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Drinking from the Firehose

Electronic Communication: By What Means Authentication?

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Part II: Developments in the Authentication of Scholarly Electronic Publications ...

There are interesting developments on the horizon for the authentication of more formal electronic communications. In investigating the subject for this column, I ran into some challenges. In order to explain authentication and encryption methods to the *ATG* audience, I would need far more knowledge than I presently have. This stuff is beyond me, I must admit. However, several knowledgeable individuals came to my rescue. **Peter S. Graham**, Associate Vice President for Information Services at Rutgers University, has written an excellent piece on the subject. This treatise may be found in its entirety in the ALA publication, *After the Electronic Revolution, Will You Be the First to Go? Proceedings of the 1992 Association for Library Collections and Technical Services President's Program*, (Chicago: ALA, 1993, A. Hirshon, ed.) Anyone wishing a good snapshot of what is going on in this area (in lay terms) should definitely read this piece.

There are people with vast technical knowledge who can discuss the topic at length and depth far beyond my understanding. For instance, **Clifford Lynch**, one of my favorite systems gurus, from the University of California, corresponded with me about the topic. He indicated that progress is being made, but much of it is still in development and is security sensitive. Talking openly about encryption techniques may be asking for trouble. In order to keep electronic integrity uncompromised, wide discussion of the topic is not encouraged, at least not on a detailed level. Well, I'm relieved; I wasn't sure I was up to it anyway! Maybe someone can illuminate us on the topic in some general, understandable fashion at next year's

Charleston Conference.

OK. Now that I have admitted to my inadequacy in explaining these concepts, (though hopefully have peaked your interest), let's hark back to an earlier time. As a library science student, I was introduced to the joys of formal descriptive bibliography, the principles of rare book collecting, and manuscript and archive inventory techniques. Back in the 1980's, as an acquisitions assistant, I had the privileged duty for a time of handling the most prestigious orders; those of the Rare Book Room. Those were halcyon days! I searched those orders with extraordinary care, and made telephone calls to out-of-state and out-of-country antiquarian dealers with baited breath. The Rare Book Curator lived or died daily by these successes or failures.

I realized by those experiences that there were out there, to be had by the quick and the well-funded, exquisite bibliographic treasures. My question today: will anyone be excited by such artifacts in the future? I hope so. But let's just imagine, for sale:

ACQNET, complete archive, from Christian Boissonnas's original files, 1991-2005. His personal notes to contributors included. Authenticated data guaranteed to be complete and unexpurgated. Loadable on a variety of machines if modern interfacing/translation modules available. \$25,000.00.

And here's another crumb of food for thought: how are businesses and institutions going to handle the official archiving of electronic communications? In many cases, they aren't (yet). Our country's National Archives have had to wrestle with this problem when the departing Bush Administration purged electronic mail that might have been considered archival.

In earlier days, these communications might have been filed as paper or might have been conversations never recorded at all. Making choices about what is "archival" with new mediums requires new levels of sophistication.

The need for new skills is being acknowledged. At my own institution, for instance, the University Archivist's position happens to be vacant and is being advertised. The successful candidate will have experience with the U.S. MARC format for Archives and Manuscripts, and will be familiar with other electronic communication formats and archiving principles. A new breed of archivists will be expected to have these skills. I am delighted that my institution recognizes this fact. When the new archivist comes to call on me, I hope that I will have my electronic filing cabinet in order! (Right now it's mess, and overflowing. And ironically, I almost never use my traditional filing cabinet, and in fact moved it out of my office recently.)

If someone wanted to track the various "editions" of this very piece, how would it work? My first draft was ink on paper. It has been thrown away. The next version was on my PC at home, in WordPerfect. Then it was uploaded to my campus computer main directory as a file. There I edited it some more. Next, it will be uploaded as a mail message, to be sent via the Internet to my editor. He may make a few more changes before it goes to the printer. Fortunately we can still enjoy the end result, an issue of *Against the Grain* in traditional manners — under a tree, while soaking in the tub, or curled up by the fire! ☺