From Paper to Cyberspace: Changing Communication Technologies and the Implications for Personal Records Archivists
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In the last fifty years, and especially within the last decade, the way people communicate has changed tremendously. Society has gone from largely paper-based means of communication to new computerized technologies. With the widespread use of the Internet, documents that were once tangible and textual are now virtual and composed of bits and bytes. People are creating documents that will never see a conventional physical form. Novels are being created, diaries are being written, and family histories are being organized and displayed, without ever having a familiar physical form.

The problem this creates for archivists is great. While a considerable amount of research has been done on institutional electronic records, and electronic public records in particular, the personal side has been largely ignored. Few people have addressed the enormous implications of computers and, especially, the Internet for personal records in general and personal records archives in particular. While it can be argued that some of the research that is being done on public electronic records can be used by personal records archivists, it can also be said that personal records archivists need to develop an approach of their own dealing with these new forms of communication.

This study hopes to raise awareness among archivists and researchers of the problems facing personal records archivists in this new era. Chapter One shows that the Canadian "total archives" tradition has meant that personal records have always been an important part of the mandate of Canadian public archives. Researchers and the wider society which funds these archives will thus rightly expect that archivists in these archives will address the matter of personal electronic records. Chapter Two provides an overview of archival responses to institutional electronic records and archives. This will show that heavy emphasis has been placed on public or government electronic records. While this orientation can provide useful insights for personal records archivists, it does not address all of their concerns. Chapter Three will examine some of the most recent developments in computerized communications technologies people are using when creating personal documents. These technologies pose new challenges for personal records archivists. A short history of personal communications will put this challenge into context. Chapter Four will convey various archival responses to personal electronic records. Some archival institutions (including the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, the University of Manitoba Department of Archives and Special Collections, and the National Archives of Canada) have been surveyed to see how they have responded to personal electronic records and how they plan to do so in future.

This thesis aims to raise awareness among archivists and researchers of the implications of personal electronic records for archives. This is an important, yet largely understudied, aspect of archives. It is hoped that this study will further examination of this key problem by archivists and others alike.