
Annie Gilliland-Swetland is an associate professor at UCLA, where she teaches Archives and Preservation Management. She has written extensively on electronic records administration and the development and evaluation of digital archival information systems (AA 165.) Her expertise and interests surely informed her involvement with the International Research on Permanent Authentic Electronic Record Project (InterPARES 1) and she is a well-regarded authority on the subject. This article details the efforts of an InterPARES task force researching prospective “truth tests” which could be consistently and reliably applied to prove the authenticity of digital records. This is a new problem in the archivist’s profession, previously, “once they have made and acted upon their appraisal decisions, archivists, for the most part, have left judgment about the trustworthiness and utilization of archival evidence to end-users” (AA 197.) Electronic records, however, exist nowhere in as concrete a fashion as paper records, and every view of the electronic record can be considered a view of a copy of some intangible original. And unlike paper originals, edits and redactions to electronic documents are not obvious, and therefore, in the absence of standardized “truth tests,” the authenticity of an electronic record lies in question. Gilliland-Swetland sums up the task force’s goals when she says it is:
concerned with achieving a better understanding of the means by which archivists can ensure that the copy of the electronic record held by the archives or delivered to the user is authentic—that it is what it claims to be, that it is genuine, that it has not been counterfeited or tampered with, and that it is free of corruption (AA 197.)

The InterPARES I Project “was a three-year international, multidisciplinary collaborative research effort that examined the preservation of the authenticity of records that [...] need to be preserved as archival records” (AA 199.) The Authenticity Task force launched its research with five questions, to be explored and further refined through internationally conducted interviews and task force studies. These questions focused on identifying elements common to all electronic records, elements that differentiate records, elements that verify authenticity in time (when the records were originally created,) and whether or not those elements can be preserved while maintaining validity (AA 199.) These elements were presumed to fall into categories identified by a previous project: documentary form, annotations, context, and medium (AA 201.) Beginning in Spring 1999, researchers spent three years interviewing systems managers, managers, and executives in international government, university and corporate agencies (AA 203.) As research progressed, the questions and interview tactics evolved. Eventually, the Case Study Interview Protocol grew to cover five areas: “Context (juridical-administrative, provenancial, procedural, and documentary), Intrinsic Elements of Form, Annotations, and Medium and Technological Contexts” (AA 204.) Such refinements of question and technique are to be expected in a long-running, complicated research effort, but instead of keeping the research focus on the intrinsic qualities of records themselves, the task force found that “it became increasingly clear that understanding the nature and boundaries of electronic records required a detailed understanding of the business functions being
studied” (AA 209.) The author, who played a lead role in the task force, points to other studies in support of this conclusion.

It is tempting to look at this as an excuse for the failure of the task force to identify any record elements that could comprise a provable “truth test.” The author sidesteps questions about the new direction taken by saying:

The purpose of conducting this functional analysis was to describe, unambiguously for non-archivists, and systems designers in particular, the nature of the record-keeping function performed by the system (AA 209.)

Unfortunately for those waiting for a usable technique for verifying authenticity,

[They] concluded, however, that it was not possible to render an accurate functional decomposition of each case study from the case study data that had been collected (AA 209.)

It seems that the task force, in examining background issues, became mired in fundamental groundwork instead of conducting research toward its original goals. Gilliland-Swetland on page 209 points to other research that reached the same dead end—but she doesn’t address the reasons the task force failed to build upon previous research instead of deciding to duplicate the failures of previous projects. It’s tempting to imagine what must have been interminable task force meetings where the ever-present specter of an insecure foundation loomed over the proceedings; it’s absolutely painful to imagine the frustration at being road blocked by questions that should have been answered at the project’s inception. In fact, it’s not necessary to imagine the pain and frustration, because that experience is aptly conveyed by Gilliland-Swetland’s thick academic writing.

Reading that the task force “purposively identified the cases that seemed likely best to elucidate phenomena that the research was seeking to understand” (AA 202)
(translation: they picked the best case studies) is an adequate stand-in for sifting through reams of procedural proposals. The passage “this examination of the nature of electronic records was conducted by means of purposively selected, interpretive case studies of electronic systems that contained, or were deemed likely to contain, electronic records” (AA 202) evokes (with searing accuracy) the experience of suffering through long-winded, pompously self-reflective committee arguments. The author wields jargon like a club, she sets up passive forms like bricks in a wall, and she pulls up the drawbridge on any non-specialists approaching this particular ivory tower. Thus shut out, where should a non-specialist but interested reader turn?

Turn to the offset text boxes. Stepping stones across a swamp of verbiage, these text boxes offer a valuable education on the problem of authenticating digital records. The task force’s key findings (mainly about organizational system types) are laid out clearly and succinctly. Table 1 examines the nature of digital records (AA 201) Table 2 tells who is likely to create records worth archiving (AA 203) and Tables 3 through 5 examine different aspects of information systems. Offset text boxes show the key findings of the task force’s functional analyses (AA 209 and 210), content analysis (AA 211) and the analysis of elements of identity and integrity (AA 206). Best of all, the appendix lists the InterPARES project’s Benchmark Requirements Supporting the Presumption of Authenticity of Electronic Records (p 213, detailing the presumably verifiable attributes of electronic records) and the Baseline Requirements Supporting the Production of Authentic Copies of Electronic Records (p 215.)

Overall, this article was instructive for a beginning archivist interested in the problems involved in verifying the authenticity of electronic records. I don’t think the
disappointing results of the Task Force’s research program merited Gilliland-Swetland’s ungainly treatment, but I was very pleased with the offset text and appendix. Since both the writer and editor must have agreed that the material in the text boxes should be presented in a clear and accessible manner; I only wish they had done the same with the main body of the article.