



historycouncilnsw

Digital Archives

Executive Summary

What are digital archives?

Digital archives are born digital files. That is records that have been electronically created such as emails, blogs, websites, and even word or excel files in your computer. Increasingly digital records have replaced letters, written reports and hard copy documentation as the primary mode of communication. They are the historical records of our time and will be the sources future historians will rely on.

How can digital archives be preserved?

Preserving digital archives is complex but not impossible. There are several points for consideration:

1. *Preservation*
Organisations, government agencies and individuals all must develop systems for ensuring that digital files are preserved.
2. *Format*
Digital archives must be preserved in a format that ensures their availability in the future. The issues of how best to preserve digital archives and ensure they can be accessed are ongoing and future archivists will have to continually adapt to changing technology.
3. *Storage*
Appropriate facilities for digital preservation are required. These facilities must be physically secure and trustworthy. They require rigorous back up regimes and a range of strategies to ensure ongoing security.

The process of digital preservation clearly requires resources, including money; skilled staff who can manage digital archives, and the appropriate physical facilities and technology infrastructure.

The National Archives of Australia began their digital preservation project in 2001. The facility became operational in 2007 and includes, a digital archive, processing facilities and experienced staff. In Victoria the Public Record Office of Victoria has developed the Victorian Electronic Records Strategy, considered to be one of the most advanced and largest scale projects of its kind in the world. The Victorians have a considerable head start having begun the process in 1995, but they have created an example of what can be achieved through the co-operation of government, industry and the academy.

Similarly in July last year the United States Government passed the Electronic Message Preservation Act to ensure the capture, management, preservation and retrieval of federal agency and presidential electronic messages that are records in an electronic format.

What is the situation in NSW?

At present each government department is responsible for its own digital preservation strategy and can not transfer digital State archives. The State Records Authority of NSW only has facilities for storage of paper and analogue format records. State Records NSW has a digital records strategy, called Future Proof, which provides standards and guidance on managing digital records. Part of the strategy is the development of a digital archive facility and State Records has been seeking funding for this work.

The History Council of NSW believes it is the responsibility of government to lead by setting examples in best practice and the issue of preserving born digital archives is a prime example of where the NSW Government should be showing leadership. It is vital that State Records NSW is able to meet its legislative obligations to preserve and provide access to the State's archives and digital records are an important element of this.

Preserving our digital archives is not an issue for tomorrow, it is urgently required as every day that we do not act to preserve the records of today they are at threat of disappearing.

Prepared and endorsed by the Executive Committee, in consultation with members of the History Council of NSW, June 2009.