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# Are you talking to me?

Why we should all be concerned about ensuring continued access to the scholarly and cultural record in digital form

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Digital preservation tends to be categorised as something for specialists to concern themselves with, and almost certainly technical specialists at that. It is not generally regarded as something that most people need to consider. We've all grown up with the traditional library model, in which roles and responsibilities can be neatly segmented. Authors write articles and books, which publishers publish, libraries buy and then (in some cases) also preserve them. Indeed, the preservation part might not occur until many years after purchase, if at all. It may be possible, through doing no more than storing them in stable conditions, for printed material to be accessible for as long as it needs to be, without any further intervention. This is sometimes characterised as 'benign neglect'.

This couldn't be further from the digital library, in which boundaries blur, and there is the potential to be creator, publisher, and/or preserver. There are technical, legal, and organisational reasons for this paradigm shift. The speed at which changes in technology occur means that we have all had to face dealing with technological obsolescence. For example the floppy disks on which I had stored back-up copies of key documents, is of little use with my new laptop, which has no floppy disk drive. There is a short window of opportunity during changes in technology, in which it is possible to move things across to a new technological environment. However, because of the short time frame in which this occurs, it is much more effectively organised by the creator of the digital data, rather than leaving it until it's time to send it on to an archive. It may be too late for them to

cost-effectively provide access to material stored on obsolete technology.

There may also be legal reasons which impede the right of an archive to undertake preservation work. Because preservation inevitably requires active intervention from a relatively early stage in the lifecycle, those who might wish to preserve the resource for the future don't necessarily have the right to make those changes, or indeed to capture it in the first place, if it is web-based content.

This in turn leads on to the organisational issues, in which the relative ease with which anyone can create digital content means that most of us are both authors and publishers, in a sense. The huge volume of material being produced in digital form, combined with the diversity of creators and also the wide range of purposes for which the content is being created, makes it even more challenging to neatly segment roles and responsibilities. These issues, combined with the short timeframe during which action must be taken to manage digital materials, suggest a much more distributed system of preservation responsibilities than is the case with traditional preservation. Factors such as file formats and standards can have a major impact on digital preservation but may well be outside the control of the archive. Furthermore, crucial contextual and technical information, which can assist with authenticity as well as determining appropriate technical strategies, may become lost in the mists of time as projects come to a close and staff move on.

The huge range of types of digital material includes records created through the day-to-day business of an organisation or acquired by them (for example emails, websites, databases, audio files, e-prints, e-journals, and other 'born digital' materials), as well as materials which are made digital through the process of digitisation. They may have been created to meet legal or business requirements, as primary or secondary research, as part of a project or as part of an ongoing strategy to digitise analogue collections. However they were created and for whatever purpose, all are increasing in volume and the only common factor that links them is that they are all vulnerable to loss unless they are properly managed.

The challenges of digital preservation have been widely articulated and discussed in the literature. A key message that perhaps receives less attention is that these challenges need not, indeed must not, be regarded as insurmountable, if the future of our increasingly digital culture, knowledge base,

and economy is not to be placed at risk. Ignoring the problem will inevitably lead to its becoming increasingly intractable, so it is crucial that more organisations make a start, however modest, in managing their own digital materials. Digital preservation has tended to be regarded as the province of a relatively small number of specialists, with a heavy emphasis on technical strategies, some of which are enormously complex. However, much can be achieved in successfully managing institutional digital resources, by nothing more complex than institutional will and commitment, combined with a good dollop of common sense.

There is also significant support for UK higher education and further education institutions in managing their digital resources provided by JISC, most recently in their JISC 4/04 Call for supporting institutional digital preservation and asset management. A key feature of this call was the objective of helping to embed digital preservation more firmly within institutional strategies. As the 4/04 Circular said:

Much of the institutional knowledge base and intellectual assets are now in digital form. There is however a growing realisation that this investment is threatened as the enduring accessibility of the digital resources into the future is far from assured<sup>1</sup>.

The call was aimed primarily at asset types which have already been addressed in previous JISC studies, such as e-journals, web resources, e-prints, e-learning objects and materials, and scientific data. Nine institutions, working on a total of eleven projects, were successful in this call for proposals, and between them will receive a total of £1M over a two year period. The Digital Preservation Coalition was directly involved in two successful bids, including one to develop an intensive training programme. This latest call continues a strong commitment from JISC, through its *Continuing access and digital preservation strategy*<sup>2</sup> in encouraging and facilitating collaboration and partnerships which will result in more widespread good practice in managing digital assets. Collaboration has also been a hallmark of the Digital Preservation Coalition, which was formed in 2001 with nine members, and has now grown to a membership of twenty eight, representing a wide range of interests and perspectives but sharing a common belief in the crucial importance of securing the preservation of digital resources in the UK and working with others internationally to secure our global digital memory and knowledge base. It does this through a programme of initiatives and

activities aimed at rapidly increasing consciousness of what digital preservation is, and how it impacts on a whole range of other activities, and by providing a focal point for dissemination of information, guidance and support. It holds regular forums on topical themes and a recent forum, held in collaboration with the British Library and CURL<sup>3</sup>, focused on institutional repositories, and the importance of ensuring their contents are managed for the long-term benefit of scholarly research and communication. It also commissions technology watch reports<sup>4</sup> on key areas of interest and the first two of these are available from the DPC website, An introduction to OAIS, aims to provide a comprehensible explanation of this important standard. Institutional repositories was also a theme for the second technology watch report. As their uptake and development increases, so does the need to support that development with information and guidance on how to manage them.

Last but not least, the recently launched Digital Curation Centre<sup>5</sup> funded jointly by two DPC members, JISC and the e-Science Core Programme, will provide a range of services to support current digital curation/preservation programmes, whose experience will in turn feed into a vigorous research programme which will yield longer-term benefits. During the launch of the DCC, Peter Burnhill invited us all to respond to the challenge 'we must all be digital curators now'. Are you talking to me?!

- 1 Supporting Digital Preservation and Asset Management in Institutions. [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme\\_404](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_404)
- 2 A Continuing Access and Digital Preservation Strategy for the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) 2002-2005. [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=pres\\_continuing](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=pres_continuing)
- 3 Digital Preservation in Institutional Repositories; report on the BL/CURL/DPC Forum held on 19th October 2004. <http://www.dpconline.org/graphics/events/041019forum.html>
- 4 DPC Reports are available from <http://www.dpconline.org/graphics/reports/>
- 5 For more information on the work of the DCC, see their website at <http://www.dcc.ac.uk>