

Personal Digital Archiving: DPC Technology Watch Report 15-01

By Gabriela Redwine. Great Britain: Digital Preservation Coalition, DPC Technology Watch Series, 2015. 33 pp. EPUB. Freely available from the Digital Preservation Coalition, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7207/twr15-01>. ISSN 2048-7916.

After explaining what he or she does, an archivist usually gets the questions: “What should I do with all my digital photos, music, and the rest of my stuff on my computer? Will there even be a trace of me when I’m gone? Who would even want any of my stuff?” Some folks struggle with the value of their personal papers, but usually identify at least one situation where preserving some of their digital files would be of value to them, their families, or their communities. Individuals do not need to understand archival theory to preserve their personal digital files, but would benefit from some basic digital preservation practices to keep their personal files safe from alteration and destruction. Personal digital archiving has become a popular topic now that more and more members of the public are creating large swaths of digital content and experiencing issues with long-term management and custodianship. Conferences like “Personal Digital Archiving” have popped up, as well as research in allied fields like archival studies, media studies, and personal information management. Personal digital archiving straddles several fields, but guidance and outcomes need to accommodate a diverse audience of content creators—from infrequent computer users to scholars conducting data-intensive research that results in digital output. This Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) report by Gabriela Redwine meets these challenges by providing practical options for a variety of contexts.

Redwine is the digital archivist at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Before joining Yale, she was the archivist and electronic records/metadata specialist at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. She has coauthored other notable and relevant works such as *Digital Forensics and Born-Digital Content in Cultural Heritage Collections* (2010) and *Born-Digital: Guidance for Donors, Dealers, and Archival Repositories* (2013), both published by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). Redwine’s current report comes out of the Digital Preservation Coalition, a membership-based organization that supports collaboration, tools, and best practices that promote long-lived digital collections. The coalition commissions *DPC Technology Watch Reports* to inform current issues, trends, and approaches to digital preservation. Current reports are restricted to DPC members for several months before they

are made publicly available. Most of the *Technology Watch Reports* are aimed at digital preservation practitioners or professionals in related fields.

The DPC *Personal Digital Archiving* report aims to describe the issues facing individuals who want to preserve their digital objects, while providing recommendations for records creators and curators to take action. Redwine presents a clear and straightforward description of personal digital archives—their history, composition, preservation concerns, and selection criteria. Once the reader has a better sense of all that personal digital archives encompass, the report spells out the major preservation threats to consider, such as hardware and software obsolescence, storage issues, third-party storage and hosting providers going out of business, and the death of an individual that could impact intent to preserve. Recommendations in several charts focus on planning, management, and budgeting for one's personal digital archive, and three case studies discuss different approaches to and aspects of this work. At the end of the report, Redwine provides an extensive list of additional resources such as OCLC's *Demystifying Born-Digital* series, the Digital Lives Research Project from the British Library, and an article from *The Guardian* on digital legacy strategies.¹

I always appreciate Redwine's clarity and use of language. It makes her publications inclusive and understandable for a diverse set of readers—in this case, archivists collecting born-digital personal papers and records creators interested in preserving their own materials. Processes, best practices, and acronyms are all clearly explained in context. Traditional archival literature is not always accessible to readers outside of our domain, so this report creates a bridge between theory and practical guidance for nonarchivists. Section 7.1 provides clear appraisal and selection criteria that anyone could use to select materials from their collections for preservation. Redwine also provides modular goals that can be customized based on one's own digital archiving situation—for example, the need to document your wishes for your digital files so that others can properly dispose of them; refresh your storage media regularly and prioritize at-risk materials; and determine what type of storage and software you will need to access and render your files in the long term.

The case studies and resources sections at the end are very useful and practical. The report reminds me of an abbreviated and updated PARADIGM workbook.² In the first case study, Charlotte Abney Salomon, a history of science graduate student and assistant at the Medical Historical Library at Yale University, describes her personal digital content and information management strategy. The second case study is authored by Cathy Marshall of the Center for the Study of Digital Libraries at Texas A&M University, who discusses social media archiving as it relates to systemic threats to content stored on third-party services like Twitter and Facebook. She counters that argument with the general sentiment that many have about their social media content, "When researchers

ask users of social media platforms like Facebook whether they would want a personal archive of the content they've contributed, they generally say no. In fact, they seem perplexed. 'Why would I need that?' they ask." (p. 20). The last case study features Paul Wilson's journey to plan for the long-term preservation of his primarily born-digital materials. Wilson, formerly of the Office Systems Division at the National Computing Centre, developed additional guidelines around his experience of personal digital archiving from DPC.³

While existing guidance is available to help individuals begin to think about and take action to preserve their digital files, how practical is it? This report provides one of the clearest sets of activities and guidelines to help an individual to begin managing and preserving their digital content, but much work still needs to be done to make it easier for anyone to make progress on their own preservation activities. Wilson remarks on this in his case study when he tries to find straightforward guidance: ". . . none of the models, approaches, and guidance that I came across provided a process description of preservation planning which I felt would meet my needs as an individual" (p. 23). Many of the services that exist are geared toward large-scale libraries and consumer-focused services, which do not always adhere to best practices such as metadata generation, preservation formats, and true transfers.

One issue worth noting with this and other similar personal digital archiving guidelines is that the level of effort and resources needed to accomplish some of the suggested steps may be prohibitive at the scale of one person compared to a repository. This is not an issue with Redwine's guidance per se, but a gap for digital-preservation-oriented software and storage services available to individuals. As Paul Wilson notes, ". . . most digital preservation models and approaches are, unsurprisingly, designed specifically for the professional curation of digital materials owned by organizations. As such, their detailed processes assume far greater levels of data volumes, time, budget, facilities, commitment, and organizational constraints than individuals are likely to have" (pp. 22–23). I wish services or better options existed to suggest to the personal digital archiving community. Many of the current options are oriented toward larger organizations with dedicated technical staff who are comfortable with the command line for installation and execution of workflows. I do appreciate the no- to low-cost options Redwine suggests, like free or trial versions of software to read files—a creative solution to a major barrier for many individuals who want to better understand what they have as they embark on safeguarding it.

This report could be very helpful for curators working with living donors, individuals as well as groups working to preserve their own content outside of the archives or manuscript repository environment. Personal digital archiving best practices from this report can also extend to communities interested in preserving their own records. I am always on the lookout for resources that

are useful for anyone wanting to know more about digital preservation in their own context, like Peter Hirtle's "Archival Authenticity in a Digital Age" that was part of a 2000 CLIR report.⁴ I think *Personal Digital Archiving* is a great example of one of those publications that helps archivists and records creators meet the challenges of the digital present and future, and it will be added to my go-to list.

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NOTES

- ¹ OCLC Research, <http://www.oclc.org/research/themes/research-collections/borndigital.html>; Jeremy Leighton John, Ian Rowlands, Peter Williams, and Katrina Dean, *Digital Lives: Personal Digital Archives for the 21st Century, an Initial Synthesis*, 2010, <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/files/digital-lives-synthesis02-1.pdf>; J. Schofield, "What Happens to Your Facebook Account When You Die?," Ask Jack, *The Guardian*, October 30, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/askjack/2014/oct/30/what-happens-to-your-facebook-account-when-you-or-a-loved-one-dies>.
- ² Both Redwine's report and the PARADIGM workbook provide easy-to-read, modular sections around a variety of digital preservation topics that nonexperts can read and understand. There are opportunities to dive deeper in each document, but you can also use sections to get a general idea of concepts, "Workbook on Digital Private Papers," Paradigm, <http://www.paradigm.ac.uk/workbook/>.
- ³ Paul Wilson, "Preservation Planning for Personal Digital Collections," Digital Preservation Coalition, April 2016, <http://www.dpconline.org/docman/miscellaneous/advice/1509-casenote-pwilson-preservationplanning-ver2/file>.
- ⁴ Peter B. Hirtle, "Archival Authenticity in a Digital Age," in *Authenticity in a Digital Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2010), <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/reports/pub92/pub92.pdf>.

Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala

By Kirsten Weld. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, *American Encounters / Global Interactions*: a series edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg, 2014. 352 pp. Softcover. \$27.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-5602-8.

In July 2005, investigators in Guatemala City looking for improperly stored ammunition unexpectedly stumbled upon another type of explosive material. At an abandoned, dilapidated police warehouse that had once been a torture and detention center known as *la isla*, or "the island," investigators found bundles of decaying police records covered in decades-thick dust, mildew, cockroach carcasses, and vermin feces. The cache, an estimated eighty million records that dated back almost a century, is the largest discovery of secret police archives in Latin American history, and held the potential to provide answers to questions