

## **Society of America Archivists**

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Long-Term Preservation of Electronic Records: The InterPARES Project

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### **Italian Research on Electronic Records**

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My presentation aims to express the critical issues of the electronic records preservation in the present Italian situation and the crucial role the InterPARES research could play to reinforce the national archival strategies in this area, thanks to its scientific method of investigation based on the diplomatics analysis and thanks to its multidisciplinary and international approach.

At least, two main aspects should be stressed from a general point of view:

- First, only the combined effort of several countries with different traditions and jurisdictions will allow archivists to meet challenge of preserving electronic records over the long term. In the telling words of Jeff Rothenberg in 1995, we run the risk of a “substantial practical loss, as well as the condemnation of our progeny for thoughtlessly consigning to oblivion a unique historical legacy.” The main technical and archival problems are the same everywhere, and can only be solved everywhere by interrelated research of different specialists from different areas.
- Second, a comprehensive international research, which tests all its results in various national and archival context, will allow us to enlarge and qualify a body of common archival knowledge in the case of the electronic records, which is everywhere badly needed.

In fact, the need for an intensive international cooperation is absolutely “required,” if attention is focused on the digital heritage preservation. It is not a matter of sharing opinions or general recommendations, but rather identifying the specific requirements for maintaining the authenticity of the various kinds of electronic records we face though time

and across the professional communities which have the same concerns from the different point of view of the the legal sector, the archivists, and the audit experts.

It is difficult to deny the futility of the much of the effort in recent years to make progress in our knowledge in this area through international seminars, working meetings, agreements for cooperation, and so on. These efforts have created useful opportunities for exchanging views and information, but they have not made substantial progress towards finding the right solutions. The problems connected with the long-term preservation of authentic electronic records are complex, even in defining the different degrees of analysis required at the theoretical and practical levels. The necessary systematic approach requires a multidisciplinary research group, involved in the project for a period long enough to share concepts, terminology and the research methodology and, chiefly, to address, and of course answer, the right questions. This is the only way to get “permanent” results and develop standards, guidelines, general and special procedures for all the communities involved. Even so, it is necessary for the research to proceed from the archival point of view, which must be at the forefront of the investigation, however it may branch out to entertain other concerns and issues. The research is particularly crucial for European countries and especially my country because of the prominent role records play in the national life, as reflected in legislation recently approved that establishes the legal admissibility of any kind of electronic records.

“What is not recorded does not exist from the legal point of view”: this is the old principle still at the basis of the modern codes which govern the large part of the European legal systems. According to the Italian law, for an act to be valid and recognized, it must take place in a well defined procedural context and have a documentary form conforming to legal requirements. In the case of probative records created as evidence of an oral act, and even for narrative records, the written form is essential for supporting the legal recognition of the act itself. The strength of the documentary form is not limited to the present, to the event, but it extends in time into the social community where it is accepted and ruled. The final point is that any record created by a public body is always admissible and valid until its falsity is proved

Several difficulties arise from the very general character of the Italian and many European laws with reference to the records systems:

- Large amounts of active, semi-active and inactive records are accumulating in archival repositories.
- Because of the strong reliance on the records, public administrators are reluctant to destroy records or even oppose instituting the proper procedures for appraisal and disposition -- only archivists are today active in the effort of reducing the quantity of the records accumulated and preserved in Italy;
- Since the beginning of this century, a national law has defined the archival requirements for the recordkeeping systems for all the public bodies, with the aim of guaranteeing in principle the reliability and the authenticity of the public records, by controlling their creation and keeping. So there is no choice for the ministries, the municipalities, the chambers of commerce, etc. in organizing their records, because they had and have to follow detailed rules for the registry systems, the classification plans, the filing systems, the archival structures themselves.
- Consequently, there is a pressing need to reformulate these rules in relation to the technological changes.

AS is the case elsewhere in the world, European society is experiencing a significant transformation in its organisation, which includes business process simplification, rationalization of administrative structure, and increasing focus on the results of the public services rather than on the formal control of their procedures. Information technology has a vital role to play in determining and intensifying this innovation process by developing easy and rapid communication and administrative interrelations. In this context, the traditional requirements for records systems are considered to be an obstacle, if they cannot be adapted to the service needs of administration in this new environment.

Under pressure to simplify and rationalize transforming the public administrative system, and with the haste usual to innovators, Italian legislators, in a way similar to those in Spain, Germany, France and also in the European Union, have recently approved a new set of rules for translating within the next five years at most the traditional records system of all the government agencies, municipalities and other public bodies into an electronic records system, based on:

- electronic registry systems,

- digital classification and filing,
- digitalization of traditional records,
- creation and keeping of the records in the electronic form.

This effort and all the concerns have been focused exclusively on the management of the active records. What is for the moment missing is a legal and technical framework for the preservation of this new electronic memory. The preservation question, even in a country like Italy based on the myth of what is sometimes called “recordness”, seems to be left, today even more than in the past, to the archival community, which is also directly involved in the definition of the electronic recordkeeping functionalities, but has also to choose a general strategy in this delicate phase of the documentary evolution.

Italian archivists, of course, cannot afford to indulge in public administrators’ reluctance to change. But, at the same time, they cannot thoughtlessly share the IT specialists’ lack of awareness and indifference with reference to the long-term fate of electronic records. In Italy, as everywhere, archivists have been left alone with the difficult responsibility to find the feasible way for exercising their role as custodians in the digital environment.

It is a role that requires:

- knowledge and methodology
- a general policy and a clear strategy
- structures and responsibilities
- financial and human resources

It is a role that must be exercised immediately, when the records are created.

For the moment, the tools provided are:

- the recognition of the authority of Italian National Archives in the law on the legal admissibility of the electronic records (dpr 513/1997) for defining the archival requirements for the creation, keeping and preservation of the electronic records in the public sector
- the recent creation in each department or agency of the public administration of a special, highly automated service responsible for the record system, assigned to a director who must be a specialist in archival science

- a program for training, in two to three years, thousands of archivists, records managers, and officers involved in managing public records electronic records systems
- the transfer to the State Central Archives of the semi-active electronic records created by the Government agencies and appraised for permanent preservation. This rule, not yet approved, adds to the Central Archives also the status of an intermediate repository.

All these tools offer support and, even more, create a framework to strengthen the archival mandate in the area of the electronic records. The knowledge, the high specialization, the methodology, the experience required to preserve these records remain, for the moment, a question left only to the archival community. Therefore, there is no need to explain why both the National Archives (the General Direction and the Central Archives of the State) and the Society of Italian Archivists (ANAI), have accepted to join and support the Inter-PARES project. For the same reason, it is easy to understand the enthusiastic support that many important bodies have guaranteed to the national research group created in Italy within the InterPARES structure: the Central Bank of Italy, the Parliament, the Union of Chambers of Commerce, the Public Authority for Information Technology, the Municipalities of Rome, the Ministry for finance, the Universities of Rome, Padoa and Macerata, just to mention a few of them.

More than practical results and pragmatic recommendations, usually subject to a brief life, the Italian archival community and the administrators and specialists involved in the research are looking for a common understanding and a basic methodology as the first, essential step to fulfill conscientiously their mandate: to preserve archives created in the digital era in such a way as will ensure that they are as authentic, integral and accessible as they were in the traditional environment. To take this step is the aim of the InterPARES project, so it is natural for us to be involved in it.