September 2008

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Recommended Citation

Maron, Nancy (2008) "Survey of Library Director Attitudes Toward Digital Preservation," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 7.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5143>

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Survey of Library Director Attitudes Toward Digital Preservation

by Nancy Maron (Strategic Services Analyst, Ithaka) <nancy.maron@ithaka.org>

In September 2005, library directors from 17 universities and colleges met to discuss the current state of electronic journal preservation and endorsed a statement calling for “Urgent Action” to preserve scholarly electronic journals. In the months that followed, many library associations also endorsed this statement and its principal message that “in a scholarly environment that is increasingly dependent on information in digital form, preservation of electronic journals is necessary and urgent.”¹ Over two years later, how far has the library community come in taking steps towards the digital preservation of e-journals?

Since that statement was issued, two significant initiatives, **Portico** and **LOCKSS**, have launched, and publishers have been active in supporting these initiatives. But it has become clear that not all libraries had yet chosen to adopt an e-journal preservation policy. The **Portico Advisory Committee** wondered what could be stopping libraries from taking steps towards protecting their e-journal investments?

Earlier this year, **Portico** partnered with **Ithaka’s Strategic Services Group**

to design a series of questions to assess attitudes in the academic library community regarding e-journal preservation. The research was conducted as a Web-based survey, sent to 1,371 Directors of Libraries at four-year higher education institutions in the U.S. Over the eleven days the survey remained open, 186 valid

submissions were received, or a rate of 13.6%.

Not surprisingly, since the survey was sent out under the auspices of **Portico**, we noted that a slightly greater percentage of those responding to the survey were **Portico** participants than would normally be found. To correct for this response bias, we adjusted the sample to reflect the actual percentage of **Portico** participants in the full target population. In our adjusted sample, 55% of our respondents were from institutions that self-identified as primarily focused on teaching, while 45% hailed from institutions with an emphasis on research or research plus teaching.

Do Library Directors Care About e-journal Preservation?

Overwhelmingly, library directors demonstrated strong support for the concept of e-journal preservation. A large majority (82%) agreed that “*libraries need to support community preservation initiatives because it is the right thing to do.*” Seventy-three percent agreed that “*our library should ensure that e-journals are preserved somewhere.*” The need for e-journal preservation came through clearly, as nearly three-quarters of all respondents felt the risk was unacceptable for “*access to some of our journals [to be] permanently lost at some point in the future.*”

Figure 1

Over 80% of respondents agreed with the statement that “*Libraries need to support community preservation initiatives because it's the right thing to do, even in the absence of tangible, near-term benefits to a particular library.*” And over 70% agreed with the statement that “*Our library should ensure that e-journals are preserved somewhere.*”

How, then, did this translate in terms of actions taken? Most (80%) felt that just having a content provider “*hold several redundant copies of its e-journals*” was not a sufficient solution to the problem of e-journal preservation. Such strong support

for the concept, paired with the expressed belief that libraries themselves ought to take an active role, seemed to suggest that we would observe high levels of participation in e-journal preservation initiatives. This is not at all, however, what we found.

Figure 2

We asked library directors if their library “*participate(s) in or contribute(s) to one of the following e-journal preservation initiatives: LOCKSS, Portico, Other.*” If respondents chose *any* of the answers, including writing in any answer at all under “Other,” we chose to consider them as “taking action.” Only if they mentioned nothing at all, did we consider them not to be taking action. Based on this broadly inclusive definition, still only 34% of the respondents could be characterized as “taking action,” less than half as many had initially agreed that e-journal preservation was important to act upon.

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The next set of questions needing exploration then, was: what could be leading to this gap between what library directors say they know is important, and what they are actually doing? What could explain why librarians would acknowledge the importance of e-journal preservation but not act on it?

Who Acts and Who Does Not?

While libraries of all sizes voiced their support for e-journal preservation initiatives, perhaps unsurprisingly taking action correlated strongly with size of the institution, as measured by either enrollment (FTE) or materials budget (LME). Similarly, those institutions which identified themselves as either research-focused or research and teaching-focused, were more likely to also be taking active steps towards digital preservation. These institutions have clearly stepped up to the preservation challenge. While nearly half of those libraries which described themselves as research or research and teaching focused also reported participation in an e-journal preservation initiative; only 24% of those institutions which described themselves as primarily teaching-focused had taken action.

What Was Learned About Non-action Takers?

Looking more closely at just those institutions which had not taken action, it was noted that a large majority (74%) of those not yet taking action agreed that *“libraries need to support community preservation initiatives because it’s the right thing to do.”* What could be causing this disconnect?

Lack of Urgency

While there is widespread agreement on the overall importance of the issue, respondents to the survey were split on just when that action needed to be taken. The distribution of responses to the statement *“E-journal preservation does not require any action from our library today or within the next two years”* creates a nicely symmetrical graph, but in essence illustrates that most institutions who have not yet acted do not feel compelled to act anytime soon. It would be important to better understand why this many do not feel the “urgency” of the Urgent Action statement: might they feel that other institutions — the ‘early adopters’ — have already taken care of this responsibility for them? If so, do those libraries that have taken action understand that they are shouldering this responsibility for the broader community?

“The funds allocated for e-journal preservation activities are found in a range of places in a library budget...”

Figure 3

Responsibility

Over half of the respondents who have not yet taken action felt that *“research libraries should be ‘taking care of’ e-journal preservation on behalf of the entire library community,”* as opposed to less than a quarter of those participating libraries. Specifically, among the non-action-takers, 59% of the teaching-focused institutions felt that preservation was the responsibility of the research institutions, while only 38% of research institutions agreed. These provocative findings suggest that there may need to be more dialogue about how the digital preservation responsibility could be distributed across the library community. Are the research institutions funded at a level sufficient to carry this burden for all others? As digital collections grow — and become more similar — across the library spectrum, are preservation obligations more broadly shared?

Budget is a Concern

Budgetary concerns are common in libraries of all types. About half of those libraries not yet participating in an e-journal preservation initiative agreed that budgetary constraints limited them from *“adopting new products or approaches until we see they are broadly adopted by the library community.”* This hesitation, likely borne of a need to allocate scarce resources to known quantities, is also underlined by the way the library directors characterized their institutions: those already participating in e-journal preservation initiatives were nearly twice as likely to consider themselves “trailblazers” than were those who had yet to take action.

The funds allocated for e-journal preservation activities are found in a range of places in a library budget, from collection development (56%), binding and processing (15%), librarian’s discretionary fund (10%), to preservation (9%). Does this practice reflect that this activity or priority has not yet been firmly established? To what extent might preservation activities be in competition with other activities, including collection development? What risks does this competition present to future access to digital resources upon which institutional resources are being expended at a growing rate?

The Influence of Campus Stakeholders

It was also noted a significant difference regarding the interaction with faculty on the question of e-journal preservation between those libraries which had taken action and those which had not yet. The former were nearly twice as likely to report that they had been approached about e-journal preservation than those who had not yet taken action. At some level it isn’t at all surprising that librarians respond to faculty requests, but is there an opportunity for proactive campus leadership here? Do libraries have an opportunity to get out in front of faculty or administrator queries and proactively lead conversations on this issue? Is there an opportunity to position the library as a campus leader ensuring long-term access to critical scholarly content?

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been slashed from \$2 million in State of SC funding to \$200,000! That’s quite a cut! We are scrambling to see how many of the online databases that we will be able to continue to

provide to our patrons in light of this huge defusion (is that a word?) of cash.
www.heraldonline.com/109/story/653565.html
pascalsc.org/content/view/full/1731/

And I just remembered to mention that the highly motivated researcher **Sherman Pyatt**, once of the **Citadel** as well as the **Avery Re-**

search Center, is now Coordinator of the Collection Development unit at **South Carolina State University** in Orangeburg, SC.

And, speaking of **forgetting** (is that the half empty and **remembering** is the half full way of looking at things?) — My daughter **Ileana**

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Figure 4

This inclusive definition of “preservation” raises another critical question: just how do institutions define preservation? While this question was not specifically asked in the survey, the range of responses is a good reminder that the use of this word can itself be problematic, masking a variety of activities, without making explicit exactly in which activities an institution is engaged. Beyond the need for technical standards, there is the need for a standard vocabulary as well, for describing the range of activities that can constitute “preservation.” Until the precise terms are clearly identified and named, libraries and the preservation initiatives that hope to serve them risk misunderstanding the range of available options and making informed decisions about which of the current options would best suit them.

There appears to be room here for greater transparency in terms of which activities

different preservation alternatives offer, which types of libraries collections they are best suited to, and how the different initiatives define preservation in the first place.

Conclusions

While most of the academic library community believes that digital preservation of e-journals is important, there is still significant confusion about just how urgent it is. Many libraries seem to be taking a wait-and-see approach, with some institutions relying on the actions of others in the near term. These data raise several questions for individual libraries and for the community:

- Who is responsible for ensuring the digital preservation of e-journals? Can e-journal preservation be sustained with only the support of a part of this community?
- For those who are waiting to see, what measures would they find the most compelling? In the meantime, is there a risk that libraries could wait until there are no viable options?
- How can library directors best address the challenges of e-journal preservation in the face of many other competing priorities?

In the months ahead, library directors and preservation initiatives may need to find ways to come together to address these issues directly, in order to ensure that the community has long-term solutions on which it can rely. 🌱

Endnotes

1. Donald J. Waters, editor. “Urgent Action Needed to Preserve Scholarly Electronic Journals,” October 15, 2005. Available at: <http://www.diglib.org/pubs/waters051015.htm>.

Digital Preservation and the Small Academic Library

by Marilyn Geller (Collection Management Librarian, Lesley University Library) <mgeller@lesley.edu>

Why would a small academic library spend precious funds from its collection development budget for **Portico** membership? Are we being good stewards of our budget? And do our patrons really see any benefit from it? Does the university? In the library world, we have lived with the reality of serials cancellations, escalating material prices, and budget dollars stretched taut for several years now, and it is these dramatic financial circumstances that convince us that our participation in an e-journal preservation solution (in our particular case, **Portico**) is, indeed, a valuable use of our money for the library, for our patrons, and for the larger organization we support.

Lesley University is a small liberal arts school with undergraduate and graduate programs in education, applied arts, counseling psychology, expressive arts therapies and environmental studies. Many of our programs are aimed

at training professionals and are, therefore, either certified or monitored by the appropriate professional associations. Our FTE is between four and five thousand students, most of whom attend **Lesley University** sponsored classes in venues other than our home campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The library supports on-campus, off-campus, online and hybrid (combination) learning environments. Among the three major collections, the general library, the arts library and the teaching resource center, we have approximately 100,000 print monographs and between four and five hundred print journal subscriptions in addition to over 60 databases and electronic resource collections. Like other libraries, we are moving towards the acquisition of more electronic resources every year. In some cases, we are converting our physical holdings to digital holdings by switching from print to electronic subscriptions.

The materials we choose to acquire for our patrons fall into one of three broad categories:

- We acquire materials to support general educational needs. These materials are usually basic information resources brought into the collection to round it out and make certain that we have foundation materials across all of the disciplines. We assume that as the subject areas in this general category develop, these materials will be superseded, and indeed be replaced within our collection, by more current information resources. These materials are interchangeable with similar titles; they provide a fundamental understanding of a subject area but are not unique.
- We also acquire materials to support degree programs. The materials in this category are more than basic; they provide our patrons with more in depth research. They also support professional certification or create a collection of adequate

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