Personal Digital Archiving: Issues for Libraries and a Summary of the PDA Conference

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Abstract:

Libraries pride themselves on their Special Collections – the unique sets of photographs, correspondence, diaries, home movies, and other documents that reside in only one library. Most Special Collection material comes from individuals or organizations, and today almost all of this material is born-digital. But there are not (as yet) well-established methods for ingesting and managing this type of material. This paper explores the emerging field of Personal Digital Archiving (PDA) which seeks to explore methods for organizing and managing born-digital personal collections of photos, email, calendars, diaries, and other documents. The paper reports back from the Spring 2015 PDA Conference on topics and tools likely to be of interest to Special Collections Librarians.

Keywords: personal digital archiving email photographs

The works entering our library Special Collections are increasingly coming in digital forms. Very soon most works our Special Collections acquire will be digital rather than analog because the letters, photographs, and documents that most individuals and organizations create today are digital, not analog.

Libraries need to develop methods to ingest, manage, preserve, and provide access to these born-digital materials. They also need to understand that the number of these will be huge. (For example, any given individual or organization might create 10 times the number of emails as they did print letters, or save 10 times as many photographs as they did in the analog world.)

In addition, libraries need to consider that, unlike in the analog world, the corpus of digital materials created by an individual or organization are not concentrated in a single location. In

the analog world, we could obtain a set of file cabinets containing most of the relevant materials. In the digital world, this kind of material is spread over hard disks, websites, and on commercial services such as Facebook, Gmail, Instragram, YouTube, etc. – what this author has termed the *Stage Two archiving problem* (Besser 2014). Many of those commercial services forbid anyone but the account owner from downloading material (even forbidding a library that has the permission of the account owner). And while many analog collections have been donated to the library by the spouse or children of someone who recently died, doing that with digital collections residing on commercial services is patently illegal in many instances.

The central place in North America for discussing the enormous problems facing library special collections acquiring born-digital individual or organizational collections has been the annual Personal Digital Archiving Conference (PDA). Since 2010, this conference has attracted librarians and archivists trying to manage this type of material, as well as individuals wanting to better manage their own personal collection of digital photographs, email, documents, and home movies. It has also attracted researchers trying to better understand how they might search through vast numbers of works (like trying to find threads in tens of thousands of emails). Here is the original "Call for Papers" for the 2015 PDA Conference:

> *Our personal and professional records are now primarily digital, and our lives are geared toward constant sharing of these works from street protests to baby photos. The complexity of these growing collections in every sphere of our lives cannot be overstated. The Personal Digital Archiving 2015 Conference welcomes a broad community, working to ensure longterm access to these personal collections and archives. We would like to see presentations that show how an individual would approach a personal collection and how a closely tied group (such as a family or a community organization) would approach their shared collection.*
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> *The array of physical and digital formats that comprise any collection is ever expanding and shifting. Approaches to managing these collections differ greatly between the broad spectrum of archival best practices and "better than leaving it in the basement" practices.*
>
> *Personal Digital Archiving 2015 invites proposals on the full range of topics relevant to personal digital archiving. We particularly encourage papers and presentations around community groups, activist groups and their use of digital media, as well as personal/familial collections and homebrewed digital solutions. Presentations might address challenges, such as:*
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> - *Ubiquitous recording devices like cell phones for videos and photos*
> - *Action cameras (such as GoPro)*
> - *Cloud storage*
> - *Social media: Vine, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, blogs etc.*
> - *Email*
> - *Open source, low-cost digital tools*
> - *From an organizational perspective: community outreach and economic models*
> - *Security: issues of access, encryption, reliability and safety*

- *Archival and library issues associated with collection, appraisal, ingest and description*
- *Migration of content from obsolete or outdated storage media*

The 2015 Conference

The 2015 PDA Conference was held on 24-26 April at New York University. In addition to traditional PDA sponsors (the Organizing Committee and the Coalition for Networked Information), this year's co-sponsored also included the hosts: NYU's Moving Image Archiving & Preservation Masters Degree Program, and the NYU Library.

Though in most years PDA focused on collections created by individuals, in 2015 an emphasis was also added on the collections of community groups and activist groups. Also the 2015 conference tried to put a little more emphasis on collections of time-based media (such as moving images and sound). The 2015 conference also offered half-day workshops focused on tools for managing PDA-type collections. Workshops included: Archivematica and AtoM: *End-to-end digital curation for diverse collections*; *Appraise, Process, Discover & Deliver Email*; *Curating Personal Digital Archives using BitCurator and BitCurator Access Tools*; and *Do-It-Yourself Personal Digital Archiving*.

The 2015 conference included four multi-participant Panels on: *Personal Tools and Methods for PDA*, *Community-based Approaches to PDA*, *The Professional is Personal: Reflections on Personal Digital Archiving Day on the College Campus*, and *Digital Preservation and Art*.

A Keynote Address by award-winning filmmaker Don Perry discussed the Digital Diaspora Family Reunion Project (Digital Diaspora website), a large-scale attempt to involve African-American communities throughout the US in saving, aggregating, and making available photographs and other documents related to African-American history (a history that is not well-reflected in most library and archival collections). The project employs moving images and social networks (as well as community events) to engage people in archiving and providing access to the rich resources of their family histories.

The second Keynote Address by Rick Prelinger and Howard Besser looked at both the past and the future of personal digital archiving, and placed it within a much larger context. The speakers anticipated how the field will evolve (including changing roles and practices for librarians and archivists), and how the term "personal archiving" is likely to replace "personal digital archiving".

A number of the presentations examined the relationship between PDA and social media (from how social media was shaping PDA practices [like those of professional photographers], to efforts to extend PDA collections to encompass collections of social media contributions).

There were about a dozen very short "Lightning" Talks given, and about two dozen Poster Sessions.

A complete list of conference sessions and other activities is available, as well as copies of most of the slides shown (PDA 2015 Conference website). Videorecordings of most of the

sessions are available from the Internet Archive (PDA 2015). And Tweets related to the conference are available at Twitter (PDA 2015 Tweets).

Acknowledgments

References

Besser, H. (2014) *The Digital-Age Challenges of Preserving "Personal" Content: Manuscript Drafts, Correspondence, & Social Movements,* **Proceedings of IS&T Archiving 2014**, pages 42-46
http://www.imaging.org/ist/publications/reporter/articles/Rep29_3_ARCH2014_BESSER.pdf

Digital Diaspora Family Reunion (website and blog)
http://1world1family.me/

Personal Digital Archiving 2015 Conference Website (including PDFs of presentation slides)
http://personaldigitalarchiving.com/

Personal Digital Archiving 2015 (videos of presentations)
https://archive.org/details/PDA2015

Personal Digital Archiving 2015 Tweets (April 22-27, 2015 only; this hashtag was later re-used for another event)
https://twitter.com/hashtag/pda2015?src=hash