

# The role of libraries for PDA

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## Abstract

This article examines the crucial role of libraries in personal digital archiving education. As digital libraries are increasingly attuned to user needs and technological changes, they should be concerned with providing information to people on how to form and manage their digital materials. The article goes on to explain the reasons that make PDA practices important and those that should incentivize libraries to take care of user training. Space is also given to the problems associated with this dissemination and what parameters should be used to make the information provided more comprehensible.

## Keywords 1

personal digital archiving; libraries; technology; digitalization; service; guidelines.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, cultural institutions, particularly libraries, have radically transformed their services, moving them from physical to virtual environments. The advent of new technologies and their widespread adoption by society have forced libraries to provide entirely new and innovative services [11]. Digital libraries have emerged as key players in this context, revolutionizing access to information and democratizing the fruition of knowledge. This transformation has enabled broader and more inclusive access, crossed physical boundaries and facilitated the sharing of cultural resources in ways never imagined in the past.

The active adaptation of libraries to the needs of the digital society has been evident through the introduction of a wide range of innovative services. These include the prevision of digital resources such as eBooks, online archives and databases, the promotion of digital literacy through virtual courses and workshops, and the implementation of advanced technological tools to enhance the research and learning experience.

Far from being static custodians of knowledge, libraries have become dynamic catalysts of knowledge, playing a crucial role in disseminating culture and encouraging digital literacy. Their proactive response to technological change has demonstrated a willingness to remain relevant in an increasingly digital world, ensuring that their mission of facilitating access to knowledge is adapted to the needs of contemporary society.

In particular, great attention has been and still is given to the long-term preservation of digital materials. This is a very complex challenge since, as technologies evolve, media, software, hardware and formats may become obsolete over time and render resources inaccessible. To address this issue, libraries have begun to adopt policies aimed at preserving both dematerialized and digitally native objects. Thanks to inter-institutional collaboration, adoption of open standards and metadata, it can be said that libraries are tackling the problem of obsolescence and preservation in an active and multifaceted way, adopting advanced technologies and relying on continuous staff training. This attention plays a crucial role in the preservation of digital heritage for future generations and especially for documents considered to be of cultural interest and for government documents.

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In addition to the focus on digital heritage, in the early years of the 21st century many institutions, such as the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) in the United Kingdom and the Library of Congress (LOC) in the United States, started to take care of educating people about digital archiving practices, ushering in the season of Personal Digital Archiving. But what is Personal Digital Archiving and why should libraries care more about it?

## **2. What is PDA**

PDA is usually defined as the "practice of preserving one's own digital records of continuing value" [13]. This practice, along with personal information management (PIM) [8], focuses on the activities of shaping, managing and preserving the various digital objects created and managed by individuals in the context of their private and sometimes professional lives. The range of materials included is very broad: photos, text documents, e-mail, websites, social media, instant messaging, audio, video. All of these items have a special significance for an individual's personal history, but their digitally-based conformation puts them at risk of becoming inaccessible. The goal of the PDA is therefore to preserve this digital data for the future and allow people to access those memories and documents that remain important over time. However, the tasks of preserving are complex and not intuitive when assessing one's own digital creations: people usually don't think their objects have a value [7].

A further complication is that unlike public archives, which are regulated by specific rules, the management of personal digital archives requires a voluntary commitment. People must therefore first understand the reasons why it is worth spending time and energy on personal digital archiving. These are non-trivial and non-immediate activities that may initially seem particularly time-consuming and expensive. In reality, the more time is spent on good training and good practice in this activity, the more time will be saved in the future when it is necessary to retrieve the documents sought and find them ready and perfectly readable.

## **3. Why libraries should take care of PDA**

The concern about these archives is well expressed by the DPC's annual report on endangered categories in the digital world. Since 2017, these include the category of personal and family digital archives, which are classified as critically endangered, i.e. among the highest risk levels. The reasons for the risk are diverse and include technical problems related to the use of fragile or low-quality portable media, dependence on specific devices or obsolete formats, the use of out-of-warranty media, the practice of making single copies, and excessive dependence on service providers. Furthermore, it is emphasized that these technological problems are due to information and educational deficiencies that make this field a breeding ground for impulsive and unconscious decisions that vulnerable our precious data. For these reasons, the DPC emphasizes that the preservation of personal records is "a public awareness campaign issue and more tools need to be made easily available for people to be able to better preserve their own digital content" [3].

Along these lines, various efforts have been made by different institutions and libraries during the 21st century. The leading library has certainly been the Library of Congress, which since 2007 has been offering advice on its site regarding digital archiving. Their involvement in this area certainly reflects the need to provide resources and practical advice to individuals for the management of their own archives, but also the idea that it is necessary to train those working in libraries so that more institutions devote themselves to disseminating solutions for these problems. With this in mind, the library produced a kit for those wishing to organize events on PDA. The kit is designed as a written guide to help other institutions in planning, organizing and publicizing "PDA day events" [5] and could easily be adopted in the Italian context as well. On the Library of Congress website, interested institutions will find not only organizational help, but also up-to-date handouts and free videos that, once translated into the language of interest, could be made available on their institutional website. For example, there is information on how to handle and preserve digital photos, emails, audio, video and personal websites, but most importantly, there are some videos that briefly explain why it is important to take good care of personal digital archives. Libraries could start their own public education journey by using these already available materials, translating them into the language of their audiences and keeping them up

to date by also consulting the DPC website. In fact, in addition to publishing an annual report on endangered materials, media and types of archives, the DPC supports the *World Digital Preservation Day*, celebrated annually on 2 November. Official event logos and even fun materials to sponsor the event and entice users to participate can be downloaded for free on the initiative website [4]. Libraries that are not yet involved in PDA could use this world event as an opportunity to raise awareness of the subject and then develop it independently through research by internal staff, but always with an international perspective thanks to these sites and their initiatives. In fact, through these events, libraries could network and share experiences and resources even with institutions in other countries.

This gives rise to a reflection on the motivations that should drive libraries to engage in personal digital archiving. These can take the form of two macro-areas of objectives that libraries should always keep in mind: the first refers to the importance of preserving individual and collective memory while the second to the function of promoting digital literacy. In relation to the first point, digital personal archives tell not only a substantial part of individual history but are important for reconstructing society as a whole. In fact, digital personal records are a testimony of contemporary society, everyday life and the social transformations of our century [12]. By dealing with PDA, libraries contribute to the integrity of the digital cultural heritage for future generations. In relation to the second goal, libraries dealing with Personal Digital Archiving directly promote digital literacy [2]. By providing guidelines, workshops and webinars, institutions help to improve users' digital skills, making them more aware of the risks of obsolescence and fragility of digital objects and creating a network of people informed about best practices for the long-term management of their digital data. Being traditionally seen as places of knowledge and advice, libraries can provide a valuable educational service to help people manage their data responsibly.

In essence, libraries should address PDA because it is a natural extension of their mission to preserve knowledge, facilitate access to information and promote digital literacy in an increasingly technology-driven world.

#### **4. Details that libraries should take care of**

From the LOC's initiatives over the years, other public and university libraries as well as cultural institutions draw lifeblood and decisive insights into the topic with their audiences through conferences, blogs, sections of official websites and social networks. However, not all large libraries have dedicated sections on their websites and when a user tries to research the topic of digital preservation, they usually come across rules that refer to insiders rather than the public. This advice or information is mostly of a highly specific and specialized nature and not of a popular one, which makes the subject difficult for newcomers. According to the author's research, current attention to PDA is mainly in the English and Dutchspeaking areas, while in Italy there is a total lack of attention to the subject.

Libraries that have not yet implemented a section on their site could first of all take inspiration from existing ones [6, 9] and, at the same time, overcome their own deficiencies. These are first and foremost in the need to maintain a constant flow of up-to-date information over time. Since the PDA discipline is relatively young and there are still no highly established certainties [1], libraries should not only provide an initial overview but also ensure that information is revised and updated over time, keeping up with technological changes.

The same attention should also be paid to the problem of links that refer to results outside the site: these links are often broken or contain errors that can significantly undermine the credibility of the information provided. Furthermore, the handover of information management activities within the site should not be the responsibility of a single person, but a team should be set up that can provide continuity of work and handovers. Ultimately, only with a meticulous and continuous approach on the part of library officials it will be possible to guarantee resources that are reliable, accurate, in line with developments in the field, and worthy of the trust and attention of users.

In dealing with users, another consideration to be made is linguistic and formal. The content offered on one's own sites should be formally and linguistically consistent with the target audience one wishes to address. It is important in this sense to understand that users are very different and that each one has different needs depending on various factors such as age, profession, prior knowledge of archival and digital skills, motivations for preservation (emotional, practical or hereditary), type of digital material

produced etc. For these reasons, the dissemination of information about PDA should always start in an informal and engaging manner, first making it clear why people should engage with the topic and then breaking the issue down into its key points. These salient topics should be explained in clear and userfriendly language, without getting caught up in the use of excessive technicalities, but giving those who are interested the opportunity to go deeper with specific and more scientific articles. Finally, the site's graphics should help users to find their way around the information: in this sense, it would be useful to divide the advice according to the type of digital material (e.g. a section for e-mails, one for photos, one for videos, one for text documents, etc.).

If seeking an exemplar in this regard, the Nestor project serves as a prime model. Their *meinDigitalesArchiv.de* website [10] not only offers invaluable guidance on personal digital archiving but also establishes a standard for user-friendly design and accessibility, enhancing the overall experience for users of all levels.

It provides valuable insights on safeguarding personal digital assets for the long haul. Offering practical advice on organizing and preserving personal digital documents, it emphasizes key areas like digital inheritance and metadata management. Additionally, the platform shares firsthand accounts from individuals of varying ages who have adapted their document preservation methods, resulting in tangible long-term benefits.

## 5. Conclusion

Libraries should actively engage in Personal Digital Archiving (PDA) as a natural extension of their mission to preserve knowledge, facilitate access to information, and promote digital literacy. Inspired by initiatives like the Library of Congress and adhering to World Digital Preservation Day, libraries can serve as educational hubs, offering guidelines, workshops, and webinars to enhance users' digital skills and awareness of digital object risks. PDA enables the preservation of contemporary society's testimony, reflecting everyday life and societal transformations.

For libraries, addressing PDA involves providing a constant flow of updated information, avoiding broken links, and ensuring linguistic and formal consistency to cater to diverse user needs. A team approach and continuous efforts are vital to guarantee reliable, accurate, and user-friendly resources that align with technological developments. By embracing PDA, libraries actively contribute to the integrity of digital cultural heritage and empower users to manage their digital data responsibly in an ever-evolving technological landscape.

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