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Is U.S. History Becoming History?



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by [Jeffrey Benner](#) | [Also](#) by this reporter

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The workings of government in the first decades of the information era have been poorly recorded, archiving experts say. Years of valuable public records may have already been lost, creating a gap in the country's historical record.

Archivists, government watchdog groups and investigative reporters worry that unless the problem is solved, the lack of information could make it more difficult to hold government officials accountable for their decisions and policies.

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"We know less about information in the information age," said Patrice McDermott, a records management analyst with government watchdog agency [OMB Watch](#). "It's not just government, corporations have to deal with this too."

Records management experts say the problem started around 1985, when U.S. government agencies began using e-mail and word-processing programs as they changed the way they conducted business. But they did it without a system for preserving electronic files.

Under the old system, multiple copies of correspondence and documents were carefully filed away. But now that nearly all government operations use electronic documents, the old "paper trail" of how policies and regulations developed, and who made them, has been lost.

Now, experts say, only the final draft is saved, making it more difficult to understand how decisions were made, who made them, and why -- the very information most crucial to historians and investigative reporters.

"The way it used to work is that when you created a document, it circulated with five carbons that were filed in different places," McDermott said.

"People started storing things on their own disks, willy-nilly," McDermott said. "I'm sure agencies have made print copies of the final documents, but the carbons of who had checked the document and how it was marked up are missing. So, reporters and investigators will have no record of how a policy came into being."

The problem doesn't look to be solved anytime soon. Much of the blame is falling on the shoulders of the National Archive Records Administration ([NARA](#)) -- the agency charged with recording the history of government.

As for the estimated 26 million U.S. government webpages, there are no archiving guidelines at all.

However, just days before the Bush administration took office, NARA instructed all agencies to take a snapshot of its websites and submit the data to NARA on CD-ROM by March 20.

The lack of an effective system for archiving electronic records troubles Scott Armstrong, an investigative journalist who cut his teeth in the Watergate Era.

Armstrong believes by the time the problem is solved, there will be a 25-year hole in the historical record. He's fond of calling it the "Carlin Gap," in mocking honor of John Carlin, archivist of the United States since 1992.

"The gap is enormous," Armstrong said. "I estimate they're preserving less than 1 percent of the electronic documents, and somewhere between 50 and 75 percent of the kind of records previously (in the paper era) archived are being lost."

Lewis Bellardo, deputy archivist of the United States, said he didn't know how much data has been lost government-wide, but he used a telling example to acknowledge that there was a problem.

Due to a server glitch, NARA lost some of its internal agency records in the summer of 1999. "We had an e-mail loss here ourselves," Bellardo said. "If that's the case with us, it's probably not just us."

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