Richard Pearce-Moses

This article is based on my address at the Annual Meeting closing plenary. The full text is available online at http://www.lib.az.us/diggovt/presentations/SAA_2005.pdf

In the previous issue of *Archival Outlook*, Rand Jimerson described the top three strategic issues on SAA's "radar screen". These strategic issues are, in Council's opinion, the most important "threats and challenges that are of critical concern to the archival profession." That column was the beginning of what I hope will be an stimulating and interesting conversation among all members of the Society throughout the coming year.

In 1991, Margaret Hedstrom observed that "Electronic records . . . present archivists with their greatest challenge in decades." [1] Last May, at NARA's celebration of twenty years of independence, Bob Horton did a nice job of summarizing what's happened in the nearly fifteen years since Hedstrom made her prediction.

> We have collectively experienced a technological revolution in the past decade. . . . We have not experienced the corresponding and overdue institutional and professional revolution that is the appropriate and necessary response. [2]

During my term as President, I want to focus archivists' attention on an "appropriate and necessary response" to the strategic issue of technology. What must archivists and records professionals do to remain vital and essential in the digital era?

Foremost, we must recognize the urgency of the problem. Council has already heard concerns that the tone of the strategic issues is too negative. It is essential that we look for positive responses and avoid any sense of defeat. At the same time, we must recognize that strategic issues have the potential to completely transform the profession. In the case of technology, I firmly believe that the notion of a 'digital archives specialist' will be meaningless in the future because all archivists will be digital archivists.

In the case of digital records, the urgency of the problem is often not apparent. Even though the vast majority of information is now created in digital form, [3] few archives have begun acquiring digital records in any significant numbers. Archivists will want to acquire many of these digital records, but unless we take steps to appraise and acquire these records now – while they are still active and accessible – we will lose many of them.

To date, much of the profession's response has come from academia and has been conceptual and theoretical. Much of this work is invaluable. While reading the literature on electronic records has given me a richer understanding of the problem, I'm left without a practical sense of the solution. I have a notion of what needs to be done, but not necessarily how to do it.

As such, I believe that the next step requires us to shift our attention from the conceptual to the practical and empirical, to pay more attention to what needs to happen in the trenches. The

---

[1] "Understanding Electronic Incunabula: A Framework for Research on Electronic Records." *American Archivist* 54:3 (Summer 1991), p. 335. After hearing this paper, Hedstrom commented "If we'd started work when I published the paper, the needed change might very have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary." Conversation with author, 20 August 2005.

[2] Presented at panel discussion during the celebration of NARA's 20th Anniversary of independence, 20 May 2005. From an unpublished copy provided to the author.

[3] See Peter Lyman and Hal R. Varian, "How Much Information? 2003." Online at http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info-2003/ (checked 25 August 2005).

profession – as a whole, and not just digital records specialists – must respond by becoming as comfortable working with digital materials as they are with paper.

Our comfort with tangible records is based on knowledge that individuals bring to the profession long before they begin to learn about appraisal, processing, and other core archival functions. These are skills that are pervasive in our culture, and they suggest parallel skills that we need to make our work with digital materials easy.

LITERACY

We assume literacy. Before we were archivists, we could read and write. We must be able to speak the language of the records. Some records demand special languages. Shostakovich's records require the ability to read Russian *and* musical notation.

Similarly, we must be literate in the languages of digital records. Although many e-records display their content in familiar human language, we must remember that there is significant code hidden beneath the presentation layer. XML is becoming the lingua franca of cyberspace.

FLUENCY

We assume fluency. Archivists need more than the ability to read and write; they must be able to interpret the records and understand them in a larger cultural context. As one narrow example, we could recognize basic formats – letters, diaries, photographs, scrapbooks, videotapes – long before we considered ourselves archivists.

We must become equally fluent with digital formats – word processing, database, and other file formats. Similarly, we must recognize how genres have been transformed in cyberspace; letters are now email and text messages, and diaries are now blogs.

ORGANIZATION

We assume some basic ability to recognize patterns and to organize materials: to alphabetize and understand the basics of filing. To survey digital records, archivists must be able to navigate a file system, not a file cabinet. Rather than scanning headings on folders, they need to know how to query the operating system for a directory of files. To be able to access these records in a database, archivists will probably need to know Structured Query Language, both to recreate the manner in which the records were commonly accessed in the office of origin and to facilitate researchers' secondary uses of the data.

THE AFFORDANCES OF PAPER

We assume qualities of paper that make some tasks easy. Equivalent tasks may be much more difficult in a digital environment.   For example, when making preservation photocopies of fragile paper documents, it's generally apparent that the process is working: we can read the copies as they come out of the machine.   Creating a preservation copy of digital records is less transparent. It's not readily apparent that the copy is reliable during the duplication process. Even if the system reports the copy command is complete, the tape may be defective and the copy useless. We have to take the extra step of comparing the copy to the original to assure ourselves of the quality of the copy.

ARCHIVISTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

I do not believe that archivists must become professional programmers. But, we must have enough skills to work comfortably with digital records. *What* we do remains the same. *How* we do it changes radically, and we must become comfortable with a new way of working. We will not transfer records by moving boxes, but through copy and file transfer functions. Arrangement will not be physical, but logical, sorts. Description may not list folder titles in finding aids, but embed a SQL query to list all documents and provide options for full-text searches. Reference rooms may be in homes and offices, with researchers working remotely.

The problem of digital records may be threatening, but they also offer enormous opportunities. We cannot remain focused on the old and familiar, but must begin to build for an uncertain future.

What we need is courage. Courage to break out of our routines. Courage to learn things that are radically different from what we are accustomed to and that are sometimes hard and confusing.

I look forward to working with all of you this coming year, to hearing your ideas about how the profession needs to respond.   While I've focused on technology, we cannot ignore the issues of diversity and public awareness. So I encourage each of you to find your passion, muster up your courage, and get involved.