

ERS "AT A GLANCE"

What is the Electronic Records Section and how can they help?

"The Electronic Records Section (ERS) functions as a locus of expertise, leadership and information sharing for the Society of American Archivists (SAA) regarding the management and preservation of records in electronic form. " The members of the ERS come from a variety of backgrounds. Some members are involved with electronic records research, or they may handle electronic records in their work, or both. Other members of the ERS are interested parties, staying up to date on electronic issues partly through their membership in the section.

The Section has a listserv, a website, a newsletter, a steering committee and holds regular meetings, which are the channels through which information is communicated to its members. The Section also comments, from time to time, on proposed government regulations or emerging standards.

The Chair and Vice-chair of the ERS function as primary media contacts for the Section. They are available to respond to calls for comments from the news media, or would be happy to give a referral to another section member who would be able to comment on a particular issue, if appropriate. Please see the press kit link to the biographies of the ERS leaders or the Electronic Records Section website leadership page for their contact information.

What is an Archivist?

Perhaps you hear the work "archivist" and conjure up images of old records, damp basements and cavernous, unfriendly libraries. While it is true that archivists do in general manage older records, this is a partial misconception.

An archivist is a trained custodian of records of long-term or permanent value to the organization (which explains why the preponderance of records in their charge may be older). Many archivists have master's degrees in either history or library and information science. Some archivists are certified, which means that they have taken special tests and have made a commitment to continuing education.

An archivist, moreover, is a person who understands that records are evidence and must be carefully maintained to retain their evidential value and trustworthiness.

How can Archivists help with the care of electronic records?

Archivists are familiar with the environmental requirements for media and the elements that contribute to environmental control. Electronic media have environmental needs, just like paper and microfilm. A stable environment is vital to ensure these media reach their anticipated lifespan. This is especially important because optimal environmental conditions for electronic media will be even more difficult to ensure than they were in the traditional archives, since not all deterioration that can happen to electronic media is visible on the physical carrier.

Archivists also have a tradition of theory and practice for the maintenance of records of long-term value to the organization. They are experienced with the identification and selection of records of long-term value, through the process they call appraisal. They can help advise on records that do not need retention.

Archivists have an understanding of the evidential qualities of records and the characteristics and attributes of records that must be maintained for records to remain trustworthy and optimally evidentially viable. Archives will be excellent test beds for long-term preservation media and solutions, since retaining records long-term is part of their mission. Archivists' familiarity with indexing and describing records makes them vital participants in discussions on what metadata to capture and how. Lastly, archivists have experience with reference or public service, which will be an increasingly important aspect of managing electronic records as they become more numerous and are subject to FOIA requests or even sought by historical researchers.

Archivists have a great deal of knowledge that can be effectively applied to the uncertainties of electronic record keeping. One group of archivists that can be particularly helpful to those with questions about electronic records is the Electronic Records Section of the Society of American Archivists.