Selecting Digital Records: Past Realities, Future Possibilities

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Introduction

• Based on knowledge of UK + Scottish national govt, UK universities, private sector
• The only selection decisions I make are for my own department’s records!
• Selection of organisational records is a multi-stage process
• Records are created by, used by, and document the activities of an organisation or individual
gov.uk records lifecycle

- Policies
  - Acquisition
  - Disposal

- Guidelines
  - Retention
  - Appraisal

- Schedules
  - Retention
  - Appraisal

- Process
  - Creation
  - 5-year review
  - 25-year review

- Places
  - External storage
  - Department
  - Disposed
  - PRO
  - Destroyed

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The way it has been

• Based on paper process
• Record content still primary driver, but…
  ⇒ Some selected because of IT significance
  ⇒ Action taken earlier because of obsolescence
  ⇒ Ease of preservation probably has more significance than with paper
• Lack of inventory significant barrier
• Digital form allows new types of content to be preserved for effective re-use
Resultant selection decisions

- Digital records continuing from preserved paper records
- Large, easily identifiable systems
- Systems on brink of retirement or replacement
- Many digital records still invisible to manual selection process
- Some difficult decisions avoided
What’s different with digital?

• Size of record collection no longer a preservation barrier
  ⇒ but complexity is more important than it was
• No need to sample case files, etc
• Quantitative research now trivial, hence...
• … Qualitatively different research now possible
• Cost of acquisition completely different
• Acquisition process significantly more complex
  ⇒ but this is a short-term phenomenon
How could it be different?

• ERM systems currently ape paper model
• Technologies for automated document classification and clustering no longer just research topics
• Documents no longer simple self-contained entities - if they ever were
• Still need to preserve context and provenance
Views of object collections

OLD

NEW
Final thoughts

• Most paper records destroyed - space and usability
• Digital records much more susceptible to bulk analysis and advanced retrieval
• True even when original records badly managed (think email)
• Experience in other domains shows automated classification can be preferable to human
• Difficult formats will be under-preserved for some time to come