

## **When Archivists and Digital Asset Managers Collide: Tensions and Ways Forward**

Anthony Cocciolo

### ***ASBTRACT***

While archivists have been developing methods to appraise, accession, arrange and describe born-digital records, a new class of professionals—the digital asset manager—has developed. The digital asset manager sees her role as creating a repository of assets that can be easily and efficiently reused by staff. Given the closeness of this role to the archivist, this case study will explore the question: *what issues arise between archivists and digital asset managers when they are working together in the same organization?* To study this, the researcher spent one year as a participant observer at a major art museum located in the northeast United States. He found that indeed tensions do exist firstly because the digital asset manager and archivists do not recognize the different roles each is playing and hence enter a kind of competition. Secondly, this tension stems from an intellectual disagreement about how digital record keeping will play-out over the next several decades. The study will conclude with suggested ways of moving forward so that both digital asset managers and archivists can further their respective missions.

### **Introduction**

Institutional archivists (including digital archivists) maintain the inactive records of permanent value for an organization. These can include paper records or electronic records, and vary in format from email correspondence, to architectural drawings in CAD format, to records on carbon paper from the twentieth century. While archivists have

been working to develop methods to accession the many formats that records occur, institutional staffs have been engaged in an over twenty year period of transition to digital production. For example, museums have undergone a changeover to digital production for the majority of its products, such as exhibition catalogs, didactics (or wall text), exhibition design and audio guides. This transition to digital production has occurred across most sectors of society, such as the entertainment sector, publishing industry, among others.

In the pre-digital world, staffs were sometimes motivated to transfer inactive records to the archives—which were often in attics or basements—because it would free-up desirable office space. However, as digital files do not take-up physical space, and as the capacity of digital storage has continued to grow, producers of digital information started to develop a new attitude: *digital files would never become inactive*. With this new attitude came the notion that all active and inactive records could be kept together and searchable from a single interface. This seemed plausible given that the Google search interface appeared to do exactly this: provide access to new and active content (e.g., breaking news story), while continuing to point to things that have seemingly not been updated in decades (e.g., the website for the Warner Brothers film “Space Jam”).<sup>1</sup> As many units transitioned to digital production, and the years of content accumulated, it became clear that at a minimum extensive organization would be required. This led to the creation of digital asset management (DAM) systems and those who oversee them. These individuals often have the job title “digital asset manager.”

---

<sup>1</sup> “Space Jam,” <http://www2.warnerbros.com/spacejam/movie/jam.htm>

Although there is relatively little professional literature on DAM—at least compared to the literature about archives and archivists—the literature does confirm the view that digital files can remain active “forever.”<sup>2</sup> In her book *Digital Asset Management*, Keathley argues that “an archivist or records manager is only concerned with the assets at the end of the life cycle; the role of a digital asset manager is to assist with the arrangement, description, preservation, and access of assets that never have a clear end-of-life status.”<sup>3</sup> This statement is not entirely correct because records managers’ role is to manage active records, and those records with permanent value are transferred to the archives when they become inactive. Despite this inaccuracy, she further reinforces that “...a creative asset never truly reaches the end of its life for dead storage, as was the practice in the last century” and that “digital files can and should *live forever* with the ability to be searched and reused as needed.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, from Keathley’s standpoint, the archivist ought to stop making distinctions between inactive and active records and bring “the practices of archivists and records management out of basements and into the everyday working environment.”<sup>5</sup>

Keathley raises a number of issues for both archivists and digital asset managers. For example, is the role of the institutional archivist destined to become the digital asset manager, where he or she is helping manage digital assets that will “live forever”? Is there still value in identifying and separating active and inactive records? Can DAM systems accommodate all the active and inactive content and still be useful, or will them

---

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Ferguson Keathley, *Digital Asset Management: Content Architectures, Project Management, and Creating Order Out of Media Chaos* (Berkeley, CA: Apress, 2014): 12.

<sup>3</sup> Keathley, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Keathley, 12. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> Keathley, 12.

become overloaded with content and no one will be able to find anything? As time goes on, will DAM systems become filled with obsolete file formats? Will the provenance of a particular asset be evident over time? How will public researchers access such systems?

This project studied how these issues played-out for the course of a year at a major art museum located in the northeast United States for part of a small grant project to help this institution plan for a born-digital archives. This museum will be referred to as USAM for brevity. Using a participant observation methodology and treating USAM as a case, the following research question is posed:

*What issues arise between archivists and digital asset managers when they are working together in the same organization?*

A goal here is if issues are found to exist, the author will attempt to rationalize how these issues might be resolved. However, before the method and results will be introduced, relevant literature needed to clarify the issues at stake will be discussed.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review will assume that the reader is familiar with the foundational underpinnings of archives, but may be less familiar with the emerging literature on DAM and how it interconnects with archives. Thus, the focus here will be on DAM. If this is not the case, useful literature on who archivists are and how they differ from other types

of information professionals include foundational texts from Gilliland,<sup>6</sup> Cox,<sup>7</sup> Roe<sup>8</sup> and Hunter.<sup>9</sup>

A casual observer may surmise that digital asset management is simply a reframing of archives for digital content. However, on closer inspection their dissimilarities start to become more apparent. With archives and digital archives, the unit being managed is the “record.” The Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology have an extended definition of a “record.” One definition that most archivists could agree to is that it is “data or information in a fixed form that is created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference.”<sup>10</sup> The record does not necessarily have any monetary value. Rather, its value is its ability to act as an “extension of human memory,” “demonstrate accountability,” and act as “evidence or proof” of the activity that produced it.<sup>11</sup>

In digital asset management parlance, the unit being managed is not the record but rather the asset. In his book *Digital Asset Management*, Austerberry argues that an “asset” within a DAM is about property in much the same way as it is meant in the financial

---

<sup>6</sup> Anne Gilliland, *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities: The Value of the Archival Perspective in the Digital Environment* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Cox, *Archives & archivists in the information age* (New York: Neal-Schulman Publishers, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Roe, *Arranging & describing archives & manuscripts* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Gregory Hunter, *Developing and maintaining practical archives: a how-to-do-it manual*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Neal Schulman Publishers, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Ricahrd Pearse-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2005): 326-327.

<sup>11</sup> Pearse-Moses, 326.

sense.<sup>12</sup> He notes that “content + rights = ?\$ asset.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, “the most important feature is that DAM provides a framework for the successful monetization of media assets.”<sup>14</sup>

Not all digital asset managers may view their assets as the possible monetary value derived from the content in combination with the usage rights. Austerberry’s focus is on media assets from the entertainment and commercial sector, and his notion may not apply very well to other sectors such as non-profit or government sectors. For example, Krogh, in his book on DAM for photographers, notes that the return on DAM “may be in the form of monetary payment or personal satisfaction.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, there is an important distinction between these two views. Archivists are interested in the record for not only the content but what it might imply about aspects that are external to the record itself, including historical and social implications. Digital asset managers are more focused on the content itself, including the legal rights to re-use.

Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I will continue to use the definition of a record from SAA. However, in the context of an institutional setting, I will define a digital asset *as a kind of record that individuals can readily reuse in future work products*. Thus, certain kinds of records have better re-use value than others, such as photographs or exhibition catalogs, compared to other kinds of records such as email correspondence. Records like email or research notes may inform future work products but are unlikely to appear in a work product. This definition is also useful because a file would not be considered an

---

<sup>12</sup> David Austerberry, *Digital Asset Management*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Austerberry, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Austerberry, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Krogh, *The DAM book: digital asset management for photographers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2009): 6.

asset if its legal reuse in a future work product could not be secured (e.g., attempting to use an image of Mickey Mouse outside of the Walt Disney Company).

Although today digital asset management may impact archives, the intellectual underpinning of DAM are better situated in librarianship or the computing industry than in archives. Most DAMs function more like item-level digital libraries, where individual items are assigned metadata using schemas like Dublin Core, VRA Core or customized item-based schemas. Provenance—or the creator of the work—is assigned equal importance to other facets, such as title, description, or rights information. This is unlike archival practice, which gives provenance—or the creator—supreme importance and acts as the ultimate organizing factor. For example, archivists often produce extensive biographies and timeline of life events for a given creator. This is unlike bibliographic description, which often does not go into much detail on the creator, other than full name, and in some cases birth and death years.

Digital Asset Management's propagation has been largely driven by the profusion of digital assets, most notably digital photography. As digital photographs do not require the cost associated with film rolls and film processing, the quantity of photographs has grown dramatically. With this growth, the preservation and access issues have become a salient issue that DAM looks to address.<sup>16</sup> For professional photographers, efficient DAM is essential to being able to operate. Krogh writes that “the market value of a photograph is dependent on your ability to get that image into the hands of someone who wants it” and that DAM practices “give you the ability to sort and retrieve photographs

---

<sup>16</sup> Krogh.

according to many different needs, and therefore to make the pictures more accessible.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, DAM is most established for photography contexts, but its applications are growing. For example, Austerberry advocates for its use in a video production environment such as television studios.

There is very little literature that attempts to breakdown the role differences between digital asset managers and archivists. Keathley provides an interesting, although somewhat troubling, account. She argues the following:

While the arrangement, description, preservation, access, and, above all, findability of information has fell to librarians in the twentieth century, DAM professionals would do well to keep the term “digital asset managers” and not call themselves “librarians” or “archivists.” While the jobs are very much the same, and my background in library science gave me an excellent grounding in the techniques and processes that help in the understanding and implementation of a DAM, labeling the job as “digital librarian” or “digital archivist” may be the path to low earning potential over a lifetime.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, for her she sees the role of the digital asset manager and the archivist as fairly similar, however, because librarians and archivists were perceived as “‘women’s work’ and the devaluing of their role in society” stunted wages, that they had better call themselves “digital asset managers” to avoid the low wages attached to “women’s work.”<sup>19</sup> Although she is no doubt correct that professional roles traditionally occupied by women have lower wages, the equating of digital asset management and archives as

---

<sup>17</sup> Krogh, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Keathley, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Keathley, 41.



“very much the same” ignores the very different missions between both groups that will be explored further in this paper.

## **Method**

I studied the relationship between archivists and digital asset managements at USAM, which has both a digital asset manager and two archivists, as part of a small one-year grant project to help them develop a born-digital records repository. During this time, I acted as a participant observer (in my research capacity) and electronic records consultant (providing advice on digital records), closely observing the interactions between the digital asset manager and archivists and keeping detailed field notes. Participant observation is an ethnographic research methodology where the researcher has “prolonged, personal contact with events in a natural setting,” allowing for the researcher to develop a “better understanding of the people and social processes that occur within that setting.”<sup>20</sup> I was onsite at USAM two days a week for a year (78 eight-hour days total), thus allowing for extended exposure to how the digital asset manager, archivists, and other staff interacted amongst each other. In addition to closely observing the interactions between these two groups, I investigated all the digital record keeping practices at the museum, including staff record keeping practices (through focus groups with every department in the museum), files stored on network storage and in the DAM system, and digital records in acid-free boxes (e.g., floppy disks). Select meetings with

---

<sup>20</sup> Elfreda A. Chatman, “Field Research: Methodological themes,” *Library and Information Science Research* 6 (1984): 426; Barbara M. Wildemuth, “Participant Observation,” in *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*, ed. Barbara M. Wildemuth, 199. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009.

the digital asset manager and archivists were also audio recorded with their consent.

From these recordings, significant quotes were transcribed and added to the notes. To address the research question, I will analyze the notes and from one year's worth of data and allow themes to emerge, and then draw conclusions from these.

### **Context Overview**

USAM collects contemporary and modern art, produces approximately a dozen exhibitions each year, has over 50,000 square feet of gallery space, and welcomes on the order of a million visitors annually. USAM has maintained archives since the 1970s, and currently houses approximately 7,000 cubic feet of paper records. The records include exhibition files, artist files, as well as other historical records, and is open to researchers throughout the year on a request basis. The archives is led by a head of library and archives, with an archivist with sole responsibility to the archives reporting up to this head. Both archivists and the digital asset manager hold Masters of Science in Library and Information Science (MSLIS) degrees from American Library Association-accredited institutions.

In 2006, the photography department, which is in charge of photographing the museum's collections as well as photographing "as-installed" views of exhibitions, closed its dark room (making it into a storage closet) and transitioned to born-digital photography. The needs of the photography department, such as organizing and providing access to the growing collection of born-digital photographs, prompted the purchase of the DAM system. The MediaBeacon DAM system was purchased and by the end of 2013

contained over 220,000 individual files that occupy 7 terabytes of disk storage. A digital asset manager was hired in the 2012 to manage the DAM and reported to the Head of Photography.

## **Results**

Results of the study reveal that tensions between the digital asset manager and the archivists did not *initially* exist. One reason for this is that the DAM system was purchased as a tool for use primarily in the photography department, and did not initially impact other departments. When the photography department was producing photographs on film, it did not transfer inactive content to the archives, thus acting as the de facto photo archive of the institution. When the transition to digital photography occurred, historical practice dictated that the photography department would continue to act as the photo archive, albeit via the DAM system rather than via drawers of film prints. However, because the DAM system was a significant investment in software and Information Technology (IT) resources, as it was hosted on-site by the IT department, it was argued for by the Head of Photography as software that was not limited to the use of the photography department but other departments could use as well. Thus, when the digital asset manager was hired, it was clear that he or she would both provide services to the photography department (e.g., ingesting photographs into the DAM, developing organizational schemas for use in the DAM), and also eventually start working with other departments so that they could use the DAM for their own needs.

The notion that the DAM could be a cross-institutional tool laid the groundwork that led to the initial source of tensions between the archivists and the digital asset manager. For the photography department, the introduction of the DAM signaled the possibility of a growing role for them within the institution as a whole. Their purview would include not only photography, but also providing a functionality for all departments to upload, organize and re-use their high-value intellectual property assets, such as exhibition catalogs, highly produced video works, and content from the audio guide.

Although the archivists did not object to the notion that the DAM could be used across multiple departments, they did object to some of the unstated assumptions that attached themselves to the DAM system. The most obvious problematic notion was that if a file were deposited in the DAM, there would be no reason to deposit it in the archives as it was permanently preserved and made accessible to staff via the DAM system. Under the DAM-as-archive scenario, the digital asset manager—in consultation with the authoring department—would organize and ingest the files as deemed fit it into the DAM, and not deposit the asset into the archives. A common organization for assets like exhibition catalogs would be organizing them under the authoring department (Publications department), providing it item-level metadata (e.g., title, description), placing it in a folder with the exhibition name, and setting access rights. For archivists, objects like exhibition catalogs would be organized according to the principle of provenance. Thus, the records of a given exhibition would be kept with the records of its curator, and an exhibition catalog would be kept with the other records of the same exhibition. Using the archives policy, the exhibition records would be opened to the public twenty-five years

after creation. However, records that were made for public consumption, such as exhibition catalogs, would be made available to public researchers immediately upon request. This is unlike the DAM system, which is only available to institutional staff.

Thus, the tension between archivists and digital asset manager was around the notion that the DAM system was the archive of the high-value born-digital content. In this situation, this left the archivists with the paper records, which they had been managing since the 1970s, and the born-digital records that were not considered “assets,” or those records that may have historic value but no clear monetary value. This could include records like Microsoft Word files (e.g., research notes from curators), emails, and the like, where the DAM would hold items like photographs and books, all of which are more clearly assets (using my earlier definition).

It is worth noting the differing practices of archivists and digital asset managers, both at USAM and more generally. The digital asset manager at USAM clearly saw her role as inextricably linked with the DAM tool itself. Thus, she dedicated extensive effort to convincing staff of the value and benefits of the tool (e.g., being able to access content through a web browser and not having to VPN into the network, not having to rely on disorganized network shares, powerful search engine, among other benefits). It is also worth noting a difference in users. For the digital asset manager, the user is almost always a member of the institutional staff. For the archivist, institutional staff is also a user group (especially museum curators), however, researchers from the general public are also considered users as they serve-up collections to the public. From the DAM

literature, a focus on user needs is especially evident. For example, Keathley notes “an organized collection of digital assets isn’t worth anything if those assets aren’t used, and in order to make a usable DAM, a digital asset manager must know his or her audience and what that audience would wish to access.”<sup>21</sup>

Digital asset managers are expected to be particularly responsive to the immediate needs of departments. This is also important for retaining the buy-in from staff so that they continue to use the DAM. For example, when photographs of an exhibition are taken, the USAM digital asset manager needs to assign metadata to the photographs expediently so that they can be found and re-used by institutional staff for a variety of publications. The practice of being a bridge between the creator of the record (e.g., the photographer) and the users of that record (e.g., institutional staffs) immediately following record creation is quite different from the practices of most archivists. Archivists tend to seek out records when they become inactive, and in some cases act as record managers to organize and communicate when a record is no longer active. Thus, at USAM, archivists tend to become interested in acquiring particular records when an initiative is winding-down, or when a staff person is departing. The archivists at USAM made it clear that they would not relish the work of digital asset manager, such as having to assign item-level metadata to photographs that are needed right away. Being able to approach creators when their records are becoming inactive, and accession them into backlogs, allows for a comparatively more relaxed approach to building collections. Thus, the active and inactive records environment and their related workflows are noteworthy distinctions in how archivists and digital asset managers operate.

---

<sup>21</sup> Keathley, 65.

A source of tension between the archivists and the digital asset manager is around the lack of digital preservation planning. In studying the files held on network storage at USAM, it was clear that obsolete file formats was not a theoretical issue but something that historically has been an issue. For example, when studied in late 2013, 11,694 WordPerfect files were found on network storage, as well as 5,194 QuarkXPress files and 1,430 Lotus 1-2-3 files. As a consultant on this project, I developed methods for appraising these files for permanent retention, and migrating them to more sustainable formats for deposit in the digital archives. However, archivists were frustrated that the digital asset manager did not seem to consider the issue of preservation planning, or what formats would be accepted into the DAM and how it would respond to file formats once they become obsolete. Archivists viewed the notion that files, once deposited into a DAM, as being accessible “forever” as a little short sighted and thought the digital asset manager ignored the evidence that preservation planning is needed. The need for preservation planning is less essential when only one type of file is being managed (e.g., uncompressed TIFFs from photography department), but becomes a more prominent issue when the DAM is opened up to all departments and the types of files they may want to deposit (e.g., exhibition designers who use a variety of 3D modeling file formats and 2-dimensional drawing formats, video creators who use a variety of video encodings, etc.).

A related digital preservation planning issue that arose during the study is the issue of file fixity checks, or rather its absence from the DAM system. File fixity checks look for

hardware or software failures that could render a file inaccessible or inaccurate. This is often referred to as bit-rot or bit-flipping.<sup>22</sup> This is usually addressed through running a file fixity check, such as applying the MD5 checksum generator to a file upon ingestion, and verifying the checksum remains the same through time.<sup>23</sup> If the file changes somehow (a bit is flipped), the file can be restored from backup. At USAM, the digital asset manager did not seem to mind that these checks were not happening and that they did not appear to be a software feature of the DAM system. This is somewhat problematic considering that file fixity checks figure prominently in standards for digital preservation, such as the National Digital Stewardship Alliance's Levels of Digital Preservation and the Trusted Repositories Audit and Certification checklist.<sup>24</sup> Gladney finds that content management systems, of which DAM systems are a variant, are "not adequate for long-term digital preservation because it includes no mechanisms for reliably assuring authenticity and intelligibility of digital documents for fifty years or longer."<sup>25</sup>

A further tension exhibited itself when archivists and the digital asset manager would attempt to communicate with department staff within the same meeting. During such meetings, the digital asset manager would indicate that digital files with value should be

---

<sup>22</sup> David S. H. Rosenthal, Keeping Bits Safe: How Hard Can It Be?, *Communications of the ACM* 52, no. 11 (2010): 47-55.

<sup>23</sup> Julianna Barrera-Gomez and Ricky Erway, *Walk This Way: Detailed Steps for Transferring Born-Digital Content from Media You Can Read in-house*, Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> National Digital Stewardship Alliance, *NDSA Levels of Preservation*, 2013, <http://digitalpreservation.gov/ndsa/activities/levels.html>; Center for Research Libraries/Online Computer Library Center, *Trustworthy repositories audit & certification: criteria and checklist*, 2007, [http://www.crl.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/trac\\_0.pdf](http://www.crl.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/trac_0.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Henry M. Gladney, "Long-Term Preservation of Digital Records: Trustworthy Digital Objects," *American Archivist* 72 (Fall/Winter 2009): 401.



deposited in the DAM and that it would be available indefinitely, thus making the role of the archives appear superfluous. Staff response to these kind of advances were largely determined by their past experiences, both within professional and personal contexts. For example, staff members who often use web-based systems for sharing and organizing content (e.g., Facebook) found the notion of the DAM system very appealing, and thought it only natural that the DAM was the digital archive for the institution. Staff members, such as museum curators who are the heaviest users of the archives and do archival research, would gravitate toward the archives as a repository for their records. At these meetings in general, the archivists tended to underappreciate the extent to which staff wanted unmediated access to their assets through a system such as the DAM system, and the digital asset manager seemed too willing to undermine the archivists' role within the institution in order to advance his or her own mission.

A notable problem found is that staff members would readily consider many things to be an archive. Some departments with extensive collections of older records view these collections as "archives" of their department's work, and exhibit a somewhat proprietary attachment to them. They prefer to maintain their records on their departmental network share drive. However, they are not sure if the files can be accessed because they may originate in obsolete file formats. Owens explores the many meanings of the word "archive" and notes that there are at least six definitions of archives that are used in contemporary society, and many of the uses do not refer to SAA's definition, which are that archives are the inactive records of a personal, organization or family.<sup>26</sup> Because of

---

<sup>26</sup> Tevor Owens, "What Do you Mean by Archive? Genres of Usage for Digital Preservers," *The Signal: Library of Congress Digital Preservation Blog*, February 27, 2014,

the readiness at which staff will call something an archive, that word gets attached to many things, including the DAM. This can be troubling for the archivist, who has to contend with the many departments who believe that they are keeping archives and may view the DAM as yet another archive.

Another source of frustration for archivists was the sense that the digital asset manager was targeting high-value content whenever and wherever it would occur, without a systematic plan for what would be included in the DAM and what would not. In 2005, a records retention schedule was developed and approved by the Board of Trustees, which made clear to all staff which records have permanent value and should be deposited in the archives and records that can be discarded after their lifecycle has ended. The archivists continue to update the records retention schedule, and made it more explicitly acknowledge electronic records. Much like the records schedule, archivists desired a more comprehensive plan of what would be included in the DAM in the way that they had identified what would be included in the archives. However, it appeared to archivists that the digital asset manager would approach content producers without a clear plan for the DAM system's future development.

## **Discussion**

This case revealed that tensions indeed do exist between archivists and digital asset managers. These tensions arise firstly from intellectual disagreements about how digital record keeping will play-out over the next several decades. Archivists believe that there

---

<http://blogs.loc.gov/digitalpreservation/2014/02/what-do-you-mean-by-archive-genres-of-usage-for-digital-preservers/>

are active and inactive records, and generally reject the notion that because a record is a digital file that it can remain active forever. They recognize that “forever” will be interrupted by things like obsolete file formats, which has occurred in the past such as the transition from Wordperfect to Microsoft Word, QuarkXPress to Adobe InDesign, or Lotus 1-2-3 to Microsoft Excel. Without preservation planning, a DAM could decline in value over time as the assets grow and their accessibility wanes as individuals move on to new computer programs or cloud-based computing options. Archivists tends to take a long view of at least a couple decades, and don’t necessarily think the content itself is the most important thing but rather what it might imply about aspects external to the record. Thus, they attempt to dedicate extensive effort describing the provenance of the record (the creator) to create context around its inception. They believe that creating item-level metadata for all records with permanent value is impossible given current and expected resources, and thus rely on describing at the aggregate level, such as the level of creator, record sub-groups, and series. For archivists, DAM systems house active records because they are put in there by users who indicate that they want them in there so they can be easily reused, which for archivists means that they are not really inactive.

Digital asset managers take the view that digital formats are becoming more mature, and obsolesce is not as major a concern as archivists make them out to be, although it is still a concern. For example, JPGs and DOC files are well documented and show no signs of being inaccessible. They use organization methods most common to libraries and digital libraries, or cataloging individual items at the item-level. This is essential for having items appear in the DAM system’s search results. For them, the most important aspect is

the content itself and how it can be reused by active departments to maximize the value of the asset. Digital asset managers work to document legal use rights so that the asset can be easily deployed in future contexts, thus eliminating the need to track-down copyright owners. They tend to see value in archivists handling of paper records, or records without clear value for the DAM, but otherwise feel that they are best equipped to create a repository of digital assets for future use. They feel that users have a strong desire to access materials through a DAM, aligning well with users experience using systems such as Facebook for curating their personal photographs. Their job is to make the DAM meet the needs of staff users, and make it well integrated into the workflows of digital producers.

Archivists recognize that the record will decline in value if it doesn't include the assets, such as as-installed photographs or exhibition catalogs, and just have the important yet less visually appealing records. Digital asset managers are perturbed by archivists that insist staff deposit their records in the archives because the DAM could act as the "forever" repository for these files, and the need for a digital archives is limited compared to the active re-use strategy they are offering.

Given this set of tensions, how can these significant disagreements be reconciled?

Clearly, both digital asset managers and archivists are going to need to work together if either role is to continue, but how?

For USAM, I recommended that items deemed assets be deposited both in the DAM system and digital archives. In the digital archives, the asset will be grouped with other records of the same provenance (e.g., an exhibition catalog will be kept with other records from the same exhibition with the top-level organization being a curator). In the DAM, metadata will be attached to the file to encourage its find-ability for reuse purposes by staff. The archivist will document the activity of the institution for researchers, where the digital asset manager will curate assets so that they can be reused for new purposes by staff. Because the purposes are not the same and the user groups do not overlap entirely, it is sensible that assets appear in both places. This is not wasteful because digital preservations have found that “lots of copies keeps stuff safe.”<sup>27</sup> At a minimum, references to the assets contained within the DAM should be added to the archives intellectually if not physically. However, the challenge with this is that DAM systems are so new, it is unclear if they will be able to provide a persistent link to such content or if the DAM system will be continued indefinitely into the future. Thus, high-value assets are best deposited both in a digital archives and a DAM system. If a DAM system is discontinued, the history and activities of an institution can still be uncovered through the archives, and assets extracted from it as needed. If the archives are discontinued, only the assets survive and an incomplete picture of the institution’s activity is preserved. Thus, there is strong reason to keep both digital asset management and digital archives initiatives active. The activities related to digital asset management add convenience that is very compelling to staff users. The archives provide services essential to documenting institutional history for its larger role in society.

---

<sup>27</sup> Vicky Reich and David S. H. Rosenthal, “LOCKSS: A Permanent Web Publishing and Access System,” *D-Lib Magazine* (June 2001).

Although both groups would concede that a DAM system can provide convenience to staff users, it does not replace the need for a digital archives nor does it mean that items deemed “assets” should not be placed in an archives. Non-historically minded individuals may assume that placing assets into a DAM is sufficient for creating a historical record of an institution’s activity. The problem is most items that are interpreted as assets, such as photographs and exhibition catalogs, were designed for the public and are the tip of the records iceberg and more revealing records as to why things developed the way they did are contained in other records (e.g., email collections, cache of documents for non-public consumption, etc.). Thus, although providing functionality for quick and efficient reuse of media assets via a DAM is a worthy goal, it should not replace the need to create digital archives that document institutional activity. The key is making institutional staff understand this difference, thus avoiding the situation where digital archives can be interpreted as redundant to a DAM system. It is also essential that staff occupying the role of digital asset manager and (digital) archivist respect the different roles that they are playing, and not try to undermine each other (e.g., telling a staff member that they only need to deposit an asset in one place and not the other).

Efficiency experts are always interested in eliminating functions that may seem redundant. Thus most institutional executives would rather have a single digital repository that holds both records and assets. Given this reality, could a DAM work not only as an asset repository, but also as a records repository? As noted earlier, the organizational systems used by DAM systems tend to privilege item-level organization,

making it a less appealing place for records grouped by provenance. One strategy could be to organize records into groups of folders, and then place them in a ZIP file that gets ingested into a DAM. However, a limitation of this approach is that most commercial DAMs have little or no digital preservation functionality, such as tools for monitoring file format obsolescence or file fixity monitoring. Thus, systems designed explicitly for digital preservation of archival assets are better suited for this task. Also, if the purpose of a DAM is designed to promote the reuse of media assets by current staff, and the DAM is filled with records that have limited reuse value that continue to appear in search results, then this could inhibit the DAM's value and cause its future demise. Thus, to promote the differing missions of archives and DAM, it is important to dissuade the efficiency experts from canceling one initiative or another in favor of the "one stop shop" approach.

This study necessarily raises new questions as it answers the initial one. Is it possible that digital asset management might cause archivists to rethink their acquisitions, description, and access practices? Are there things that archivists can learn from digital asset managers and vice versa? Are the goals of the two professions really that far apart? Although each of these questions could be a new study onto itself, initial thoughts will be offered. Clearly, both professions are not so far apart. One indication of this is that the same degree (the MSLIS) can help meet entry-level qualifications for both roles.

However, through the course of this study one aspect became clear: that the digital asset manager did not want to be the archivist, and the archivist did not want to be the digital asset manager. Wanting to be involved in the active records environment, or to be in the

thick of things, would seem to be a necessary trait for the digital asset manager. The archivist would rather be a step removed from this environment, and have the opportunity to be more reflective, which is a useful trait for presenting historical records to researchers. Archivists would like to not be in the role of assigning item-level metadata to large volumes of digital assets, and digital asset managers would rather not be stewarding troves of yellowing papers.

Through studying the digital asset manager and the archivists, I grew more confident in the flexibility and economy that archival methods permitted, specifically not requiring metadata creation for every item being stewarded. I was particularly concerned with the extensive labor-involved in creating item-level metadata for every item in the DAM, and wonder about the long-term sustainability of this practice. Despite this increased confidence in archival methods for dealing with large quantities of information, I did grow concerned that users have grown accustomed to the Google-like access to items, such as that afforded by DAM systems, and may not be satisfied with the access at the aggregate level that archival arrangement and description allow.

### **Limitations**

A notable limitation of this study is that since it only provides an in-depth look at a single context (USAM), it may not be applicable to other museums or organizations that have both archivists and digital asset managers. Further, many organizations may have one of these roles and not the other, and thus this tension does not exist. And lastly, it is certainly possible that other organizations have both digital asset managers and archivists who deal with electronic records and they have not experienced such tensions. This is a



limitation of the single case study method, which can describe a certain context in-depth but cannot shed light on how applicable the situations described are instantiated in other contexts. Future research that pays close attention to the interplay between digital asset managers and archivists across a variety of contexts is necessary for the future health of both professions.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this case study revealed that tensions do exist between archivists and digital asset managers. This tension is in large-part the result of digital asset manager and archivists not recognizing the different roles each is playing, and thus entering into a kind of competition. This tension also stems from an intellectual disagreement about how digital record keeping will play-out over the next several decades. Fortunately, this tension can be dispelled by each group focusing on their mission and creating opportunities for the other to be successful. For example, the digital asset manager ought to focus on their mission: creating collection of digital assets for the effective and efficient re-use by staff members. Archivists should focus on their mission: to document institutional activity through records of permanent value in whatever format they may occur for use by staff and public researchers. Thus, archivists—when they discover reusable assets such as digital photographs that could benefit from easy find-ability by staff in the DAM—should alert the digital asset manager. The digital asset manager—when he or she encounters an asset that is an important record of institutional activity that is not documented in the archives—should contact the archivist. Because of the differing roles played by the archivist and digital asset manager, and the non-overlapping nature of

the information they are managing, tensions should become a thing of the past as our digital world continues to unfold.