

Book Review

Personal Archiving: Preserving Our Digital Heritage. Donald Hawkins (Ed.). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2013. 320 pp. \$49.50 (softbound). (ISBN: 9781573874809).

Personal digital archiving is not a new field, but one that has enjoyed recent interest from researchers and information professionals, as the debate over how to best maintain personal digital collections become of concern to lay individuals. *Personal Archiving: Preserving Our Digital Heritage* attempts to address the perspectives, approaches, and challenges associated with personal digital archiving, but in trying to appeal to individuals, researchers, and practitioners, casts such a wide net it falls short of its goals. Published by Information Today, the introduction to *Personal Archiving* states that it is “intended to appeal to a broad spectrum of readers.” This voluminous list includes consumers, academic researchers, libraries of all types, historians, public officials, and “anyone who has a mass of digital information and wants to organize and preserve it” (pp. xvi–xvii). *Personal Archiving* argues that there is growing interest in the field from the consumer and academic spheres and that there are not many books that address the topic, which is what this book tries to do. I applaud the editor’s efforts, as there are few collected works on personal digital archiving; *I, Digital: Personal Collections in the Digital Era* (Lee, 2011), reviewed in the June, 2012 issue of this journal, is one of the few examples. Practicing librarians and archivists, as well as consumers, are likely to find this book of most use, as several chapters successfully discuss how archival and library standards and principles can be applied to the management of digital collections. This can be of use to individuals, as well as librarians and archivists developing instruction tools and programs to assist patrons with personal digital archiving. While the “research” chapters are well-written and could be of use as an introduction to the field, they do not belong in this book. There are not enough research-focused chapters to be of use to most academic researchers and, further, much of the research described has been published elsewhere in greater depth.

Many chapters of *Personal Archiving* accurately list grand challenges for the field, including obsolescence, motivations for archiving, neglect, privacy and legal issues, and legacy issues. However, there is not a central thread here. A chapter in which the challenges that all the authors state are compared and contrasted would have provided more

structure. The first few chapters of the book address concerns of the individual consumer attempting to manage their personal digital archives. Information practitioners will also find these chapters of use, in order to understand how to work with patrons seeking assistance with managing their personal collections.

Thirteen chapters were contributed by researchers and practitioners who work in the field. Each author provides a unique perspective on personal digital archiving, which is described in the Introduction. The chapter authors include several authorities on the subject of which they write, making for a credible work. All citations are accurate and what I would expect to see from writing on this topic. Ubois’ Chapter 1 defines the term personal digital archives, an essential place for a work like this to start. Chapter 2, written by Conklin, an archives and library consultant, and Chapter 3, written by Ashenfelter of the Library of Congress, successfully explain how library and archival principles can be adapted by individuals to suit their collecting needs while providing suggestions to practitioners working with patrons interested in this issue. Ashenfelter also describes the Library of Congress’ outreach programs that address personal archiving. Ximm uses a similar format in Chapter 10 to discuss efforts by the Internet Archive to promote active digital archiving. Hawkin’s Chapter 4 provides a summary of useful tools for individuals to use in maintaining their collections, but due to the speed of changing technology, is likely to become outdated within a few years.

In Chapter 5, Carroll provides a straightforward introduction to the legal issues associated with managing a digital legacy and provides advice on the issue, which can also be of use to consumers. While this chapter can serve as an introduction to practitioners, those interested in the topic will find more detailed information and advice in Carroll and Romano’s (2010) *Your Digital Afterlife: When Facebook, Flickr and Twitter Are Your Estate, What’s Your Legacy?*, published by New Riders in 2010.

Several of the research-focused chapters provide introductions to research and authors’ reflections on their previous work. Marshall’s Chapter 6 summarizes her previous research studies on personal digital archiving and then argues that archival institutions are better suited than individuals for maintaining personal digital information. While this argument will be intriguing to researchers working in this area, the message may be misunderstood by consumers, who hoped to find a DIY guide, rather than advice that someone else is better suited for the task. Banks’ Chapter 11 is similarly written: a review of his previous research studies

that can serve as an introduction to HCI work concerning personal digital archiving, which may not be of use to consumers.

Chapter 7, written by Zalinger, Freier, and Shneiderman, can also be considered a research-focused chapter. While intriguing to academic researchers, it is unlikely to be of use to consumers due to the discussion of the subtleties associated with narrative search.

Chapter 8, written by Cahoy, and Chapter 9, written by Kim, will be of most use to information practitioners seeking a summary of research associated with personal archiving within the field of libraries and archives. Cahoy provides a succinct review of the literature applicable to personal archiving issues in academic libraries. Kim provides a thorough and well-structured summary of the personal archiving issues addressed in previous academic research, mainly from the archival and personal information management perspective.

Chapter 12, entitled “New horizons in personal archiving,” suggests that predictions will be made about the direction of research in the field. However, the chapter offers a description of three personal archiving projects that provide applications for consumers and practitioners. A conclusion that summarizes how these projects demonstrate the future direction of the field would have added to the chapter.

Finally, in Chapter 13, Lynch attempts to frame the field of maintaining personal digital information by identifying prevalent developments in personal archiving research. While Lynch does define many significant issues, the fact that these issues could have been adapted to organize the chapters of the book is a missed opportunity.

While all the chapters of *Personal Archiving* make contributions to the field on their own, they are not effective when combined as a unit. If the only purpose of the book was to bring together approaches, issues, and challenges associated with the maintenance of personal digital material, then the editor has met his goal. The work would have been bolstered by a more nuanced goal. The book is missing a central thread that ties the chapters together, other than that they could all be associated with the keyword “personal archiving.” The issues raised by Lynch in the last chapter of the book provide a starting point, but identifying these issues in that last chapter of the book is too late. Attempting to appeal to five categories of readers who approach personal archiving differently does not serve either category of reader very well. One could argue that to provide an exhaustive understanding of personal archiving, it is necessary to include information for all approaches. However, the reader is then left with a book where several of the chapters are not applicable to their situation.

I found myself disappointed upon conclusion of the book. As an academic researcher who conducts research in this area, I was frustrated that the research chapters were mostly reflections on previously published work that I had already read. Researchers who work in the area of personal archiving and are familiar with the literature of the field will find little new in *Personal Archiving*.

Where *Personal Archiving* succeeds is in the ability of its authors to utilize existing library and archival principles and apply them to personal archiving issues in a way that is of use to consumers. Specifically, the chapters by Conklin and Ashenfelter that apply library and archival principles to individual maintenance of digital material. The ability to translate professional principles for the lay individual is not always easy and Conklin and Ashenfelter do it well. Carroll also effectively explains legal issues for consumers. While the research chapters attempt to present research findings that apply to consumers, there may be little interest in this research from DIYers.

While consumers and practitioners will most benefit from a reading of *Personal Archiving*, there are potential uses for some chapters in the classroom. The research chapters by Marshall and Banks could be useful in courses that aim to provide an undergraduate introduction to information studies. In this environment, succinct summaries and reflections of previous research studies work well. Cahoy’s and Kim’s reviews of literature associated with the field could also provide fitting introductions to personal archiving issues in an introductory course setting.

Perhaps, if *Personal Archiving* had limited the scope of the audience, it would have more effectively met its goals. Or, if the work had added structure via more details about the goals of the work and headings that organized the chapters according to audience, it would have focused the work a bit more. *Personal Archiving* demonstrates a further point: that audience may be an additional grand challenge for the growing field. What is the best environment to discuss issues associated with the maintenance of personal digital material? Should such work be wholly inclusive, or should academic researchers carve out a space of their own and distance themselves from literature that focuses on advice for the lay individual?

The field of Personal Information Management (PIM) does this well with the application of a framework that organizes PIM activities. This framework separates PIM literature from that of personal organizing. Personal digital archiving may also be in need of such a framework, which could have organized and guided the thesis of this work. When such a framework is widely adopted, it may be a more fitting time for an edited work on the subject.

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Published online 2 April 2015 in Wiley Online Library
(wileyonlinelibrary.com).
DOI: 10.1002/asi.23473

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