

The National Archives' digital strategy – the Olympics and beyond
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Abstract

Objective

The National Archives is rethinking its digital strategy, looking critically at our current, essentially orthodox approach to digital preservation and asking whether it has genuinely enhanced our ability to preserve and provide access to digital records. The drivers include rapid technological change in recent years, our experience operating a web archive of more than 1 billion records, and the imminent transfer of the complete digital records of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

This paper explains our new thinking and approach, and through it we hope to convey some of the opportunities that come from seeing digital records archiving as analogous to paper record archiving, just on a larger scale.

Statement of findings

Our main challenge is not in dealing with file formats – the much-feared ‘black hole in our history’ due to obsolete formats is unlikely to materialise, at least not in the UK. Nor is the challenge in physical storage – our one petabyte archive store already provides a cost-effective and scalable solution. For us, the major challenges lie in dealing with significantly increased volume, building the utility of metadata and guaranteeing authenticity. These challenges are not radically different in principle to those presented by traditional paper records – the significant difference is in the scale.

Key conclusions

The challenges presented by digital records are big, but meeting them arguably requires less of a departure from traditional archival practice than previously thought. As archives we need to stay focused on selection and retention - the question of 'what to keep' - and on doing our job as an archive, which at core is to collect well, manage repositories excellently and make the records accessible.

Author biography

Oliver Morley is Chief Executive and Keeper at The National Archives, and has led the organisation since March 2010. He joined The National Archives in 2008 as Director of Customer and Business Development, leading the team launching the 1911 census and The National Archives' online strategy. Previously, Oliver worked at Thomson Reuters, with global responsibility for ensuring improvement of information services for customers. He has worked in the shipping and technology industries and has an MBA from London Business School.