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Saving the past in digital age; Files created a few years ago can't be opened; [Final Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

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

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.

Full Text (368 words)

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What if the world never saw Romeo and Juliet because the 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 B.C., Duranti is the director of an international, multi-year project that's striving to preserve the world's digital archives.

"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."

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 pose the greatest challenge to the validity and longevity of that information.

"That's the biggest factor, that's the biggest problem," says Duranti, who is currently on sabbatical in Rome. "It's not just changing, it's over-writing."

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

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

Physical works of art or text documents can be verified by analyzing how they were produced, Duranti says, but the virtual- jigsaw nature of digital documents means there is no original to authenticate -- making a reliable record all the more important.

The ultimate aim, Duranti says, is to ensure that "the memory that we will have is not necessarily the memory of the rich and powerful, it is the memory of everybody."

[Illustration]

Colour Photo: Luciana Duranti ;

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