How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bits: Archival Motivation in the Digital Age

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As a result of the continually advancing presence of digitized and born digital archival collections, the physical nature of archival “stuff” is changing. While there remains the physical imprint of digital information on floppy disks, CDs, DVDs, hard drives, and old computers; the aspects of these physical artifacts might not evoke the same visceral pull to the profession as musty, raspy, paper-based documents. In light of this shift in physical presentation of information, we are faced with the question: how does love of archival “stuff” translate to work in digital archives? What is and/or will be the pull to become a digital archivist?

The goal of this survey is to expand the archival discussion on what it means to be an archivist in the digital age. What compelling intrinsic, evidential, or informational values are present in digital archival content that will draw professionals to the field? Are there other values inherent in digital content that are currently unexplored?

Research Questions:
1. What motivates people to become archivists?
2. What aspects of digital archives do or can potentially motivate people to seek out a career as an archivist?
3. What, if any, motivational factors for becoming a traditional archivist are the same as those for becoming a digital archivist?
4. What, if any, motivational factors for becoming a traditional archivist are different from those for becoming a digital archivist?

Measures:
1. Demographic: type of institution
2. Generalized descriptions of initiation into archival profession
3. Motivations of archivists
4. Value judgment of analog and digital content

Society and the archival profession will benefit from this study through its contribution to the body of research discussing content and archival motivations in the digital age. The research will provide an overview of the current trends in motivating forces behind both digital and analog archivists to establish a data set for further discussion in the field of archival studies.

A paper record can become "archival" through neglect, and later be accessioned formally into an archive, but a digital record requires active intervention to perpetuate its existence, and this can make it difficult to justify the need for a specifically archival information system as opposed to just maintaining the creating system indefinitely.