

Remembering Not to Forget: Digital Preservation

The decline of paper as a medium for sharing and recording information has been dramatic. As we move towards paperless offices, and from digital-first to digital-only services, we have doubtless saved a lot of trees and a lot of space. However, paper does have the clear advantage of being a relatively solid and long lasting material. If we put it in a box, and keep it dry, then it will remain usable for years. Can the same be said of digital?

The [example](#) of the Archives of Germaine Greer, acquired by the University of Melbourne in 2013, provide an answer. While the written manuscripts, letters and other printed materials have been easy to access, the floppy disks, old iMacs and voicemail recordings were not. Painstaking efforts to locate the hardware necessary to read old formats, or find means of extracting information from an outdated hard-drive have been necessary. And this is the case with a person who conscientiously sought to preserve her work.

Elsewhere, e-mails are deleted, websites are taken down, and servers are wiped, potentially erasing forever the materials that will help us understand today, tomorrow. When it comes to laws and legal materials, this becomes a question of ensuring justice, democracy and accountability.

Monserrat Canela Garayoa, Archivist at the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), compared the experience with the Bosnian war to that in Serbia. After the Bosnian war, UNHCR took delivery of documents on the fate of refugees. They came in cardboard boxes, and could be stored for the long term in the physical space provided by the archives. Electronic materials did exist – and the High Commission did introduce electronic archives in 1996 – but these still represented a relatively small part of the organisation’s work.

However, in 2013, as the Syrian conflict intensified, it became clear that over 90% of relevant material was electronic – e-mails, videos, other documents. UNHCR therefore took the decision to shift the focus to archiving all types of digital material, working to guarantee that material in all formats can be used in future. Everything would be saved, and properly catalogued for future discovery. Under UNHCR rules, after 20 years, it will be open to the public, in all but the most exceptional cases.

In doing so, it became possible to ensure the accountability of UNHCR into the future, as well as to support future researchers and to ensure that the importance of the UN’s work in helping refugees is recognised. While this effort will only bear fruit in future, it is clear that if we want to enjoy the same access to archival material about today as we do about past events, it is necessary.