

Are we Leaving Behind a Society Without Memories?

The digital age has improved the access to information and the speed of information distribution dramatically. Are we failing to preserve histories, images and pictures for future generations?

January 13, 2006 (FPRC) -- When the author of these lines tried to transfer some information from an eight year old computer with no W/LAN to a current PC recently, she failed. To some surprise, the only possible device the eight year old machine could write to was a 3 ½" floppy disc, a device which looks to younger computer users like an ancient storage system, as they are not likely to ever see a wobbly 5 ¼" disc. Current Windows XP machines tend not to have floppy disc drives. This raises a fundamental question: What will happen to all the CD-ROMs, DVDs, memory sticks, SIM-cards and mp3 players we store music and pictures to ? Will future societies have devices able to read current data, image and music archives?

Museums and history departments boost records of ancient books and correspondence, lovingly decorated with frames and illustrations and transferred from generation to generation as historic documents. Today, applications like SmartPic from Abelssoft help to decorate emails with clipart and Smileys, expressing the writer's mood. The developer Abelssoft claims, that "a nicely laid out and decorated message is much more likely to be preserved by the recipient". But this is in any case only as long as the hard disk survives. Some other recent product releases illustrate the trend towards ever faster flows of information across ever bigger networks. Software developer "euris 4c" updated its plug-in "4c", a thumbnail previews add-on for Internet Explorer. The application replaces website description text with quick previews, allowing the user to view a thumbnail size preview of a webpage before clicking onto it. If "4c" is active on the system, it also starts a special windows administration as soon as two or more browser windows are open. The window administration displays previews of all browsers. A mouse click on the preview suffices to access the website. Kai Bonfigt of developer "euris 4c GmbH": "Parallel surfing with several browser windows open is now a child's play." Multiple site browsing previews clearly accelerate the information flow.

The software developer Somebytes has released tools which for little money enable Microsoft Outlook users (probably most personal computer users) asynchronous synchronization of Outlook folders through email. People working in teams on multiple sites or across time zones will immediately understand the benefits: - appointments, contacts, tasks and notes from a home PC or office PC can be updated with defined users at any location and in any time zone to allow any colleague, family or club member access to the same schedule or information (access can be defined individually). While this may make current life easier and speed up the information access, it makes any paper based time planner incompatible and redundant. Future generations of historians and archaeologists will gain access to current digital records only if hard disks will be preserved and readable. As recent history shows this is not likely.

The trend towards traceless operation is well illustrated by the award winning Buyertools Reminder. This free software handles multiple bids on the virtual auction site eBay, placing the bid at the last minute before the end of an auction. This increases the chances to land a bargain, as it reduces the time other interested parties have to outbid the offer. This is followed by some electronic communication completing the process. Apart from the goods acquired on eBay everything else is fully automatic and digital. No paper receipt, no tangible traces.

According to a recent report by Ipsos Insight consumer interest in digital cameras held steady for the third year in a row with 22% of US consumers planning to buy one in the next three months. 22% of US consumers plan to buy an MP3 player in the next 3 months, up from 13% in the 2004 survey. The music industry is suffering from another gift season enforcing the trend towards the mp3 format. Acon Digital Media, presenting itself as the developer of some affordable and easy to use music software tools, has released a new application helping consumers to convert any piece of music into a real music ring tone in less than three minutes, available from <http://www.myringading.com>. According to Acon Digital's Managing Director Stian Aagedal "the application called "My Ringading" makes creating truly unique ring tones and transferring them to a cell phone a child's play - infrared, cable or Bluetooth as well as cost effective WAP uploads are all available at a mouse click". Storing music on hard discs and mobile phones is converting essential cultural expression into a throw away item. Though at only EU€16.90 / US\$19.90 for the software this at least reduces the burden on ring tone consumer's budget. Even the greatest trend in puzzles and saviour of newspaper sales, Sudoku becomes available by thousands of games generated by Sudoku software on CD-ROMs like "embalado's Su Doku elements".

A recent paper by Klaas Brumann on interactive online networking for business users shows a growing trend which has been supported by new developments in social software (see <http://www.socialbc.com> and <http://www.sossoon.net>). Online networking has been expanding during the year 2005 into research and higher education with the knowledge network academici. This online network provides instant access to any information published and asynchronous communication in specialist subject groups across fields of research and academic disciplines across the globe, 24/7. Once the servers are switched off our society will return to be as advanced as the last book that was printed. In our present time however, interactive networking for business and academia will become essential.

The only product reviewed recently that bugs the trend and carries memories into the future are printed photo albums, like the FotoInsight.com Photobook. Great about processing or printing photos is that all those digital treasures languishing on hard drives finally see the light of day. Getting nicely laid out, perfectly printed photo books preserves photographic memories and converts digital images into gifts and pieces of reference. FotoInsight reports that in the first month it already made 12% of its revenues from photobooks alone with traditional photographic processing down sharply over the previous year.

Conclusion

A culture failing to preserve memories will vanish without trace. Computer users should not assume that their children will be able to read or access in any form the information currently being accumulated on memory sticks, CD-ROMs or DVDs.

Sources:

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