

Jump In Initiative Survey of Computer Media in the Edward M. Kennedy Senate Papers

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At the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, our collections are largely paper-based because our mission is to document President Kennedy's life and career. Most of the library's records date from the 1960s and earlier. Although we do have a significant amount of audio-visual material, very few of our collections contain computer media or electronic records. Recently, however, the papers of Senator Edward M. Kennedy were deeded to the library. His collection has greatly expanded the scope of our holdings both in terms of time period and media format. Edward M. Kennedy, the president's youngest brother, served in the U.S. Senate from 1962 until his death in 2009; this is the third longest term in American history. The collection is vast, totaling nearly 8,000 cubic feet, and our accession registers indicated the existence of various types of computer media among his papers. I decided that the EMK Senate Papers would be a good candidate for the Jump In project.

I began my survey by performing keyword searches in the EMK master boxlist, compiled from transfer sheets and accession records. I searched for terms such as "computer," "electronic" and "disk," then copied any entries that looked promising into separate Excel spreadsheet. Next I went to the stacks to visually inspect any box that claimed to include computer files. In some cases, I found only one CD or floppy disk among an entire box of paper records. I decided not to include these solitary items in my survey. Instead I focused on larger groups of computer media found in the collection, such as entire boxes full of magnetic tape reels or floppy disks. I figured that this approach would account for the vast majority of computer media in the collection and give us the best results in the least amount of time. Ultimately I identified seven cartons full of computer disks and reels to survey. I would not be surprised if we found more during processing, but developing a workflow with this initial group of material will make it easier to address any additional items that are discovered in the future.

Box by box, I described each piece of computer media in my spreadsheet, noting the physical media type and copying any written labels. Sometimes even with labels I could not really tell what the disk might contain. In one box of magnetic tape reels, I found several stickers loose at the bottom of the box and could not determine the reels to which they had been attached. It was amusing to see all the old formats, some of which I remembered from my early childhood, and others I had never encountered before. The earliest material was on large reels of 1/2-inch magnetic tape dating from the early 1980s. Files from the later 1980s to the mid 1990s were stored on 8-inch, 5.25-inch, and 3.5-inch floppy disks. Even with a minimum of descriptive information, I noticed that a significant portion of the media was apparently used for backing up data and word processing files. I did not get the sense that these items contained unique records. Once I completed the item-level survey, I tallied the total maximum amount of data in the collection. I did have difficulty estimating the storage capacity of the magnetic tape reels because the recording specifications were not apparent.

In the end, the Jump In survey led me to think a lot about appraisal and a cost-benefit approach to these materials. A portion of the items clearly have no archival value and could be safely discarded right away. For example, I found many install disks for WordPerfect and America Online software! Other media contained data from outside organizations that was repurposed by

Senator Kennedy's staff (such as contact information for campaign mailing lists), and backups of word processing files. Presumably there are paper copies of these documents elsewhere in the collection. Should we even attempt to preserve the versions stored on computer media? Is it worth the time and money that it would take to get this data off the disks? The answers will probably become clearer once we begin to process the analog part of the collection. Until then, at least we have a detailed description of the computer media to guide us along.