

How to stop the Digital Dark Ages?

The Role of Archives in preserving Data of Communities

TECHNICAL AND FIELD RELATED PROBLEMS OF TRADITIONAL
AND ELECTRONIC ARCHIVING

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graz

We start with two questions

- Who is already operating an OAI conform Digital Archive?

Show of hands: yes

- Who can rule out, that you have unidentified data carriers (CD-Roms, DVDs etc.) within your holdings?

Show of hands: yes

... the „dark“ side of Digital Archiving

- Since 1980s/90 we live in the „Age of Digitality“ (Felix Stalder): **Digitality demands digital archiving.**
- Start-up projects to establish digital archives are long, financial and know-how resources are limited.
- Public records: Administrations are reluctant in accepting archival guidelines for records management.
- Personal fonds: Since decades (!) we get even more and more unstructured data on not-ready-for-archiving devices.

Analogue Personal Fonds

- Diaries, calendars, letters, document collections in folders, manuscripts, photo albums etc. are easy to hand over to archives by heirs.
- These holdings are highly relevant for researchers.

Preparation for the handover of the estate of a former mayor of Graz in September 2025
(© Wolfram Dornik)



Digital/hybrid Personal Fonds

- Since the homecomputer revolution (1980s) more and more parts of personal fonds are digital.
- But ...
 - ... how could we get access?
 - ... when can we get access?
 - ... do the heirs have access?
 - ... are the fonds archivable?
 - ...



Born Digitals in
the depository of
the Municipal
Archives Graz,
October 2024 (©
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Digital Sources in historical Research

- What is an "original" in a digital context?
- Historical research is currently "practicing" with data collected directly from the internet.
 - This needs an expanded methodological set: authentication and integrity checks, storage etc. (i.e. Pascal Föhr).
- Few studies develop methodological foundations using DIPs from OAIS systems (i.e. Moritz Feichtinger).
- Formal and content-related source criticism remains essential.
 - But, formal source criticism requires contextual knowledge (a basic understanding of the development of digital data creation and processing, analysis programs etc.) – Is this taught at history departments?

Terry Cook (2013)

„In this new digital, political, and pluralistic universe, professional archivists need to transform themselves from elite experts behind institutional walls to becoming mentors, facilitators, coaches, who work in the community to encourage archiving as a participatory process shared with many in society, [...]“

One Approach: Personal Digital Archiving

- PDA is a set of methods for transferring digital data from private individuals to a cultural heritage institution.
- Technical solutions are necessary to support archival work: pre-ingest process, metadata enrichment, transfer management.
- PDA does not begin with the technical transfer, but rather before that: empowerment for data literacy of citizens (consulting, training, etc.). This needs new ways of communication and cooperation with citizens!

Citizen Archive Platform

- Project: Dialog City
- Creative Europe fund, 2022-2026
- Municipal Archives of Graz and Aschaffenburg + 5 other partners.
- Archival education program to empower potential donors (pre-custodial phase).
- Development of the Citizen Archive Platform.



Playing „Preservia“ at the Hybrid Festival Graz, June 2024 (© Sebastian Reisner)

Citizen Archive Platform

- Website to handle the transfer of data. A plugin allows the upload (incl. virus scan).
- WordPress based, with a SQL database to organize the users and the submitted data.
- User (archivists and citizens) centered design: focus groups, expert workshops, hackathon etc.
 - Frontend for identified users, and frontend for archival users to curate and appraise data.
- Formation of interoperable OAIS-conform SIPs with an EAD-conform description XML.
- Archiving, description and dissemination are not included.
- Multi-client capable (language, design, organisation etc.).

PDA Collecting in Practice

- 2024-25: 104 users, 2.307 files in Graz and Aschaffenburg
- Graz in detail:
 - 4 calls: football, European Cultural Capital Graz 2003, „lost Graz“, women history.
 - 2163 files, 2048 accepted.
 - 98% pictures, 2% other files (38 pdf, 8 videos).
 - User metadata good basis for further description.
 - Very different feedback on calls (90% on „lost Graz“, 9% football, 1% rest).

PDA Collecting first Conclusions

1. We collected experience in digital collecting.
2. We need to raise more awareness on the archival relevance of personal data within citizens. Calls help citizens to understand archival needs.
 - a) New role of archivists: moderator, motivator, enabler.
3. Digital collecting is a hybrid process: it needs digital tools but personal engagement, too.
4. We need more feedback of future users (historians, journalists, curators etc.) on our appraisal criteria and collection strategies.
5. Feedback on calls is not representative, we need other strategies to increase archival value.

Conclusion

- PDA may help us in making our collections more adjusted for the Age of Digitality.
- In the current state, collecting personal data is no problem of mass. The number of citizens who can handle their data and who are motivated to hand it over to an archive, is limited.
- We still struggle with the amount of work to get files of archival value.
- PDA is a new way of getting in touch with people, of raising awareness for archival matters and of building up new alliances with other stakeholders.
- There are several questions we still must discuss—in our teams, with citizens and within the archival community.

Thank you for your attention!

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