

Study attempts to save our fading digital past

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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"That's the biggest factor, that's the biggest problem," says [Luciana Duranti], who is on sabbatical in Rome. "It's not just changing, it's overwriting."

"The comments of the community worldwide were, 'This is all well and good, but this can only be done by those who have lots of money,'" Duranti says.

FULL TEXT

What if the world never saw Romeo and Juliet because the text file was corrupted, or no one laid eyes on Leonardo's Mona Lisa because they couldn't find the program that created it?

Luciana Duranti is trying to ensure that doesn't happen to today's masterpieces -- or even to our birthday party snapshots and city hall property records.

A professor of archival studies at the University of British Columbia, Duranti is the director of an international, multi-year project that's striving to preserve the world's digital archives for 2008 and beyond.

"Our identity is given by our past. Who we are, we know from our past," she says, "Without our memory of who we are, we don't exist."

Retrieving documents and being able to prove they're authentic also has a pragmatic purpose, Duranti says: Business, government and the legal system often depend on building a reliable paper trail.

Technology is evolving so quickly that it can be impossible to open computer files created just a few years ago with now-defunct programs. And in a world where anyone with a keyboard can alter Wiki- reality, she says the constant mutability of the Internet and all digital documents poses the greatest challenge to the validity and longevity of that information.

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The InterPARES Project -- the name is Latin for "among peers" and short for "international research on permanent authentic records in electronic systems" -- began in 1999 and just launched its third phase.

The first focused on preserving existing documents in the face of creeping obsolescence, as well as making sure they're accurate.

The second developed guidelines on how archives and organizations can create data that is easier to preserve from the start.

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The third phase -- just awarded grant support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and scheduled to continue until 2012 -- will help small organizations with minimal resources figure out how to safeguard their digital shoeboxes for the future.

InterPARES looks at artistic data such as digital photos, music and moving images, scientific documents such as NASA records or astronomy research, and government documents.

People think of e-mails or the photos and videos they share online as digital objects that exist somewhere in their complete form, says Duranti.

In fact, they are just tiny bits of data that are stored in our computers and reassembled each time we call up that message or image, she says.

Physical works of art or text documents can be verified by analyzing the materials or techniques used to produce them, she says, but the virtual-jigsaw nature of digital documents means there is essentially no original to authenticate -- making a reliable record all the more important.

Illustration

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