

Preserving Australia's electronic information

An ACLIS Task Force is beavering away on this thorny issue—Jennifer Peasley, its Secretary, explains what it has been doing

Information in electronic format has been a boon for libraries, enhancing libraries' ability to access and retrieve information quickly and effectively from almost any location. It is not, however, without its problems: more and more varied records are being held in machine-readable tape or computer disk format, making these records very vulnerable. They can be altered or revised without any indication that a change has been made, so that data is lost to future research use.

Since 1985, a Task Force (first of ALIC, later of ACLIS) has been working on the problems of preserving electronic information, aiming to make librarians more aware of these problems. ACLIS believes that the library community now needs to decide which libraries will be responsible for preserving certain categories of electronic information.

The Task Force has identified categories of electronic information and ranked these in order of 'worthiness of preservation'. A wide cross-section of those potentially interested was involved: librarians, archivists, historians and computing lecturers. As might be expected there was much debate on the categories and the relative importance

of preserving each category. Working parties were established for categories of records in which respondents expressed strong interest and willingness to work. These working parties identified the records or data worth preserving. The categories are not exhaustive and gaps may exist; however they were seen to be the highest priority for preservation.

These categories are:

- authors' works in progress;
- research communities' information exchange;
- factual files and reference type records;
- training packages and educational software.

Following this initial work, the Task Force on the Preservation of Australian Electronic Information has now produced a position paper which was endorsed at the *Towards Federation 2001* Conference as an acceptable approach to preserving electronic records.

The position paper does not offer any great depth of technical or financial guidance in the preservation of electronic information. Its purpose is to ensure that libraries have an understanding of the problem; to outline which categories are at risk and why they should be col-

lected; to explore which libraries might accept responsibility for the collection and preservation of these records; and to provide guidelines for how, and in what form, the records might be preserved given the present state of technology.

With categories determined and some guidelines given, those libraries accepting responsibility will then need to establish policies and procedures for preserving the records. While the Task Force has made some recommendations on what to collect, when to collect and in what format, the rapid pace of change in this area means that the position paper will need to be reviewed annually.

The Task Force has produced two brochures to publicise the need for preservation, one promoting the need for libraries to collect drafts of authors' works in progress, the other promoting the collection of cartographic data in electronic form. These brochures have been distributed to institutions and agencies known to be interested; if you have not received them and would like a copy, contact ACLIS on (06) 262 1244.

Jennifer Peasley can provide copies of the position paper—contact her on (02) 230 1551. ■

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