

# Time to clean up your digital closet

August 5 2009, By Chris O'Brien

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Let's jump ahead 50 years. Imagine your grandchildren are rummaging around in your attic, looking through old boxes and trunks. They discover laptops, hard drives wrapped in cloth, DVDs, and maybe even a real antique: A floppy disk.

What will become of all the data you've stored on these devices? Will any of them still work? Will your heirs have any devices that will allow them to read these treasures?

Here's the really big question: Have you ever once even stopped to think about this scenario? If you're like me, the answer is a resounding, "Nope." For all but a few, the issue of how to maintain personal digital archives is nowhere on the radar.

"I think there is a sense of collective denial," said Bill LeFurgy, project manager for digital initiatives at the Library of Congress. "I don't think it's really penetrated the consciousness of the typical [computer](#) user."

Chalk it up, in part, to human nature. We're lazy. Or worse, naive. There is a widespread, and mistaken, belief that because information is being stored in digital form on a device or in the "cloud," it will endure. In fact, the opposite is true. For a host of reasons, our digital data is even more vulnerable than paper.

Here is where I wish I could say, "Fortunately, there are a host of solutions coming onto the market that aim to solve this issue." But I can't. Because there aren't.

Don't take my word for it. Let's hear from Cathy Marshall, a senior researcher at Microsoft Research in Silicon Valley. Marshall has spent years studying the issue of digital personal archiving and what a miserable job we're doing of it.

"People are really disappointed that I don't say, 'Here's what you do,'" Marshall said. "Because there's not an easy solution. And I don't think there's ever going to be an easy solution."

Rats.

And here's more bad news: The problem is getting worse. Technology is enabling us to fall further behind every year when it comes to our personal digital archives. That's because digital storage is becoming cheaper and larger by the day. So we remain stuck in our default mode of saving everything over the short term at the risk of losing everything in the long term.

"You can't ignore the dynamic of capacity growth in this industry," said Drew Meyer, director of storage at Netgear. "The mad rush of content generation and capacity kind of go hand in hand. It's easier to just buy a new drive and stick it in your machine."

If we were growing old 50 years ago, our houses would be stacked with newspapers we couldn't bear to discard. Today, we can easily become a nation of digital pack rats because, well, why not?

To understand the scope of the problem and what's at stake, take a typical, lazy consumer who is headed toward unspeakable disaster if he doesn't change his habits: me.

A few weeks ago, I was rummaging through a desk at work, and came across some old Zip drives. I had forgotten about them. I plugged the Zip

disk drive into my PC, popped in the disk, and ... nothing. A friend later explained that the disks had probably demagnetized and the data was lost.

This brought up a couple of troubling points. First, these disks survived only a few years. And second, I had forgotten about them. How many other things had I lost track of?

I went on a scavenger hunt at home. I discovered a stack of high-density diskettes bundled with a rubber band in a shoebox from the 1990s. There were three dozen compact discs packed with photos, videos and documents that I had transferred off the hard drive of a PC we retired in 2004, which is now stored in the basement. I also have a dozen DVDs filled with files recovered from a hard drive that died a couple of years ago.

On top of this, my current Dell PC just informed me that my 150 GB hard drive was full. Ack! Now what? My first thought was that I needed to get an external hard drive to add more space. Another digital closet to fill up with junk. Or maybe just transfer stuff to DVDs to clear up space?

But all the storage options I mentioned have one thing in common: They're degradable. They won't last.

To read my old diskettes, I had to get my Mac PowerBook out of the attic because nothing else had a [hard drive](#). When I popped some of the CDs into my PC, I had a hard time opening some of the files because they were on old versions of Microsoft Word.

And finally, it was impossible to find anything. I had only the most basic system for organizing files, and the labels were miserable, especially when it came to photos.

What makes those problems real is that some of this stuff has real sentimental value. Many of the CDs contained photos from the first few years of my son's life. Why wasn't I taking better care to preserve them? It's little comfort to know that I am not alone.

"When I think about how many consumers have so many things they care about on degradable media, it's scary," Marshall said.

And we haven't even gotten to the Internet yet. This trip down memory lane reminded me that once upon a time, I had created a Web site through a service called Angelfire. I was a voracious reader of books, and I kept a running list of every book I read along with short reviews. This was pre-blogs, so I manually coded the page.

During a stretch of my life, from 2000 to 2004, I was religious about keeping it updated. Then I forgot about it. I tried to log back into Angelfire and discovered that because it had been inactive for several years, the page was gone. It's not even on Archive.org, the nonprofit that is trying to preserve as much of the Web as possible.

Now throw into the mix all the stuff I've posted on social media sites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Can I count on YouTube being around for 50 more years? Recently, Yahoo shut down its online video site, Jumpcut, which I used a few times. I forgot to download my Jumpcut videos by the deadline, and now they're gone.

Yes, I'm an idiot. But I'm not alone.

"We had a session recently where we brought in a bunch of computer users from high schools," said the Library of Congress' LeFurgy. "And they were shocked that this was even really a problem. One of them said, 'I thought anything I put on the Internet stayed there forever.'"

However, all is not lost. There are some strategies for storing your digital archives. But you'll have to do a lot of work. You will need to start thinking like a librarian and become an active curator of your files. That means relentlessly organizing, labeling and tagging, backing up and deleting.

The first and most important thing to do is to begin deleting files. Whittle things down to the essentials. What do you really want to maintain and pass along? You must be ruthless and vigilant.

Next, develop a system for organizing files online and offline. If you're going to store stuff on removable media, like DVDs, place them in cases that have extensive labels, and index them. And don't store files like text documents or photos on propriety formats that are not widely adopted. Experts recommend photos in JPG forms and documents in PDF formats or basic text formats.

Label every file and tag them with as much information as you can. Being obsessive now will pay off in the long run. This is a lot of work, which is why you want to cull your archives as much as possible.

Once that's done, make multiple copies. You can also explore "cloud" backup services. My wife uses Mozy, an online backup service that stores everything from her laptop on a regular basis. Unlimited storage costs \$103.95 for two years.

Netgear offers a piece of hardware called ReadyNAS, which connects your PC to your choice of third-party "cloud" storage services to create remote backups.

Of course, even if you've done all of this, you have to create a system for remembering where it all is and which services you've used.

Jeremy Toemam co-founded Legacy Locker to help keep track of online archives and to create a system for handling them when you die. You probably haven't thought about what will happen to your Facebook account, or Yahoo Web mail, when you pass. Legacy Locker creates a system for letting you pass along all your passwords and important digital documents to yours heirs after you die.

But with any of these cloud solutions, you need to read the fine print and terms of service. What happens to all that data if the company goes out of business? What happens if you die, and your bill is no longer being paid?

It's overwhelming. And that's why the smart thing to do is to start right now.

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## WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

The Library of Congress has a Digital Preservation project that has loads of information and tips for managing files at home:

[www.digitalpreservation.gov/you ... digitalmemories.html](http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/you-should-know/digital-memories.html)

And read Cathy Marshall's "Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving" paper that appeared in D-Lib Magazine in March 2008 for a comprehensive overview of this subject:

[www.dlib.org/dlib/march08/mars ... /03marshall-pt1.html](http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march08/marshall-03/marshall-pt1.html)

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