

Computer Forensics and Cultural Heritage Meeting  
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## Marianne Moore's Sofa

I was in graduate school in 1984 when I purchased my first computer, an Apple Macintosh with 128K of memory. For the past twenty-five years all writing that I have done has been done on a succession of different computers. It is safe to say now that virtually all textual production—what used to be called “writing”—is done on a computer. While the dates may vary from one individual to another, all of us who work with collections of personal papers or archives can date the change quite precisely. For Salman Rushdie it occurred sometime between *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 and *The Moor's Last Sigh* in 1995. Holograph manuscript drafts and typescripts corrected in the author's hand give way to the clean pointillism of the dot matrix printer.

If you are like me 3.5” diskettes began accumulating right away. Typically they would go into a desk drawer, until a particular writing project was done. When my dissertation was finally accepted I recall a cathartic purging of dozens of disks. If I had to, I may be able to find a few loose stray disks collecting dust, but there has certainly been nothing systematic about their survival.

When diskettes began showing up in the contemporary writers' archives I was assembling at my university, our processing staff didn't quite know what to do with them. If we were lucky the disks had been labeled and one could record that detail in a finding aid before dropping the disk in a box. It wasn't practical to open the files to see just what was on them. We had neither the equipment nor the software to read these files (if we even knew what it was); frankly, we didn't have the inclination either. They fell into a grey problem area: neither paper nor realia.

When Matt Kirschenbaum asked me to join you today he asked if I would offer some framing questions for the conversations that will follow. While we have many questions—questions about best practices, standards, sustainability—I would like to pose just three questions that I believe merit our attention and discussion over the next day and a half.

### 1. First, what are a writer's obsolete computer disks worth?

“I email a lot,” Salman Rushdie wrote at the time of the negotiation over his own archive, “so there's all sorts of stuff there, but don't ask me to remember what it is.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 “Literary Letters, Lost In Cyberspace,” by Rachel Donadio, New York Times Book Review (Sept. 4, 2005), p. 15.

Rushdie's literary agent, Andrew Wylie, was no help filling in what "it" was either, though he certainly pressed hard that whatever it was, it must be quite valuable. "I foresee volumes of email correspondence that are far more interesting than the traditional selection of written letters," Wylie wrote. He was commenting on the character of email—its unguarded spontaneity, its conversational quality—very different from the conventions of a formal letter. It is, he insisted, "a *very, very* valuable resource."<sup>2</sup>

Wylie, (not W I L Y, but W Y L I E) Wylie more typically negotiates publishing contracts for his clients, and he was intent on driving the sale price for the Rushdie papers as high as he possibly could. In the end, however, no precedent was set for the value of the born-digital content in Rushdie's archive, since the purchase price we agreed to did not differentiate what portion of the total was for the traditional paper-based archive, what portion for the born-digital archive (if any), and what portion for Rushdie's commitment to deliver an annual university lecture.

Why does this matter?

It may, in fact, matter a great deal. Whatever else we may have to say about the trade in writer's archives, it is that trade that has ensured the survival of countless collections of letters and manuscripts. Before Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath discovered a market for their papers, they used manuscript drafts as scrap paper to be used up and disposed of. It was only after Plath discovered that she could *sell* her husband's manuscripts to a London bookseller in the early 1960s that the couple began carefully saving such material.

The Irish poet Derek Mahon similarly tossed his early manuscripts until Rick Gekoski got hold of a clutch of his papers and sold them to my university for a handsome sum. His surviving archive dates from that moment of recognition.

But if self consciousness of an archive's monetary value has led to a high survival rate for scores of paper-based archives, uncertainty about the value of born digital content threatens the survival of today's contemporary archives.

In the UK the Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts (GLAM) surveyed major research and university libraries only to find that nearly half were unwilling to accept materials in electronic format.

When novelist Zadie Smith was asked what would likely become of her born digital archive, she replied, "I guess it will go the way of everything else I write on the computer, oblivion."

The diskettes, CDs, and hard drives that are making their way into collections of personal papers are doing so largely through neglect. When I arrived at Rushdie's London home I found he had simply shoved his old, obsolete computers into a closet.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

So the first question I would pose is what will the survival rate be for computer files if there is no market incentive for such material to be preserved?

## 2. Archival Appraisal in a Born Digital Environment

Despite no clear financial incentive to save digital media, we do know that floppies and diskettes are making their way into boxes of personal papers and archives, sometimes in alarming numbers.

Harvard recently found among the John Updike papers 5 ¼” program disks for *Lotus Ami Pro* word processing software (ca. 1992) indicating there must at one time have been 5 ¼” floppies though none are present in the archive.

What did survive, however, are forty 3.5” diskettes dating from a later period of Updike’s writing life. It appears he would often use these to mail stories and reviews to his editors at the *New Yorker* and elsewhere. While Updike was meticulous about saving drafts that he had printed out and revised, he did not take the same attitude toward the digital files themselves and discarded used disks and overwrote other files as he revised.

The Norman Mailer archive at the Ransom Center contains 359 computer disks, 47 electronic files, 40 CDs, six mini data cartridges, and three laptop computers. Mailer would no doubt be delighted by his own digital prolixity, though it appears the bulk of this content was created by his assistant, Judith McNally, a detail that extends even further Jerome McGann’s notion of “corporate authorship.”

We will hear at this conference details about how some of our institutions are handling this digital content, but the second question I would pose is whether the steps that seem justified in the case of Salman Rushdie, John Updike, and Norman Mailer are scaleable, whether the practices we employ in the cases of these celebrated authors are the right model for all born digital content arriving at our institutions?

Harvard may well take steps to preserve the 40 diskettes that came with the John Updike archive, but will we apply those same practices to all digital content that arrives at our door?

To cast the question in a slightly different way, what becomes of that professional practice of “archival appraisal” in the born digital environment? That is, “the process of determining whether records have permanent (archival) value.” SAA reminds us that appraisal may be carried out at the collection, creator, series, file, or item level. Do such practices, developed in a simpler paper-based time, apply to born digital content? According to professional practice, “the basis of appraisal decisions may include a number of factors, including the records’ provenance and content, *their authenticity and reliability*, their order and completeness, their condition and *costs to preserve them*, and *their intrinsic value*.”

How does one properly appraise electronic files that, in many instances, one may not even have seen? And a related question, how does one responsibly address the privacy concerns of living authors short of asking them to reread their entire archive?

Born digital appraisal may well shift how archivists undertake this kind of evaluation. *Condition* and *costs* may well rise in importance, as will entirely new criteria such as *file types* and the *availability of compatible software and hardware*.

### 3. Does the changing nature of the archive anticipate a corresponding shift in what we take as our object of study?

Our modern literary archives have been built to support particular types of critical inquiry. During the post-war expansion of special collections in American libraries major textual projects were launched with the aim of establishing authoritative texts (projects like the Mark Twain Papers Project at Berkeley which continues to this day). With the emergence of electronic text centers in the 1990s, we returned to a kind of text-centered inquiry (granted with a significant difference) building and enhancing textual resources for online discovery.

But the growth of collections of personal papers at many of our institutions also supported a wide range of other kinds of inquiry. The growth of new historicism in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped to expand the notion of textual objects and encouraged use of our archives to examine the historical interconnections of writers and communities of writers, the business of literary production, the processes of canonization, and reading practices among different communities of readers in different times and places.

Does the changed character of the born digital archive merely represent those same objects of study in electronic forms, or do these forms themselves anticipate a corresponding shift in what researchers may now take as their object of study?

Will the researcher that sits down to Rushdie's computer in emulation mode be asking the same questions of the archive and examining the same forms of evidence, or are we now promoting through our libraries' practices new and different forms of inquiry itself?

A number of years ago the Rosenbach Library acquired the entire contents of Marianne Moore's Greenwich Village apartment, including her velvet sofa. The aim, to the extent that it was ever expressed, seems to have been to evoke the absent author's presence through the objects she once touched, in this case a velvet sofa she once sat on.

Is emulation, the desire to gaze at Rushdie's own desktop, prompted by a similar impulse? Is it prompted, on some level, by our own anxiety over the changing nature of the archive itself? Are we trying to reassert the presence of the author at a time when he seems more fugitive and ephemeral than ever, or, alternatively, has a new object of critical scrutiny emerged in archival based literary studies?

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I realize I have raised more questions than I have answered.

In closing, let me simply add, on a personal note, that I resolved each of these questions by moving from Emory to the Folger Shakespeare Library, a library where the central figure famously left behind no manuscripts whatsoever.