INFORMATION IS A VERB (CONTINUED)

The beginnings of a digital dark age?

Just came across this perceptive piece about digital archives in SAP INFO “Digital Information Will Never Survive by Accident” – an interview with Neil Beagrie of the British Library. (This came to me via the excellent blog – Stoa.org.)

Here is an excerpt:

Mr. Beagrie, in modern societies information is expected to be digitally available. Why is this a threat to the future viability of this information?

Beagrie: In the right conditions papyrus or paper can survive by accident or through benign neglect for centuries or in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls for thousands of years. It takes hundreds of years for languages and handwriting to evolve to the point where only a few specialists can read them.

In contrast, digital information will never survive and remain accessible by accident: it requires ongoing active management. The information and the ability to read it can be lost in a few years. Storage media such

as paper tape, floppy disks, CD-ROM, DVD evolve and fall out of use rapidly. Digital storage media have relatively short archival life-spans compared to other media. As the volumes, heterogeneity, and complexity of digital information grows this requirement for active management becomes more challenging and more critical to a wider range of organisations.

How real and how urgent is this threat?

Beagrie: The threat is very real and insidious and will eat away at the future of our cultural heritage, knowledge economies, and information society if we fail to address it. Statistics on current losses are difficult to compile although there are a number of well-known individual examples of loss or near loss such as the BBC Domesday Disks. Wider overviews are rare. In part this is because few organisations wish to publicise losses. Also sometimes the information can be recovered or substituted in some way (e.g. a paper copy). In such cases the loss is often more subtle: information has effectively been degraded through loss of functionality, linking, or documentation, substantially reducing its real value. We do have current statistics in some areas. For the Web we know

the average life of a webpage is around 44 days. This impacts not only on ephemera of just local interest but on core information resources. For example some studies have shown the impact on access to URLs cited in medical articles after only one or three years.

For the future, there is good statistical information on the current explosive growth of digital information and clear projections for a future data deluge in areas such as scientific research. Instruments and experiments currently being built will generate in a few years more data than has previously been generated in the whole of human history up to that point. Not all of this information has constant and persistent value but a significant proportion of it does. A serious and worsening gap has developed between our ability to create digital information and our infrastructure and capacity to manage and preserve it over time. Some commentators have referred to the likely cumulative effect of this as a future “digital dark ages?.

Stanford Humanities Lab (I am more involved now with its running) hosted a meeting last week of a new consortium for promoting the digital humanities – HASTAC (see my blog from the meeting in Irvine last year [Link]). It is a struggle to convince people that the archaeological issues in creating digital archives are profoundly important. My one-liner is that information is a verb and all media, analogue and digital, are material and social networks. Information needs care and curation.

So little is being done that Bill Rathje (with his garbologist’s perspective on society’s remains) and I are convinced that what will remain from today for future archaeologists is going to be a sad and uninformative mess.