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# *THE IMPORTANCE OF EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE AS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE DIFFICULTY OF SAVING IT*

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***Abstract:***

*For at least two decades, email has been dominating written communication in formal and informal professional contexts and to some extent in the private sphere.“Electronic letters" are not a direct development of the traditional paper letter, but a new form of verbal exchange that combines aspects of earlier written as well as oral communication. An uncountable quantity of emails has already been lost, because it was not archived Preserving emails is a very special task not only for technical challenges, but also for legal and cultural reasons. Focusing on the current situation at Austrian universities, the article discusses the characteristics of email communication and their impact on the efforts of implementing a preservation strategy.*

***Keywords:***

*email, digital preservation, private papers, records, scolarly correspondence*

***Izvleček:***

***Pomen e-poštne korespondence kot kulturne dediščine in težave njenega shranjevanja***

*Elektronska pošta že vsaj dve desetletji prevladuje v pisni komunikaciji tako v formalnih kot tudi neformalnih poklicnih okoljih in do določene mere prav tako v zasebni sferi. »Elektronska pisma« niso neposredno nadaljevanje tradicionalnih pisem na papirju, temveč nova oblika verbalne izmenjave, ki združuje vidike nekdanje pisne in ustne komunikacije. Nešteto e-poštnih sporočil je že izgubljenih, ker niso bila arhivirana. Ohranjanje e-poštnih sporočil je zelo posebna naloga, ne le zaradi tehničnih izzivov, temveč tudi zaradi pravnih in kulturnih razlogov. Članek se osredotoča na trenutno stanje na avstrijskih univerzah in obravnava značilnosti e-poštne komunikacije ter njihov vpliv na prizadevanja za izvajanje strategije ohranjanja.*

***Ključne besede:***

*e-pošta, digitalno arhiviranje, zasebni dokumenti, arhivski dokumenti, znanstvena korespondenca*

## 1 A new form of communication

Email has widely been available since the 1990s. Thirty years later, email clearly dominates both internal and external communication in organisations. Email has also become established in the private sphere, where it has already been replaced partially by more convenient messenger services. At the University of Graz, the use of the internet and email services began with the domain "kfunigraz.at" in 1994, initially as a service for staff only. By June 1999 – the service had been opened to students –, the IT department reported 15,000 active email users on the UNIX server at the time (Berthold, 1999, 49). More than thirty years later, 5.800 of the overall 35.000 mailboxes belong to members of staff.

It is evident, that email has already replaced most of the communication written on paper. But the "electronic letter" can not only be seen as successor of the traditional paper letter (Yates, 2000) – it is much more than that. It is a new form of communication that has replaced parts of the former written **as well as** oral communication (e.g., telephone calls). Some of the Information that was never passed down as long as it was exchanged orally in the pre-digital era is now recorded in writing and often saved multiple times (in several mailboxes). Not only correspondence in business and administration, but also collaborative work processes involving more than two participants can be operated via email. This has increased the overall volume of written material considerably.

A new source for future historians has emerged and we have to find ways of preserving it in the archives. The technical process has already been developed and can be applied, if an archives' resources are efficient. Despite this, email archiving is still struggling to get off the ground in many institutions – mainly because a new category of written communication cannot be classified and taken care of within our traditional ideas and methods of archiving.

This article addresses the social and communicative functions of email in the context of Austrian universities, in order to identify fundamental problems with archiving. At this point I would like to emphasize the pre-condition of "university archives": They belong to the types of archives that are units **within** organisations with other purposes and missions than preserving cultural heritage. This constellation may (but must not in every case) be associated with low visibility and limited resources.

## 2 Email as personal space in working environments

The digital transformation has significantly changed organisational structures and corporate culture in many ways. Advanced technology has created a personal space in the office environment, particularly in institutions that belong to the public management sector. Every employee is granted access to IT services, which also include a personal email account. This personal access to IT services is protected by a password that only the user knows and keeps secret. Furthermore, the use of email accounts for private purposes is tolerated at Austrian universities as long as it does not exceed a reasonable limit. What is particularly noteworthy here is that hierarchical superiors cannot simply take a look at the email correspondence of their own staff (or at their files on a personal drive). The act of writing or reading an email as such is very inconspicuous, because email does not have to pass through an internal post office like a physical letter and the messages are protected by confidentiality. Therefore, a great deal of written communication takes place directly between two parties – completely unnoticed by others (Rigler, 2024).

At the same time, email communication has upgraded the idea of transparency in business communication, just because it is technically so easy to include further people in a conversation and to keep the message thread together. Transparency may always be voluntary, but avoidance of transparency can be taken as a gesture of disrespect under certain circumstances. A real game changer is the direct and personal channel of communication that email technology has opened for everyone. This immediate way of approaching colleagues, superiors or even total strangers, even if they are shielded by the infrastructure of an “office”, might not always work, but very often it does.

## 3 Occurrence and function of email communication at the university

Email is used as a method of communication for almost all occasions and settings of hierarchical relation, not only at universities. The “universal” applicability is typical of email in general (Schmitz, 2017, 34). Since the focus in this article is on individual exchanges between two or more correspondents, newsletters and other mass mailings that serve the one-sided dissemination of information are excluded from the discussion.

In the archives we are not only confronted with pure email holdings such as entire mailboxes. We can also find single emails as part of official files or unstructured dossiers or as email correspondence in collections of private papers (e.g., a special file from the mailbox of an employee). Email is in use for internal and external correspondence. It can be carried out bilaterally or within a group. The communication purposes of university emails are diverse and include official communications, informal exchanges in various scenarios, but also private chats – provided that private use of the mailbox is permitted in the institution concerned. In day-to-day operations, emails are mainly saved in three ways: as printouts in paper documents, as digital files in different formats or in their original format directly in a mail client, which would be the most authentic environment. It is important to note that ALL kinds of email messages described above can appear in a single person's mailbox or drive. Even if we are dealing with a business account, we cannot be sure that we will come across business related messages only. Email content also covers a wide range of possible topics, including official documents, announcements, orders, informal debates or peer to peer scientific exchange.

Email collections – especially entire mailboxes – are heterogeneous and huge collections. They contain many messages that are not of archival value or should not be archived at all for legal reasons. These special features of email correspondence make it difficult to establish an efficient appraisal procedure and select them accordingly. Due to the high number of messages, the creators are often unwilling or unable to review and pre-sort their mailboxes retrospectively. Nor do archives normally have the capacity to evaluate single messages of email collections ‘by hand’. In order to document decision-making processes at management level, the “Capstone” approach seems to be the most useful instrument of appraisal: The archival value is derived from a person's role within the organisation. The “Capstone” email appraisal approach was originally developed by the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) of the United States in 2013 in order to manage email correspondence in agencies of the federal government. In the *White Paper* of 2015 four “benefits” are pointed out:

- Increasing the amount of email of permanent value transferred to NARA,
- Reducing the burden on individual end-users within agencies,
- Reducing reliance on print-and-file practices, and
- Allowing for systematic destruction of temporary email based on an approved NARA disposition authority, reducing the amount of email that has no further

> value being stored by agencies (National Archives and Records Management, 2015, 3).

At the university, the group of capstones would include top-level administrators (rectors, vice-rectors, deans, vice-deans), heads of administrative departments and faculties, but also high-ranking academic staff members in research and teaching. Scientific correspondence of academic staff is, of course, especially relevant for university heritage. Ownership rights are not always evident in this area of application, because scientific work and research are protected by copyright law, even if the activity is carried out on behalf of the university. Correspondence of this kind does not automatically belong to the university, but to the corresponding persons and should be treated by the archives similar to collections of private papers.

## 4 Challenges in email preservation

A personal email account at a university is a business account – but the university has no access. The personal email account is not the sole property of the user – but the user must consent to archiving. Against this background, personal email accounts have remained excluded from archiving at universities in Austria primarily for reasons of data protection. At the University of Graz, email accounts of former employees are permanently deleted by IT services and are definitely gone after this process. As a result of this practice, a large number of emails have been irretrievably lost over the last thirty years.

It can be assumed that emails included in files or record management systems will reach the archives with the usual workflow. However, the vast majority of email messages remains in the original mailboxes and is not systematically archived. Donations of email collections have occurred, but they are still rare and further loss is inevitable as a result of this situation. It is well known that emails are considered particularly vulnerable in terms of preservation, because of their technical nature (Digital Preservation Coalition, 2024, 139).

There are various reasons for the hesitant approach to the task of email archiving: The data protection regulation applied in the European Union in 2018 (GDPR) makes archiving of digital material fundamentally more difficult than paper files. Furthermore, the technical demands of OAIS-compliant long-term archiving (OAIS, 2024) are a major hurdle and still out of reach for many, especially small, archives. This certainly affects not only email archiving, but all sorts of digital heritage lying ahead of us. Digital archiving is a cross-cutting issue and best to be planned at the root of electronic file creation, an approach that has the best chance to succeed if it is initiated top down. Email as the very centre of the “personal space” at work seems to be an especially delicate matter in the context of data protection. We have experienced a range from sceptical to clearly negative attitudes at all levels of staff as first reaction, when email preservation is brought up, and these reactions are not always entirely based on rational arguments. On campus, the confidentiality of email correspondence will stay sacrosanct, as long as the private use of the service is not forbidden. A ban of private use is being discussed, but the efforts to cut this benefit, are very reluctant. Added to this is a lack of information concerning access regulations, for which the archives themselves are not entirely blameless. It is often assumed that digital archive material is automatically made available online. Providing information about statutory blocking periods is a very simple but effective confidence-building measure in this regard. The fact that every user has full control over what to delete and what to keep in their own mailbox, is usually countered

by the argument that it is simply too much work to sort out private messages because so much has already accumulated. Unregulated growth of outgoing and incoming mail over many years seems to be the rule rather than the exception. When complete mailboxes are taken over by archives, a lot of unsuitable material has to be accepted in order to get to the essentials. The good news is that with the help of AI-based tools appraisal should become more efficient.

As mentioned before, the position of the archives within the organisation has to be taken into account as well. At a university the needs of the archives are never high priority. Understanding of archival work is quite specialised, and leaving historians aside, the university is no exception. The constant need to argue and explain archival basics naturally grows, when it comes to a new source like email that logically has no tradition yet. New documents are always more “in danger” than the old ones, simply because it is not an obvious idea for everyone to identify their own every day working materials as historical source of the future. It seems to be the paradox of the archives that since archival holdings of the time are not open to the public of that time, the idea of archives being more than repositories of the *past* can never become common knowledge.

None of these obstacles is insurmountable, but a great deal of groundwork still needs to be done before email archiving becomes standard practice at universities. Email archiving is, of course, a structural issue that requires the cooperation of many stakeholders at an organisation to be solved sustainably. Unfortunately, such processes take a lot of time, while the number of lost emails is increasing. For the period of transition, a pilot project based on voluntary participation has been proposed by the Archives of the University of Graz. The concept is simple and easy to realize: Participants collect emails that they themselves consider worthy of archiving in a clearly identified folder of their own mailbox. The determined folder is allowed to be submitted to the archive when the participant leaves the university or in the event of unforeseen circumstances (e.g., deadly accident). The legal embargo periods guarantee that neither university members nor external users get access. Correspondence partners are afforded additional protection by having the messages previewed and only a selection moved to the defined folder. To make it easy to get started, participants are not required to review the entire mailbox, if they don’t want to. The main advantage of the concept – voluntary participation – is of course its weak point. The burden of appraisal stays with the end-user and requires their commitment and activity. The aim of the project is not only to capture a meaningful selection of emails, that would otherwise be deleted, but to start an awareness process in the first place. In the face of a major loss of documents, even small steps count.

As a pioneer in the university sector, ETH Zurich has established a much more determined course by applying the Capstone approach as a method of appraisal several years ago. The entire mailboxes from a group of high ranging managers are taken from the IT repository on a regular basis. The time span is limited in that only emails from the term of office calculated to the day are included and submitted to the archives. The following functions – all members of the ETH Executive Board – are classified as “capstones: The President, the Vice-Presidents, the Rector and the Secretary general (ETH Zurich, Executive Board, 2026; Briellmann und Schneider, 2024).

## 5 Reliability and type of information generated by email

As mentioned above, emails are not **only** to be regarded as a further development of written communication in paper form, but have largely replaced paper letters, especially in the business sector. This has changed communication in the social fabric. From an archival perspective, the question now arises as to what the secondary information of the source "email" looks like compared to a traditional letter. (Rigler 2025) An envelope is a very revealing piece of paper and always included in the archival description of the letter itself if available. The names and addresses of senders and recipients mostly refer to real persons, a postmark provides information about the day and place of posting and the type of transport –information that can influence the verification of events. The material and aesthetic information of a paper letter can also be significant: paper types, imprints, watermarks, applications, enclosures, writing instruments and graphic design tell us something about the author as well as the period of origin and make each letter a unique object.

What options does email offer to customize a message apart from its primary content? The electronic message itself has no physical body. The original core of an email is a binary code that must be read and implemented by a machine. For humans not only the readability, but the entire haptic experience is linked to the handling of the electronic output device and changes with it. The design elements of an email cannot clearly be attributed to the author, since the sender does not have full control over how an email appears on the recipient's device. Due to electronic transmission, which is based on machine-readable commands, design options are very limited and those that exist are rarely used (Yates, 2000, 243; Schmitz, 2017, 53). The vast majority of emails has the same austere appearance, which, surprisingly, has not changed significantly since the beginning. This applies not only to the email header, but also to the actual text of the message (email body). A peculiarity in this context is the free-text field "subject". Not only in business communication, but also in informal and private correspondence, it is still common practice to specify a subject of the message. Depending on the mindset of the writer, the “subject” either may or may not be a true indicator of the content. This form of personal content-related indexing is likely to become an issue in the context of scientific evaluation of email collections.

Even though the digital transmission process has a limiting effect on personalisation features of email beyond linguistic style and content, it provides highly reliable information concerning the process itself. The few header lines visible in the standard view of a mail client are a reduced version of the complete email header, which is hidden. The input fields “To”, “From”, “CC”, “BCC” are effective as commands in the transmission process and require the exact entry of specified character strings. During transmission, further elements are automatically added to the header, a process that the “human” sender cannot influence. Incidentally, these input fields are a nostalgic reference to the “memo”, the formal model on which the email was based. The abbreviation (B)CC stands for (*blind*) *carbon copy* (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992, 316; Siegert, 2008, 239-241).

The full version of the email header is not automatically displayed, but can easily be accessed. In the header every Internet service provider the message has passed through is recorded. As dates and times are added automatically, emails without date do not exist. There is also an entry for the “content type” and the attachment of files is recorded. Not only a recipient address but also a sender address (“return path”) is mandatory in the email protocol. What the email address cannot tell us, though, is the identity of the real person behind. Only with the help of internet service providers can geographical locations be determined and contract holders be tracked down (Grimm and

Pähler, 2010). This kind of research which is today restricted to forensic purpose only will be open to the public one day. But the success of this research in the future will depend on the accessibility of databases and company archives that will have been preserved.

An improvement of the source situation in general will be the tendency towards completeness of correspondence. Incoming and outgoing emails stay together for several reasons. First of all, both outgoing and incoming messages are saved automatically in the mailbox. Secondly, it is very easy and very common to create email threads using the functions “forward”, “copy” or “reply”. In the case of threads, the correspondence is usually kept together in more than one mailbox, a redundancy that seems to be a benefit when it comes to letters. Last but not least, there is a good chance, that after the expiry of embargo periods, email archives will be accessible for research much faster than traditional letter archives ever were.

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## POVZETEK

## POMEN E-POŠTNE KORESPONDENCE KOT KULTURNE DEDIŠČINE IN TEŽAVE NJENEGA SHRANJEVANJA

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Elektronska pošta je postala prevladujoča oblika pisne komunikacije, zlasti v poslovnem sektorju, in predstavlja zaradi širokega spektra vsebin pomemben zgodovinski vir za prihodnost. Na univerzah je elektronska pošta pomembna ne le za sledljivost upravnih postopkov, temveč tudi kot medij za znanstveno korespondenco. Kljub temu se k arhiviranju elektronske pošte na univerzah (kot tudi v mnogih drugih institucijah) pristopa le z zadržki. Ta zamuda je posledica zgodovinsko uveljavljenih univerzitetnih struktur ter posebnosti e-poštne komunikacije. Arhiviranje digitalnih dokumentov in zlasti e-poštne komunikacije zahteva ne le revizijo arhivske tradicije, temveč tudi prilagoditev pravnega okvira, vsaj v Avstriji.

Treba je domnevati, da se zaradi obrobnega položaja univerzitetnih arhivov v njihovih institucijah zahtevam arhivskega ohranjanja ob uvajanju digitalnih sistemov na univerzi običajno posveča malo ali sploh nobene pozornosti. Digitalno arhiviranje zahteva vzpostavitev drage tehnične infrastrukture in dodatnega osebja z ustreznimi znanji. Večina arhivov te opreme nima, deloma tudi zato, ker pogosto primanjkuje jasne zavezanosti univerzitetnega vodstva, ki mora na področjih poučevanja in raziskovanja reševati nujnejše probleme. Avstrijske univerze so od reforme leta 1975 oblikovane s strukturami soodločanja.

V tem okviru je uporaba novih tehnologij pripeljala do razvoja osebnega delovnega okolja, v katerem je zaupnost elektronske pošte posebej zaščitena. Na ravni EU je Splošna uredba o varstvu podatkov (GDPR) od leta 2018 zakonsko zagotovila povečano varstvo osebnih podatkov v digitalni obliki, kar otežuje predložitev nekaterih dokumentov arhivom. Tudi za predložitev nekaterih vrst dokumentov (npr. kadrovskih map) iz univerzitetne uprave, ki je pred uvedbo sistemov za elektronsko upravljanje podatkov potekala kot samoumevna praksa, univerzitetni arhivi zdaj zahtevajo posebna

dovoljenja, ki izhajajo iz notranjih odobritvenih postopkov. V primeru novih virov, kot so e-poštna sporočila, je treba premagati še večji odpor, čeprav prednosti digitalno obdelanih e-poštnih sporočil govorijo same zase: v primerjavi s papirnimi pismi e-pošta samodejno ustvarja zanesljive sekundarne informacije (npr. datume pošiljanja oz. prejemanja). Dejstvo, da e-poštna komunikacija temelji na izmenjavi kopij namesto edinstvenih izvirnikov in da so zato povezana sporočila shranjena skupaj v poštnih predalih, bo v prihodnosti znatno olajšalo raziskovanje. Po izteku rokov hrambe je mogoče zbirke e-pošte hitro dati na voljo z vsemi udobji digitalnih delovnih orodij.

Primer arhiviranja elektronske pošte kaže, kako pomembna je vloga inovativnih arhivov v okviru institucij, kot so univerze, še posebej v obdobjih prehoda. V takšnih razmerah morajo arhivarji aktivno in odločno prispevati svoj vizionarski pogled, da bi zagotovili dokumentiranje zgodovine svoje institucije. Odpiranje vrat za ta namen je včasih lahko naporno, saj se dodaja k običajni delovni obremenitvi, vendar pa predstavlja tudi dobro priložnost, da se končno odpravijo znane »kletne podobe«, ki jih arhivi že dovolj dolgo nosijo s seboj.

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**O avtorici:**

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