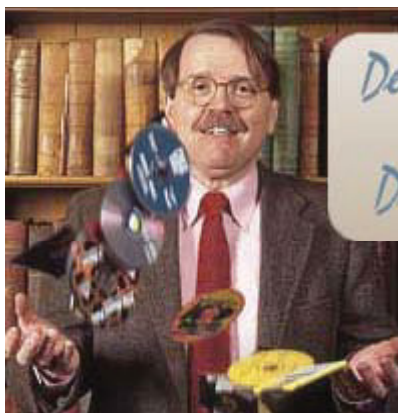


Suppose you moved a filing cabinet and found an ancient 5 ¼-inch floppy disk, circa 1985, written in Wordstar and labeled “Cure for Cancer.” How do you read the darn thing now?

For that matter, suppose the county clerk converts all of the property deeds to digital ones. Can you be sure some hacker won't substitute his name for yours?



*Devising Rules
for the
Digital Road*

By Richard Chady

Although some computer advocates once heralded the arrival of the “paperless society,” Philip Eppard, dean of the University at Albany’s School of Information Science and Policy, views the rapid evolution of the digital age with concern.

In many ways, he said, it’s a crisis that “will make Y2K seem like nothing.”

“It’s so easy to lose data altogether,” Eppard said. “Electronic material can be altered without leaving a trail unless there are proper controls.”

Eppard is directing a three-year, \$780,000 federally funded project, part of a multi-national effort, to develop ways to ensure the long-term preservation, trustworthiness and accessibility of computerized records. The scary truth is that there is no such system today.

For centuries, a paper document, whether it was the Magna Charta or someone’s old bank book, was seen as an unchanging record that could be analyzed in the context of its author, the time it was created, its use and so on. If Lincoln scratched out several versions of the Gettysburg Address, future readers could follow his thought process through the edits.

But a digital record is merely a collection of electronic bits and bytes that can change instantly at the click of a mouse as the record moves through different systems or uses. And preservation isn’t just a matter of printing out a copy, because digital records can include sounds, images and moving pictures.

One of the goals of the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) project is to recommend model policies, strategies and standards to ensure that authentic electronic records are preserved over long periods of time. Participants have already conducted a survey of institutions, suggested requirements for establishing authenticity, drafted models of appraisal and preservation activities, and written a glossary.

UAlbany is one of five U.S. universities that are part of InterPARES, a global effort involving 10 nations and directed by Prof. Luciana Duranti of the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. The other American campuses are UCLA, Georgia Tech, Missouri and Penn State; also participating are the National Archives and Records Administration and the Smithsonian.

The American research team has been funded by a grant to the University at Albany of \$780,188 from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission — the largest award in the commission's history.

“If the project is successful, people who need to access information from the 1990s will have a guarantee that those important electronic records have survived and are authentic,” Eppard said.

Richard Chady, M.L.S.'88, is an award-winning writer who works in the health care field in Albany.