



ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Research Libraries' Enduring Responsibility for Preservation

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The members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) hold a stunning array of cultural and information resources, diverse in both content and form. In building these collections, ARL libraries strive to enable current scholarship and anticipate the needs of future generations of scholars. With this long view of the world of research and learning, the members of ARL affirm that preservation is a fundamental role and responsibility of the research library.

Historically the act of collecting has been the first and most significant step in preservation. The challenge, however, of caring for what is collected has become more complex in the contemporary era. The nature of library collections is changing and with change come new challenges for preservation. Paper-based books and manuscripts have been the mainstay of scholarly communications and library collections for hundreds of years. But in less than two decades digital information has become integral to research in all disciplines. Web documents, moving images, sound recordings, and data sets are an increasing part of everyday life and communication for much of the world. Rapidly these media are forming a substantial part of the cultural record. New formats for content—particularly digital formats—that are just emerging or were once considered specialized areas of collecting are growing more important and mainstream for scholarship. The contemporary research library must collect and preserve a greater variety of formats than ever before, each with particular characteristics, vulnerabilities, and needs for care.

As in the past, scholarship depends on collecting content based on intellectual value, not media permanence. Grand in concept, preservation is accomplished through practical decisions and technical processes that reflect not only the goals of academia but also the changing realities of current technology, financial resources, and the information marketplace. However, the continued work of developing preservation strategies in research libraries requires a new level of intensity to succeed in an information landscape that is more complex and less stable than ever.

This widening spectrum of needs in preservation can be met only through a sustained and multifaceted approach. Each research library has a core of preservation responsibilities, some that can be met only locally but others that increasingly should or can be met only through cooperative strategies. For the scholars and researchers we serve to have enduring access to scholarship in all formats, ARL member libraries must invest in maintaining strong local and cooperative preservation programs.

21 Dupont Circle
Washington, DC 20036
202 296 2296 telephone
202 872 0884 fax
<http://www.arl.org/>