I recently looked again at love letters I had received as a teenager nearly 30 years ago. I had not taken great care of them, wrapping them in an elastic band and leaving them in a drawer for many years. Although they were creased and dusty, with slightly brittle paper and faded ink, they were still readable, capable of bringing back both happy and poignant memories. The same is true of the letters my parents wrote to each other in their teenage years, almost 60 years ago. Almost all of us have such mementoes of our lives or those of our families. Photographs, postcards and other items have little intrinsic value, but great personal worth. I realised that if I were a teenager today I would have nothing similar to look at in my middle age. My words of love and passion, and those written to me, would be sent in text messages via mobile phone, or by email to an address on Hotmail or Yahoo. The words are no longer inscribed on a physical object which I own; they are brief magnetic fluctuations stored in a chip or on a disk at an unknown location over which I have no control. The same is almost true of many of the photographs I take. I abandoned film some years ago in favour of digital cameras. They bring many advantages, not least in saving the costs of printing what are often unsatisfactory pictures. I do have control of my digital pictures, and have multiple copies of them all on CDs stored in two separate places, to guard against loss by fire or theft. If I wished to save the emails from my web account, I could also download them to the same CDs. The messages from my mobile phone present much greater problems – they are ephemeral and I have no way of extracting them other than to copy them with pen and paper.

These examples are just a few of those facing us all with the preservation of digital materials. Governments, businesses, publishers, universities and individuals are increasingly creating and receiving information of all forms which can only be read using a computer. Much of it has a short life and need not be kept. But much is of long-lasting value and will be lost if action is not taken to preserve it. Whether it be the website of La Vanguardia, a government database, or digital pictures of our grandchildren, their survival for future generations is far from certain unless someone acts now. My letters were neglected for 30 years and survived unharmed. If I leave my CDs of photographs in a drawer for 30 years, it may well be unreadable – they require controlled temperature and humidity to have a chance of lasting so long. Even if the CD survives, will I still have software or a CD reader that can read it? Word processor files from only 10 years ago now present real challenges for everyone but experts in the field to be able to read.

Yet ensuring the survival of information from the digital age is not primarily a technical problem. We understand how to retain information for many years and can rescue old data where necessary, albeit at a cost. The problem is partly one of software companies that do not use long-lasting formats for the information their software stores, and partly
one of lack of awareness amongst everyone who creates or uses digital information. The digital age has brought great benefits, but without concerted action its memory may be lost forever.

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