

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

A collaborative research project to evaluate and provide sustainable recommendations for our digital preservation programmes

Computers are the apogee of profligacy: a response to THE most important PASIG 2017 presentations

Posted on **22 September, 2017** by **Dave Gerrard**

Following the PASIG conference, Cambridge Technical Fellow Dave Gerrard couldn't simply wait to fire off his thoughts on the global context of digital preservation and how we need to better consider the world around us to work on a global solution and not just one that suits capitalist agenda. We usually preface these blogs with "enjoy" but in this instance, please, find a quiet moment, make yourself comfortable, read on and contemplate the global issues presented passionately presented here.

I'm going to work on a more technical blog about PASIG later, but first I want to get this one off my chest. It's about the two most important presentations: Angeline Takawira's *Digital preservation at the United Nations Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals* and *Keep your eyes on the information*, Patricia Sleeman's discussion of preservation work at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Angeline Takawira described, in a very precise and formal manner, how the current best practice in Digital Preservation is being meticulously applied to preserving information from UN war crimes tribunals in The Hague (covering the Balkan conflict) and Arusha, Tanzania (covering the Rwandan genocide). As befitted her work, it was striking how calm Angeline was; how well the facts were stuck to, despite the emotive context. Of course, this has to be the case for work underpinning legal processes: intrusion of emotion into the capture of facts could let those trying to avoid justice escape it.

And the importance of maintaining a dispassionate outlook was echoed in the title of the other talk. “Keep your eyes on the information” was what Patricia Sleeman was told when learning to work with the UNHCR, as to engage too emotionally with the refugee crisis could make vital work impossible to perform. However, Patricia provided some context, in part by playing [Head Over Heels](#), (Emi Mahmoud’s poem about the conflict and refugee crisis in Darfur), and by describing the brave, inspirational people she had met in Syria and Kurdistan. An emotionless response was impossible: the talk resulted in the conference’s longest and loudest applause.

Indeed, I think the audience was so stunned by Patricia’s words that questions were hard to formulate. However, my colleague Somaya at least asked the \$64,000 one: *how can we help?* I’d like to tie this question back to one that Patricia raised in her talk, namely (and I paraphrase here): *how do you justify expenditure on tasks like preservation when doing so takes food from the mouths of refugees?*

So, now I’m less stunned, here’s my take: feeding refugees solves a symptom of the problem. Telling their stories *helps to solve the problem*, by making us engage our emotions, and think about how our lives are related to theirs, and about how we behave impacts upon them. And how can we help? Sure, we can help Patricia with her data management and preservation problems. But how can we *really* contribute to a solution? How can we stop refugee crises occurring in the first place?

We have a responsibility to recognise the connections between our own behaviour and the circumstances refugees find themselves in, and it all comes down, of course, to resources, and the profligate waste of them in the developed world. Indeed, Angeline and Patricia’s talks illustrated the borderline absurdity of a bunch of (mostly) privileged ‘Westerners’ / ‘Northerners’ (take your pick)

talking about the ‘preservation’ of anything, when we’re products of a society that’s based upon throwing everything away.

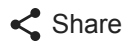
And computers / all things ‘digital’ are at the apogee of this profligacy: Natasa Milic-Frayling highlighted this when she (diplomatically) referred to the way in which the ‘innovators’ hold all the cards, currently, in the relationship with ‘content producers’, and can hence render the technologies upon which we depend obsolete across ever-shorter cycles. Though, after Patricia’s talk, I’m inclined to frame this more in terms of ‘capitalist industrialists generating unnecessary markets at the expense of consumers’; particularly given that, while we were listening to Patricia, the latest iPhone was being launched in the US.

Though, of course, it’s not really the ‘poor consumers’ who genuinely suffer due to planned obsolescence... That would be the people in Africa and the Middle East whose countries are war zones due to [grabs for oil](#) or [droughts caused by global warming](#). As the world’s most advanced tech companies, Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft et al are the biggest players in a society that – at best indirectly, at worst carelessly – causes the suffering of the people Patricia and Angeline are helping and providing justice for. And, as someone typing a blog post using a Macbook Pro that [doesn’t even let me add a new battery](#) – I’m clearly part of the problem, not the solution.

So – in answer to Somaya’s question: how can we help? Well, for a start, we can stop [fetishising the iPhone](#) and start bigging up [Fairphone](#) and [Phonebloks](#). However, keeping the focus on Digital Preservation, we’ve got to be *really careful* that our efforts aren’t used to support an IT industry that’s currently profligate way beyond moral acceptability. So rather than assuming (as I did above) that all the ‘best-practice’ of digital preservation flows from the ‘developed’ (ahem) world to the ‘developing’, we ought to seek some lessons in how to preserve technology from those who have fewer opportunities to waste it.

Somaya’s already on the case with her [upcoming panel at iPres on the 28th September](#): Then we ought to continue down the road of holding PASIG in Mexico City next year by holding one in Africa as soon as possible. As long as – when we’re there, we make sure we [shut up and listen](#).

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