

Evolving Preservation Roles and Responsibilities of Research Libraries

Introductory Note

On September 15, ARL held a Webcast, "Preservation: Evolving Roles and Responsibilities of Research Libraries."

The Webcast featured presentations by:

- Lars Meyer, Sr. Director, Content Division, Emory University Libraries and ARL Visiting Program Officer
- James Neal, Vice President for Information Services and University Librarian, Columbia University Libraries
- Deborah Jakubs, Rita DiGiallonardo Holloway University Librarian and Vice Provost for Library Affairs, Duke University Libraries

The Webcast was grounded in the recently released report, *Safeguarding Collections at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Describing Roles & Measuring Contemporary Preservation Activities in ARL Libraries*, prepared for ARL by Lars Meyer. Meyer's report, released in May 2009, documents the trend within research libraries of broadening preservation activities to address digital content, and the drive to develop collaborative approaches to providing preservation functions. In addition to the speaker presentations, the broadcast included substantial time for live question-and-answer exchanges. What appears below is a sampling of audience questions that could not be accommodated on air, along with brief responses from the speakers. To view the original Webcast archive, the complete Q&A exchanges, as well as speaker information and additional resources, please visit <http://www.arl.org/preserv/preservationwebcast/index.shtml>.

Digitization and Preservation

Q: Most libraries digitize ad hoc...however, most libraries also consider "digitization" the end to preservation. How do we educate and implement programs of digital migration to further preserve digital surrogates, and also insist on the physical preservation of original rare antiquity in libraries? Should we preserve both for the long run?

Jim Neal: Digitization is not preservation. There is a complex set of provisions and investments for infrastructure and migration that need to be enabled to guarantee

the long-term availability of the digital copy. And although the availability of a digital surrogate may relieve some pressure on the use of the original, it does not set aside the continuing responsibility for the conservation of originals of rare and special materials... I believe the library community needs to develop a more systematic and standards-based national strategy for last copies print repositories. The Cloud Library project among NYU, HathiTrust, and ReCAP with the support of OCLC/RLG and CLIR will begin to test some of these models.

Lars Meyer: Digitization, or digital conversion, can be an effective reformatting strategy. Digital surrogates and the metadata that describe and provide context for those surrogates requires an institution to have in place policies and infrastructure to manage these as digital assets. Ideally, concern for digital assets, irrespective of whether they are created or acquired by the library, should be incorporated into collection development policies that might pose questions unique to this class of information resource. For example, we might ask: Why do we create or acquire these materials? What does it cost to manage them? Who is responsible for managing them? What kind of access do we provide to these resources?

In terms of whether to keep the original items or not requires preservation staff and collection development staff to discuss not only the possibilities and limitations of digitization and digital surrogates but also expectations, options, and costs for managing digital assets. Most libraries have been determining the costs and benefits of keeping print copies with regard to their own user (however defined) requirements and expectations. Community-level strategies are certainly needed and there is evidence that work has begun; see for example the work being done by OCLC (<http://www.oclc.org/programs/ourwork/collectivecoll/default.htm>).

Deborah Jakubs: One should be reminded of the broader scope of our responsibility and the importance of the continued availability of the original, for uses to which the digital version cannot be put. I also emphasize that digitization often results in more (not less) interest in seeing/examining the original.

Staffing the Preservation Function

Q: Lars mentioned that with an increase in scope of preservation, we are seeing more people (outside the preservation department) involved in preservation. Can you give examples of new approaches to staffing and organizing preservation activities to mainstream it within our libraries?

Deborah Jakubs: One example, which may not be all that new, is to involve subject specialist librarians in decisions about what to reformat and what to digitize, and to involve digital collections and technology / digital production people in developing the “business plan” for costing out a given strategy.

Lars Meyer: Preservation, particularly for digital content or carrier-dependent technologies (e.g., VHS tapes, CDs, motion picture film, etc.), should not be an afterthought. Libraries should develop documented strategies or business plans that address what to preserve, when to preserve, and what technologies to use. The staff involved in this work will differ from library to library and from collection to collection. Preservation staff should contribute to the effort by providing knowledge about the costs, benefits, and risks of alternatives, based on their knowledge of the technology (be it deacidification, digitization, conservation, etc.) and the vendors who we might use.

Furthermore, preservation staff can ensure that the right resources (people and tools) are in place in appropriate stages of the work, regardless of whether the work occurs in the preservation department or elsewhere in the library or on campus. Preservation staff may need to rely on others in the library to provide needed expertise. For example, if there’s expertise in digitizing sound recordings in a music library, it’s probably best to continue to use that staff, but align their efforts with a greater preservation initiative. The challenge for each library will be to determine when preservation is playing a leading role or a supporting role.

Q: What does the educational, professional development, and career trajectory of the modern/future preservation professional look like? What will libraries need as we staff the future of preservation?

Jim Neal: The challenge, of course, in research libraries is that we carry a very significant legacy responsibility for conserving and protecting the rare and special

materials in our collections in their original formats, even as we expand investment in digital preservation and as we begin to collect and archive Web content. We need to maintain and develop new expertise across these arenas, led by preservation directors who can see, advocate for, and work across them. Institution-based preservation programs may need to be set aside in favor of expanded outsourcing and new combinations of libraries to get the work done collectively.

Deborah Jakubs: The expansion of the definition or scope of preservation means that it will involve a wide variety of skill sets. I'd suggest that we be active in inviting interns and students to work in our preservation operations, and that we consider teaching on-the-job skills to some promising individuals who are interested. The preservation professional will need (and already needs!) to understand and manage a much wider array of domains than before.

Lars Meyer: We will see continued need for expertise in the areas of sound recording and moving image preservation, as well as still-image digitization. For libraries with significant book and paper special collections, trained and experienced conservators are essential. Needed expertise will differ from library to library. Does a library expect to hire someone to oversee the work in house or to manage work that is outsourced? When we expect to complete complex, technical work in house, we will need high level, appropriately compensated, technical positions that likely cannot be filled by library science degree holders or typical library paraprofessional staff. Today's preservation librarian or administrator should be integrated with collection development staff to better understand and contribute to decisions that affect users of information resources, be they historical or legacy collections or new, born-digital content. We need to close the gap that's grown between collection development and preservation.

Collaboration to Address the Preservation Challenge

Q: How do you see these new challenges changing the methods of setting priorities for preservation, with regard to cross-department collaboration? Are we beginning to see more collaboration or convergence between libraries and archives in addressing preservation challenges?

Deborah Jakubs: If we view preservation and the preservation mandate as of a

larger scope than before, it is incumbent on us to bring in collaboration from outside the traditional preservation department. This is a good thing, and leads to broader discussions of priorities, in conversations that include more voices and perspectives. It will also inform those outside the department of the priorities as viewed from inside.

Lars Meyer: In regard to the first question, if we accept the fact that the scope of preservation is getting broader, we also need to accept that staff from throughout a given library will contribute to a preservation effort, including participating in discussions about priorities. We also need to look to partners outside of our own libraries and parent institutions to help us set priorities, this is particularly important for libraries who are actively working with content creators and aggregators from elsewhere in the university.

In terms of the second question, I think conversations are emerging on campuses about how to capture, provide access to, and preserve digital content that's created on campuses by academic departments, administrative units, and student groups, as well as scholars and researchers. Due to issues of format and technology obsolescence, as well as staff and student turnover, it makes sense to build concern for these into records management and university archives programs.

North American Leadership/Policy

Q: Jim, you mentioned the lack of national policy and direction in terms of preservation of North America's collections. What is the most important thing we could do to change and/or make some headway on this problem?

Jim Neal: We need a national program, which sets clear collective priorities, including research and education. We need policies in the form of new exceptions in copyright and standards to drive practice. We need funding from appropriate federal agencies, who see the economic benefits of the investment.

I see centers of excellence, with the depth of technical and science expertise needed across the preservation challenges, as inevitable if we are going to get the work done. This may take the form of institutional focus, or new for profit or not for profit organizations, public/private partnerships, or regional centers supported by our universities.

Q: Jim, why do we not have a central mandate for preservation and conservation? Who is responsible? Isn't it ARL?

Jim Neal: ARL in my view, as part of its current strategic plan, largely set aside a programmatic priority for preservation. There are initiatives that have explored areas of interest, like in e-science and the current report that Lars prepared. And when preservation touches information policy and scholarly communication, ARL has been very active. A new strategic focus on Transforming the Research Library may allow for more of a programmatic focus on preservation, but ARL has generally avoided operational roles.

To cite this article: "Evolving Preservation Roles and Responsibilities of Research Libraries." *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC*, no. 266 (October 2009): 7–12.

<http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/rli/archive/rli266.shtml>.