Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Give me a serve of data with that

Antony Funnell*

> **Antony Funnell** is a Walkley award-winning journalist and broadcaster. He is also
> the author of the book *The Future and Related Nonsense* (HarperCollins). Antony
> has been the presenter of *Future Tense* on ABC Radio National since 2009, explor-
> ing the influence of technology and rapid change on individuals and society. Prior to
> that he fronted *Media Report*. Over the past two decades he has worked for many of
> the country's leading news and current affairs programs, including *AM, PM*, the *7.30
> Report* and *Background Briefing*. In the late-1990s he was the senior producer for
> Australia Television News – ABC TV's nightly satellite news service into the Asia
> Pacific. Antony has travelled and reported for the ABC from a diverse range of
> places – from Mongolia to the isolated community of Ali Curung in the Northern
> Territory. He won his Walkley in 2006 for a documentary entitled *The Financial
> Abuse of the Elderly*. In 2003 he was awarded a United Nations Media Peace Prize
> (Best Radio) for a half-hour program he produced on Aboriginal customary law. He
> won the same UN award in 2007 for his coverage of issues relating to the then polit-
> ical crisis in Zimbabwe.

It is natural and understandable when considering issues relating to the preservation of
information to focus on new technologies. Changes in technology directly affect what is
and is not available to be preserved, as well as influencing issues of access. However,
the nature of the technology used by any generation of people to record, transact and
correspond is only a part of the equation. Understanding how data formats may vary
over time is useful, indeed essential, but so too is developing the ability to comprehend
crucial shifts in societal attitudes toward data.

The growth of the digital world, particularly over the past two decades, has led to
an enormous, though often unappreciated, change in the way in which people view and
value information. At the most obvious level we have moved from a period of informa-
tion scarcity to one of over-abundance. That transformation has also influenced, and
accompanied, the wholesale commoditisation of information. Data, even of the most
seemingly trivial, personal kind, now has economic value because it is worth money to
the social network providers we patronise and the advertisers they in turn solicit.

Paradoxically, while information now has heightened financial value on the broad
scale, its very ubiquity, in many ways, diminishes its specific value. Tweets, texts and
other forms of social messaging are designed for instant response and gratification.
Their shelf-life is, by design and execution, brief and transitory. In other words, in the
twenty-first century, data, for the great majority of us, exists simply to be consumed,
with little thought to its ongoing importance or preservation.

That this is the case should come as little surprise. For better or worse we live in an
age defined by our ability to consume. From Beijing to Belgium to Barangaroo the

*Email: funnell.antony@abc.net.au

encouragement of consumption is seen as a key to economic growth and thereby to our national and international prosperity and wellbeing.

Crucially, the economics of consumerism go far beyond actual need, and our modern high levels of consumption are only achievable and sustainable, it could be argued, in an environment of heightened disposability. That is, consumables need to break, stop working or simply be dispensed with, in order for them to be replaced and for the cycle of consumerism to continue. As a result, nothing in the twenty-first century is made to last – toasters, washing machines, even iPads. In fact, this is an age in which even cash register receipts – official financial records – fade after several days in your wallet, or an hour or two in a hot car.

In short, disposability has now become a defining facet of modern life. So much so that most of us no longer notice the disposable nature of much of what we purchase or work with. In other words, disposability has become a mindset and it is now as much a characteristic of the digital world as it is of the physical. And that carries with it significant implications for those who deal in history, including archivists and recordkeepers – particularly around issues of both preservation and access.

Of course the online environment still offers the promise of hyper-longevity. Once posted, an article, photo or document theoretically has a limitless existence. But anyone who works for a large organisation could, I am sure, attest to the fact that emails, documents, even whole websites now disappear or are automatically purged on a regular basis in order to deal with storage issues. Often times such decisions to delete are made based on simple arithmetic calculations, rather than any deep consideration of the historic worth or importance of a said piece of data.

There is also, it should be noted, a growing lack of interest among many organisations in maintaining the online integrity of their documents. Recent research in the United States suggests that more than half the URLs found within US Supreme Court opinions 'do not link to the originally cited information'.[1]

But perhaps what should be of most concern to recordkeepers and archivists in looking toward the future is the attitude of disposability that is increasingly becoming a part of the social media experience enjoyed by the young – the next generation, the greatest exemplar of which being the popular photo-messaging application Snapchat. Messages, photos or videos sent via Snapchat disappear after a matter of minutes. 'It's about the moment,' declares the application's website. 'The lure of fleeting messages reminds us about the beauty of friendship.'

Now, self-destructing messages and fast-fading photos on social media may not seem like a serious threat to the preservation of our historical record. But it needs to be recognised that social media applications represent the letters and diaries of the early twenty-first century. And in countries such as the USA and Australia, social media applications have now already surpassed email as the major means by which people exchange personal correspondence.

Dealing with society's increasingly casual attitude toward data and information, I would therefore suggest, represents perhaps the greatest challenge to the safeguarding of important social documents and artefacts of record.

On a final note, let me briefly comment on the integrity of what is being preserved in the digital age, particularly as it relates to the growth of cloud computing and cloud storage.

The benefits of cloud computing are well documented and real. Storage in 'the Cloud' is not only cheaper for many organisations and individuals, it also offers people

and companies the flexibility of being able to retrieve data from any computer or device, almost anywhere in the world.

But our enthusiasm for embracing the Cloud, I would argue, has come at the expense of a proper evaluation of its fragility. Contrary to what its name might suggest, the Cloud is not some sort of magical digital storage locker. It is, in reality, simply a series of giant server farms (storage data warehouses, if you like) operated by a handful of giant communications and technology companies – IBM, Apple, Toshiba and the like.

That so many government organisations, companies and individuals should feel secure in trusting their digital data to the safety of private, profit-driven, server farms is testament to the casual nature of our attitude toward data in the twenty-first century.

We are yet to see the full ramifications of that development as none of the major cloud storage providers has so far faced serious financial difficulty, or indeed closure. But, as we know from experience, the technology sector is a volatile environment and companies can rise and fall in rapid time. Exactly how issues relating to data ownership will be treated in the event of such a closure is still to be tested.

The fact that we no longer feel the need to personally safeguard our own personal and business information speaks not just of incredible trust in the ongoing viability and integrity of technology corporations, but also of an attitude that, whether we choose to consciously recognise it or not, sees information as ultimately disposable and therefore of little value.

For those interested in the preservation of our historic record this is problematic indeed. For as the old saying goes, we keep only what we value.

Endnote

1. Jonathan Zittrain, Kendra Albert and Lawrence Lessig, 'Perma: Scoping and Addressing the Problem of Link and Reference Rot in Legal Citations', *Social Science Research Network*, 1 October 2013, available at *<http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2329161>*, accessed 14 March 2014.