal archives suggests this purpose as well, but such administration is often done behind the scenes, with records neatly stored in boxes and folders, on disks, and on personal computers. The public display employs a much more selective process of interpretation, whereby we assemble key documents – sometimes selected as much for their aesthetic value as for their evidence – to portray a certain image or to assume a particular identity.

We can understand more of this role of personal archives if we understood why we carry certain records with us. The photographs, receipts, credit cards, licenses, and membership cards we transport with us every day in our wallets, purses, and briefcases speak loudly about us as citizens of the world. Some of these cards, such as a driver's license, we carry with us because we are required to by government agencies. We keep these documents with us because they provide some identity for us, especially as we relate to others. And, with the aid of laptop computers, PDA's, and cell phones, we can now carry far more personal information, some of it quite symbolic of who we are and much of it as carefully arranged and catalogued as an exhibition at a museum (or at least as good as the hallway outside the kitchen).

Recordkeeping we associate with government responsibilities as public data managers, such as vital family records – like death, birth, marriage, and baptismal documents – and a large array of licenses (from hunting to driving, passports and professional certification) have seemed to be with us nearly forever. Many people associate such vital records with government responsibilities, and, indeed, such recordkeeping did become an essential and ubiquitous aspect of government bureaucracies as social, health, and legal services expanded. Some associate such government recordkeeping as being synonymous with bureaucracy, the filling out of endless forms that every citizen experiences every time they visit a government office. Nevertheless, our effort to complete such records or to provide the information essential for completion leaves traces everywhere of us, adding to the accumulation of personal records we generate on our own volition.

Vital recordkeeping was not always a government responsibility. Non-governmental organizations, most notably churches, recorded births, deaths, marriages, and baptisms as part of their sacramental responsibilities – and it is reasonable to assume that if government had not become the official agent for this that such private groups would have continued to perform this function. Many of us have copies of these documents in our family scrapbooks or framed and hanging on the wall, especially since many of these documentary forms are in beautiful calligraphic hands and are associated with landmarks in our lives and those of our families. The rapid growth of interest in genealogy through the past century shows no signs of abating and, along with other hobbies such as scrapbooking and diary writing, suggests a continuing interest in personal archives. (for example, we can see this in the study of scrapbooks, such as Tucker, Ott, and Buckler) [12]. If government was not recording so many of our activities, even with all the reasons of privacy invasions and misuse of personal data that should concern us, would we simply ramp up our own self-recording? The relationship between governmental and organizational recordkeeping and the individual impulse to develop personal archives is a complex, but quite real and useful, one.

The level of commitment we might want to invest in such personal documentation, even to the point of forging our own documentary past, can also be seen in other document forms, such as diaries. The writing of diaries has been a human activity for centuries, and nearly everyone can think of a famous one that has been published. And, perhaps, the best window into the process can be seen in the words of diarists themselves, such as in the those of Rev. Francis Kilvert, a nineteenth century English curate, quoted by Bret Lott in his book on writing: “Why do I keep this voluminous journal? I can hardly tell. Partly because life appears

to me such a curious and wonderful thing that it almost seems a pity that even such a humble and uneventful life as mine should pass altogether away without some record such as this” (quoted in Lott, 79) [13]. The process of diary writing may be the quintessential act of personal recordkeeping, where the daily – or some regular occurrence – of scribbling in a bound book can become an obsession of trying to record every activity, or, at least, an interpretation of every activity.

Whatever diaries might be, they have become popular again. It seems that nearly everyone at least starts compiling a diary, although most do not sustain the process (committing to a diary over an extensive period of time has about the same success rate as dieting and New Year's resolutions). There is a contemporary revolution in diary writing. Diaries are portrayed as the place to write down those salacious thoughts about illicit or immoral activities, a kind of protest against authority (but, also, I would argue, really intended to be read as well). Now, of course, every bookstore chain devotes an entire section to “archival” quality notebooks, beautiful and sleek fountain pens, and books about how to compile a diary (along with family histories, photograph albums, and scrapbooks). There is a public invitation to creating personal archives everywhere one looks, and it is sometimes hard to ascertain whether the vendors are driving and creating a market or whether a market has emerged all on its own. The popularity of diary writing can be seen in the growing presence, since 1995, of online diaries on the Web, with their writers searching for an audience, a connection with others.

Blogging eliminates the middle agent, removing the question of whether the diary is intended for personal use or for public consumption by going instantly to a public (one much larger than when occurs when diaries are placed in archives or even when they are published). Blogging suggests that personal archives are becoming more public, as people also put scrapbooks with family photographs and scanned images of memorabilia online for their family and friends. As one thinks about their personal recordkeeping, it is not difficult to imagine a clear or precise role for the diary. It is the backbone of a personal archive, providing the basic outline of a life and its activities, a frame of interpretation for other records.

As photography became cheaper, more portable, and more adaptable for a wider range of activities, individuals and families took to photography as a means of documenting all facets of their lives. Photographs of travels and tourism became a normal personal pastime for the use of the camera. Family events, such as picnics, baptisms, and reunions, were all documented less formally than before. Informal images, people reading or talking over dinner, proliferated and filled scrapbooks and document boxes. A fuller sense of the personal archive became possible because of the advent of photography, and it is safe to say that newer technical developments, such as Polaroid instant photography and portable digital cameras, added to the possibilities of a richer documentary foundation (although posing new preservation problems).

Another essential part of any personal archives is the array of certificates one gathers over the years. We accumulate diplomas, award citations, and certificates indicating the completion of a special course or program through the years, with the largest clumps coming in our earliest and latter years. Our parents dutifully keep those certificates we receive in grade, middle, and high school, and we generally start holding onto them when we enter our college years. Most of these documents are intended to

be framed and displayed, much like what we do with photographs. These documents are markers of personal progress, expertise, and authority, and they are most often displayed in public spaces such as our offices.

Such records exude symbolic value and provide a connection between modern records and their ancient antecedents. Documents such as modern diplomas have little, if any, legal value as they are issued merely for decorative purposes, mimicking older parchments and more ancient forms of records. They speak eloquently to the symbolic role of archives, a role whereby the documents take on more of a cultural rather evidential purpose. They provide a source of identity, prestige, and status, especially as they are usually displayed before us, usually hung in a place where they will be best seen. These documents manifest much of the overall symbolic value of our personal archives, including those parts of the archives that we carry around with us.

Certificates and diplomas often wind up in scrapbooks, another essential aspect of our personal archives, and now a modern multi-billion dollar a year industry with millions of people creating scrapbooks in one recent year, some using software enabling digital scrapbooks to be created as well. Scrapbooks are what many people think of if you ask them about their family archives, and, in many ways, they are another form of symbolic personal archives, with their arrangements creating order and meaning. Assembling a scrapbook is the amateur's approach to the classification and ordering of information done by librarians and archivists, portraying what their families have been up to through the decades. Individuals select documents and enhance their value as they sort through boxes and file cabinets jammed with records, ephemera, and artifacts and shape to their own and family's history by arranging the materials in volumes with narratives and interpretations. Menus, postcards, ticket stubs, letters, receipts, and other items serve as mementos of favorite or benchmark events, allowing individuals to construct a narrative of their past, as deliberately as others write diaries.

7. TRACES OF OURSELVES

Personal archives can be viewed as crucial aspects for knowing about ourselves, our families, and our times, as important as licenses and memberships enabling us to function on a daily basis. There is some security in being surrounded by evidence of our lives and families. And there ought to be a feeling of insecurity when we lack such knowledge, equivalent to being illiterate. When we lack the right records, and hence the necessary information, we weaken our ability to read and cope with the world. Some of our fascination with old manuscripts, photographs, and other original documents derives from romanticized aspects of creating and interacting with such materials, but there are other utilitarian aspects motivating our personal recordkeeping.

The next time you are walking on a busy street or traveling through an airport, observe what people are carrying. Nearly everyone is laden with a briefcase, a large purse, or a backpack of some variety. Some of these devices indicate a businessman or -woman or a student, but they have become so ubiquitous that it is difficult to assign such identities so easily. What kinds of things are in these various contraptions? Some are filled with their business documents and readings, especially since so many carry laptops so that they can fire up and work anywhere (in the year

2003, laptops began outselling personal computers).[14] But they also carry many parts of personal archives. Photographs, credit cards, membership identifications, drivers' licenses, and other items either include or represent the trail of documentary evidence that follows us everywhere we go, work, and play. With the laptops and digital cameras, most of us seem able to take nearly our entire personal archives with us wherever we travel, provided we have taken the time to scan in the older papers and photographs. It represents just one reason why digital curation might become as much a public concern. While efforts such as the PARADIGM project at the Universities of Oxford and Manchester are working on digital personal archives, recognizing that "there is a marked lack of research and development dedicated to the preservation of this kind of content," since "to date, digital preservation projects have tended to be sponsored by corporate bodies or state archives." Even so, this project has as its "principal audience . . . organizations, of any flavor, which care for the personal archives of politicians, scientists, writers, journalists, academics or of other individuals" (PARADIGM) [15]. My point is that we need to focus as well on the digital curation needs of average citizens, even if very little of their personal archives might ever reside in a repository.

Much of our personal space is occupied by older devices, from furniture to built-in shelving and filing cabinets, reflecting very traditional document systems. We reside in a world where we are bombarded by advertisements suggesting that most of this is obsolete or that it should be only of interest to us if we are engaged by the use of antiques and more comfortable with obsolete technologies (and I write this on a laptop on a hundred year old desk where sits a fountain pen and an old letter sorter). The maintenance of personal archives will be contested in this environment, raising many of the same issues archivists and records managers face in striving to administer both paper and digital systems in our transitional era from analog to digital formats. How we engage such challenges and incongruities with our personal and family records ought to make us better in how we explain, engage with, and resolve such situations in other organizations supporting the archival programs we normally think of when we imagine the archival mission.

8. DIGITAL CHALLENGES

It is difficult to know just what the impact of the Internet (and other digital documentary forms) has been on the sense of the personal archive. As I have discussed in this paper, the Internet has provided a new space for displaying personal archives, such as blogs and personal photograph galleries, but there has been enough debate about the preservation of digital records that no one should view the newly emerging digital personal archives with unbridled confidence. Electronic mail has proved to be a particularly testy challenge, as it generates great gobs of documents testing maintenance and control systems, posing new security problems, and, like the telephone before it, has probably lessened the reliance on the traditional letter. A child writing from college is now likely to ask for money by dispatching quickly an email, perhaps with digital images attached, a scan of a professor's positive comments on an essay, and other documents. Saving these kinds of records suggests both greater problems and more imagination. No longer can we casually jam stuff into a box in the closet, planning to look at and assess the records at a later time. Now we must more consciously plan out what our personal archives will look like and the functions it will serve,

understanding that it will consist of paper records, printed ephemera, photographs, memorabilia, and digital materials.

It is likely that the increasing use of digital formats will enhance interest in the preservation of personal archives and that this will strengthen the public's awareness of the importance of archives, records, and information management. For example, as digital photography has captured the public's interest, now constituting a billion dollar a year industry, with its ease of making and reproducing images, other problems have emerged. These images are easily manipulated, but just as easily lost. If archivists can step forward and provide advice about such problems, a new public comprehension of the archival mission may be gained.

Personal records and artifacts immerse us into the world in a way that gives us meaning beyond the superficial material stuff we acquire. All we have to do is to determine how best to care for the archival goods, recognizing that the personal sensibilities associated with family archives may be far more important than all the scholarship and theorizing being devoted to studying such documents. All we may need to do is to read the testimony of a writer like Ivan Doig rediscovering his mother and his childhood after he receives a packet of his mother's letters years after her death, suddenly "sensing the carrying power of ink as a way to go on" (Doig, 4). [16] We have to acquire a sense of the digital version of this "carrying power."

9. WE ARE ALL ARCHIVISTS

Most people have little sense of what an archivist does, or even know that such a profession exists. It is difficult for the public to understand archival work because of the shifting notions of archives in scholarly and popular usage. A lot of scholarship about the nature of the "archive" has twisted and expanded the concept beyond any sense of the traditional meaning of the term as a repository where scholars and other researchers use historical records to try to decipher the past.

Fortunately, there are places to turn for assistance. Enough people struggle with administering their own personal papers that a number of self-help books have appeared offering advice and promising solutions. Even the vendors of the latest glitzy software products have gone after the market for managing personal records.

Maintaining one's own personal or family papers is a crucial activity for preparing a family history, and while there are similarities between archiving and writing there are also differences. Americans have been blessed with an abundance of historical agencies providing many programs offering advice and instruction on family history work. And these organizations have been doing this for a long time.

Archivists can gain valuable assistance by understanding the nature of personal recordkeeping. For the archivist, some of these personal archives may ultimately be offered to their repositories, and it behooves the archivist to provide advice about the care of such documentary sources to ensure that they arrive in good order. Some professionals have awakened to this role, as reflected in the recent book by Don Williams and Louisa Jaggard on *Saving Stuff*, offering basic advice on the care of personal artifacts and documents. [17] Of course, the vast majority of personal records will not be offered to archives, as they are of much greater value to the individuals and families they relate to. But for the archivist, the key importance may be tapping into the concept of personal archives as a way of explaining the importance of administering

records. Too often we assume that others do not share any sense of this important work, when, in fact, many are quite engaged in trying to preserve their own family and personal papers.

The archival profession needs to concentrate on developing new mechanisms for educating the public about how to care for their personal and family archives. Perhaps, this has already started to happen, as we note that one of the expanding sections of the major chain bookstores is the self-help section. In this section there is a growing number of books about organizing personal papers, what to keep, how to avoid cluttering up one's life, preserving family archives, and so forth. Any of these self-help guides provides as good a reason as any why there is a need for people to follow the advice being offered. However, professional archivists can do better than most of the advice currently being offered in such publications, but, in order to do so, archivists need to shift some of their attention from mostly serving the needs of academic and experienced researchers to working with amateurs committed to preserving their personal and family archives.

Archivists need to be careful in how they might criticize the role, old or new, of individual preservers of documentary materials. A historical perspective clearly indicates that the source of many holdings in now established archival repositories is that of the work of individual collectors or the efforts of some family member to preserve the family archival legacy. While archivists often see or portray themselves as the documenters or collectors of our society, if the truth be told many of their holdings were already somewhat formed by individual collectors who built aggregations of documents or who worked to preserve their own family archives; their disposition in an established archival repository with a more public mission was simply the last stage of a process. What I am getting at is that we may be seeing a very different role for family archivists because of the digital platform on which they work. Whether this new archival desire emanates from simply a utilitarian interest in maintaining personal and family papers or whether it reflects a new kind of competition with archival repositories, it is too early to tell.

The transformation of archival perspectives has usually occurred because of rapidly growing volumes of documents and increasingly complex hybrid documentary technologies. Over the past two decades especially, new networked digital technologies have pushed archivists, at least some, to rethink the custodial model and to consider new kinds of distributed or post-custodial strategies. This seems to be where we now are with personal and family archives, and the prospects for continuing archival work are both daunting and exciting. Continuing archival work is challenging because the digital recordkeeping and information technologies continue to perplex archivists, especially those working in smaller institutions with limited resources, in their abilities to apply traditional notions of record reliability and trustworthiness to the new environments; the result has been almost an avoidance of dealing with these documentary forms, an approach bound to cause problems with the future prospects of the archival profession. Dire predictions of the demise of the archival community have not come true, although it is also the case as much because there are still vast reservoirs of paper records to be analyzed and administered. It is unlikely that sanguine predictions will continue if archivists working through society simply do not deal with digital formats; this avoidance will result in other disciplines or new disciplines stepping in to fill the void.

The exciting aspect of rethinking how archivists will work in preserving personal and family archives is that it may re-open a

much greater possibility for reaching the public with a clearer sense of the archival mission, an objective archivists and their professional associations have struggled to do for several decades with very mixed results. It is, however, clearly the case that the public itself is actually sowing the ground for archivists to seed. As individuals and families continually invest in new technologies that are portable and use them to store ever-growing amounts of records and information, they will encounter increasing challenges for maintaining these sources. Even as people grow more aware of the potential loss of these materials because of technical glitches and design weaknesses, they may be loath to give up on them because of their convenience and ease of use (similar to people being hesitant to stop using credit cards and retail discount cards even as they become more aware of the increased threats to personal privacy).

In addition to archivists adopting a broader campaign to assist the public, they must redirect part of their attention and resources from acquisition of archival materials and to assisting onsite researchers to developing workshops, self-help publications, and other tools for the purpose of equipping more and more citizens to care for their own archives. There is an emerging scholarly discipline, personal information management, archivists need to begin both to dig into and to influence (and there is probably a natural connection to the other emerging area, digital curation).

Partnerships with other disciplines to develop solutions for personal archives management and a greater dedication to research about the reasons why personal and family archives are formed and maintained are good commitments for the archival community to make. Archivists, either on their own or in collaboration with others, need to write and publish guides about the management of personal and family archives directed at the lay audience. Maybe we are becoming poised to do this as we begin to see new attempts to provide such publications. The Council of State Archivists, for example, published in late 2007 a guide on saving family records in disasters [18]. Advisory publications such as this are a by-product of what might be a new role for professional archivists. In this role archivists will function more as advisors rather than acquirers, educators giving their knowledge away rather than protecting the secrets of a guild, and advocates rather than reactors in seeking to preserve the portion of the documentary universe that possesses archival value. Some of this should seem familiar because it relates to some notions promulgated by those working with electronic records a decade or more ago, although some of these views have been greeted with criticism or silence.

I am not arguing that established, institutional archives will not acquire and preserve personal and family archives in the future. What I am suggesting is that the vast and rapidly growing digital documentary universe of such archives requires that archivists first try to advise the creators and amateur caretakers of these materials and only intercede when valuable or unique personal and family archives are endangered. This will require new and more intense archival appraisal approaches, ones that have not been devised yet, as well as new standards for the maintenance

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and use of personal and family digital archives. These are interesting and engaging problems that should be the increasing focus of what educators teach, what doctoral students conduct research about, and what working archivists experiment with and develop into reliable systems.

10. WHITHER DIGITAL CURATION?

The digital age is such that we read of new terms, concepts, jobs, and even disciplines on a regular, sometimes frightening basis. Digital curation is, of course, just another new entry in our new cyberuniverse, and the question of whether it has staying power or not depends on how relevant and practical it proves to be in supporting archivists and their allies to develop new training programs both for records professionals and for private citizens interested in preserving digital documentation.

The efforts in the digital curation project to catalog required knowledge and to define and explain this knowledge with specificity in order to build a logical curriculum are quite important. Terms like “systems engineering and development,” “harvesting,” “ingest,” “digital objects or packages,” and so forth, all seem perfectly at home in a graduate-level curriculum. However, there also needs to be some thought given as to how to condense or spin-off elements of this curriculum, minus the technical or professional jargon, in order to create guides, training programs, and other forms of advice for public use and consumption.

My hope is that we can build on the digital curation initiative in order to develop the means by which to help private citizens to care for their materials. However, even thinking in this way might be far too limited. Nicholas Carr, in his latest book, predicts the rise of private computer systems companies providing centralized data processing services and storages. Carr also hints that these services will not just be directed at large companies with their immense computing needs, but that individuals might also be in line to use such services. Already, Carr suggests, “our PC’s are turning into terminals that draw most of their power and usefulness not from what’s inside them but from the network they’re hooked up to – and, in particular, from the other computers that are hooked up to that network” (Carr, 27). [20] Some archivists might think that this means they should contemplate developing such a service role, but I believe that would involve resources far beyond the archival profession. However, it might mean that archivists should target these emerging computer services and data companies to educate them about the archival issues. The digital curation definitions and curriculum might provide one means to do this.

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