

Information and Continuity in Digital Memory

by Tullio Gregory

Digital information constitutes a predominant feature of contemporary society, where communication has become increasingly invasive, while, at the same time, less grounded in substantiated evidence. The Internet is a prime example, often spreading information that is not verified or backed up by qualified sources. In many cases, the Internet offers too much information, and is therefore difficult to navigate; moreover, even the most highly protected systems are vulnerable to unauthorized entry or intentional damage by hackers.

A second problem that is typical of the digital era is memory deterioration. This is not due to the hardware – which is expected to last about 25 to 50 years – but to the rapid obsolescence of software and its relative technical support. The bewildering variety of available software and the lack of shared standards make the situation even more complex.

In 1998, at a meeting promoted by the John Paul Getty Trust, a provocative, but well-founded suggestion was proposed: to convert all digital information into paper or microfilm in order to ensure a longer preservation.

The question of continuity in digital memory involves public and private bodies that entirely entrust their communication and information to automatic data-processing. In Italy, research bodies like CNR, as well as various Government departments, boast that they will soon become paperless, i.e. eliminate any form of paper communication and record. This is also true for other countries of the EU, as well as for the United States. However, the meaning of this revolution in the relationship between an administration and the citizen is underestimated: on the one hand, people with no access to the net will be excluded; on the other hand, the risk – already a reality in many cases – of digital memory loss is very high – and therefore, a significant source of contemporary history would be gone.

Because the problem of digital information is a global concern, several influential international bodies are currently discussing the matter, but up to now, no country has been able to establish a policy for digital memory preservation that is adequate and shared by all digital information producers. Therefore, the only outcome of recent meetings and conferences on this subject has been the expressed desire for a more

responsible future (see, among official papers, the Resolution of the Council of Europe of June 25th, 2002, and the Resolution on the Preservation of Digital Heritage by the Unesco general conference of October 17th, 2003)