Dear Sir/Madam,

I write as Provost of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, to support the extension of the policy of collecting and preserving of online digital formats.

It is quite clear that we are at an inflexion point in the history of information that is only matched by the discovery of the printing press and the mass production of books and newspapers made possible by the industrial revolution. Vast resources are being spent on producing websites and digital information and this information is influencing every facet of modern life. Speaking both as an engineer and as the head of a university that has attempted to store copies of every book published in these islands for centuries, I believe that it is essential to preserve all contemporary publication formats as well. I am under no illusions that this will be difficult but it is essential for scholarly research but also for a functioning society. A proper archive of virtual web publications will be a resource for politicians, lawyers, public health officials and many other arms of the State which do not yet know that they will one day require the sort of information that is presently being lost.

These are some of the reasons that explain why three quarters of all European Union countries have passed legislation for legal deposit of digital formats and they are the reasons Ireland should do the same. It is for this reason that the Library of Congress is archiving every tweet. Who knows when a tweet from teeneger will one day be an important a document? We are already late to the table; many Irish websites from the late 20th century and early 21st century have already been lost - we cannot allow this to continue.

The power and responsibility for archiving this treasure trove of information should rest with librarians. The technology sector is, rightly, focussed on the future and new developments. It requires a different mind set, a different agenda and considerable resources to want to preserve the past. There are organisations currently collecting websites on an ad hoc basis but the legal underpinning for their work is hazy and what will happen to those archives in 50 or 100 years is anybody’s’ guess.

Libraries, such as the library in Trinity College Dublin or the National Library, have a long tradition of preserving our cultural heritage and ensuring that scholars and others have access to the heritage. We must continue this tradition for future generations in a manner that makes sense.

Digital preservation is such a vast area that it is probably impossible for a single organisation to capture of the material that has been made for the internet in a sophisticated country such as ours. But we need to start somewhere and create a nationwide partnership of organisations that will collect and preserve our digital heritage.

It seems that every generation in Ireland is tasked with preserving a different aspect of our culture. In the past it was books. Later it was the Irish language. Later again it was folklore and oral history. Today, it is Ireland’s digital
heritage that needs to be protected for generations to come.

Thank you.

Best regards,

Dr Patrick Prendergast
PROVOST