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# Why should we archive governmental email as correspondence? An analysis of the Capstone-Approach from the perspective of Austrian historical source studies

Maria Benauer\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Austrian Historical Research – Austria

## Abstract

Email has become a key instrument of modern administration in the digital age and can hold an archival value by providing evidence on governmental transactions. While being an administrative mean, however, email also is the most frequently used media of communication worldwide. It is a multifunctional tool that can be used to exchange diverse types of information for different purposes and, thus, blurs the line between private and official recordkeeping structures and practices. In recent years, multiple studies have reported that this ambiguous nature of email and the information behaviour associated with it internationally has led to a deterioration of recordness in public administrations across the world and hinders the capture of significant emails for permanent preservation. In reaction to this problem, some public archives, therefore, have implemented new approaches to manage and preserve governmental emails.

The so-called Capstone Approach is a systematic and automated way to capture emails of archival value for preservation. This new method does not rely on the end user assigning email messages to single business processes, as commonly established for administrative records, but shifts the focus to their functional context by appraising and archiving entire email accounts. By doing so, it suggests structural similarities between governmental email and personal correspondence, just as the email system itself, and, thereby, has a significant impact on the future scope of use, interpretability, and evidential function of governmental emails. From a user perspective, for example, the archival capture of entire email accounts could provide unique insights into individual realities and lighten up organisational processes which previously have lacked a written manifestation along the administrative procedure. Overall, however, the treatment of governmental emails as correspondence challenges traditional concepts of recordkeeping and archival thinking while also confronting historians with practical and conceptual challenges when approaching email archives.

This paper investigates the interrelation of archival appraisal and historical research in the digital age by the example of governmental emails. Based on a triangulation of recent international findings in archival theory and an Austrian source studies approach, it examines the Capstone approach's implicit expectations for governmental email as a historical source genre in order to assess its long-term impact on the archival usage of email archives. Thereby, it aims to investigate how email, as a medium, affects traditional recordkeeping and archival principles to reflect on the question whether the traditional distinction made between official and private in Austrian archival science as well as historical source studies is still reasonable in the digital age.

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\*Speaker

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