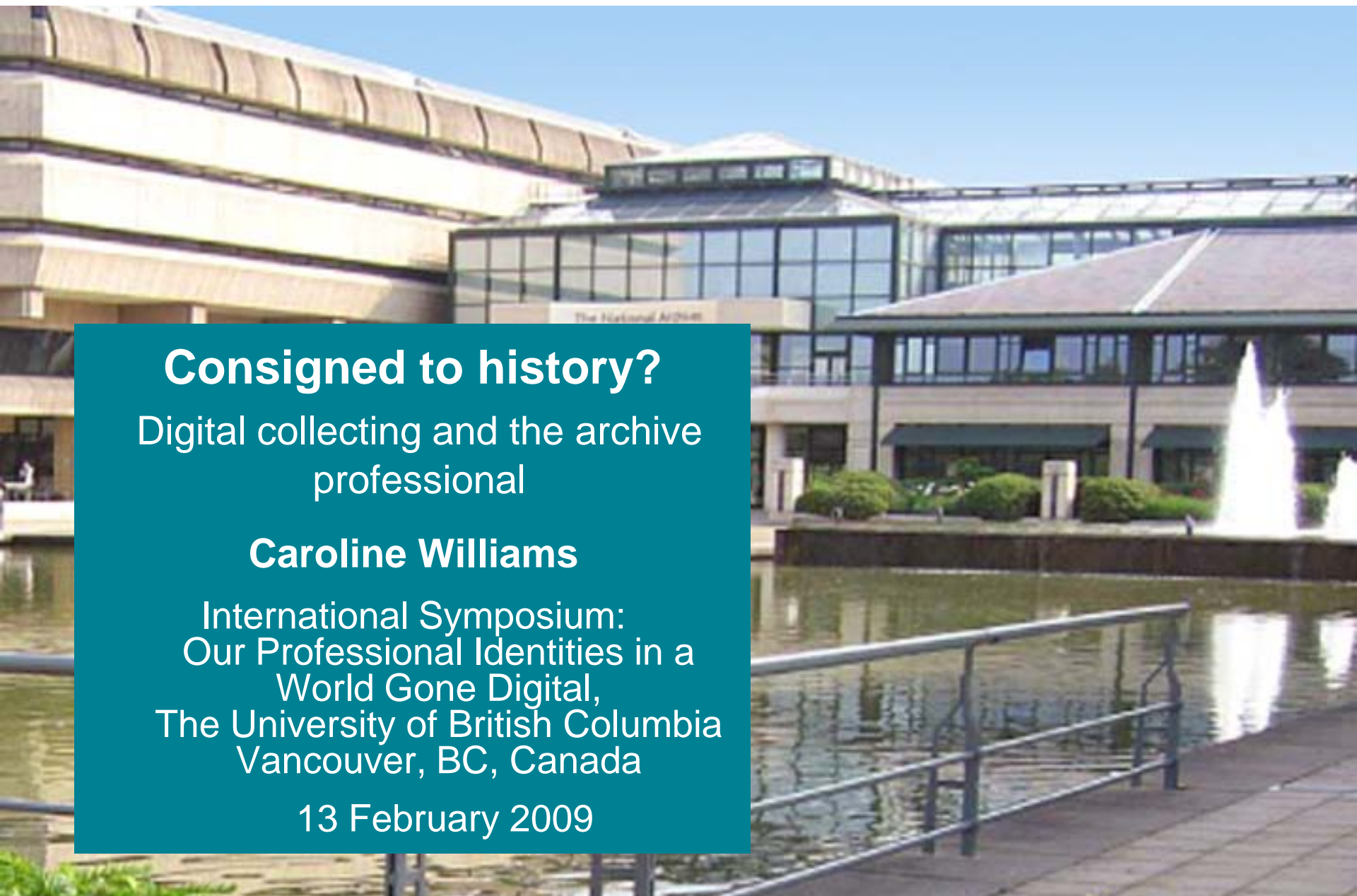




# The National Archives

[nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk)



# **Consigned to history?**

Digital collecting and the archive  
professional

**Caroline Williams**

International Symposium:  
Our Professional Identities in a  
World Gone Digital,  
The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, BC, Canada

13 February 2009



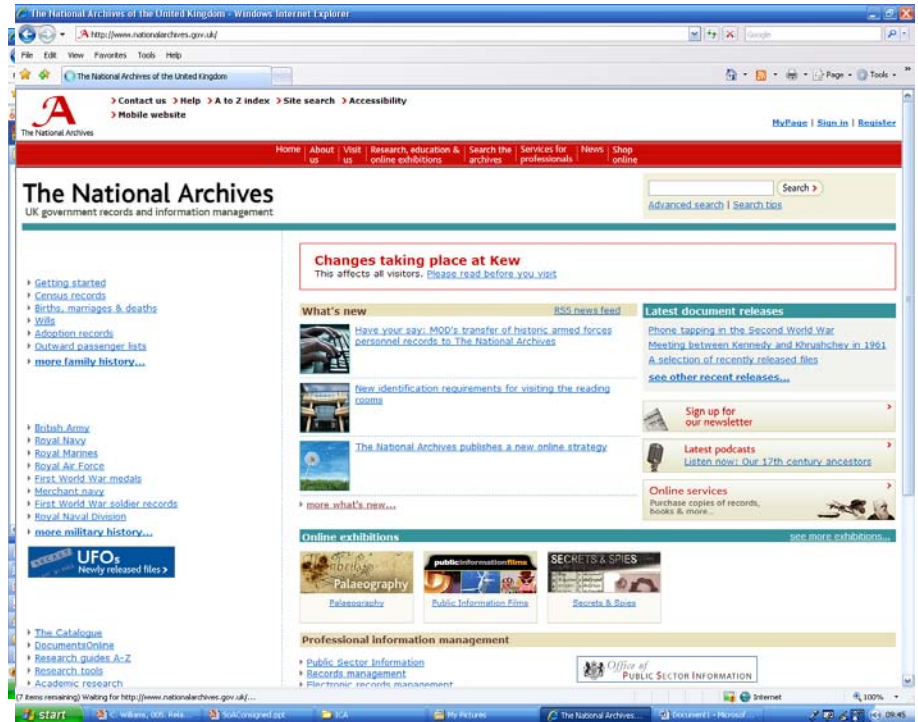
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## Scope

- Collecting born digital: issues for the 'collecting' archive
- Scale of the problem
- Recent and current initiatives
- Putting solutions in place
- Knowledge and skills
- Research



# Scale of the problem: then and now





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## Identifying key information

- Email
- EDRMS
- Business systems
- Datasets
- Publications
- Legacy/hybrid
- Emerging technologies
- Web applications & wikis, blogs, intranets



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## End of pre-digital collecting model?

### PRE-DIGITAL

- Broad-based, inclusive collections policy depends on being offered archives
- Assumes depositors keen to get rid of bulk
- Provides a service at end of life-cycle
- A degree of serendipitous acquisition
- Special formats sent elsewhere: no appropriate in house facilities

### DIGITAL

- Less incentive for depositors
- Reduction in number of accessions, and in range and variety of content
- Receive material in hybrid formats
- Obsolete digital formats unreadable
- Continue to send digital formats to specialist storage?
- Fracturing of collections
- Museum of paper



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## Recent initiatives – UK

- UK surveys and analysis
  - National Council on Archives: *Your Data at Risk* 2005
  - Museums Libraries Archives Council/DPC *Digital Preservation in the Regions* 2005
  - Digital Preservation Coalition: *Mind The Gap* 2006
  - MLA East of England *Digital Preservation Regional Pilot Project*, 2006
  - Survey of digital preservation in local authority archives, September 2008
- Issues
  - Lack of commitment, provision, resource, training and skills
  - Lack of control over material originating externally
  - Few strategies for digital preservation
  - Responsibilities not identified
  - Inability to find a common language
- Progress
  - ARC Magazine March 2008 showed progress in lots of areas
  - Findings from 2008 TNA self-assessment Qu 86 & 87



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## Recent initiatives - US Survey 2006

- 124 'collecting' archives – largely academic bodies
- 47% accept, 24% of these have a policy; of these 57% say policy is same as for analogue
- Issues
  - Ad hoc approach
  - Distance from policy setters; and from record creators whether internal or external
  - Academic archive units have little connection with digital efforts in University library
  - Historical societies do not have comparable functions – of 14 responding only 4 accept and 2 plan to.
  - 'Regular' work seen as more important
  - Single homogenous approach based on institutional models not necessarily the solution





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## Building success from the bottom up

- Alex Eveleigh of West Yorkshire Archives - US tour
- Arizona State Archives
  - Began by appraising web archives – now co-lead in a multi-state partnership
- North Carolina State Archives
  - Began by opening a state governor's emails – now working with a key collaborative e-mail project
- “Over and over again, people made the point about small projects being a stepping stone to bigger efforts, building skills and capacity in an incremental manner”
- Washington State Digital Archives...



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## Putting digital solution in place

- Custodians need to do more
  - Creators need to be more involved
  - Users need more help
  - Whole profile of local collecting will still change
  - A new a business model for remote archiving?
  - Community archives?
  - Fewer, bigger, better?
  - Hugely resource intensive
- ‘The cultural shift which has accompanied technological developments in terms of how people create, use, share and publish info requires a revision of the established patterns of acquisition, management and access which have informed local authority services’ collecting practices over the past 50 years’

Deborah Tritton, Cornwall  
ARC March 2008



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## Some sources of help?

- UK In-house projects
  - BL Digital Lives; Paradigm Project and personal papers
- The National Archives
  - Seamless flow
  - Websites – UKWAC and European Archive
  - Datasets - NDAD
  - Digital Continuity –for non-archival records
  - National Advisory Services – Collections Development
  - Collection Strategy Programme
- DCC, DPC, UKDA, ULCC and similar organisations
- Huge literature on digital preservation
- Skills development
- Research is offering conceptual and practical solutions



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## Knowledge and skills



- ‘With regard to our responsibilities for digital information... archivists, records managers, and librarians lack both the formal and tacit knowledge necessary for refining and developing all of the new skills we need... Given the disruptive changes in technology, organisations and communication, it might be premature to commit to a hardened skill set at this point in our evolution’ Margaret Hedstrom, SAA Collquium 2006



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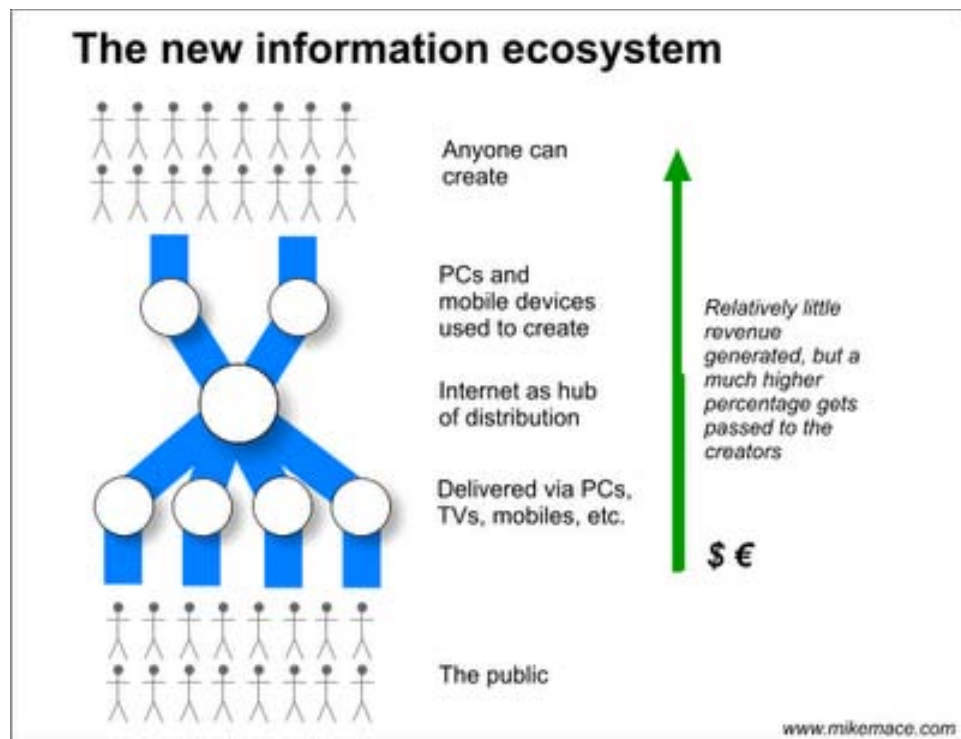
## What are the 'right' knowledge and skills?



- Society of American Archivists  
Colloquium 2006  
*New Skills for a Digital Era*
- Knowledge and Skills Inventory  
2008
- 'What are the skills that  
information professionals must  
have to work with e-books,  
electronic records and other  
digital materials?'
- Describes k & s needed for digital  
acquisition, processing, access,  
preservation, management

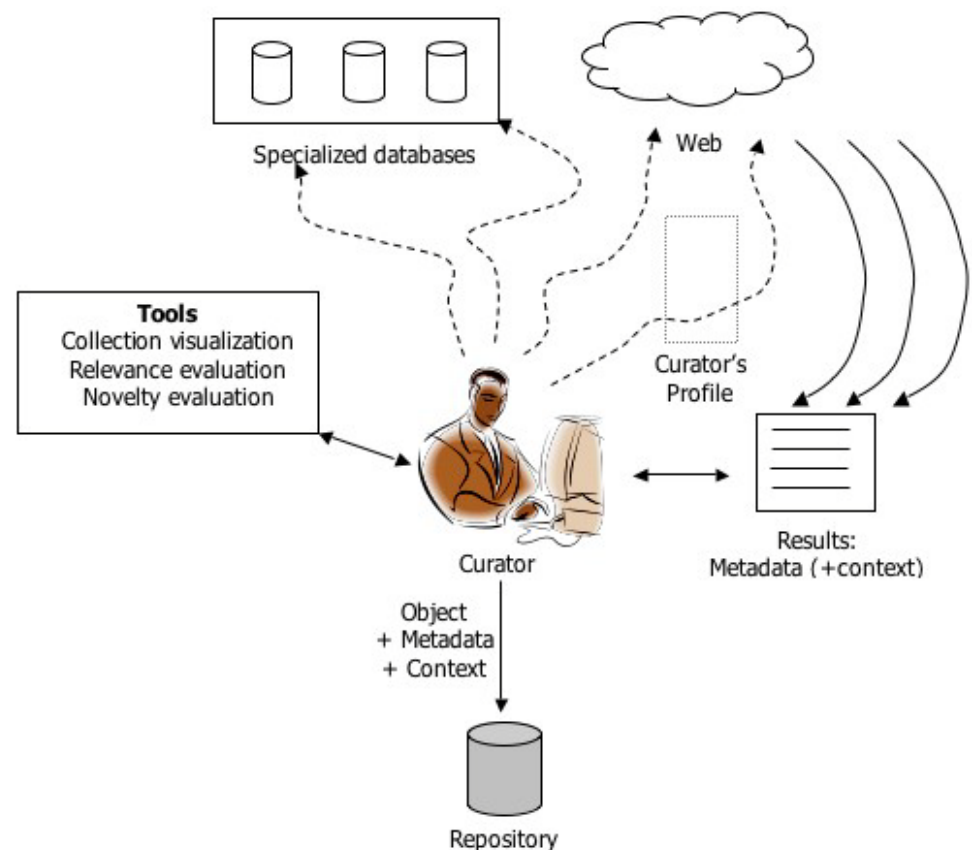
# At the very least...

- Understanding the information eco-system at macro and micro levels
- Reconceptualise many founding principles
- Be familiar documentary forms in the virtual environment
  - range of data formats, file types and media
  - databases, datasets, web
  - mark up languages
- Familiar with technology of holdings
- Technical knowledge to undertake *digital* curatorial activities and workflows



# Can/should you separate the curatorial from the technical?

- ‘Increasingly archivists...[must] understand issues including information systems, the nature of e-records and databases, record migration, digitization, web design and access provision..’  
Helen Tibbo, Archival Science (2006) 6:231-145, p.231
- NY Times Feb 2009
  - ‘Digital archivists, now in demand’





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## Need for research

- ‘Problem solving alone can turn into a huge exercise in trial and error if we don’t also conduct research into a wide range of issues and develop foundational knowledge on which to build new practices and skills’ Hedstrom
  - Understanding the nature of contemporary organisations
  - Analysis of how various forms of electronic records are generated, organised, valued, managed and kept
  - Understanding the shift from physical to on-line access and attendant changes in use patterns and user behaviour
- Move from case studies, that provide a basis of knowledge, to a systematic and coherent reporting





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## Conclusion

- We know what the issues are and numerous surveys have provided data
- We need to move from surveys to trialling models for action, assisted by research
- We need to proactively shape the collections of the future, or they won't survive
- It is not just a digital issue – nor is the solution simply a digital preservation one: we archivists need a change of mindset
- Some solutions may be quite radical

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