

# From the Guest Editor: “New Contexts of Permanent Change” in Digital Archivy



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It has been eighteen years since *Archivaria* published a special issue on electronic records. In the introduction to the special issue (*Archivaria* 36 – Autumn 1993), Roy Schaeffer stated that the 1987 conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists was the first national conference within Canada devoted to electronic records and automated archival techniques. However, Schaeffer noted that we should not feel too comfortable regarding our sense of achievement in the intervening six years, as “many challenges [regarding electronic records] identified in 1987 remain unaddressed.”<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer also alerted the reader to the potentially troubling fact that “there are more articles dedicated to the subject of automation here [in *Archivaria* 36] than appeared in all of the issues [of *Archivaria*] produced between 1976 and 1987.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the history of electronic records in Canada – and beyond – goes back earlier than 1976. Of particular note is Michael E. Carroll’s case study of the Public Archives of Canada’s (PAC) implementation of a “machine-readable archives” program, presented as a paper at the 1974 International Council on Archives Conference on Archives and Automation, and subsequently published in *The Canadian Archivist*.<sup>3</sup> Betsey Baldwin’s article in *Archivaria* 62 provides an excellent overview of the issues and controversies regarding electronic records and automation both within Canada – particularly at the PAC – and within the United States.<sup>4</sup> Personally, however, I feel that one of the greatest influences on organizing this special issue has been a 1972 article by Hugh Taylor.<sup>5</sup> While not specifically about electronic records, Taylor provides

1 Roy Schaeffer, “The Information Age Revisited,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), p. 13.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

3 Michael E. Carroll, “The Public Archives of Canada’s Experience in Establishing a Machine Readable Archives,” *The Canadian Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 5 (1974), pp. 53–64.

4 Betsey Baldwin, “Confronting Computers: Debates about Computers at the Public Archives of Canada during the 1960s,” *Archivaria* 62 (Fall 2006), pp. 159–78.

5 Hugh A. Taylor, “Information Retrieval and the Training of the Archivist,” *The Canadian*

some exceptionally strong advice to archivists facing rapid technological change and the expanding mass of data and subject content that rings true nearly forty years after the article's publication:

[The archivist's] resources will span the present and the past, and he will hold the key to decision-making and research alike. His bank of interest will be far wider than that of the records manager, but he must learn the language of the computer like his native tongue if he is not to be relegated to the fringe of administration from which he came.<sup>6</sup>

Taylor subsequently makes some prescient insights regarding the further evolution of the archival profession and the training of archivists in the face of "permanent change." We have seen changes over time in how the profession characterizes digital information in the shift of terminology, with earliest references to "machine-readable records" changing to "electronic records," and further moving beyond that term to the newest incarnation, "born-digital archives." The genesis of this issue's theme was also spurred by change in the profession, and originated in an informal discussion with Jean Dryden, the General Editor of *Archivaria*, at a symposium discussing the use of computer forensics tools and methodologies in the cultural heritage sector. The symposium itself represented an evolution in thought and practice and provided ample material for us to reconsider the archival enterprise in many ways, including technology, education, ethics, and collaboration.

The articles in this special issue address a number of themes and relate to the evolution in key areas related to archival management of digital information. The articles also describe a change in a relationship between different roles of individuals with technology, organizations, or records. Ciaran Trace opens the issue by investigating the relationship of the individual with computer technology in the form of a micro-ethnography that investigates the detailed operation of the computer system as a whole. Trace's article allows and encourages us to go beyond the "black box" to understand the materiality of digital information and electronic recordkeeping.

Sabine Mas, Dominique Maurel, and Inge Alberts investigate the perspective of the records creators and records users in digital environments in their article. This research paper examines the use of faceted classification in the personal organization of electronic records to augment traditional hierarchical structures such as directories or folders. Mas, Maurel, and Alberts also establish the need for a paradigm shift in organizational recordkeeping contexts that would allow individuals to collaborate with records managers in the development of classification schemes.

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*Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1972), pp. 30–35.

6 Ibid., p. 33.

The two following articles are both case studies of specific, large-scale digital archives projects. Laura Carroll, Erika Farr, Peter Hornsby, and Ben Ranker's article focuses on how the acquisition of the Salman Rushdie Fonds by the Emory University Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library required a radical rethinking of the work of the archivist, and considerations of how to mediate between the requirements of the donor and the needs of users. Carroll, Farr, Hornsby, and Ranker describe the creation of a cross-functional working group and the means by which the team attempted to arrange and describe the fonds holistically by integrating the paper and digital records.

Courtney Mumma, Glenn Dingwall, and Sue Bigelow present the experience of the City of Vancouver Archives in acquiring and maintaining the records of the Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC). Working with the VANOC Fonds allowed the authors and their institution to recognize the complexities of collaborating with a large organization in structural flux, working within the limitations of their technical structure when faced with a wide variety of records and formats, and how key archival functions and practices may need to change when managing digital records.

The issue also includes a case study by Charles Levi on a legacy electronic records pilot project at the Archives of Ontario involving records received on digital media. In particular, Levi's case study addresses the issues in dealing with obsolete media such as 5.25-inch floppy disks and the need for practical manuals for archives professionals facing similar challenges.

Echoing Taylor's call for archivists to be appropriately educated to deal with the looming mass of computer-generated records, two articles address evolution in education and pedagogy from the perspective of archival educators. Christopher Lee and Helen Tibbo present the development and structure of the DigCCurr (Digital Curation Curriculum) Matrix of Digital Curation Knowledge and Skills. Lee and Tibbo also describe how the functions contained within the Matrix have been established within the curriculum at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and investigate a number of potential ways in which digital curation and digital curation education could advance the archival enterprise. Patricia Galloway's article describes how a graduate course in digital archives at the University of Texas at Austin has been established as a laboratory that supports active learning through real digital archives projects. This course, as well as its larger departmental context, allows for educators to revisit and improve the infrastructure, methodology, and resource on which the course relies.

This issue's *Counterpoint* article, by Frank Upward, Sue McKemish, and Barbara Reed, considers the application of the records continuum as a means to address the recordkeeping processes and practices of online cultures. The article takes a theoretical approach to investigate the challenges to archival

access introduced by continuum theory, recordkeeping in Indigenous communities, and WikiLeaks. The essay in particular urges us to continue analyzing how recordkeeping in online cultures will impact archival education, development, and operations, and to rethink our practices to allow us to become more agile and responsive to the needs of society.

This special issue could not have been completed without the work of our authors, to whom I would like to extend a deep thanks, particularly during the occasionally long processes of revision. I am also deeply grateful to our peer reviewers, who provided excellent and thought provoking assessments of the articles. Most of all, I must thank *Archivaria's* General Editor, Jean Dryden, for giving me the opportunity to serve as a guest editor, for her sage advice, and for her support in completing the work needed to meet the aggressive schedule for production of the special issue. It is my hope that *Archivaria* can be a sounding board for the continued evolution of digital archivy and record-keeping, as well as the profession in general, and that as a profession we can be much more responsive to the “new context of permanent change” described by Hugh Taylor.