

Introduction

In 1997 Terry Kuny warned a workshop of the International Federation of Library Associations that the era might become known as a “digital Dark Ages” if we didn’t watch out.¹ In his influential paper, he predicted that an age of knowledge recorded only electronically could be lost forever unless librarians and archivists rose to the challenges of digital preservation.

A decade later there has been significant progress towards meeting those challenges. We no longer fear the loss of entire census datasets or the e-journal output of major academic publishers. The need for digital preservation is part of the professional consciousness and has been accepted by governments worldwide. Disaster scenarios have been superseded by a risk-management approach.

At the same time, digital preservation is still a young field, heavily dependent on research and experimentation. There is an emerging corpus of best practices but no “tried and true” solutions. Moreover, digital preservation activities take place in the context of economic uncertainty and changing and untested rights regimes. It is a fast-moving area that advances yearly in theory and practice but as yet has few exemplars. As a specialty, digital preservation has to be one of the most interesting areas ever to emerge in the domain of information science.

The field is also blessed by the circumstance that most of the relevant literature is freely available on the Web. This literature includes manuals and guidelines for practitioners, research reports from grant-funded projects, studies and white papers commissioned by professional organizations, and a large and growing number of open-access conference proceedings and journal articles. Interestingly, however, there are few published overviews of the field for non-specialists available for purchase, and

fewer still that address both the fundamentals of digital preservation and important current initiatives. The collection of essays offered in *Digital Preservation (Digital Futures Series)* by Marilyn Deegan and Simon Tanner covers most of the territory, but at 260 pages it is more than an overview. *The Long-Term Preservation of Digital Documents: Principles and Practices* (Borghoff, Rodig, Scheffczyk, and Schmitz) is very good on preservation strategies but light on initiatives, and it is even longer than Deegan and Tanner. Alice Keefer and Nuria Gallart’s *La preservacion de recursos digitales* is a current and fast-reading primer, but has not yet been translated into English.

This issue of *Library Technology Reports* is intended to provide a relatively brief, relatively comprehensive introduction to digital preservation. Please note, however, there is so much activity in the field that the goal of being “relatively comprehensive” necessarily has to take a back seat to being “relatively brief.” If I’ve omitted anyone’s favorite tool, project, or information resource, it might have been my ignorance or it might have just been lack of space, but it shouldn’t be taken as a value judgment.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe digital preservation in terms of what it is (definitions) and what it does (goals and strategies). Chapters 3 and 4 delve more deeply into fundamental issues by introducing core frameworks and standards, and the heart of digital preservation, digital formats. Chapters 5 and 6 mention major international preservation initiatives and major open-source repository applications. Chapter 7 covers some specialty subdomains such as e-journal archiving and Web archiving.

I do not cover the arguments for the need for digital preservation. I assume that *LTR* readers accept the need and

are more interested in the means. However, for those who are interested, here are some good essays to start with:

- Terry Kuny, "A Digital Dark Ages? Challenges in the Preservation of Electronic Information," Aug. 1997, www.ifla.org/IV/ifla63/63kuny1.pdf. An early call to arms.
- Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003), www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.3/rosenzweig.html. A lively and nuanced analysis from the perspective of a social historian.
- Martin Waller and Robert Sharpe, "Mind the Gap: Assessing Digital Preservation Needs in the UK," Digital Preservation Coalition, 2006, www.dpconline.org/docs/reports/uknamindthegap.pdf. A valuable assessment for U.S. readers as well.
- James Currall and Peter McKinney, "Investing in Value: A Perspective on Digital Preservation," *D-Lib Magazine* 12, no. 4 (April 2006), www.dlib.org/dlib/april06/mckinney/04mckinney.html. How to make a business case for investing in digital preservation. See also the *espida* Web site, www.gla.ac.uk/espida/index.shtml.

Note

1. Terry Kuny, "A Digital Dark Ages? Challenges in the Preservation of Electronic Information," Aug. 1997, www.ifla.org/IV/ifla63/63kuny1.pdf (accessed Nov. 17, 2007).