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Evidence Summary

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Abstract

Objective – To define principles for the sustainable management and preservation of digital resources.

Design – Survey and literature review.

Setting – Academic libraries in South Africa.

Subjects – Twenty-two academic institutions in South Africa.

Methods – The researchers evaluated four conceptual models of digital preservation and conducted a literature review for the same

subject. Informed by these reviews, the researchers developed a questionnaire for South African academic institutions, distributed the questionnaire, and studied the results using statistical analysis software.

Main Results – Twenty-two of twenty-seven (81.5%) surveys were returned. Results indicated a broad consensus about which factors were important in sustainable digital preservation; all factors listed received anywhere from 86.3% to 100% agreement among respondents.

Conclusion – A proposed conceptual integrated digital preservation model

recommends a three-pronged approach to address management-related, resource-related, and technological-related factors in sustainable digital preservation.

Commentary

The central issue of this study is a central issue of libraries in the Information Age: how can libraries ensure consistent, reliable access to materials heavily dependent on technologies and services that seem to change from year to year? Sustainable digital preservation is an ideal many would recognize in name but would have difficulty putting into practice. Masenya and Ngulube seek to solve this problem by developing a conceptual model that highlights the necessary constituent parts of successful digital preservation initiatives.

Masenya and Ngulube follow in the footsteps of the esteemed forebears they evaluate, from Carnegie Mellon University's digital preservation capability maturity model (1990); through Davies' policy, strategy, and resources troika model (2000) and the open archival information system model (2002); to Corrado and Moulaison's digital preservation triad (2014). This study, which meets accepted standards of validity when assessed with Glynn's critical appraisal tool, surveys South African academic institutions and proposes a conceptual model for a new decade (Glynn 2006).

While on the surface, the research design of this study does not present any obvious flaws, the homogenous responses to the questionnaire suggest an alternate approach may have yielded more insightful results. In their environmental scan, the researchers collected factors that influenced the success of digital preservation initiatives. They then used those same factors in a questionnaire that asked librarians at academic institutions to use a Likert scale to state whether they agreed if those factors were influential. The consequence is a tautological study: the results of the questionnaire provide the same information they used to create the questionnaire. Put another way, the survey determined its own results.

The Likert scale yields objective, quantitative results that may be easier to analyze, but allowing institutions to write in their own answers (i.e. not providing answers for them) would provide richer, if subjective and harder to analyze, results. After all, very few responsible librarians, attentive to the breadth of issues associated with sustainable digital preservation, could imaginably disagree with the importance of any one of these factors. Allowing the respondents freedom in their answers would more accurately reflect their own local institutional concerns regarding digital preservation. Greater freedom could also derive a greater variety of responses, attuning the researchers to previously unstated issues in digital preservation. The study in its present state, however, only allows the researchers to confirm what they already knew.

Nevertheless, compounded with the researchers' initial literature review, the results of the survey clearly indicate that long-standing issues influencing digital preservation sustainability continue to be concerns for libraries—concerns often shared among institutional peers in a region. Libraries interested in pursuing digital preservation initiatives, especially those in emerging areas, should heed the study's recommendation to build regional partnerships to develop expertise, pool resources, and benchmark their progress.

References

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