

## **THE FUTURE OF THE ARCHIVE**

Scott Campbell Rhymer

©2006 Scott Rhymer

There is much worry on the part of historians, or more precisely, antiquarians who lament the shift toward electronic storage of documents. While there are undeniably problems that arise from this move from the traditional boxed and stored papers, photos, and maps of the archive, what seems to elude them is that rarely do these materials simply disappear. Current projects to digitize other “hard media” rarely result in the destruction of the original material, but simply copy – or backup, to use a more appropriate term – the documents in question. Any efforts to duplicate and hence maintain historical records is a laudable and should be encouraged.

Several arguments arise from those critical of digitization, and many have valid points. Roy Rosenzweig has pointed out the speed with which early storage media become damaged or obsolete. A writer who has stored his material on 5 1/4 inch floppies would be hard pressed to find a readily available drive to read the material...but these old drives have by no means disappeared. As with those antiquarians that prefer the sensory input of handling old books, papers, and photos, there are electronic equivalents (e-ntiquarians, if you will), who preserve and maintain old computers. Finding a 386 DX66 DOS geek to crack the 5 1/4" disk would not be as difficult as you might think. A search on Google took me two minutes to find such a service.

However, Rosenzweig’s point of data corrupted and therefore lost on these older media is a prescient one. Magnetic coding on 3.5" and 5 1/4" disks is notoriously unstable over time. However, the same problem exists for even older magnetic tape. Music historians have been able to do much with the preservation and recovery of this storage substrate, and many of their tricks

would be applicable to the magnetic disks of the aforementioned kind. Despite this, the amount of loss data is likely to be negligible from a historian's point of view. The age of the floppy disk was short-lived, a little over a decade. Much of the data that had been created for government purposes has, ironically, a paper backup. For individuals that might have stored writings on these disks, we must simply hope that the information stored there was later backed up to optic disk.

Continuing advanced in storage systems will alleviate some of these concerns. Optic and holographic storage is much more stable than the traditional magnetic ones, but still subject to the weird world of quantum events, or the occasional galactic cosmic ray strike. However, these advances will no doubt be incorporated in the archives around the world, making the preservation of historical texts more reliable, and more accessible for the historian and public at large.

As for access to the data in these archives, the main issue is that of copyright. Many of the libraries that store these documents do not own them; delivery of the material via electronic access may violate copyright, depending on the agreements between the archive and the owner. This can be avoided by renegotiating the terms of the storage and access with the current proprietor of the material. Once again, not an insurmountable issue.

Manipulation of the material is also a great concern. As evidenced by the Rathergate scandal, it is possible for documents that look reasonably authentic to be entered into the historical record. However, as with forgeries in on paper, these forgeries are subject to analysis, and depending on the timeliness of the document, are often debunked within hours based on a knowledge of fonts. War photos from the Middle East are frequently called into question, as in the war between Israeli and Hezbollah forces in 2006. Photos were doctored by the photographer

to increase the amount of smoke in a supposed attack to give the picture “punch.” Staged incidents by Hezbollah to gullible reporters were noted by rescue workers who pointed out the cleanliness of rescuers, the posed figures being rescued. No matter the skill of manipulation in a photograph, digital fingerprints are left in the footage that can be picked out by a skilled photographer, digital artist, or photo-intelligence expert. Altering Acrobat files – the standard in print documents transferred to digital storage – is even more difficult and easier to note, since changes to files are recorded in the “metadata” of the file. As with other historical artifacts, forgeries will occur. Some will be caught, others will not.

Rosenzweig is also greatly worried about the vast amount of information that will be released into the aetheric realm of the internet. Google can direct a researcher to thousands of websites, many of which will entertain the reader with gobs of juicy pornography. However, the trained (or quasi-intelligent) seeker will quickly learn which sites are reputable and which are not. University libraries, national or private archives remain the primary holders of historical data, and their databases and scanned material are highly likely to be authentic and verifiable. As with the intelligence field, this would require the historian to develop a sense for what material is likely to be pertinent to their researches. But unlike the current researcher, plowing through boxes of material in an allergic-reaction inducing basement somewhere, the internet archivist will have increasingly better search native search engines or online archival assistance to direct their attentions to the material needed. A wealth of data is always better than a dearth, but may require the historian to be more discriminating in the use of material, and more savvy in their research techniques.

Historians are scholars of the past, and are by the very nature of their field, conservative.

Change in the archives brings a reflexive shudder to many. To lose the “archive fever” Derrida spoke of – the excitement of possibly finding heretofore undiscovered evidence; to lose the sensations of the past – the smell and texture of the vellum a court order is written on, the quality of the ink handwritten on a missive from Spanish colonial official or other from the New World...to the antiquarian this is to lose a portion of the past. However, time is change – it is the medium of history. Time brings eventual decay and loss of historical texts, particularly those on as flimsy a substrate as paper or magnetic fields. It is essential to the historical record that this knowledge be preserved in multiple formats – hard copy and electronic – as possible, and that these materials be as accessible to the scholar or lay person as possible. Only then can this memory of man truly survive.

#### WORKS CITED

Roy Rosenzweig. *Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Age*. Last accessed 15 JULY 2008 through <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.3/rosenzweig.html>

Carolyn Steedman. “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust.” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, 1159-1180. Oct, 2001. Accessed 27NOV2007, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762%28200110%29106%3A4%3C1159%3ASSCAFM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-%23>