



Evidence Summary

Public Library Users are Challenged by Digital Information Preservation

A Review of:

Copeland, A. J. (2011). Analysis of public library users' digital preservation practices. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 62(7), 1288-1300. doi: 10.1002/asi.21553

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Abstract

Objective – To discover the factors that influence digital information preservation practices and attitudes of adult public library users.

Design – Mixed methodology combining matrix questionnaires, interviews, and visual mapping.

Setting – Urban public library on the East Coast of the United States.

Subjects – 26 adult members of a public library's Friends group.

Methods – The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 participants. All

participants drew maps to indicate the types of information they value and why, and their preferences for information storage and maintenance. Qualitative data were supplemented by a matrix questionnaire on which 22 participants identified the types of digital information they maintain, and modes of storage.

Main Results – Some public library users may store and organize information inconsistently, utilizing a variety of digital devices. Technical, social, and emotional context influences choices about organization, sharing of information, and short- and long-term preservation. Users reported placing a higher value on born digital information, and information that they had shared with others.

Conclusion – Public librarians may have a role in facilitating growth of patron knowledge about creation, storage, preservation, and sharing of personal digital information.

Commentary

While corporate and academic libraries have investigated the long-term storage and preservation of their patron and institutional data, the author makes a compelling case that we know less about the everyday digital information preservation practices of individual public library users.

Designed to validate a qualitative inquiry, the author's methodology offers a time-intensive model for inquiry about information use and preservation. The author carefully explains strategies employed to validate the results. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed with NVivo 7.0. To ensure coding consistency, two independent judges evaluated the coding of a sample of the interview transcripts. The researcher used an instrument developed by Savolainen and Kari (2004) to evaluate the maps drawn by each participant.

The author outlines three questions about public library users and the characteristics of the digital information they maintain, their motives, and the factors that influence their choice to preserve digital information. All participants reported storing digital photographs, email, music, and word processed documents using a variety of tools, with varying degrees of technical problems and challenges. While the author suggests that public libraries could become more involved in patrons' private computing, studying participants who own a computer curtails the library practitioner's ability to apply findings about participant behaviour to public library users in general.

The study's most notable finding is that users most valued digital information they had shared with others, and information sharing

was influenced by the emotional connection represented by the file. Emotional attachments to information strongly influenced participants' rationale for preserving files for the long-term, and the social and emotional context of information creation influenced choices about organization, naming conventions, and sharing.

The validity of this research is limited by the characteristics and size of the participant pool. The author offers no justification for recruiting volunteers from the Friends of the Library, a decision which yielded an unrepresentative sample of public library users in general. In addition, this research does not explore how often or how participants used the library, or whether subjects desired library instruction about digital information preservation. In light of these factors, the author cannot generalize about public library users' "everyday life" modes of digital information creation or storage, common motives for preserving information, or how public librarians might intervene to enhance users' skills and expertise.

Librarians might hope that the outcome of this research would inform the development of group, individual, or point-of-need instruction. The author suggests that public library patrons may benefit from instruction or consultation about methods of prioritizing, storing, and organizing digital files. However, this research would be more useful to practitioners if it offered evidence that the diverse population of public library users needs and desires library instruction and services about digital information management.

References

- Savolainen, R., & Kari, J. (2004). Placing the Internet in information source horizons: A study of information seeking by Internet users in the context of self-development. *Library & Information Science Research*, 26(4), 415-433. doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2004.04.004