



InterPARES 2 Project

International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems

Overview

Case Study 05: Archives of Ontario Web Exhibits

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The Creator Context / Activity

Creators: Archives of Ontario and Archives of Toronto, in collaboration.

Creator type: Government focus / Public sphere (provincial or state administration)

Juridical context: laws relating to governmental communication with citizens, including copyright (e.g., the use of images in Web site exhibits), translation into French (a legal requirement for the provincial organization), accessibility to disabled users, privacy protection (e.g. donors of materials used in the exhibits) and using source materials consistent with the requirements stipulated in the governing donation agreements.

Activity: The creation and posting of institutional Web exhibits (*The Government of Ontario Art Collection, Toys of Our Childhood, The War of 1812*). This seeks to partially fulfill the Archives of Ontario's mandate to enhance access to its "rich and varied holdings via the Internet" (FR 1) and is a result of tools and policies in the Archives' 2000-2003 strategic plan. The Web exhibits are created not for the internal business purposes of the institutions themselves, but specifically as a tool of outreach to remote and new clients. The archivist of Ontario has stated, "We are always looking for *new and better ways* to serve the public and reach the people of Ontario, and our Web site has become an important tool for people interested in accessing the Archives' records." (FR 8, emphasis added) The Web exhibits are therefore a nascent business practice of the Archives.

The activity of producing a Web-based exhibit was seen as taking place in a nascent creation context. "During the study, development of institutional Web sites generally appeared to be an emerging business process...in that the Web-based resources were being used to fulfil a "big idea."" (FR 2) This nascent activity should be nuanced, however. "Creation of exhibits is not a new activity for archival institutions, but creation of Web exhibits is an emerging business activity not only in the sense that institutions are only recently investing in this activity, but also in that these records used within the exhibit are placed in a narrative context by the creator, rather than leaving it to the client to develop the narrative. Web exhibits reverse the normal archival practice of describing or representing holdings from the general to the specific.

Exhibits focus on specific records with the purpose of attracting new users to the institution.” (FR 10)

This case study is grouped in the government focus, although it closely resembles one that could be found in the artistic focus. This is a non-traditional government activity in that the production of on-line exhibits is more closely related in nature to artistic activity, not the typical government activity of creating and keeping official records or of providing information to citizens. However, the two bodies producing the exhibits are the archives of a provincial and a municipal government working together. So, while the actors are governmental, the activity is artistic. However, due to the fact that the larger mandate and operations of the Archives of Ontario are squarely in the government field, the creator is categorized in the government focus.

Nature of the partnership

The creator is a partnership between two publicly-funded archival institutions, the Archives of Ontario and Archives of Toronto. However, the Archives of Toronto is fairly overshadowed in the final report. The exact nature of the links between these two institutions is quite vague, though it is assumed that they both collaborated in the production of the Web exhibits.

Bureaucratic/Organizational Structure

The two participating institutions that provided the environment for the case study were organizations within larger governmental structures –the central administrative governments of the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario. The Toronto Archives is under the administration of the City Clerk, while the Archives of Ontario is within the Management Board Secretariat, the structure of which supports the Management Board [Committee] of Cabinet.

“In both institutions, the business process leading to the creation of Web exhibits was in a formative stage. In each organization, some aspects of the process were clearly defined, whereas others appeared to vary or be *ad hoc* in nature.” (FR 10) The exhibits are created by archivists, working with support staff and the Archives’ Web site coordinator. Archives’ staff select the subject of the exhibit, the records to be used and how to present the selected records. Management approves exhibits before they are posted to the Web site. The lack of a defined business process, most likely in light of the nascent creation context, led to problems with record keeping (see below).

Digital Entities Studied

The digital entities in this case study are Web sites with interactive space for online exhibits and the elements that comprise these Web sites. A cascading style sheet is used for the whole institutional Web site and HTML is used to integrate the various elements of the Web exhibits, which include digitized images, recorded sound, video and text files. Web site coordinators use DreamWeaver and PageMaker software to create Web pages and also determine the size of pages, based on download times and how to best develop the exhibit.

In some instances, particularly the digitized images, the components may be copies of records. That is, in the context of Web exhibits an image may be a component of the record. In the context of the institution’s visual holdings, the image may itself be a record.

Documentary Practices Observed

Because the activity of creating Web-based exhibits was seen as an emerging business process, there were no formal record-making or record-keeping practices in place. “There was no procedural context established in terms of which officers would fulfil which roles...or what records needed to be created and how they would be maintained. Rather, various individuals participated in the creation of Web exhibits on an as needed basis, sometimes through business activities that were already being undertaken but were now adapted or applied to the creation of Web exhibits.” (FR 2-3)

Records Creation and Maintenance

Documentation regarding records creation varies from sporadic to non-existent. “The research and Web page construction **processes**...are not consistently documented” (FR 30) and “the processes identified in the response to...retrieving and accessing Web exhibits are not documented.” (FR 30)

Although there are no formal procedures for records making in the context of Web exhibits, the three **processes** of creating an exhibit (research, administrative and technological, “may draw upon existing processes or procedures within the respective organizations. For example, the creation of scanned images for use within Web exhibits is an existing process for creation of reproductions for institutional clients and for populating the database of visual images.” (FR 25) Despite this fact, technological processes were not documented in the records-making process. No norms, standards or internal procedures were applied in the creation of records. “Each individual’s involvement was “trust-based.” For example, the scanning technician was not required to report on the setting chosen for scanning a particular item. The scanned component was used on the basis of trust—the scanning technician’s judgment in the matter was neither recorded nor challenged.” (FR 3)

There are, however, certain **guidelines** for document creation, such as the existence of corporate standards for Web site development in the jurisdictions of both institutions to diminish or minimize the variations in the interaction of the Web browser with the exhibit. The template dictates much of the structure of a Web page and includes visual cues (e.g., corporate logo) and mandatory relationships to other parts of the corporate Web environment. However, these seem to be the only formal standards or practices followed in records making, beyond certain requirements such as translation and provision of access for individuals with disabilities. “Several of the processes are required by corporate standards or guidelines for practice, but there is no requirement to document the usage of Web page templates or how guidelines to improve access to Web content by disabled people are met, for example.” (FR 29)

There appears to be some sort of **naming convention**, although it is not clear to what extent this is required or implemented. “When viewing the source coding for each Web page within each exhibit, each page is also titled, although this may be simply a practice of the individual Web site developers rather than any institutional requirement or record creation best practice.” (FR 22)

“The entire body of exhibits on the institution’s Web site are (sic) **organized** in chronological order (by date of posting). Each exhibit is organized internally in a way that reflects the creation process, an essentially conceptual process. The narrative is reflected in the “chapters” or Web

pages comprising the exhibit.” (FR 42) “The manager at [one] institution commented, “file **naming conventions** have been somewhat erratic.” Comments by other interviewees made in passing throughout the interviews suggest that organization of supporting documentation is idiosyncratic.” (FR 42)

Recordkeeping and Preservation

For the provincial archives, “There is no one recordkeeping system for records generated in the creation of exhibits. Different contributors (most notably the curator, Webmaster, scanning technician, and manager) each create and maintain their own records of this process. The Web site component files exist on both the development and production servers only. Thus, there is no common **classification** scheme or file **naming convention**.” (FR 11) As a result, “recordkeeping throughout the creation process of a Web exhibit is ad hoc and at the discretion of the participating individuals.” (FR 30) Since there is no recordkeeping system for the exhibits themselves, “these Web sites and their contents need to be seen within the context of a corporate Web site that has some aspects of a recordkeeping system.” (FR 11)

There was a problem regarding the difference between the recordkeeping **environments** of the two partners. “The recordkeeping environments of the two institutions studied differed in some important ways. The city Archives, as one organization within a larger corporate entity, followed the corporate recordkeeping requirements, including a corporate recordkeeping file classification plan. Records created (on paper) in the development of Web exhibits at the city were filed according to this plan and retention was governed by existing retention authorities. However, interviewees did not believe that electronic records, including the Web exhibits themselves, were governed by these corporate procedures. Recordkeeping at the provincial Archives was not governed by any corporate or institutional requirements. Record creation and maintenance was *ad hoc*, at the discretion of individuals participating in the development and maintenance of Web exhibits. In the absence of a defined business process, neither record creation requirements were specified, with the exception of the Web exhibit itself, nor were retention requirements stipulated.” (FR 3)

Despite the fact that the digital entities are not kept in a recordkeeping system as defined by the InterPARES Project, Web exhibits are kept active in the larger environment of the institution’s Web environment. “Components of Web exhibits are **stored** in various places, with the only complete source being in the development server and ultimately the production server. Supporting records are not centrally stored, but rather in relation to the various individuals through their roles in Web exhibit development and maintenance.” (FR 40-41) The Archives of Ontario makes **backups** to removable media (CD-R, DVD-R) approximately once a month, although it is the development server that is backed up, and which may contain drafts or rejected files that never made it to the production server.

“No written policies or procedures were provided concerning the **preservation** of Web exhibits.” (FR 41) Ironically, despite the fact that the creators are two archival institutions, it does not seem that traditional **archival principles** apply to the digital entities under study. “In neither institution are Web exhibits governed by a records retention authority.” (FR 41) Also, because no appraisal of Web exhibits was undertaken at either institution, it was not possible to identify what values (e.g., legal, fiscal, administrative) the creating organization attributed to them.

Regarding the file classification plan for the city of Toronto, “It is unclear, and appears to have been unclear to the interviewees, how this plan, and accompanying records retention authorities, governs records in electronic format such as Web exhibits, or the e-mails, scanned images, etc., that are their components.” (FR 11)

Maintenance of the exhibits primarily involves making revisions to them. However, **changes** made to the exhibits are not documented. Web-logging software documents aspects of all **interactions** with the institution’s Web site, but related **metadata** are not readily accessible, even if they have been captured. This is due to the absence of a recordkeeping system and lack of consistent recordkeeping processes around the provision of access to Web exhibits within the two institutions.

Accuracy, Authenticity and Reliability

Generally speaking, the creators of these Web exhibits based authenticity, accuracy and reliability considerations on principles or practices external to the actual business process. This is likely due to several factors, predominantly the nascent business process, the specialized (and trusted) competencies of the staff involved and the presence of practices imposed from outside the institution (e.g., the security of corporate Web servers on which the institutional Web site resides).

Since the Web exhibits use archival records such as images as components of the record that is the exhibit itself, “it is reasonable to conclude that the authenticity, reliability and accuracy of a record that is used as a component in another record contributes to the authenticity, reliability and accuracy of that other record.” (FR 5)

“In terms of determining the effectiveness of the efforts by the creators to establish authenticity, reliability and accuracy in their Web exhibits, knowledge of the user’s viewpoint is important.” (FR 5) Unfortunately, little user response information was available for study in this case, and what little there was tended to be anecdotal in nature.

The three processes of creating the Web exhibits (research, administrative and technological) all incorporate aspects of “quality assurance,” which may be seen as a fourth process. This idea of “quality assurance” may take the place of accuracy, authenticity and reliability or may be mistaken for an assurance of these three notions.

Accuracy

Accuracy was defined by one participant in terms of interpretive text being factually correct and by another participant in terms of making choices (of facts or images) transparent to the user/visitor of the exhibit.

Interviewees generally felt that Web exhibit contents were accurate both in terms of the components that comprise the exhibit and in terms of the exhibit as a whole. The accuracy of a digitized image, for example, was based on the skills and eye of the scanning technician as well as technology such as a calibrated display monitor, even while it was recognized that the digitized image might be poorly rendered by the user’s platform. For the exhibit as a whole, accuracy was based on principles of scholarly research, e.g., citing sources.

Authenticity

Authenticity requirements were impossible to establish in the final report, since the values attached to the records by the creator were unknown and there were no formal record creation or keeping processes.

Record authenticity was generally considered to be established and maintained by Web server security, for which procedural and technological details were unknown to the interviewees because they are outside the scope of the institution's competence. Also contributing to record authenticity are the corporate Web page templates provided for both institutions for all Web content.

"In technological terms, the creating institutions perceive no significant threat to the authenticity of the Web exhibits" (FR 31) because access to the production server is limited to the Web site coordinator and hosting service.

Reliability

Reliability was based on relationships established with the source records used in the exhibits, since one of the main purposes of a Web exhibit is to represent institutional archival holdings. At one institution, this was accomplished through reference code citations or hyperlinks from the Web exhibit to the relevant archival description in the institution's descriptive database. This links reliability within Web exhibits to reliability of records created in much better-defined institutional business processes, in this case the practice of archival description resulting in archival descriptive records. Reliability is also based on scholarly research practices.