

Addressing the personal digital archives needs of a contemporary artist

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ABSTRACT

The study of personal digital archives is an emerging research area that crosses multiple domains including digital preservation, personal information management, archives, and recordkeeping. The practical need and desire for solutions and tools to meet the long-term preservation and access needs of individuals is increasing in relation to the ubiquitous production of digital information in contemporary society. To date, most digital preservation research has focused on the development of methods, tools, and solutions for institutional contexts such as libraries, archives, and other types of repositories. The personal context of an individual is distinct from organizational or institutional contexts, and necessitates new methods and approaches to better understand and develop solutions to meet personal digital recordkeeping and preservation needs. This paper describes a research project in progress that is focusing on this personal context by utilizing a case study approach to explore the design, development and implementation of personal digital recordkeeping system for a specific type of individual: a contemporary artist.

General Terms

Communities, specialist content types, case studies and best practice,

Keywords

Personal digital archives, recordkeeping, artist records

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of personal digital archives is an emerging research area that crosses multiple domains including digital preservation, personal information management, archives, and recordkeeping. The practical need and desire for solutions and tools to meet the long-term preservation and access needs of individuals is increasing in relation to the ubiquitous production of digital information in contemporary society. To date, most digital preservation research has focused on the development of methods, tools, and solutions for institutional contexts such as libraries, archives, and other types of repositories. The personal context of an individual is distinct from organizational or institutional contexts, and necessitates new methods and approaches to better understand and develop solutions to meet personal digital recordkeeping and preservation needs. This paper describes a research project in progress that is focusing on this personal context by utilizing a case study approach to explore the design, development and implementation of personal digital recordkeeping system for a specific type of individual: a contemporary artist.

2. PREVIOUS WORK

2.1 Personal digital archives

In a series of articles Marshall [1, 2] reports on studies conducted with a wide array of “consumers” to learn more about their understanding, behavior, and actions in relation to personal digital archives. From interviews and direct observations of personal digital archiving activities of a number of different types of individuals, Marshall describes a range of categories of personal digital archiving principles that consumers practice and the related challenges associated with those principles from the perspective of designing a personal digital archiving service. In distilling the findings of her studies, Marshall articulates the notion of “benign neglect” as being inherent to the practice of most individuals, and the need for the recognition of this phenomenon within the design of any future personal digital archiving service. While positioned within the personal information management field, Marshall’s work crosses into the domain of archives, recordkeeping, and digital preservation, and represents an important contribution to an understanding of the personal digital archiving needs of the general consumer.

Lee and Capra [3] further explore the intersections between personal information management and archival literature. In their analysis of the commonalities between personal information management and archives and records management theories and practice, Lee and Capra recommend future research areas in which to further explore these connections, including “designing systems that are attentive to individual needs and behaviors” and “individual scale digital preservation”. In a similar vein to Marshall’s findings, these recommendations represent a shift from studies focused on identifying and understanding personal digital archiving behaviors and needs towards projects that explore the design and development of systems and services that address those needs.

Within the archival literature a number of studies and projects have investigated personal digital archives from the perspective of collecting institutions, the places where personal digital archives may eventually be acquired and managed. The Digital Lives project [4] is a recent significant contribution to this perspective, developing an “intellectual framework to help to better understand how people create, organize, manage, use and dispose of their personal digital archives” based on interviews with multiple stakeholders including creators and curators. Additional studies [5,6] have explored the personal digital archiving habits, behaviors, and actions of specific types of creators including writers and photographers. Findings from these studies include recommendations that can be characterized as a need for increased interactions between archivists and creators before digital materials are acquired or transferred to an archive. These recommendations include archivists providing guidance or simple

steps for creators to follow in creating and managing digital archives, actions which will potentially benefit an archivist or institution that may acquire the materials in the future.

Cunningham's [7] position on personal digital archives, or in his words, "personal recordkeeping", functions as an early statement in support of archivists providing guidance to individual creators, but also suggests a more fundamental shift for the role of the archivist. In alignment with the records continuum conceptual model, Cunningham suggests that archivists should endeavor to be more directly involved in the records creation process to ensure that records are, "created and captured into well-designed, well-documented recordkeeping systems". He further articulates that recordkeeping standards and methodologies, such as ISO 15489 [8], based on the records continuum conceptual framework, could potentially be applicable in the realm of personal recordkeeping and personal digital archives, and should be tested through "research projects with some individual creators". Cunningham's embrace of the records continuum approach to personal digital archives represents a distinct contrast to perspectives based on the life cycle model which suggest increased, but still fairly limited, intervention on the part of the archivist in relation to the records creation process.

2.2 Artist records

Within the larger context of the InterPARES 2 project, researchers investigated the documentation practices of the performance artist Stelarc [9]. Utilizing a case study approach, through interviews with the artist and observations of performances, researchers analyzed the creative activities of the artist to determine how the digital entities that resulted from these activities corresponded to a traditional definition of a record based on diplomatics theory. With recognition of its limitations [10], the Stelarc case study represents an important contribution to understanding the records creation process of a contemporary artist and the related recordkeeping and preservation system requirements.

Another contribution to the understanding of the recordkeeping and archival needs of contemporary artists is the recent project, Studio Archives: Voices of Living Artists, Their Assistants, and Their Archivists [11]. Through a series of interviews with a range of artists at various career stages, this project has attempted to document the current state of artist's studio archives, articulate recordkeeping challenges and needs, and build relationships between artists and information professionals. The primary goal of this project is to produce, "a guide for artists on how to establish an archive, and how to maintain it over time". To date, this guide has not been published, but is intended to include guidance for managing and preserving digital content.

Furness [12] has produced one of the few examples of a study that investigated the recordkeeping practices of a single contemporary artist using an exploratory case study approach. Specifically, this project sought to, "understand, through empirical investigation, the many factors that shape the artist's recordkeeping and archives in the personal sphere and contribute to the nature of the eventual archival fonds in the institution". In this case, the artist records had already been acquired by an archival institution. Through interviews with the artist, Furness investigated the relationship between the artist's recordkeeping activities and her creative practice. Additionally, the archivist responsible for the acquisition of the artist's records was interviewed to understand the archival transfer process. While this project is framed by the context of an institutional archive, it offers valuable insight into the creative

process of a contemporary artist and the resulting records of that process.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current project described here seeks to build on contributions to the understanding of the issues, challenges, and opportunities related to the emerging field of personal digital archives provided in the studies described in the previous section. This project seeks to move beyond current understanding, to extend and expand the discourse on personal digital archives by engaging in a project with a very practical goal: the design, development, and implementation of a functional personal digital recordkeeping system for a contemporary artist. While the primary goal of the project is to produce a recordkeeping system that integrates digital preservation actions throughout the artist's creative process, a secondary goal is to support the preservation of the outputs of this process, including artworks that are or include digital objects as elements. The research questions that propel this project are as follows:

1. What are the personal recordkeeping and digital preservation needs of a contemporary artist?
2. What are the specific recordkeeping and preservation system requirements?
3. Can these requirements be met by current recordkeeping and digital preservation software and services?
4. What does a functional personal recordkeeping system for a contemporary artist look like?

4. METHODS AND APPROACH

To investigate these research questions, the project is utilizing a case study approach to explore the development of a recordkeeping system for an individual contemporary artist. The case study approach provides a framework to focus research on a case unit to allow for a more intensive and detailed investigation than may be possible with multiple units [13]. The current project's focus on a single contemporary artist as the case unit is intentional and corresponds to a hypothesis that artists are a specific type of creator that will have specific recordkeeping needs related to their creative process. The case study approach provides a framework for a rich and deep exploration of the artists' creative process, and the development and implementation of a recordkeeping system upon which to assess this initial hypothesis.

Within a case study structure the project is also employing an action research method to facilitate the process of working towards very practical goals and objectives. Action research provides a structure for projects that entail a different approach from the traditional model of researcher as an observer of research subjects. In action research, the researcher role functions more as a facilitator and the traditional role of the subject is instead an active participant in all phases of the research project that seeks to investigate, plan, and implement actual change [14]. The action research method offers a structure that is particularly applicable to personal digital archives research, in that it entails an iterative process of planning, acting, and evaluating to work towards project goals. Previous research [15] has illustrated the idiosyncratic nature of how individuals think, behave, and act in relation to personal digital recordkeeping. In the context of the current project, which is based on collaboration between an archivist and an artist, an iterative approach that incorporates continual evaluation will allow for flexibility in adjusting project

activities in relation to potential nuanced discoveries, as well as assist in ensuring that both participants are making progress towards stated goals.

Finally, the current project is also investigating the applicability of the records continuum conceptual framework to the realm of personal digital recordkeeping. Situated outside of a traditional institutional context of an archivist acquiring the records of a donor for inclusion in an institutional collection, the current project aspires to explore the potential role of an archivist in engaging and collaborating with creators to develop practical solutions for their personal recordkeeping, digital preservation and access needs.

5. PROJECT STATUS

The project is currently in an early phase. To date, work completed includes establishing a relationship with the specific contemporary artist, and early steps in describing and mapping the creative process of the artist.

5.1 Establishing the relationship

The decision to design the project around the recordkeeping needs of a contemporary artist did not follow a traditional process of the researcher selecting a particular research subject based on the subject's qualities in relation to a specific set of research questions. Instead, the relationship was established and evolved through a series of social interactions in which the topic of personal digital archives was repeatedly discussed between the author and the contemporary artist. It is important to note that these interactions took place before the author was affiliated with their current institution, and evolved into a consultant (author) and client (artist) relationship as initial project goals and objectives were developed. This relationship has evolved into an equal collaboration as the project has shifted into a more formal mode, including the development of the specific research questions and the decision to utilize the research methods articulated in the previous section.

5.2 Creative process mapping

Through a series of semi-structured interviews the author and artist are engaging in the process of developing a set of diagrams that visually map the various steps and activities that are involved in creation of a typical artwork or project. The creative process diagrams will be revised multiple times through an iterative process of collaborative review between the author and the artist. The final versions of the creative process diagrams will include the identification of specific digital objects that function as outputs of the various creative process activities.

6. FUTURE WORK

Additional proposed project phases include:

1. Identification of specific digital objects as records and determination of record value
2. Design and development of recordkeeping system requirements
3. Identification and testing of tools to meet system requirements
4. Implementation initial version of recordkeeping system
5. Assessment of recordkeeping system functionality and use
6. Modification of recordkeeping system elements based on assessment results

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