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News

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June 2003

- [June 24, 2003] "[Archivists Say Computers Have No Sense of History](#)." By Kevin Coughlin. In [Star-Ledger News](#) (June 19, 2003). "A scientific journal is warning that electronic record-keeping is no match for paper and ink when it comes to preserving history... The bottom line: Future historians may be clueless about the past without a systematic and reliable way of keeping electronic records. 'The pen may be mightier than the sword, but a single mouse-click can destroy products of inestimable value,' a trio of scientists contends in the current issue of Nature. John Carlin, archivist of the United States, claims the republic hangs in the balance. A 'democracy without open access to its government's records is no longer a democracy,' he told computer scientists in 2001. How to store, retrieve and interpret electronic documents in perpetuity -- regardless of changing technologies -- is an urgent question for the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and a global consortium called InterPARES. That's short for International research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems. They are searching for 'electronic amber,' a digital equivalent of the resin that has preserved fossilized insects for millions of years... One way or another, the government is obligated to hold on to certain records for a very long time. Carlin said it may be necessary to keep tabs on radioactive materials from nuclear plants for 100,000 years. Authenticating electronic documents and preserving the appearance of original materials are key challenges. (The Declaration of Independence loses something as a simple text file.) Officials from the National Archives and Records Administration are working with the San Diego Supercomputer Center and the Georgia Tech Research Institute as well as the National Science Foundation, the Department of Defense and the Patent and Trademark Office. They hope to have a prototype system for 'persistent archives' in a year or two. One promising approach involves XML, or Extensible Markup Language. It's a system that encodes digital tags for describing and sorting electronic documents..."