

**THREE DAYS IN FEBRUARY**  
AN OUTLINE FOR THE DIGITAL LIVES RESEARCH CONFERENCE

**DRAFT  
TEXT FOR THE OUTLINE**

## Day 1: Digital Lifelines

In collaboration with archival and curatorial colleagues based in the United Kingdom, the Digital Lives Research Project has already begun the process of synthesising a lifecycle approach to personal digital archives. A key aim of the first day of the conference is to engage similarly international colleagues in order to share experiences and ideas.

Another specific aim of this day is to bring together three groups of experts: (i) archivists and curators who are already working with personal digital objects (eMANUSCRIPTS), or anticipate doing so before long (perhaps as part of a hybrid personal archive); (ii) specialists in theoretical aspects of digital archiving, curation and preservation; and (iii) information technologists familiar with the diversity of personal computers from contemporary mobile and handheld devices through to ancestral systems.

There will be a series of accounts of practical experiences with personal digital objects and archives along with a number of demonstrations in the use of forensic, audio and other technologies. The usefulness of open source software for digital curation will be considered, a key case in point being the Advanced Forensic Format (AFF), an open and extensible file format that can be used for disk 'images'.

Topics include: (i) digital capture, (ii) curatorial and originator examination, (iii) procedures for personal information and copyright, (iv) longterm digital preservation, (v) metadata extraction and automation, (vi) the creation of complementary contextual content, and (vii) the enabling of access with high fidelity representation and intelligent discovery and mapping.

Outcomes will include a series of resolutions, potentially supported by a wiki and other collaborative and networking tools. Key priorities will be identified. The feasibility of establishing an informal but active international community of people focussed on personal digital archives will be explored.

Chris DiBona, responsible for the open source software programme at Google, will be giving a Keynote Lecture.

This day is mainly directed at professional specialists and expert enthusiasts in relevant fields although it is hoped that some members of the digital public, especially any who are demonstrably active in self-archiving will also be present.

## Day 2: Personal Information Lifecycles

One of the principal challenges presented by the curation of personal digital archives by a repository or even an individual is that it involves people of very diverse interests, motivations and expertise.

The creators and originators range across all fields of endeavour, of course: poets, playwrights and novelists; musicians; mathematicians and natural and computer scientists, medical researchers and inventors; politicians, statesmen and stateswomen, diplomats, reformers and campaigners; economists, social scientists and anthropologists; entrepreneurs, business people and corporate executives; building and landscape architects; graphic artists; and so on. Beyond these highlighted examples of occupational types, there are members of the public who use computers: the digital public. All of these groups of people use computers in miscellaneous ways and engage with the internet with varying sets of skills and levels of intensity.

The handling and curatorship of archives in itself encompasses the skills of: digital archivists, curators and digital preservation specialists; computer developers, systems architects, information scientists and digital librarians; usability and resource discovery experts; forensic and security analysts; legal and ethical authorities; and web designers and editors.

Among the consumers there are literary scholars, biographers and historians alongside natural, social and human scientists.

All of these people have a place in the lifecycle of the personal digital archive as do the family, friends and associates of the originators; and indeed third parties represented in almost every substantial archive.

This day will embrace the entire lifecycle: from creator through curator to consumer. A strand that threads its way through the day is the question of how the fundamental dilemma of access for research is to be balanced with privacy and confidentiality, and how free usage that stimulates and inspires further creativity to be balanced with the need to reward and encourage original ingenuity and imagination.

Over the course of the day, members of the Digital Lives team will present a series of talks highlighting findings from the project to date. There will be a corresponding series of keynote lectures from high profile contributors eminent in a closely affiliated field.

Gordon Bell, the subject of the MyLifeBits Project, will be giving the First Digital Lives Conference Keynote Lecture. Among the most prominent and earliest of those pioneers who are actively attempting to capture their lives through digital media, he is researching and developing procedures with his colleague Jim Gemmell at Microsoft Research.

The day will feature an informal discussion involving a number of eminent creators: Writers in Conversation.

Interested members of the public are welcome to attend. All potential participants are asked to register beforehand. (More information will be forthcoming in due course.)

### **Day 3: Living Online and Digital Archives in the Wild**

One of the most profound changes in the history of personal archives has been the recent and continuing movement of personal digital objects or eMANUSCRIPTS from the immediate environs of the individual (the desktop, laptop, external hard drive, optical disk or memory stick) to the remote servers of online service providers. This is intimately associated with the still emerging phenomenon of cloud computing: the manifestation of not only Software as a Service (SaaS) and Web 2.0 processes (most notably social networking), but also the increasing portability, mobility and ubiquity of computing devices.

Some of this transfer to remote sites represents a publishing of personally created digital objects, such as photos, videos and graphics, and content such as text, to the wider community: an empowering activity not available to people generally in former times.

The focus of this conference and project is the personal digital archive, the digital equivalent of 'personal papers'. Thus it is the online sharing of personal files which is restricted to specific smaller communities such as family and friends that is of most direct interest. This less public information is not necessarily obtained by web archiving programmes. In addition there is the backup of personal digital objects to remote servers. What happens to these components of the personal digital archive in the longterm? Conversely, there is also the growing 'digital shadow', the capture of ambient personal information about which many individuals are only vaguely aware or are even unaware.

What kinds of personal digital objects will curators and archivists encounter? The nature of writing, note taking, graphics and other forms of personal creativity and the media associated with them are clearly changing rapidly in the networked world for science, art and literature; and there is a corresponding change in individual and collective contributions and choices.

Future historians will not only be interested in the personal digital archive, the digital objects themselves; they will be interested in the online phenomenon itself, namely the living of life away from the real (or offline) world. Even if and when an individual is not actively creating digital objects, the social scientist will probably like to be aware of the details and nuances of

life online: the time spent passively viewing shared videos or news programmes or listening to podcasts, the effort devoted to various activities such as blogging, chatting, phoning, texting and twittering; and there is the increasingly fascinating progression of daily life and living in virtual worlds.

The conference is not simply about the way archives are changing but about the way the lives underlying them are changing. To ascertain curatorial requirements it is necessary to understand to some extent the lives that the archives represent.

The online and networked nature of this personal information means that new kinds of uses and ways of obtaining access to personal digital archives, or life information, are emerging. There is the prospect of more and more people seeking to find out their own DNA profiles in part for health reasons; there will be corresponding benefits for characterising an individual's lifestyle based on their personal digital archive. Increasingly, human-computer interaction and usability is designed to be modified according to personal preferences and past activities; possibly the ultimate resource in this regard is an individual's personal archive, dynamically accessed.

With the fast moving nature of technology, archivists and curators find themselves (like many people) subject to a continuous stream of change and tend to react to each change as it arrives. It would be helpful for the community to try to anticipate change, and so be better prepared. One of the topics of the day will be emerging technologies.

How can the empowering participatory activities of the web, commonly referred to as Web 2.0, be harnessed to ensure longterm retention and access to personal digital archives? One of the aims of the conference is to engage representatives of online service providers, and to identify possible futures such as collaboration with repositories and individuals.

Finally, the day and conference will conclude with a Digital Conversazione involving all participants, virtual and real world, and looking back over the entire conference.

***Digital Lives Research Conference***  
The British Library  
London

**9-11 February 2009**

**Jeremy Leighton John**  
*Curator of eMANUSCRIPTS*  
12 January 2009