

Authenticity Revisited: The Cultural Implications of a Digital Reality

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UNESCO's "Memory of the World" and Google Print are just two of the many projects that seek to digitize our cultural record. The duplication, preservation, and dissemination of these sources with digital technology, however, come at a cost. The panel will explore the cultural implications of transferring and re-rendering our historical, cultural, and intellectual legacy in a new medium.

In addition to exploring the idioms of digitized informational realities, the panel will also investigate how, recursively, these spaces are effecting change in the analogue world. The re-appearance of historical artifacts as digitized entities, as well as the emergence of born-digital entities, has forced us to question our traditional ideas about what constitutes an original or a copy, and what we mean by the term 'authentic'.

Inspired by the success of last year's session, "Authenticity: New Personas for Digital Media," the panel for 2006 will take a more comprehensive look at the concept of authenticity in both analogue and digital environments. This

interdisciplinary panel of established and junior scholars from the humanities and the social sciences will suggest new ways of approaching and understanding emergent informational realities.

Authenticity and the Trusted Custodian: The Role of the Archivist in the Long-Term Preservation of Digital Records

Heather MacNeil

Authenticity is a concern for any area of scholarship that analyzes and interprets documentary sources. For records that are held in archival repositories, scholars traditionally have relied on the integrity of the archival procedures associated with their acquisition and preservation to provide assurances of the records' authenticity over the long term. Protecting the authenticity of analogue records held in archival custody is predicated, in large part, on their preservation in the form of stable and enduring physical objects. Protecting the authenticity of digital records in archival custody is complicated by the fact that they cannot be preserved in the form of stable and enduring physical objects. Given that loss and change are inevitable and unavoidable in the digital world, on what grounds can archival repositories claim to protect and preserve the authenticity of digital records over the long term? What definition of authenticity underpins such claim? What are the nature and limits of that claim?

With these questions in mind, this paper will examine the concept of authenticity in the context of the long-term preservation of born digital records; it will look specifically at the role of the archivist as a trusted custodian of records as it has been understood historically in the analogue world and how the digital world is transforming that role.

Historical Authenticity in the Digital Library

Bonnie Mak

The survival of many heritage objects is threatened by natural disaster and the lack of long-term strategies for preservation. As a part of an effort to keep historical materials accessible for present and future generations, cultural organizations are promoting the digitization of these imperilled resources. Libraries around the world have likewise used digital encoding as a way to share their holdings with the public.

By replicating existing collections in virtual space, digitizations re-situate traditional materials in new contexts and present them in this way as a part of our historical record. While there are many benefits to the use of digital technology in historical research, it is important to consider whether these digitizations are providing access to an authentic past. To this end, the paper will consider the ramifications of understanding a history that is

mediated through digital technology.

Any history is comprised of an interweaving of past and present narratives, but the interpretation of historical materials on the Internet or on CD-ROM is made more complex by the conditions of their digitization, which may include cultural, political, and economic factors. In one particular example, this paper will show how a digital collection can be read to reveal the circumstances that underpin both the digitization itself and the historical moment that it seeks to preserve.

Authenticity and the Digital Copy

Jennifer Douglas

In recent years, the demand for digital content on the websites of archives and libraries has grown significantly. At the same time, external funding is provided only to projects that promise to increase access to and promote the preservation of noteworthy items and collections. As a result, archives in Canada and the United States are selecting records from their holdings, converting them to digital formats, and displaying them either as part of online exhibits or in online catalogues and image banks. Although international, national and institutional guidelines exhort archivists to preserve the authenticity and integrity of digitized records, questions arise as to the extent that this is possible.

Authenticity is an important concern in the preservation of archives, and while research is being conducted into methods for preserving the authenticity of records born digital, there has been little consensus about what authenticity means in the context of digitized archival records. In particular, digitized records need to be evaluated to determine the degree to which, as copies of original records, they are capable of replacing the originals for use and display purposes. Further, the extent to which they can and do remain faithful to the original records must be investigated. The paper will begin this process by examining the nature of the activities in which both the original records and their digital copies participate. This examination will show that digital copies are no longer records of the activities documented in the original records, but are instead records of our own activities as archivists. I will use concepts from archival diplomatics, as well as theories of authorship and reader reception, to explore changes to the nature of these new records and to their position in relation to the original records, the archival institution and the viewing public. Finally, the implications of these changes to ideas of archival authenticity will be assessed.