

**North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
Office of Archives and History**

Guidelines for Maintaining and Preserving Records of Web-Based Activities

Introduction

The use of Internet websites to distribute information, provide services to, and transact business with the citizens of North Carolina is fast becoming a preferred method of state and local governments. In many cases the information is merely graphic representations of publications previously made available to the public in hard copy (brochures, reports, forms, etc.). However, many website pages published by government agencies exist only in electronic form and in a multitude of locations and formats. The mounting use of websites adds yet another wrinkle to the spectrum of electronic records management issues facing government agencies.

Legal Background

The need to manage these website resources is the same as for other records keeping systems—to ensure compliance with North Carolina statutes concerning the creation of, retention of, and continuing access to public records. Since the charge of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources (DCR) is to provide for long-term preservation and access to records with historical, legal, administrative, or evidentiary value, these guidelines were created to provide government agencies with guidance in managing their website records.

Chapter 132 of the *General Statutes of North Carolina*, the Public Records Act, defines a “public record” as “...all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, photographs, films, sound recordings, magnetic or other tapes, electronic data-processing records, artifacts, or other documentary material, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance in connection with the transaction of public business by any agency of North Carolina government or its subdivisions.” (Emphasis added.) Website source files meet the definition of a public record as they are “made or received pursuant to law or ordinance in connection with the transaction of public business.”

Because they meet the above criteria, all provisions of the North Carolina Public Records Act (G.S. §132) apply. State and local government agency heads should ensure that disposition of these source files be planned, managed, and carried out according to the Public Records Act’s requirements and using procedures of the DCR, Office of Archives and History. Public officials should also note that the retention of records maintained in electronic files is the same as for similar records maintained in traditional paper formats unless otherwise specified by an authorized records retention and disposition schedule. It is the record and its content and function, not the media, which drive retention and disposition decisions, although the same record created in both paper and electronic formats may have a different retention requirement for each format. It is also critical to note that as a disbursement or publication means, websites often contain records that have their own separate retention period. These items should be scheduled separately from the website.

Definitions

The **Internet** is a decentralized, global network connecting millions of computers. It allows computer users to communicate information to each other.

Websites are collections of information, documents, and databases that are provided to a user community utilizing World Wide Web formats and protocols.

Web page is a source file, maintained as ASCII text, provided by a file server, and subsequently executed on a local computer, that uses HTML/XML markup languages and external software tools to produce a representation and provide meaning.

HTML is a non-proprietary file format for describing the structure of hypermedia documents—plain text (ASCII) files with embedded codes for logical markup, using tags to structure text into table, interactive forms, headings, paragraphs, lists, and more. It can be created and processed with a wide range of tools from simple text editors to sophisticated authoring software.

Website Content Assessment

To help with the analysis of your agency's website, the Office of Archives and History has included a Website Content Assessment (WCA) table, which will allow you to determine the level of legal and/or managerial risk associated with your website and your online presence. Your future records keeping actions will be determined by the risk level under which you are currently operating.

Why Take Website Snapshots?

Snapshots capture the look and feel of active agency websites at particular points in time and ensure that DCR, per its charge in the Public Records Act, documents agency use of the Internet over time.

Frequency of Capture

The frequency of website changes and revisions will vary greatly from agency to agency. Some agencies that publish fairly static versions of policies, publications, or images may not see major changes to their website design for months at a time. However, agencies with more advanced services (interactive forms, streaming video, etc.) might undergo major changes a number of times each year. Recognizing those differences, DCR recommends that website snapshots be taken at the time of each major version change to the website (different look, additional features, etc.) or at least every two (2) years, whichever occurs first. For those agencies who have a high litigation risk, we recommend that you audit every change to the site, cite the date that change occurred and whether or not that change was posted as part of the official website. This documents for legal purposes your agency's position at a particular point in time.

Website Description Form

DCR has prepared a standard description form (see attachment) that permits government agencies to capture easily information about the content, format, and technical characteristics of their websites. Submission of this descriptive information, along with copies of all active source files and both electronic and hard copy versions of relevant log files that document the names of files supporting the website, will allow DCR to provide continuing access to and an historical perspective for the provision of government information and services. [Agencies may deem it efficient to capture relevant source files using website capture software. This is an acceptable alternative to identifying and capturing source files manually, as long as the files are saved as ASCII text.]

What to Include in the Website Snapshot

You should include all active documents available to the public that are located on the agency's web server, including copies of agency documents that exist in another form elsewhere, EXCEPT:

1. Databases
2. Files located on a web server external to the agency (e.g. another agency's website).

Acceptable Media for Submission of Website Snapshots

To ensure ease of transfer and standardization of the media being submitted for preservation, DCR suggests that agencies adhere to the following media specifics when capturing their websites:

1. Use a fresh CD-ROM (CD-R)
2. A gold reflective surface is preferred but not required.
3. Source files should not be compressed.
4. The CD's case should be appropriately labeled, but the CD itself should not. A volume label is automatically created during initial use of the CD, and may be edited to reflect your agency's nickname/acronym, date, and/or disk number within the allotted 11 characters. Place this number on the case and all related transfer documentation.
5. The CD writing should comply with the Joliet modifications to ISO 9660 specifications. These settings are available in your CD creation software options.

Procedure for Submission of Website Snapshots to NC Office of Archives and History

The media and documentation from the website snapshot may be transferred to the Office of Archives and History using the standard records transfer form (see <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/archives/rec/transfer.htm> or call the State Records Center at 919-733-3891). The media and documentation may only be transferred under provisions of an approved records retention and disposition schedule and will be transferred immediately to the custody of the North Carolina State Archives upon receipt.

Attachments

- Website Content Assessment Table
- Website Description Form
- Website Description Form Instructions