

Fog on the Horizon: Anticipating Digital Acquisitions at NVMA

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Analogy

Since this session is titled “Apples and Oranges”, I thought perhaps another analogy would be acceptable. Some years ago, I spent a day on the Pacific Northwest shore of the Oregon Dunes – a hot, sunny, glorious day. Far out on the horizon was a curious dark band, which we ignored for a couple of hours, enjoying the sun, the kids playing with their disappearing footprints in the sand. A wind whipped up, warm at first, but imperceptibly colder as time went on. The narrow dark band was wider, darker, moving towards us. The speed of its approach accelerated; suddenly, the sun disappeared, the wind turned damp and cold. In no time, we were surrounded by thick fog. Which brings me to InterPARES, naturally!

Our motivation for participating in InterPares as a case study, was sighting the ominous narrow band – digital records – lurking on the horizon, and knowing we’d be in a complete fog about them when they blew in someday, unless we took steps to get up to speed. I thought – perhaps we can be proactive about this, rather than reactive, by joining that InterPares outfit. Maybe they can help us dispel the fog.

Digital World of NVMA

Already, much of our ‘environment’ at NVMA is digital – we are a typical early 21st century office. We participate in the District’s Extended Area Network, and Electronic Documents management system. We maintain a web-based database, hosted on a City server. We are digitizing our photographic holdings at a slow but steady pace. My relationship to much of this is the same as my relationship to my car – I’m a good driver – but not much of a mechanic. But digital records are barely present in our holdings – the fog bank is still at a comfortable distance.

Our first challenge was to choose a project for the case study, and we started by floating too many possibilities. Should we study the arrangements for the long-term preservation of our own corner of the E-Docs system? We couldn’t deal with that corner in isolation. Should we attempt to include the E-Docs system as a whole in our study? Or should we focus on preserving our digitized photographs? We knew we’d fallen behind emerging best

practice, and that gold CD's were an increasingly expensive, inefficient way to save our master files. What about the stuff lurking offshore? Did a few floppy discs and CD's sitting in the files of –say- the Lynn Valley Garden Club, warrant any sort of study at all? Our first year with InterPares was spent in answering these questions.

Organizations and organizational culture – what's that got to do with preserving electronic records?

Understanding our peculiar organizational arrangements turned out to be an important aspect of choosing a do-able project for InterPares. The North Vancouver Museum and Archives is a joint operation of two municipalities: the City of North Vancouver, and the District of North Vancouver. They fund us on a very precise, and carefully monitored 50/50 basis, both in cash and in kind. We are governed by a Commission, whose members are appointed in equal numbers by the City and District. Though we are a distinct arms-length organization, we piggy-back, for much of our administrative infrastructure, on both municipalities – payroll and personnel services provided by the City, IT and E-docs network services by the District, and so on. Since 2006, facilities too are divided between the municipalities; our archives is located in the District, our Museum Galleries and warehouse are located in the City. These municipal contributions must roughly match each other from a budgetary perspective. Despite some jockeying between jurisdictions, the NVMA is regarded by the municipalities as a successful collaboration; we like to point out we're located in the first purpose-built archives of the 21st century in BC.

The InterPares process begins with a contextual analysis that discovers, at greater length, and in more detail, all the organizational information I have just shared with you. So, for example, elements of the contextual analysis include the origins, legal status, funding, resources, governance, mandate and philosophy of the case study institution. It examines the administrative and managerial framework, and numerous aspects of records creation within the organization. This analysis didn't seem to help us identify a do-able project. It was clear that the archives has –organizationally- precisely no mandate to guide or govern either the records management or IT functions of either municipality. Our participation in these functions is strictly that of a recipient client. If redefining these relationships was the problem, then InterPares really couldn't help us in a specific way, and any prospect of dealing with public electronic records was a long way off. One result of this period of discernment, if I may call it that, was seeking, and getting, membership on the Records Management Committees of both municipalities. We also developed a strategic plan that identified the first steps in bridging the gulf between ourselves, and our sponsors. But these steps, though important in themselves, got us no nearer to grappling with digital records.

We also identified, at this phase, the few digital materials already in our holdings, according to format and medium – a mix of photographs, sound and moving images, and textual records on mini-discs, CD's, 3.5 inch floppy discs – it seemed a pitiful little accumulation. By this time, I'd sat in on a couple of InterPares plenary sessions, and begun to wonder what NVMA was doing there – everyone else seemed to be talking records management, and troubles

with apathy and compliance in much larger organizations than ours. Would ARCHIVES –community archives- come into the discussion at some point?

An aside concerning community archives

I recall feeling quite defensive about our “pitiful accumulation”. It is easy to undervalue community archives as the repositories of the records of insignificant clubs, and quaint, even eccentric, locals. I have mentioned the Lynn Valley Garden Club, but I should amplify your sense of the scope of our holdings. The community IS a local entity – the place where we live. But its boundaries are porous, and the locals do not necessarily live strictly local lives. Local people and local organizations, lead lives and engage in activities of provincial, national, and international significance. Two examples will illustrate the point. One of our local ‘eccentrics’, Walter Draycott, lived in Lynn Valley from 1911 to 1985 when he died at the age of 102. In World War I, he was a military topographer with the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry. Among his records are his original field drawings of several of the major battle fields of that war, as well as the diaries he kept then, and all his life. He was wounded, and gassed more than once – experiences which probably account for his later eccentricities.

We also hold the extensive records of Burrard Dry Dock, the North Shore shipyard that built over a hundred supply ships during World War II, part of a national effort to keep Britain supplied throughout the war. In the post-war years, they built several Coast Guard vessels, and made important innovations in the technology of barge transport. The records of their eventual demise document the intersection of governmental decisions and economics at the national level.

Re-orienting our view of NVMA’s organizational culture

To return to our frustrated search for a useful project, the Eureka moment came, for me, when I was trying to find a really good reason to quit InterPares in a moderately graceful way. InterPares – International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems! Aha! NVMA is primarily a community archives. Community records are not created in electronic systems. They’re rogue records, way out of control – not the stuff InterPares is interested in!

This insight, however, led to another. Somehow, we had missed something fundamental in the Contextual Analysis. We had looked at our accountabilities in relation to our sponsoring agencies, and under our own roof, but NOT in relation to the community we are meant to serve. What if we turned outwards, to think about the web of informal, extra-systemic relationships and obligations in which we operate? What could we discover about the record creators we actually deal with, and who actually look t us to preserve their records, and make them accessible? This was an exciting idea, and we decided to revisit our original contextual analysis. And so – quitting, graceful or otherwise, was not to be.

What we're good at

So let's take another look at the elements of the Contextual Analysis, with this new point of view. We could now characterize our records creators in a general way. Individuals and families do create predictable kinds of records. So do voluntary organizations and businesses. Increasingly these typical records are created with digital tools, and stored on a wide variety of digital media. Record keepers – those who take whatever responsibility is taken for records - are frequently self-appointed or elected from a small pool of volunteers, with wide variance in the skills and commitment brought to bear on the task. They are free to set up their own systems for filing and maintaining their records, so strategies are ad hoc, and often a little eccentric. There are few legal requirements and constraints on record-keeping – but there are some. Financial records must be retained for prescribed periods; societies must submit annual reports and financial statements, businesses are constrained by privacy legislation, and so on. What we have traditionally acquired in paper form, we can certainly expect to encounter in digital form.

This re-examination also made it clear what our competencies and strengths are. The NVMA has a public service, rather than a business orientation. As part of that public service ethos, we have a role in helping community records creators to maintain and preserve their own records. To that end, we offer a popular workshop called "Help for the Family Recordkeeper", and another called "Using Your Community Archives". Two beliefs underlie both courses: first, that archival knowledge is useful to people who are not archivists; second, that if individuals and organizations do a better job of maintaining their own records, over time, more complete, contextually intact records will make it into the archives. I recalled that my first sight of the afore-mentioned ominous bank of fog came from participants in those classes; all of them had questions about their digital records. Some were worried about them, some over-confident in the capabilities of their computers.

From this fresh analysis, a suggestion arose for a do-able, and do-able by us, InterPares project. We would develop materials in laymen's language to assist community record creators with their digital materials.

The result is a set of four brochures, two more than we had initially planned. We envisaged two audiences. The first would be individuals, families, and small informal organizations with few resources. The second would be larger more complex voluntary organizations, and businesses too small to have records management and E-doc systems. We had decided on a brochure format for our educational materials, because I saw it as something that could be distributed in my classes, or handed out in response to questions from researchers. But the brochure format proved useful as an editorial discipline. The principal challenges were to simplify the language, and to

reduce the word-count. As work progressed on the first two brochures, it became clear that more needed to be said about e-mail than we could encompass in the general purpose tool. So a third brochure was developed to deal specifically with e-mail. Then we realized we had not had space to address the subject of donating digital materials to the archives at all – hence, a fourth brochure. The brochures are now available on the InterPares III website.

We will be developing NVMA-branded versions of these brochures, as well as web versions, for distribution and dissemination to our North Shore constituency. Our intention to make generic, customizable versions available through InterPares has been realized; the brochures are now posted to the InterPares III website.

Flushed with the successful completion of the brochures, my GRA's were emboldened to draft a digital acquisition policy for the NVMA. I'm a little intimidated by what it commits us to, as some of the necessary resources are not in place, but it indicates the direction we need to take, and the resources that will be required. That helps us to communicate effectively with our IT support people, and our funding agencies.

Conclusion

What are my final reflections on the InterPares experience, after so many doubts mid-way through the process? All of the advice I received from participants has been useful. The plenary format fosters cross-pollination between projects; our e-mail brochure is largely the beneficiary of work and study done on other case studies. NVMA is pleased with what we bring away from our involvement with InterPares. Where I began thinking that a community archives (and its archivist!) had little to contribute to InterPares, I have ended believing that we can contribute some observations out of our experience with community and outreach that are applicable to other kinds of repositories and organizations. One such observation is that organizational culture, and a right understanding of it, are fundamental to success in choosing a project that can succeed. Organizational charts, workflow charts, contextual analysis, and so on, can get you started on a right understanding – but they can only discover what is official, and explicit. We're a community archives. What's our community? All of the individuals, families, service clubs, businesses, quasi-governmental service agencies and other elements that make up, and have made up, the complex life of our geographic area, the North Shore. We know we can't make an org. Chart out of that. But large organizations that CAN make organization charts have communities too, particular audiences with a wide variety of skills, interest and commitment to bring to the job of maintaining digital records. I hope the tools we have developed for our community can help others with outreach to theirs.

As for us at NVMA, looking out towards the horizon – I do believe the fog is thinning.