

the life of the record, the components of the record, and identifies the derivatives of the record which might be made for online use or for publication. The components of the record, documented in the meta-data would be equivalent to the context for the archaeologist: what information goes with that object for it to be meaningful. Think e-mails and attachments.

‘Electronic’ is used to refer to the means of managing and sharing the digital object; the system, infrastructure, and devices all make up the electronic system. Electronic management systems store digital files. There are many terms that describe these systems and it is important to understand the purpose, the actions, the risks and the functions of each. Managed electronic systems can be as large as the ‘cloud’ with widely distributed server farms, to spinning disks and juke boxes, to hard drives and even your cellphone may have some storage capacity. By themselves, the electronic storage systems that manage bit-streams of digital information are not going to preserve digital culture.

Preservation in a digital world

Archival and records management has to manage records in almost 100 common digital formats including e-mail with attachments, audiovisual formats of all types, databases including the more complex relational databases, geographical information systems and compound documents that start as one format, but attach information in one or more of the other formats. This complexity of formats is what drives the suggestion that what is required for preservation is a flexible, modular framework of preservation action that can apply a wide set of tools to carry out the required actions based on the formats.

This is in itself not that different from the way a preservation programme normally addresses archival preservation. Each record represents some variation on a known type of material and requires examination and analysis, testing of various options, verification that changes will not cause harm or significant change and that the required actions will be cost-effective and sustainable. If we apply the known principles behind the practice of preservation there is a pathway that guides us. Electronic records are like other holdings with specific characteristics. There is a life cycle that begins with creation using known tools and technology. We know that, for preservation, we need to provide a secure environment, we need to assess and consider risks that might lead to either catastrophic or long-term loss and we must consider what will keep the objects safe and accessible in the most cost-effective and sustainable way. Our goal is always to provide authentic and trustworthy information that meets the needs of the public.

Providing the real thing is a familiar concept within preservation. We research how things work, why they don’t work and what might