

Washington State Digital Archive's Approach to Preserving Electronic
Records

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Introduction

With the advent of personal computers and the World Wide Web, the pace in which new records are created and accumulated is increasing dramatically. This is no exception for large organizations and government institutions. In addition, more and more records/documents are web-borne or created electronically. One does not have to look far for examples; from emails that are created and transmitted daily to legally binding loan documents, the electronic format is here to stay. Ease and immediacy that the medium offers is irresistible. As an example: for a busy university student, the process of applying for a student loan can be done entirely on the web. One can fill out the entire five plus pages (electronic pages) on the student loan website, sign via an e-signature, and complete the application process with a confirmation reply, all from one sitting. For the user, this loan document exists entirely on the web as an electronic document.

The ease in which these electronic records can be created and altered has its benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, the electronic records can bring people together and creates a smaller community where exchange of information and ideas are more

immediate, with more focus and succinct¹. On the other and, this fast and efficient nature also has a darker side. The electronic records are fragile in the sense that they are easier to alter, as well as the hardware and software that support this format damages or get outdated quicker than traditional format such as paper.

Washington State's government recognized the dilemma that as more and more of their institutions' paper records creation is replaced by electronic record creation, the risk of losing these documents becomes greater and greater. Staying with status quo and continuing with traditional archival method and facility is no longer an option. The creation of Washington Digital Archive was necessitated to preserve government documents in this relatively new electronic medium.

The Washington Digital Archive

Located on the web at: <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>

This archive came into fruition in June 2004 after strategic planning first taking place four years prior. Located in the eastern part of Washington State at the Eastern Washington University campus (Cheney), the Washington Digital Archive is touted as the world's first digital archive. The general description for the website states that the archive is a dedicated archive designed to preserve state and local agencies' electronic records that have permanent legal, fiscal or historical value. To accomplish this, the repository marries modern

technology with traditional archival theories providing onsite as well as remote access to its holdings.

The holdings (what does it have?)

The holdings include current and prior Marriage Records, Naturalization Records, Census Records, Death and Birth Records, Military and other Institution Records. In addition, there are historical Washington State documents such as the ratified Washington State Constitution, Election Returns, early first law passed by the territorial legislature.

Latest addition to the collection is an archival version of the recently dethroned governor Gary Locke's website. The former Governor's website has been replaced by the newly elected Governor Gregoire's website; the Washington Digital Archive decided, with some P.R. and fanfare, to preserve Locke's website in near entirety. The benefits: this collection exists not just as a snapshot but in an organic, a near original order, providing contextual information to otherwise preserved static pages of information. It has over 1,200 web pages and more than 3,200 files of the Locke Administration, including 1,605 press releases, 536 speeches, and 162 media events. According to a press lease by Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed "...all of these documents are accessible to the public at anytime, anywhere in the world...100 years from now our grandchildren and

great-grandchildren will have access to the legacy of the Locke administration"².

By promoting high profile projects such as Governor Locke's project, the archive is working its P.R. aspect, an important, and much overlooked, task needed for current and future funds to continue; a necessity for a costly archive such as this.

Active Appraisal and Accessioning

Beyond incorporating public relations, the archivist has the overwhelming task of appraising and accessioning records. Traditional arrangement of provenance is at best, difficult to achieve when dealing with electronic records. Many electronic records can have non-linear creation chronology and be located in multiple areas. How can organic order and provenance concepts be applied within the new arena of electronic record creation? By examining the Washington State Digital Archives Feasibility Study report, the following two key points were discovered to have been explored. First, incorporate new tools and standards to better describe records, redefining concepts of provenance and organic order. Second, and equally important, the archivist must actively work within this arena to implement, promote and stay on top of emerging technologies.

Identifying electronic records of enduring and historical value from the mountain of obsolete records is a monumental challenge for

the archivist. This needs to be tackled from all levels of the institution. Methodology of attaching meta-data or basic categorical information upon the newly created record can greatly aide the archivist. Clear guidelines in applying common file structures and naming conventions must be established and conveyed to the creator of the document. The archivist must take an active preemptive role in this task in order to have meaningful records to add to the collection. The report also outlines multi-tiered approach to accessioning in which audit and cross check for accuracy is applied for authenticity of the records³ (pg. 33-34). Archives must be able to guarantee authenticity as well as retrievability of records to maintain their value as evidence⁴.

Lesson Learned

Archivists can no longer play a traditional passive role when dealing with electronic records. Archivists need to step into this new technological arena and provide a leadership role in record creation. Hunter, quoting Bearman and Hedstrom, states that the archivist must change their shift in thinking from a "rowing mentality" to a "steering mentality"⁵. Records creators need to be included in management of records; Archivists must apply public relations skills to increase product awareness, and promotion of new methods and standards must be carefully nurtured in the organization in order to have a meaningful and whole archive.

Overall, the Washington Digital Record has managed to start something that seems impossible to accomplish. Studying the literature behind the making of the archive brings light onto all the technical nuances that the archive team must address to tackle this monumental undertaking. This project is a giant step in the right direction. As new technology brings forth more complex records and challenges, so as long as the archive adheres to fundamental discipline and principles of archival practice, it will continue to set an example for other archives to follow.

Work Cited:

¹ Edward Higgs. *History and Electronic Artefact*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1998 (pg.118)

² Washington State Government, “Washington Secretary of State – Digital Archive”, Washington Digital Archives; available from <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/Content.aspx?txt=01272005>, Internet; accessed 10 August 2005.

³ Washington State Government, “Feasibility Study.pdf”, Washington Digital Archives; available from <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/content/Feasibility%20Study.pdf>; Internet; accessed 10 August 2005.

⁴ National Library of Australia, “PADI –Digital records”; available from <http://www.nla.gov.au/padi/topics/70.html>; Internet; accessed 10 August 2005.

⁵ Gregory S.Hunter. *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives: A How-to-do-it Manual*. New York: Neal – Schuman Publisher, 2003 (pg.244).