

# DOCUMENTATION GOOD PRACTICE

## *Bringing Order in Disruptive Times*

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**Abstract - In times of disruption we need to do the less interesting parts of our job better than ever. Documentation falls into this category - a sometimes neglected task that is often sidelined in favor of new and exciting innovations or even just the constant pressure of other routine tasks. It is easy to forget to create documentation or to let existing documents stagnate and become out-of-date. And yet, in the event of a disaster, it may be the very first thing we will turn to, to help to bring order to the chaos. When faced with lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, there is some evidence that digital preservation practitioners turned to maintenance tasks like documentation when working from home [1]. Digital preservation documentation is undoubtedly important to us in the digital preservation community but where is the good practice guidance that tells us what to document, when, where and how? This paper describes work at the Digital Preservation Coalition to gather together community experiences to create a new good practice guide on digital preservation documentation.**

**Keywords - Documentation, Good practice, Guidance, Collaboration**

**Conference Topics - WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER; FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

### I. INTRODUCTION

In February of 2023 the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) began a small project to create a good practice guide to digital preservation documentation. This was a theme that had been flagged up by DPC members more than once as a

topic of interest and we were keen to publish a resource containing helpful advice, both for our members and for the wider community. The topic had been raised most often in the context of our Rapid Assessment Model (DPC RAM), a maturity model for digital preservation [2]. In the frequent conversations we have with our Members around the model, questions about documentation often emerged.

The Rapid Assessment Model encapsulates digital preservation good practice and includes examples of activities that should be in place in order to move up to a higher level of digital preservation maturity. For example, at the 'Basic' level of the Policy and Strategy section of the model it is mentioned that "some procedures for managing, and providing access to, digital content are in place and may be documented". At the 'Managed' level it is suggested that "a suite of documented processes and procedures for managing, and providing access to, content within the digital archive exists". Other mentions of documentation appear throughout the model.

The theme of documentation also runs through the NDSA Levels of Digital Preservation [3], with work on the Levels Reboot even going so far as considering adding a new row to the Levels with a focus entirely on documentation. Documentation is mentioned directly six times within the Levels matrix, making its importance quite clear.

In a call to action published on the DPC blog, Amy Rudersdorf of AVP highlighted the importance of documentation as part of any digital preservation program and provided a persuasive list of reasons why we should all focus more time on it [4].

These examples all help to highlight the centrality of documentation to recognized digital preservation good practice, but none of these sources describe *how* we should do it.

The OSSArcFlow Project which ran from 2017 to 2020 has produced some valuable outputs of relevance to this question. It provides a methodology and a range of examples relating to the documentation of digital preservation workflows using open-source tools. Of particular interest is their Guide to Documenting Born-Digital Archival Workflows [5].

Further examples of digital preservation workflows can be found on the Community Owned Workflows (COW) wiki [6]. There are some good examples here of documented workflows and diagrams which may act as inspiration for those who are looking to create their own documentation.

Outside of the digital preservation community there are further resources that can be accessed to learn more about documentation. Write the Docs describes itself as a “global community of people who care about documentation” [7]. Though much of this resource is focused on documenting code, there are certainly some useful tips to be found that are more broadly relevant to documenting digital preservation processes and procedures.

Good documentation clearly *is* good practice for the digital preservation community but how should we go about this task? It is clear that some useful resources already exist, but it was recognized that a guide to provide advice to practitioners on how to approach their digital preservation documentation challenges would be helpful.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Collaboration is built into the workings of the DPC, and it seemed an obvious step to bring together a group of practitioners to share thoughts and experiences on digital preservation documentation and brainstorm some of the key questions which would be addressed within the good practice guide.

Volunteers were sought from the DPC Membership to come together in a series of focus groups to discuss the topic of documentation [8]. There was considerable interest in this call and a wide range of organizations expressed a desire to be involved. The focus group meetings took place in February and March of 2023. To accommodate different time zones, two separate meetings were arranged. This led to smaller groups and helped facilitate more inclusive discussions and open sharing of ideas. With the help of sticky notes on a Google Jamboard, and question prompts for discussion, participants were invited to share their thoughts on topics relating to documentation, in particular looking at the five W's (and one H) [9] of documentation:

- **Why?** Why do we document and what are the risks if we don't?
- **What?** What should we be documenting?
- **Who?** Who are we documenting for?
- **Where?** Where should we store our documentation?
- **When?** When should we document, when should we revise and update it and at what point should we preserve it?
- **How?** How should we document and how should we maintain it?

## III. SCOPE

The first task of the focus group meetings was to discuss and agree the scope of the work. Documentation is a big topic, so keeping the scope tight and focused was important in ensuring the task of creating a good practice guide was manageable. It was agreed that the documentation in scope was as follows:

*Documentation that is important for the day-to-day operations of digital preservation activities within an organization, for example recording how digital preservation tasks and procedures are carried out or how tools and systems are integrated and configured.*

Elements of digital preservation documentation that were considered out of scope were:

- Digital preservation policy or strategy documents - this is a very specific type of documentation, and guidance on this is already well covered (see for example the

recently revised Digital Preservation Policy Toolkit [10]).

- Documentation relating to high level planning and reporting – this guide was focused on documentation that describes processes and workflows rather than that which describes and informs future plans.
- Documentation that describes individual datasets to enable them to be understood and re-used - though this subset of documentation is clearly very important, it has quite a different emphasis and purpose to documentation specifically about digital preservation operations.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Discussions within the focus groups were lively and interesting and participants had no shortage of ideas and experiences to share. Documentation is a topic that is of relevance and interest to everyone, and it was interesting to learn about different ideas and approaches to tackling this task across different organizations. The question prompts and discussion not only elicited sharing of current practice but also encouraged some participants to consider changes to their own practices as a result of learnings from the sessions. It was encouraging to see positive outcomes such as this even prior to the guide being written.

#### V. GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

The focus groups provided a wealth of material which could be condensed into a series of helpful sections of the guide. Focus group participants were also able to provide comment and feedback on the draft text for the guide as it was developed and were encouraged to supply examples and written case studies to help to illustrate the advice given.

The main sections of the guide are described below:

- Why documentation is important – this section describes the benefits of documentation (along with the risks if documentation doesn't exist).
- Audiences for documentation – a summary of the internal and external

audiences who documentation may be intended for.

- What makes good documentation and what makes bad documentation – this section takes the form of a table summarising some of the key characteristics of good documentation and bad documentation.
- Tips for creating documentation – this section includes information about methods, tools, templates, diagrams and testing.
- How to maintain documentation and manage versions – this section covers the challenges of keeping documentation up to date over time and how version control should be managed.
- Preserving documentation – this section of the guide briefly describes why documentation may need to be preserved for the long term and some of the things that should be considered.
- Case studies – members of the focus groups have provided case studies about their own documentation practices. A range of types of organization were selected, with different tools, platforms and practices represented.
- Examples – some organizations make elements of their documentation publicly available online. The guide shares links to helpful examples which can be used for inspiration.
- Further reading – useful links and references are shared to other resources.

*Digital Preservation Documentation: a guide* [11] will be publicly launched at iPRES 2023 and freely available for all to consult.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

The opposite of disruption is calmness, tidiness, and order. Whether our work in digital preservation is disrupted or not, the presence of well-crafted documentation should provide a level of reassurance in our processes and procedures both now and in the future. It is the author's hope that the guide, released as a result of this collaborative work,

will provide helpful advice to the digital preservation community on creating, managing and preserving digital preservation documentation. Good documentation is an essential element of digital preservation good practice and one which should not be put off until tomorrow.

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