

UNESCO PERSIST—ADDRESSING THE SHARED CHALLENGES OF LONG-TERM DIGITAL PRESERVATION

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION SECTION

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon everyone.

I very much appreciate being part of the Preservation and Conservation section's session this year on Planning Digital Preservation. It is a topic that I have been involved with during my time as IFLA President and as the former University Librarian at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. And it is a topic that requires our attention. If you look at the professional literature over the past 10 years, the overwhelming topic that is covered is about Access, access in all its forms and formats. Yet, very little is being said and written about preservation, all types of preservation. But without preservation, you cannot have access. I am sure that the speakers that will follow me will be sharing the same message with you.

[Slide 2]

I will be speaking about an international digital preservation initiative called UNESCO PERSIST with which I have been involved since a UNESCO Memory of the World conference held in 2012. And if you are wondering where the name PERSIST came from, it was created in 2013 and stands for this long description of our mission. It is taking time, but I think it is an essential activity to provide an overall framework and guidance to the many digital projects taking place in the world today.

[Slide 3]

So, what is the size of the challenges we face in digital preservation? I often use this slide to show that there is an ocean of digital data that we in libraries,

archives and other information institutions deal with every day; and the sea level is rising rapidly, and not only because of climate change. Just as we don't know how many fish there are in the seas, no one really knows how much information, how much data exists online. But we all agree that we are facing a tsunami of digital information. There are several ongoing estimates of how much digital information is being created every second. The data company Domo calculates that every minute, internet users send almost half a million tweets, 400 hours of video are being uploaded to YouTube every SECOND, and, on the Internet, there are about a billion websites. And we are talking only about human created information. Think of all the machines and robots and implanted sensors that are collecting data every second for reuse in positive or negative ways.

[Slide 4]

So, PERSIST was created as one of the responses to addressing this global challenge of preserving our cultural and documentary heritage in digital format. PERSIST was a result of a UNESCO Memory of the World conference held in 2012 in Vancouver which brought together not only memory institutions from around the world but also the other two major partners in any kind of digital preservation project, namely the ICT industry and governments at national and international levels. UNESCO is firmly supportive of this preservation effort, and all the member states of UNESCO in 2015 adopted a Recommendation concerning the importance of preservation, including digital preservation. A UNESCO recommendation is not legally binding as a UNESCO Convention is, but every country has to report on its progress towards achieving the terms of the Recommendation within four years, so in 2019.

With the recognition that preserving digital objects is not just a technical challenge, PERSIST began with three working groups: Technology and Research, Policy and Content & Best Practices.

[Slide 5]

One of the working groups, Content and Best Practices, is being led by IFLA, and aims to enhance the practices in memory institutions across the globe in the area of content curation and digital preservation. We successfully produced a very

important document in 2016 to assist memory institutions in selecting digital items for long term preservation.

An international group of experts from memory institutions around the world developed these guidelines for the selection of digital heritage items for long term preservation. These guidelines are on the unescopersist website and are available in 7 languages, including Mandarin, Spanish, Serbian, Lithuanian, Arabic and French. If there are some people in the audience who would volunteer to do additional translations, the document has 19 pages, I would love to hear from you after this session.

In addition to content activities and best practices, PERSIST is working with the ICT sector to include preservation elements in the development of new software to ensure the long term accessibility of digital objects, we are developing guidelines for what UNESCO member states need to implement policy measures related to digital preservation, and we continue to advocate for digital preservation to all levels of government.

[Slide 6]

I think it is very important to point out that it is the connection to UNESCO that distinguishes PERSIST from other digital preservation projects. Over the past few years there has been ongoing discussions about where within the UNESCO hierarchy would PERSIST best fit. The conclusion is that PERSIST is closely tied to the UNESCO Memory of the World program and its International Advisory Committee. We have recently agreed that PERSIST should merge with the Preservation Subcommittee that has existed for many years within the Memory of the World program. This merger will greatly enhance the visibility and impact of preservation activities in general under the UNESCO umbrella.

Overcoming the challenges of digital preservation and achieving digital sustainability requires the active participation of the ICT industry, memory institutions, and governments. UNESCO has the convening and advocacy power on a global level to bring these parties together.

[Slide 7]

But there are an increasing number of digital preservation projects happening around the world, which is very encouraging to see. We must encourage more of these national and regional projects to promote the importance of digital preservation through conferences and workshops, and through the development of tools and technical capacities to actually perform efficient and sustainable digital preservation. A World Digital Preservation Day is now celebrated at the end of November each year.

[Slide 8]

And so, PERSIST was not created to duplicate existing digital preservation efforts. We believe that we can add value for practitioners and information providers by offering high level policy advice, standards and guidelines to inform other projects. PERSIST believes in establishing dialogue and cooperation between governments, organizations and information providers to create practical solutions in the area of sustainable digital preservation. One area of focus for PERSIST is the collaboration that is happening with the ICT industry to develop a platform for legacy software so that memory institutions and others can continue to provide access to information using outdated software codes and programs. This is not an easy task since software and hardware companies are reluctant to give up control of their earlier products.

[Slide 9]

Dealing with the ICT industry is only one of the challenges PERSIST and other digital preservation projects face. We have limited people power to put towards this effort. Members of our Steering Committee and of our various working groups are all volunteers who firmly believe in giving time and attention to this important objective. Similarly, digital preservation is tremendously expensive, and there are no large funding opportunities for preservation as there are for projects that promote better access to digital information. A change of mindset is needed among funders, governments, the ICT industry and the general public to recognize the perils that confront us all in losing for all time access to some of our most important cultural heritage.

[Slide 10]

And so, I am putting a call out to our IFLA family and others who wish to join us in promoting digital preservation around the world and help us to develop standards and policies through a global collaborative effort that will help to achieve positive and impactful results. Please have a look at the PERSIST website which can be found at UNESCOPERSIST.org. That will give you more up to date information about our current work and our future directions.

Many of you can be advocates for digital preservation in your countries by connecting with key stakeholders and promoting the adoption of relevant standards and policies. We need our communities to become more involved with each other, in libraries, archives and museums and with other stakeholders. To that end, there are guidelines on this website to facilitate your involvement in collaborations and activities to work with PERSIST so that we can mutually help each other to advance our preservation priorities together.

There are too few of us in memory institutions to carry the flag alone for good practices in digital preservation. We are not in competition with each other, but rather we have many synergies to develop together. While the pace of adoption of good digital preservation practices may seem slow to some, including me, I think we must remember the African saying that goes: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

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Thank you. Terima kasih.