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Archiving our past with accuracy and precision

UBC professor leading the way to preserve current records for thousands of years

by Alia Dharssi
NEWS STAFF

Imagine if every record in human history disappeared.

That's why Luciana Duranti, a UBC Professor from the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies is heading the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems Project (InterPARES), an international study aimed at establishing guidelines to ensure that digital material remains accurate and accessible decades after it is created.

Preserving records and maintaining authenticity is the hardest part with digital records, she said.

"When we have a paper document, even 500 years later, we can run tests to see whether it is authentic or not, because it is still the same thing," said Duranti. "But, with a digital document every time we save it, we break it into parts, and every time

we call it back, we make a copy."

The InterPARES Project, which began in 1998, is an international collaboration among governments, private organisations, universities, and professionals as diverse as artists and engineers who deal with electronic material over time.

"The project was started eight years ago...to ensure not only that we could preserve material generated in digital form, but that we could preserve it in a way that we could be sure of its authenticity over time, because that's the big issue," Duranti explained.

The findings of InterPARES have already had a marked impact on the technological industry. No European Union (EU) government buys software that does not satisfy the recommendations of InterPARES. Some countries belonging to InterPARES, like China, have already embedded the InterPARES standards into legislation.

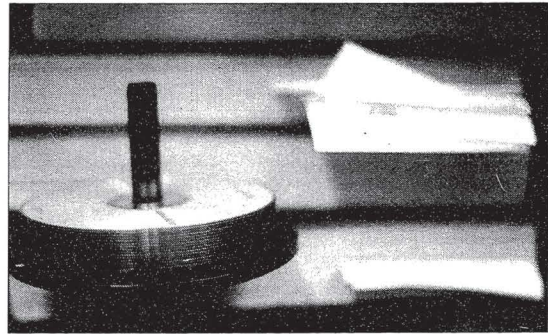
"While an archival institution or

an archival program has always been important to preserve our memory, to make our documents available to the next generation, now it has acquired a different function and the function is to ensure that those documents are protected," Duranti stated.

The InterPARES project focuses on protecting the authenticity of two types of records. The first type consists of those that are necessary to keep, such as documents that embody the rights of the citizens and blueprints of buildings. The second category of documents includes those that record the administrations of businesses and people.

Duranti explained that these records will provide historical accountability by providing evidence of our actions while suppling the reasons behind the actions.

Files are frequently corrupted because of changing technology, and the project is searching for ways to prevent this.



DIGITISE: Extensions of our memory. YINAN MAX WANG PHOTO

Every time a system is upgraded, files can be corrupted, she said. "It's not a question of keeping the bits and the bytes. It's the question of being able read them," she added.

Another goal, Duranti said, is

establishing a system so that when documents are no longer needed, they could be taken out of the hands of those who produced them and archived immediately.

This would make it hard to tamper with or delete digital evidence in a case of government or business scandal, she said.

The study is not without its share of skepticism, however. There have been concerns that implementing a system that InterPARES strives to establish might limit the types or records that get added into a database. No one would want one person writing history, she said.

Duranti countered by stating that the debate occurs within the research group.

She explained that if there was no debate this process would have proceeded faster. This hasn't been the case, however.

"The solution we present, is already the result of the debate... Because we are so varied, we have everybody from all walks of life," she said. "So, believe me to produce what we have produced in eight years, if I were by myself with my best friend, we could have done it probably in two years. It takes eight years because it takes that long to get everybody on board on the same thing."

"So basically instead of producing something fast and then taking 20 years to get it accepted, we first decided to accept, to agree on what we were producing, so that when it gets it out, it is already accepted." ■

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BRITISH COLUMBIA



NEWS BRIEFS

Solidarity talk draws crowd

Dozens turned out for a talk at noon on Tuesday, March 21 in the SUB titled, "Is Israel an Apartheid State?"

Organised by the Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights group, speakers spent two hours discussing the question posed by the lecture.

Mostafa Henaway, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and International Solidarity Movement activist, asserted that the Palestinians were subject to a second, inferior set of laws that other Israelis were not, which to him, qualified Israel as an apartheid state. "A legal form of colonialism, that's what Israel is," stated Henaway.

Mobilisation Against War and Occupation (MAWO), Fire this Time and the Vancouver Communities in Solidarity with Cuba were also present at the event. ■