Abbey Newsletter

InterPARES Project Seeks to Preserve Digital Records

"InterPARES" (pronounced *inter parries*) means "International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems," and it also means "among equals," which pleases those involved in the project. It evolved out of previous research at the University of British Columbia's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. This UBC project began by defining the requirements for creating, handling and preserving reliable and authentic electronic records in *active* recordkeeping systems. These requirements, now a formal standard, are used by the U.S. Defense Information Systems Agency.

Next the UBC Project worked on the preservation requirements for *inactive* records, and soon saw the need for an interdisciplinary, international approach. Planning for a preliminary meeting began in 1997; the meeting took place in June 1998, in Washington, DC. There the research plan was drafted and given the name "InterPARES," but the plan was not officially launched until January 1, 1999.

At the Society of American Archivists meeting in Pittsburgh two months ago (August 1999), there was a long, fascinating panel session on InterPARES, chaired by Anne Gilliland-Swetland, who co-chairs the American Research Team. There were presentations by Terry Eastwood (Chair of the Canadian Research Team) and others. The Project Director is Luciana Duranti of UBC.

The approach taken by the Project is best described in its web page, http://www.interpares.org/about.htm.

Under the heading "The Electronic Records Problem," for instance, it says, "To deal with the hybrid nature of modern recordkeeping, some organizations have attempted to reduce all records produced by an office to a single medium, for example, by printing out email and inserting it in a paper file, by scanning paper documents into electronic systems, or by converting electronic and paper records to microfilm. These attempts have been unsuccessful for a number of reasons. Firstly, the conversion of records purely for preservation reasons tends to hamper the workflow in an office and, consequently, its implementation is often sporadic and inconsistent. Secondly, many records do not lend themselves to such conversion. . . . Thirdly, recent court decisions have rejected the practice of converting electronic records to other media. . . . "

There are 20 members of the International Team, which acts as a steering committee for the project. The members come from national research teams in six or seven countries or geographical areas. There are four domains of investigation, each of which has a number of questions to work on:

conceptual requirements

appraisal criteria and methodology

preservation methods

a framework for developing policies, strategies and standards

This project somehow inspires confidence, partly because the members are from a high decision-making level, partly because they seem to have been successful in attracting funding, and partly because they are not looking for easy answers.

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