



## Sustaining the Digital Investment: Issues and Challenges of Economically Sustainable Digital Preservation

Interim report by the  
Blue Ribbon Task Force on  
Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access  
December 2008

Most would agree that digital information is fundamental to the conduct of modern research, education, business, commerce and government. Comparatively little agreement exists, however, concerning **"Who is responsible?"** and **"Who should pay?"** for access to, and preservation of, valuable digital information.

The Blue Ribbon Task Force's Interim Report explores fundamental issues and challenges associated with economically sustainable digital preservation and access. The report emphasizes that **the digital preservation and access problem is urgent**: *Access to data tomorrow requires decisions concerning preservation today.* It also makes clear that viable digital preservation strategies require attention not only to technical, legal, and social issues, but to economic issues as well.

The report identifies a number of **systemic challenges** to economically sustainable digital preservation and access. They include:

- **Inadequacy of "one-time" funding models** (e.g. research grants or contracts) to address persistent long-term access and preservation needs.

- **Poor alignment between stakeholders in the digital preservation and access world and their roles, responsibilities and support models.** For example, creators, users, and stewards of digital information may be different groups with different funding models.
- **Lack of institutional, enterprise, and/or community incentives** to support the collaboration to enforce sustainable economic models. Many institutional and community cultures dis-incentivize the common formats, standards, and the hardware/software compatibility needed for digital preservation.
- **Complacency that current practices are "good enough."** Both "carrots," in the form of recognition that access to information is an investment in current and future success, and "sticks," in the form of penalties for non-compliance, accounting of explicit opportunity costs, or costs of lost information, are needed.
- **Fear that digital access and preservation is too big to take on.** Digital preservation is a big problem, but not insurmountable. Solutions may be as manageable as including a "data bill" as an explicit, fixed part of an institution's business model.

The Interim Report stresses that **institutional, enterprise, and community decision makers must be part of access and preservation solutions.** Without their participation, it will be nearly impossible to build the critical foundation of digital information on which the modern world depends.



The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation



### LINKS

Blue Ribbon Task Force on  
Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access  
<http://brtf.sdsc.edu>

BRTF-SDPA Interim Report (December 2008)  
[http://brtf.sdsc.edu/biblio/BRTF\\_Interim\\_Report.pdf](http://brtf.sdsc.edu/biblio/BRTF_Interim_Report.pdf)



## What is Economic Sustainability in a Digital Preservation Context?

*Economic Sustainability* for digital preservation and access is the set of business, social, technological, and policy mechanisms that

- 1) encourage the gathering of important information assets into digital preservation systems.
- 2) support the indefinite persistence of the digital preservation systems, thus securing access to and use of the information assets into the long-term future.

### Economically sustainable digital preservation requires:

- **Recognition** of the benefits of preservation on the part of key decision-makers;
- **Incentives** for decision-makers to act in the public interest;
- A **process** for selecting digital materials for long-term retention;
- Mechanisms to secure an **ongoing efficient allocation of resources** to digital preservation activities;
- Appropriate **organization and governance** of digital preservation activities.

## The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access

The Blue Ribbon Task Force on Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access (BRTF-SDPA) was launched in late 2007 by the National Science Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in partnership with the Library of Congress, the Joint Information Systems Committee of the U.K., the Council on Library and Information Resources, and the National Archives and Records Administration. It was charged with investigating one of the great challenges of the Information Age – creating sustainable economic models for supporting the long-term access and preservation of the digital information on which modern work and life depend. The BRTF-SDPA issued an Interim Report at the end of its first year and will issue its final report at the end of its second and final year in late 2009. The Final Report will focus on practical recommendations and models for economically sustainable digital preservation in academia, the government sector, and private enterprise.



## BRTF-SDPA Task Force Members

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