

Digital Curation: A How-To-Do-It Manual. ROSS HARVEY. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2010. xxii, 225 p. ISBN 978-1-55570-694-4.

The long-term management of digital information and evidence is not a new issue for archivists. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of technology has required many disciplines to take an increasingly active role in understanding how individuals and organizations create, use, reuse, manage, and add value to data. This book presents a holistic view of digital curation – “the range of processes applied to digital objects *over their whole lifecycle*” (p. 15; italics in original) – in order to inform a wide audience, including archivists, librarians, researchers, and other creators and curators of data. Readers with a background in archives will recognize a strong archival influence – both in the approach to digital curation itself and in Ross Harvey’s presentation of the material – and will discover ample resources to further inform their work.

Understanding the book at the highest level requires a comparable high-level understanding of digital curation. In his introduction to digital curation as a discipline, Harvey notes that it is often described in terms of what it is “not,” or what it is “more than.” For example, he explains that one of the key drivers behind the creation of the UK-based Digital Curation Centre (DCC) was the recognition that digital preservation by itself was insufficient to address the long-term viability and reusability of digital information. He

states that “although digital archiving [defined as ‘the process of backup and ongoing maintenance as opposed to strategies for long-term digital preservation’] and digital preservation [defined as ‘actions required to maintain access to digital materials beyond the limits of media failure or technological change’] are important aspects of digital curation, they are not the whole story” (p. 7). Digital curation is best understood as an inclusive conceptualization of the activities related to the entire life cycle of digital information, from the initial planning of data collection or creation, through management phases, to use, reuse, or other disposition of the data. It goes beyond the aims of digital preservation in particular because of its emphasis on adding value to data – through the creation of annotation or citation services, for example – and because it involves a wide range of stakeholders across many disciplines.

The book is organized into three major sections. The first is a context-setting section that introduces the primary concepts and definitions referenced throughout the book, the motivation and requirements behind digital curation, and the conceptual models used in digital curation. The rest of the book is organized according to the Digital Curation Centre’s Curation Lifecycle Model, which provides a high-level overview of the activities necessary for digital curation. Harvey notes the importance of the interrelatedness of the actions in the Curation Lifecycle Model: “actions applied (or not applied) at each stage ... directly influence how effectively that information can be managed and preserved in following stages” (p. 34). The second section presents the key requirements for the practice of digital curation; Harvey emphasizes the identification of the actions necessary throughout the life cycle of digital information, including the overall aims of digital curation, its essential roles and responsibilities, the requirements for metadata and other information, and the importance of knowledge sharing and collaboration. The third section addresses the life cycle of digital information as a combination of sequential and occasional actions, starting from conceptualization of potential data creation activities (i.e. before the point of creation) through appraisal and selection, ingest of digital objects, application of preservation actions, storage, and access, use, and reuse.

Overall, Harvey’s presentation of digital curation as a collaborative and comprehensive professional field is well written and extremely easy to follow. Many archivists will find themselves in agreement with his suggestions and recommendations as they affirm, adopt, or relate to practices that are part and parcel of their discipline. The book also provides archivists with a wide variety of tools and strategies to adapt and recontextualize for their profession. For example, Harvey’s introduction to appraisal and selection incorporates a notable amount of literature from the field of archives and describes the use of appraisal tools originally designed for the assessment of research data sets. Another example can be found in Harvey’s chapter on the “Create or Receive” phase of the DCC Curation Lifecycle, wherein he discusses the possibility of

influencing the creators of digital information. While Harvey recognizes that in some situations the extent of influence is limited, he nevertheless feels that archivists should consider the possibility that they may have greater influence if they participate in the earlier “Conceptualize” phase of the Curation Lifecycle. This book could provide archivists with a significant opportunity to evaluate and improve upon professional practices as they cope with ever-expanding amounts of digital information and evidence.

Despite what the subtitle suggests, the book cannot, strictly speaking, be considered a “how-to-do-it manual.” As Harvey notes, “digital curation is a developing set of techniques ... not yet described in detail in the literature” (p. xvi). While the book provides an excellent introduction to the field and presents important developments and current practices, the emergent nature of digital curation will require practitioners to stay current with the literature; thus, this book should be used as a starting point rather than a single detailed guide. On a related note, there is a chance that the book could become outdated rather quickly given the rapid pace of development in digital curation. The publisher provides a companion website, which includes checklists adapted from the book’s content, templates that can be used for planning and workflow development, and links to related information.¹ However, the website does not make it easy for readers to determine when the content was last updated. It is clear that Harvey intended this to be a resource that would continue to be expanded in future, but its design does not lend itself to ready determination of the currency of available information.

Nevertheless, Harvey’s book provides a strong, wide-ranging introduction to the field of digital curation, and considerable guidance for implementing a digital curation program based on current developments within the discipline. As mentioned earlier, archivists and other professionals will also find this book useful when rethinking existing practices and procedures to preserve the data in their care. This book would also serve as an excellent textbook for a graduate program in archives or library and information science, if supplemented by additional readings from the field. All readers of this book would benefit from a critical examination of the most recent developments in digital curation, and given our professional perspective as archivists, we are particularly suited to evaluate and contribute to digital curation research and practice.

Mark A. Matienzo
Manuscripts and Archives
Yale University Library

1 Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., “Digital Curation: A How-To-Do-It Manual,” <http://www.neal-schuman.com/curation/> (accessed 27 November 2011).