

Electronic violence on sport archives - the risks related to electronic archiving

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My paper has three different sections. First I will briefly introduce the collections of the Sports Archives of Finland. Then I will describe the present state of archiving in Finland's sports federations and clubs and the kind of material they produce. The main part of my presentation will deal with the risks related to electronic archiving.

The Sports Archives of Finland, located at the Olympic Stadium in the centre of Helsinki, is the central archives of Finnish sports. Its collection contains over 1,200 shelf metres of documents of Finnish sports organisations – national, district and local entities, clubs and associations of various sports – as well as private papers of persons who have been influential in Finnish sports.

The collection is of course far from complete. There are gaps, but it still gives quite good information about Finland's sporting life from 1850 to 1980. Minutes, correspondence, annual reports and other primary sources are available. Minutes, for instance, are usually quite useful, because they can contain notes of discussions held at the meeting.

The Sports Archives of Finland also has a responsibility regarding material that is produced today. Today's society claims to be an information society. We who are working with archives have to question this claim. Are we really living in an information society? From the point of view of archives it seems that in the worst case today's society destroys more than it preserves.

Persons who produce valuable information too often pay little attention to preserving the information they get and produce. It is very easy to blame everyday hurry on the working place. There is no time to think about the significance of, for instance, e-mails. They are deleted after reading and replying. The information from old websites is forgotten, because new pages require space. There are even sports organisations which produce their records only as computer files and preserve them that way, without considering that in the future they will not be using the same kinds of computers and other information systems. We have to inculcate to sports organisations that they must take paper copies from all their material which is to be preserved permanently.

I am afraid that too many do not take our advices very seriously. This unfortunate situation prevails, even if the Sports Archives of Finland has since 1986 fulfilled its duty to advise sport organisations. Within its limited resources, the Sports Archives of Finland has educated the staff of sports organisations on records management. The program of the courses includes basic principles and techniques of records management as well as introduction to the sources and services available at the Sports Museum, the Sports Library and the Sports Archives. Last winter, for instance, we instructed the staff of the organisation committee of IAAF World Athletics Championships, which were held last August at the Olympic Stadium of Helsinki.

The high turnover of personnel in the sports organisations has made the situation worse. Usually when we contact sports organisations it is difficult to find persons who are willing to pay some interest to preserving material that they daily produce. The attitude is often negative and people feel that archiving takes too much time. We also have to mould their attitudes. We underline that archiving is an important undertaking, work that will also benefit next generations.

Outdated technology was seen as the biggest threat by scientific libraries in Western Europe when answering a questionnaire in 1999 on problems related to electronic archiving. As second came problems with resources and the lack of planning – very much the general situation. The least concern was physical preservation.

We can define three different phases in the life cycle of electronic documents. First we have an active phase when organisations use the material. This is followed by a passive phase when organisations have their electronic material recorded. Many e-mails and websites never even get to this phase. Thirdly – if we are really lucky – the electronic material reaches the historical phase. And then begins the work of the archivists. What should we destroy, what should we preserve for 5, 10 or 50 years, and what must we preserve permanently? These are the same questions that are relevant also for traditional paper documents, but with electronic documents we need to put even more effort on selection.

Today's documentation is more and more electronic: e-mails, websites and different kind of documents on computer files. Not all material holds enough value for permanent or even for long-term preservation. The International Council on Archives (ICA) has recently published a handbook for archivists on electronic records, where it is underlined that: "Before considering specific technical solution to the long-term preservation of electronic records, it is important to reflect on what one is trying to achieve by preserving them." As with traditional archive material, the primary reason for preserving records is still their evidential value, the re-use of the records themselves or the information they contain. ICA puts particular emphasis on this because re-use of electronic information is typically far easier than it is with information on paper, particularly with large quantities of data or documents. ICA gives us a memory list of basic requirements needed in order to achieve our preservation purposes. Records must be: authentic, complete, accessible and understandable, processable and potentially re-usable.

The preservation of electronic material includes copying the files in at least two different formats. It is also recommended that organisations send a copy of their most important files in e-mail attachments physically to a different place, another office. This is an inexpensive way to avoid damages of fire and break-ins.

The electronic material must be converted when new systems, both software and hardware applications, are taken into use. This copying must be carefully planned, bearing in mind that computer systems last usually only 5, not more than 10 years.

Thirdly we can use a technique known as emulation, in which newer computer systems are provided with software that allows them to emulate older hardware and software systems. Despite this we have to preserve the original software application. ICA points out that sudden transfers are to be avoided if at all possible. They may lead to loss of information, loss of contextual metadata or loss of authenticity.

These are important pieces of advice. What remains is the problem of who in the sports organisations has the time and ability to handle electronic material. Changes can also be expensive. I want to underline for the second time: take paper copies from all the electronic material which is supposed to be preserved permanently.

As researchers we have to bear our own responsibility and take all necessary actions to ensure that today's information will be preserved also for the next generations. The electronic world is changing rapidly. New software and hardware applications emerge all the time. The equipment suppliers strive to ensure that old software and hardware can run in a new system, but how can we be convinced? Compatibility does not persist forever. New computers cannot handle the devices from three or more generations back.

In conclusion I claim that in general the attitude of Finnish sports organisations on electronic material they produce is too careless and optimistic. There is lack of planning and lack of resources for electronic archiving. The organisations have no willingness to think about posterity: what kind of material to preserve on a long-term basis and what to archive permanently. Education is one solution, but first there has to be a change of attitude towards archiving. The role of the archivist is to be critical toward electronic archiving. The future will perhaps bring new solutions but certainly also new difficulties. Before a world-wide standard of electronic archiving system is developed and adapted it is strongly recommended that as a precaution paper copies should be taken from all the electronic material which is supposed to be preserved permanently.

Sources:

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