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MetaScholar briefing: Free Culture proceedings

An editorial guide to the proceedings of the 2005 Symposium on Free Culture and the Digital Library, Emory University

Our briefing on the proceedings of the 2005 Emory symposium, featuring Lawrence Lessig and Siva Vaidhyanathan, on digital access to cultural information and the legal limits placed on it.

About this briefing

This briefing was written by the MetaScholar editors. It describes the proceedings of the Symposium on Free Culture and the Digital Library, held at Emory University on October 14, 2005. It draws on the symposium's public program and call for papers. It does not reproduce or quote the papers, and it does not attribute views to speakers beyond the topics they were listed as addressing.

The symposium

The symposium was hosted by the MetaScholar Initiative of Emory's libraries and held at Gambrell Hall, home of the Emory University School of Law, from morning until early evening. It was sponsored by the Robert W. Woodruff Library and the Emory University School of Law. The featured speakers were Lawrence Lessig and Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Its subject was the relationship between digital access to public cultural information and intellectual property constraints. The organizers observed that new legal limits in the United States were affecting public access to material held in many kinds of open digital infrastructures, from the Library of Congress to peer-to-peer networks such as Kazaa. They argued that as technology and law both changed, it had become critical to understand how digital innovation and legal regulation affected each other, locally, nationally and internationally.

How the proceedings were assembled

The call for papers invited contributions from many disciplines, including the humanities, information science, law, the social sciences, computer science, librarianship, archival science and the study of popular culture. Papers were to address the themes from cultural and social, legal, digital library technology or library science perspectives.

Suggested topics included the influence of copyright and internet law on digital media, the cultural impact of electronic content, case studies of digital library services changing research or teaching, digital scholarly publishing, the design of digital library services, and the likely effects of digital libraries on education and e-science. Accepted papers were original work in English, presented in person at the symposium and included in the proceedings. The submission process ran on Open Conference Systems from the Public Knowledge Project.

What the papers cover

The list of presenters shows a deliberately broad conversation. Several papers addressed law and policy directly. Marjorie Heins of the Brennan Center for Justice asked whether fair use would survive the digital age. William Maher of the University of Illinois Archives wrote on unpublished orphan works. Denise Troll Covey of Carnegie Mellon analyzed responses to the Copyright Office notice of inquiry on orphan works. Karrie Peterson and James A. Jacobs examined government information in the digital era.

Other papers described open systems in practice. Simeon Warner reflected on the arXiv as a long-running example of open scientific communication. Edward Fox of Virginia Tech argued that universities could readily support free culture through electronic thesis and dissertation programs, using the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations as his example. Daniel Mayer discussed Wikipedia and trust in users.

A third group looked at commons-based production and the role of librarians. Joseph Corneli, Robert Milson and Raymond Puzio wrote on peer production platforms and free mathematics. Debora Halbert and Meghan Miller Brawley considered librarians as agents of cultural exchange and of open access. Bradley Daigle asked how digital scholarship can be sustained. Barrie Howard of the Digital Library Federation and Aaron Krowne of Emory also contributed.

Reading notes for today

The proceedings capture a specific moment. Copyright terms had recently been extended, open licenses were new, and digital libraries were testing what the law would allow. Read twenty years later, the volume is valuable as a record of which problems the field saw clearly. Orphan works, fair use for digital access, and the place of open repositories in scholarly life were all on the table.

Some of those questions have since moved, through litigation, licensing and policy. Others, especially orphan works in the United States, remain open. Our essay on free culture and the digital library twenty years on offers a fuller comparison.

The archived symposium pages list the presenters, abstracts and program. Readers citing a specific paper should cite its author and title directly.

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