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Letter to the Editor: Re: Authentic Digital Objects

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Summary

This letter responds to Andrew Wilson's concerns regarding my article in *IJDC* 4(1) entitled "An Institutional Framework for Creating Authentic Digital Objects". This response clears up some of the issues regarding my assertions about digital certificates, metadata, and the roles of librarians in the digital environment.

Dear Editor,

In his letter, Andrew Wilson raises some important questions to which I welcome the opportunity to respond. At the outset, it is important to establish the different perspectives that are represented in our contrasting interpretations of authenticity.

There are many institutions – museums, libraries, corporations, and so on – that are digitizing physical artifacts and capturing “born-digital” objects with the intent of digitally preserving this material. However, within the digital preservation community, there is considerable confusion and little consensus on the definition of authenticity. These various communities are making major contributions to digital scholarship, however there is significant risk by implying that preserved objects are authentic. The disciplines and perspectives that are contributing to the dialog consist of archivists, records managers, librarians, historians, and computer scientists – all of whom can and are making contributions. In response to some of Mr. Wilson’s concerns, my article is in many ways speaking to the academic library community (Jantz, 2009, p.78) and I did not intend to denigrate the contributions of archival science. On page 74, I acknowledge the possibility of some rhetorical confusion by indicating that I will represent these diverse professional backgrounds by using the term “archivist”. Practicing librarians are becoming, by default, archivists when they create and preserve digital objects. Similarly, at the institutional level, academic libraries are becoming archival institutions. A major thrust of my article was to develop an awareness of issues of digital object authenticity within the academic library community. Given the volume of digital materials, we need to harness the capabilities of many disciplines in order to capture and preserve our digital assets. I do not want to enter into the debate regarding archival science and diplomatics; however, in my opinion, the volume of material forces archivists to increasingly deal with aggregations as opposed to individual records.

The importance of digital signatures and the associated technological framework is only a part of the required awareness. In my opinion, digital signatures are a necessary component of digital authenticity, however these signatures are not sufficient to establish authenticity. The summary to my article (p. 81) specifically states that we are dealing with probabilities and that the proposed approach at three levels – institutional, professional, and technological – offers the opportunity to significantly increase the probability of insuring object integrity. Mr. Wilson claims that I have maintained that a digital signature is sufficient for authenticity. I have never claimed or implied such a statement although there are likely those from computational disciplines who might make such a claim. For example, Haber and Kamat (2006) claim in their abstract that the goal of their service is “to demonstrate that information in the archive is authentic . . .” Mr. Wilson further states that I have suggested a digital signature is sufficient without the support of metadata. On page 74 of my article – last paragraph – I clearly state the importance of metadata and the professional responsibility for creating metadata.

In my paper I state that there are claims to be made by the archivist that go beyond the claims of the record. Although he uses different phrasing, it seems that Mr. Wilson actually agrees with this point as in the following excerpt from his letter : “. . . it is obviously the creators’ role to do their best to ensure authenticity . . .”.

Park (2001) has addressed how authenticity is understood in practice and lists several projects, including the Australian Records Continuum model, stating that none of these projects “. . . examine the extent to which these outcomes and definitions map onto how practitioners construct discourse-based or rhetoric-based concepts such as authenticity.” Of the 104 respondents to the Park survey, 42 were records managers/archivists and 30 were librarians – an indication of significant contributions from non-archivists. Significantly, 12% (Park, 2001, Table 1) of the respondents indicated that they had no criteria for judging authenticity and several of the other cited processes were informal, at best. Further, Table 4 (*ibid*) illustrates the divergent views between archivists and librarians as to how authenticity is defined, showing – as one might expect – emphasis respectively on either archival or bibliographic practices. Park’s study confirms my view that librarians are, by way of their involvement in digital preservation, also either implicitly or explicitly taking on the responsibilities of an archivist. These practitioners should be brought into the larger archival community in order to address the growing problem of digital authenticity.

I am not clear as to the implications of Mr. Wilson’s comment: “Jantz . . . has the effrontery to say that librarians should serve as trusted third parties for authenticity.” As noted above, librarians are acting now in the capacity of practicing archivists. These practitioners need to be versed in archival theory in order to credibly undertake archival practice. It is also noteworthy that other respected scholars (Cullen, 2000; Atkinson, 2005; MacNeil & Mak, 2007) have also made similar comments about the profession of librarianship. MacNeil and Mak (2007), in their examination of definitions of authenticity, suggest that authenticity “is best understood as a social construction” and its structures vary from one field to another.

In summary, we have much work to do before we can claim a clear, unambiguous definition of authenticity. As MacNeil and Mak suggest, the definition may be discipline-specific, suggesting that the archival community should be open to different views as to what constitutes authenticity. Given this variability, we can expect many contributions to be made by those in fields other than archival science. I also believe that this view is consistent with the continuum model. For example, McKemmish (1997) has stated that the model includes “broad range of stakeholders” and an effort “to build partnerships with business, accountability, information, and cultural players.” I am encouraged that Mr. Wilson has taken the time to read my article and to respond with thoughtful and constructive comments. Hopefully, my response will clarify the issues that he has raised and I welcome further dialog.

Yours,
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