

Preservation of E-mail Addressed by New Studies

by Clay Redding

The Internet has changed the way many of us keep records. As Internet technologies have grown in popularity, so too have the number of e-mails we send. Up to 90 per cent of the 108 million Internet users in the United States cite e-mail as their primary use of the Internet. Recent projections indicate that Americans will send upward of 60 billion e-mails this year alone.

Given this glut, and the fact that e-mail will proliferate at an increasing rate every year, many are unclear as to how they are supposed to manage such quantities of data. There is no easy answer. Archivists and computer scientists have only recently developed preliminary steps to help manage the information overload. Issues surrounding the best practices for e-mail management are currently being developed out of projects focused more broadly on electronic records preservation.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has addressed issues surrounding electronic recordkeeping since the 1970s; however, their initial answer to preserving e-mail records was to print them out. This held true until 1997, when journalists, historians, and librarians challenged their practices in court (*Public Citizen v. Carlin*). The judge decreed that NARA's practices were flawed, and the only way to legally maintain electronic records -- especially e-mail -- was to preserve them electronically along with their metadata (data which provides technical information relating to record creation and dissemination). This decision forced archivists to rethink how e-mail should be managed, and served as the springboard for the development of current electronic records research projects.

Today, NARA is actively involved in several important projects focusing on electronic preservation. In its work with the San Diego Supercomputer Center project, researchers are striving for "persistent object preservation." The idea is to store the characteristics of an electronic document or image in an open-source, standardized format that ensures its use with any software or platform in the future. NARA is also participating in the InterPARES project, an international effort which aims to ensure long-term preservation of electronic records through the use of archival methodology and theory. Outside of these efforts, Australian archivists have made important contributions relating to file formats through the Victorian Electronic Records Strategy.

For everyday users interested in archiving their e-mail, the best advice for storage and preservation is to keep the mail in its original format on the server. Both searching capabilities and data storage are rapidly becoming so cheap that within a few years even a large volume of e-mail should pose no problem. Meanwhile, if the lack of storage space becomes an

issue, users should contact their systems administrators or Internet service providers to recommend a temporary solution (printing out is not the answer, however). One alternative is to save and compress the data onto optical disks or magnetic tape. Otherwise, users may have to simply purchase additional storage space.

Those using proprietary e-mail software packages should make certain to migrate their e-mail to newer versions of the software as it is released. In addition, it is advisable to ask your systems administrator or Internet service provider about the environmental conditions in which the mail servers and backup tapes are stored. Ideally, servers and tapes should be maintained at a temperature of 60° to 70° F, and at a 20% to 40% relative humidity.

Until the aforementioned projects' solutions hit the mainstream, users should stay the course. Those who face difficulties with electronic preservation may contact us at credding@aip.org to receive advice regarding their e-mail preservation dilemmas.



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