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An article first published in the Independent on Sunday by Steve Connor.

It is one of the great ironies of the late 20th Century: computers are enabling more information to be stored than ever before, yet this is turning out to be the worst documented period in history.

Professional archivists are alarmed at the number of official documents being lost for prosperity through being stored in electronic forms that will be unreadable in years to come. They have launched an international effort to avert a crisis that could mark the beginning of the end of history as it has been studied for centuries.

Britain's official archive authority, the Public Record Office, has been joined by the government archive services of the US, Canada and Australia to co-ordinate a campaign to warn the world about the dangers of losing historic documentation in the digital age.

A majority problem is the continual turnover of new computers, new software and new ways of storing information, either on magnetic tapes, floppy disks or laser read optical disks.

“This digital information gets lost in a self perpetuating and expensive cycle of obsolescence and incompatibility”, Professor Durance said. “Anyone who attempts to recover an old letter from an outdated 5 1/4” floppy disk which was written in an obsolete word processing program on a personal computer whose manufacturer is no longer in business, faces this problem.”

An example of the difficulties that archivists face occurred when the German Federal Archives in Koblenz attempted to save thousands of historically important computer files from the communist era of the former East Germany. “The documentation of the digital systems on which the records were generated is missing, the software codes are unknown and the storage media themselves obsolete and in poor condition,” Professor Duranti said. “The electronic records of East Germany are lost to the new German government.”

Christopher Densmore , an archivist from the State University of New York at Buffalo, who is part of the Inter Pares Network said that there was another important reason why the late 20th century could become the worst-documented period in history. “Digital information is extremely fragile,” he said. “Little is known about the stability even of old technologies such as magnetic tape which lasts only about 10 years. Much less is known about the generations of disks and CD's. Right now the average book published on acid free paper by university presses and stored in a library is expected to remain useable for 500 years. That's the standard for paper documents, photographs and microfilm. So material stored in those formats will be available in the year 2500. Contrast that with the stuff of floppies, which, with great care might last until 2030 and without care only 10 years or until 2010. Optical disks might survive intact until 2060 – no one really knows for sure.”

A further problem with the digital age is that it is easier to alter information without a record being kept. Paper held files at the Public Record Office, for instance often include hand written notes in the margins of all the memos and letters that lead up to a policy document.

In the computer age, e-mail messages are rarely stored for archival use and a document in electronic form can be repeatedly changed without the original version being kept. "The archivist may not know who received copies and was therefore in on a decision," Dr Densmore said, "The original item also may have been edited electronically."

Professor Duranti said the Inter Pares project was crucial to future historians. "These issues affect every society every discipline and every practical and intellectual endeavour and common solutions are necessary to reduce barriers to research study and every sort of communication" she said.

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