



AMS Imaging
Australian Microfilm Services
230 Bank Street, South Melbourne, Vic 3205
Ph. (03) 9690 6800 Fax. (03) 9696 3865
ABN: 87 129 201 221
www.ams-imaging.com.au



DIGITAL AMNESIA

*It's a disease associated with long-term information storage.
But it's a disease with a cure, so why are we ignoring it?
By Russ Burkel*

Articles warning of digital obsolescence seem to be coming out of the woodwork these days. All at once it seems the computer/digital experts are writing about an issue that frankly, should have been obvious to them for years – digital amnesia.

What I find strange is that they are still missing the root cause of the problem. The pundits keep talking about life expectancy of storage media. But media is not the real problem.

In today's world there are two basic competing forms of communication. One is human language, both written and spoken. The other is digital languages and the systems associated with them. An obvious difference is that human languages are standardised and digital languages are not. You may ask, why? The answer is really quite simple.

The urge to communicate

Humans, by their nature, want to communicate with each other. They do it by language. The specific language may differ from culture to culture but there's a common thread: language is a methodology that provides easy "access" by humans without reliance on an external technology.

In the digital world things are quite different. Technology, rather than human interaction, is primary. Standardisation that would facilitate access is way down the list. The companies involved in digital storage products salivate at the thought of the profit potential of proprietary systems – which are the opposite of a standardised, universal language. An obvious example is Microsoft's proprietary PC operating system Windows.

The billions of dollars proprietary operating systems have made for their inventors and marketers provide no incentive for the companies in control to create standards. As a result, there are virtually none.

Long-term storage standards?

As for standards for reliable long-term digital storage, forget it. I doubt you'll ever see them. Why? Because people don't demand them and the companies producing digital operating systems see no reason to establish them.

Even if people want it, no company can be forced to produce an access system that will endure even as technology changes. With human languages, people are the access system. With digital systems there is no equivalent.

It's time to face the fact that guaranteed access to digital information is not going to happen.

It's also time to look at something else that deserves but isn't getting attention. That is the fact that computers have the ability to interpret human speech and the written word. A simple solution to digital amnesia is right in front of us.

Store information in analogue form on high quality microfilm and teach the computer to read it at high speed. In fact, reading high quality alphanumeric COM with today's OCR software is a snap. So it should be easy – and inexpensive – to cure the patient of digital amnesia.

Russ Burkel, former vice president international sales and a founder of Eye Communications, is now a consultant on microfilm and digital information systems. He can be reached in the USA on 262 966-7511 or rburkel@juno.com

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