MetaScholar briefing · Symposium held October 6, 2006

MetaScholar briefing: Sustaining Digital Libraries

An editorial guide to Strategies for Sustaining Digital Libraries, the publication from the 2006 Sustaining Digital Libraries Symposium at Emory University

Our briefing on the publication that grew out of Emory's 2006 symposium on how digital libraries can be kept running, funded and preserved once the build phase is over.

About this briefing

This briefing was written by the MetaScholar editors. It describes Strategies for Sustaining Digital Libraries, the publication associated with the Sustaining Digital Libraries Symposium held at Emory University's Robert W. Woodruff Library on October 6, 2006. We summarize its purpose and context from the public record of the symposium. We do not reproduce the text, quote its contributors, or report findings that the record does not support.

The question behind the symposium

By 2006, digital libraries had grown quickly for about a decade. Many had been built with grants and launched with energy. The question of how to keep them going had become a serious concern for a wide range of institutions. The symposium was organized to bring digital library leaders and other professionals together to look at the key issues in sustaining these services.

The organizers framed sustainability broadly. It covered preserving information over time and keeping it accessible to very different communities of users. It also covered the organizations, budgets and partnerships that make preservation and access possible.

Who took part

The program was designed to include several perspectives that rarely sat together. Funding agencies were represented, including the newly established Office of Cyberinfrastructure at the National Science Foundation, which was to describe how sponsors saw the problem.

Panels included representatives of major national programs: the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program led by the Library of Congress, the National Science Digital Library, and the Digital Library Federation.

The organizers also invited groups that had succeeded at similar functions but were not usually part of library discussions. Amazon.com and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research were named among them. Including a large commercial retailer and a long-established social science data archive signaled that the organizers wanted practical lessons from outside the library field, not only from within it.

The symposium was hosted by the MetaScholar Initiative and sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Science Digital Library and the Digital Library Federation. Seating was limited, so a published record mattered for the many people who could not attend.

Themes to look for

Readers approaching the publication today will find it useful to read with a few questions in mind. Who is expected to pay for a digital library after its first grant ends? What organizational forms, such as host institutions, consortia or partnerships, have proved durable? How do preservation and access compete for the same limited resources? And what can libraries learn from commercial services and data archives that had already built long-running operations?

Those questions connect directly to the MetaScholar Initiative's own trajectory. Its projects moved from grant-funded experiments toward longer-term structures, most clearly in the MetaArchive preservation network, which became a member cooperative. The symposium can be read in part as the initiative reflecting in public on a problem it was facing in its own work.

A practical way to use the publication is as a checklist against a current project. For each contribution, ask whether the project you are planning has an answer to the problem it raises. Gaps found this way are cheaper to close before launch than after the first grant ends.

Reading notes for today

Sustainability has not become easier since 2006. Many digital projects from that decade are no longer online. At the same time, models that were early or experimental then, including preservation cooperatives, shared repository services and institutional open access infrastructure, are now common. The publication offers a snapshot of the field at the moment those models were being argued for.

Later work, including the 2010 final report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access, carried the economic side of the discussion further. Read together, these documents show how the field came to treat sustainability as a question of incentives, roles and governance as well as technology.

Our essay on funding models for sustaining digital libraries draws on this history and offers practical guidance for current projects. Readers citing individual contributions should cite them by

author and title from the original publication.

This briefing is an independent editorial summary by the MetaScholar editors. It is not the original report and is not affiliated with Emory University or any funder named here. www.metascholar.org/documents.html