Digital Preservation Cross Discipline Survey Abstract

From newspapers to photography magazines, the popular press is touting digital technology as the best method for individuals to preserve their photographs while computer scientists, information scientists, librarians, and archivists are writing article after article in academic journals lamenting the impending loss of knowledge because the lack of a comprehensive digital preservation strategy. To see if this digital preservation dichotomy between academics and the popular press also exists in the real world, a survey was developed to test the attitudes about, and knowledge of, digital preservation.

The 26-question survey had 11 questions on attitudes and awareness – longevity of formats, confidence in software, availability of access, and personal practice – as well as 15 questions on knowledge of specific digital formats. Both sections used semantic differential scales. Over 220 students were surveyed from computer related courses at Indiana University Bloomington campus from the Kelley School of Business, the School of Informatics (which includes the Computer Science Department) and the School of Library and Information Science.

The data was analyzed to determine two scores – one for attitudes and one for format risk. In general, the students are optimistic about the longevity of digital information and the availability of access to digital information. Being nearly neutral, the students show little confidence in the ability of software to deal with older digital information or in business’ ability to migrate their data. The students do not have a good concept of risk in data formats. There is very little difference in the scores between the safe and risky formats. They are virtually neutral on the very risky formats.
Attitudes towards digital preservation vary widely by area of study. Business is the most optimistic, followed by Informatics. Computer Science and Information Science are tied. Library Science students are the least optimistic with a negative score. The scores for assessing the risks of digital formats follow a similar pattern. Perhaps this is the beginning of the digital preservation dichotomy.

Education seems to moderate optimism and improve knowledge. The most interesting finding is that format familiarity equates to safety. New technologies are not trusted. But there is a significant anomaly: even though all students expressed almost no confidence in software and business in general, all of the proprietary file formats created by popular software rated high in safety. MS Word and Excel have higher safety scores than XML.