

Nestor working group: guidelines how to develop a Preservation Policy

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Abstract

The paper gives insights into the work and first findings of the nestor working group Preservation Policy which was founded in the beginning of 2012. It is led by the German National Library and the Leibniz Information Centre for Economics/Goportis. There are ten other institutions from Germany and Switzerland involved.

The publication of our policy development guidelines is planned for the end of 2013. The guidelines describe what a policy is needed for, which contents it could have, how it is developed, which staff member should be involved in the development and how the quality of the policy is ensured - even in the long run, as technical aspects of digital preservation are changing at breakneck speed. The working group attempts to help institutions developing their own preservation policy. It will provide guidance to the content and structure of an institutional preservation policy as well as a selection about existing policies.

Keywords

Preservation Policy, Digital Preservation, Guidelines, nestor, Working Group

Introduction

Although many institutions in Germany and all over Europe have already begun to engage in digital preservation, most of them lack a digital preservation policy. Yet, a policy is an important part of preservation action and should not be an afterthought. Especially if the preservation policy is to be issued on the institution's website, institutions tend to be reluctant regarding the publication of their preservation policy. A transparent policy which can be seen by users, partners and investors is a big commitment.

To simplify the task of developing a Digital Preservation Policy, in 2012 a nestor Working group has formed to establish guidelines to create a Preservation Policy for public memory institutions like archives, museums or libraries.



Nector, the competence network for digital preservation, was founded in 2003 and has 13 members, mostly German memory institutions like libraries, archives and museums. It has different working groups which often provide standards and guideline for the community, e. g. a translation of the OAIS model to German or guidelines to archive research data, which was also translated to English to provide to a larger, international community.



The nector working group on Preservation Policy was founded in 2012, is led by the German National Library and the Leibniz Information Centre for Economics and has 13 members all over Germany and Switzerland.

The guidelines will be published by the end of 2013 and consist five main chapters:

1. goals of our guidelines
2. use of a policy
3. development of a policy (motive, responsibility, publication, relation to other policies, strategies and workflows)
4. possible content of a policy (goal of the policy, ...)
5. updates of a policy (policy watch)

Following, an overview and a summary of the chapters of the guidelines is given.

Chapter 1: Goals of our guidelines

A preservation policy is an important prerequisite to secure the long-term-access to digital objects. The task of memory institutions to maintain access to our cultural heritage bears as well technical as organizational issues. A policy serves to address these issues and shows the commitment and responsibility of the archiving institution.

A policy is a "Written statement, authorized by the repository management that describes the approach to be taken by the repository for the preservation of objects accessioned into the repository. The preservation policy is consistent with the Preservation Strategic Plan." (ISO 1663, 2012)

The work of the nestor group aims to simplify the difficult task of developing a preservation policy and raise the awareness of the need of a publicly visible policy. Many institutions already run a Digital Archive, but only few have published a preservation policy of some kind (Angevaere, 2011), most are of them to be found in Northern American institutions.

Our guidelines provide a tool box which enables the institutions to decide which possible parts will be relevant for their institutional policy and can create their own, which is suitable for their needs. It aims to assist in accomplish a policy, but it will not dictate any mandatory rules while developing a policy, as the needs of the different institutions and digital archives are very heterogeneous. The readers have to decide which parts are valid for them and the needs of their institutions. We want to inform our readers about the impact, use, typical questions and difficulties concerning a policy which will prevent them from having blind spots, and facilitate the task of developing an own policy especially for their needs, knowing about dependencies and consequences.

A generic policy example gives an idea to the readers of how a policy might look like, looking at already existing ones, but without the special needs of a certain institution.

Chapter 2: use of a policy

The use of a policy derives from the readers of the policy, the target groups, or, simply: the users of the policy. There are internal and external users.

As for internal users, the policy serves the staff as the basis for their decisions. It will provide help with difficult decisions as to migrate with scarifying some functions of the digital objects or risking to lose the data. A policy is the basis of decisions. It can also serve to mitigate possible financial cuts,

the responsible staff can point to the policy and insist at least on the budget needed for the standards the institution has publicly committed to maintain. Avoid budget cuts [Quelle ware toll!]

For external users like the users of the data, a policy builds trust and security that the data will be kept for the long haul, especially if quotation and citation or further use is intended by the user. The same is true for the data providers themselves who have an interest in their findings to serve for future users as well. Stakeholders will have transparent information about what and how is done to secure long term access, as will potential clients who are toying with the idea to outsource their Digital Preservation. This is of course especially true for already existing clients of the institutional Digital Preservation Archive. The institutional preservation policy is likely to be the basis for any service level agreement between the archiving institution and any third party (Beagrie, 2008).

A policy might be also useful – even mandatory – for certification processes and certainly will help with fundraising.

Chapter 3: development of a policy

There are multiple motives for starting to develop a policy. The best case scenario would be the beginning of digital preservation activities, but reality has shown that this is rarely the case.

Technical or organizational changes within the institution could be the reason to start as well as an external evaluation of the institution. If a certification of the Digital Archive is planned, a policy can be helpful or even mandatory.

Possibly, in a couple of years it will be common practice for all Digital Archive to have a published Preservation Policy so the pressure for every institution being involved in this topic might feel the pressure to do so as well.

Depending on the organizational structure of the institution, responsible staff for the policy text can be diverse. Possible scenarios are described in our guidelines. In most of the cases, however, as well members of the management board as practitioners are likely to be involved. Adjustment will be time-consuming, especially if many staff members need to be involved. If possible, it is recommended to keep the involved persons to the necessary minimum.

The scope of the policy influences where the policy is published. The policy might contain confidentialities and therefore only be published within the institutions. This might affect the whole policy or just certain chapters. The language of the policy depends on the target group, usually the national language is used, sometimes there is an English translation for the wider audience as well. The language used has to be comprehensive for the wider audience and should avoid technical terms.

Additionally, the policy can be related to other policies, strategies and workflows. It is recommended, however, to outsource parts that address the technical solutions in detail, to other documents, as the content is likely to change very fast.

It is important to ensure that the policy does not conflict with laws, rules or tasks of institutions or already existing policies, for example a preservation policy for printed material.

A very common issue with preservation policies is – due to the relatively new field – that the Digital Archive is in a development phase or in a very early stage of the productive use and the status quo of the Archive is still not stable enough to be able to frame certain principles. This is one of the reasons so many institutions are still reluctant to publish a final policy. Are they to express the status quo of their archive or the wish-to-be of the near future when all milestones will be reached? Both possibilities bear a risk of having to adjust the policy too soon.

Concerning the length of a policy a great variety is to be found, for some institutions some short paragraphs will do the job while others publish a 30-pages-long policy.

Chapter 4: possible content of a policy

This is the main chapter of our guidelines, as the possibilities are diverse and multifaceted. Therefore, only a variety of possible aspects are highlighted in this paper. It is important to give an overview over possible content of a policy including possible consequences for further work and the need to update a policy regularly, but without giving too much advice for the target group because each institution will have very individual needs and there will be no one-serves-it-all-solution.

The goal and the scope of the policy should be embedded in the general strategy of the institution and depends on focus, priorities and tasks. It is important to define the goal in time and even address it within the policy.

The goals of preservation as e. g. maintaining the usability, authenticity and integrity of the archived digital objects, can be a main part of the policy, as this is the heart of all preservation activities and especially of interest for the target group. Then policy can address as well how these preserving goals will be reached. As the solution may depend on technology a lot, this will most likely lead to the need of regular updates, which will be addressed in detail in the chapter 5 of our guidelines.

During the IASSIST conference in Cologne in 2013 the audience of the presentation suggested that the selection of the digital objects for the Archive might as well be part of the policy. Furthermore, the access to different collections – if it is a light archive with user access – might be an important part as well, and as the digital collections are growing, the policy would have to be extended quite often. This, as well, might be outsourced in another document.

Chapter 5: Updates of a policy

Opinions about whether or not how a policy is allowed to be changed differ a lot, even within the members of our working group. On the one hand, an institution can show that it does active technology and preservation watch and keeps the preservation policy up to date. On the other hand, a preservation policy should be a commitment for the long haul, something the institution staff, stakeholders and clients can build and rely on.

It is a matter of trust to keep the reasons for updates and changes of the policy transparent and archive the older versions and keep them accessible on the institution's website.

Of course it is possible that the policy does not meet the daily work anymore and an update is necessary. For example, if an institution has had a dark archive and adds an access component, the policy is likely to lack guiding principles for a light archive. It will be necessary to extend the policy in forms of access to the archived collections and this will have to happen in a transparent and comprehensible way. [give example, TNA?]

If the policy includes pretty technical aspects in the first place, it is likely to adjust to have to changes of workflows and technical developments quite often. This could be announced and be part of the policy from begin on.

An evaluation of the preservation policy can include the question if the policy has met its goals. It might be necessary to adjust existing workflows to the policy. This is the best case scenario. An evaluation might as well reveal that the reality cannot be adjusted to the policy and the policy has to be changed because certain instructions cannot be implemented. Due to the lack of experience in this still relatively new field, this cannot be excluded. It is recommended, though, to give especially insightful explanations about changes like this.

For several reasons, the Marriot Library, the university library of the university of Utah in Salt Lake City, USA, has changed its policy three times during the last three years.

(Explain reasons) [x] Add Reference

Summary and future work

The nestor working group on costs aims to publish their guidelines at the end of 2013. There likely will be a workshop during a nestor conference in 2014 and possibly other follow-up-actions. The guidelines will be available in open access and nestor will announce the publication in mailing lists and its website. In general, nestor plans a best practice wiki and the topic preservation policy is likely to be a big part of the topics, providing a competence network for practical questions and issues, as there are many special needs and thinkable scenarios while building a preservation policy not only unsolved but unknown yet.

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