Lessons From The Future

Looking Back on Policy Development

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Abstract – Policy is an important component of a successful digital preservation program. For example, CoreTrustSeal [1] suggests that a policy statement would be appropriate evidence to demonstrate that a repository has an explicit mission to provide access to and preserve digital objects, and the DPC's Rapid Assessment Model [2] suggests that a digital preservation policy should be in place in order to reach the 'Basic' level of the 'Policy and Strategy' section. While resources exist [3] to assist organizations in developing their first digital preservation policy, these formative strategic documents are intended to hold relevance beyond their initial publication. This panel session highlighted challenges and opportunities in the development and ongoing maintenance of digital preservation policies across three organizations: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, National Library of Ireland, and National Library of New Zealand. Panelists reflected on learnings from different stages of the policy lifecycle, including initial development, initiating revisions, and re-engaging with dormant policy documents. These efforts are contextualized within broader policy education resources, including the DPC's revised Digital Preservation Policy Toolkit [4].

Keywords – policy, outreach, documentation, advocacy

Conference Topics – From Theory to Practice; We're All in this Together

I. Introduction

Digital preservation policies represent many things to many organizations. For some, publication of a policy represents a foundational event in a digital preservation program; for others it is an aspirational document that guides developing operations; for others it indicates a level of operational maturity and stability. For many organizations, it serves more than one of these roles.

Because digital preservation policies are so specific to an organization and its setting, it can be challenging to transfer generalized policy guidance to a unique organizational context. This panel was put together to explore the challenges in developing and maintaining digital preservation policies across different stages of the policy lifecycle, drawing lessons learned and recommendations from practitioners across the world: from those contemplating their first policy to those who may have inherited a policy that no longer meets the needs of their organization.

II. The Panelists

The panelists for this submission were selected for their diverse policy experiences; a short

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description of each panelist and their work in policy development is provided below. This session was organized in collaboration with Jenny Mitcham and facilitated by Sharon McMeekin, both of the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC). The DPC have revised and republished their Digital Preservation Policy Toolkit this year and are developing training materials on the topic of digital preservation policy development.

Elizabeth England is Senior Digital Preservation Specialist at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), where she participates in strategic and operational initiatives and services for the preservation of born-digital and digitized records of the U.S. federal government. The NARA digital preservation strategy was first published in 2017 as a largely aspirational document, and Elizabeth led revisions to the document in 2022.

Martin Gengenbach is Digital Preservation Policy and Outreach Specialist at the National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ). His role is focused on developing and communicating policy to support digital preservation throughout the Library. He began this role in 2022, and has been driving revisions to the Library's digital preservation strategy and digital preservation policy, which were originally published in 2012.

Kieran O'Leary is Digital Preservation Manager at National Library of Ireland (NLI). He is responsible for coordinating the implementation of digital preservation throughout the Library. NLI has drafted previous digital preservation policies in 2017 and 2020, and will publish their first digital preservation policy in 2023.

III. PANEL DISCUSSION TOPICS

During this session, panelists reflected on what they have learned in their work developing, maintaining, and updating digital preservation policies. The topics and questions chosen for discussion constitute "lessons from the future," providing guidance for policy development rooted in past experience and common challenges.

Building internal support for policy development - Administrators and funders may not understand the purpose and value of a digital preservation policy, particularly if there are already operational procedures in place for working with digital materials. Panelists discussed their experiences in cultivating support for policy publication and revision, and where new internal champions were needed to move forward with policy goals.

At NARA it was noted that a gap analysis based on ISO 16363 was carried out in 2017 and identified the need to have a digital preservation policy in place. Knowing that at that stage, the document would be largely aspirational, it was eventually agreed with colleagues that framing it as a strategy would be more appropriate than having a policy document that NARA didn't meet in practice. It was noted however that having a document (even if not policy in name) was better than not having one at all.

At NLI there has been a lot of support for the development of a digital preservation policy and to a certain extent this has been supported by the presence of digital preservation in the institutional risk register. Once the risks around digital preservation are flagged up to senior management it becomes more pressing to find ways to mitigate them. This was a key step in gaining necessary buy in and support from colleagues. Another important step was to form a steering group of key stakeholders who could review and have oversight of the policy. At NLI an existing group was transformed and repurposed and this has been key to moving the policy forward.

Martin Gengenbach noted that at NLNZ support can take many different forms. The very fact of his job role being supported suggests that policy is a priority within the organization. Challenges around gaining support have been in getting individual units within the organization to engage with policy work around other operational priorities. He has discovered that the 'outreach' aspect of his job title is equally important to the 'policy' element, with the two parts going very much hand-in-hand.

How policy can be aligned with organizational strategy and vision - Connecting a digital preservation policy to organizational priorities is one way to gain administrative support by demonstrating how digital preservation goals further other organizational initiatives. Panelists were encouraged to discuss some of the broader organizational strategy elements that played a role in their digital preservation policy development.

At NLNZ digital preservation policy work has been tied in to ongoing initiatives that directly impact

business units across the organization. It has been incredibly valuable to be able to demonstrate how digital preservation policy work is applicable to wider organizational goals and initiatives.

At NARA, Elizabeth England expressed an intention to firmly tie policy revision into the timeline of the organizational wide strategic plan. The current plan runs until 2026 which marks a key change in digital collecting for the organization. Digital preservation policy needs to align with, and support, this wider plan. Review cycles for these documents will also be aligned in future.

Kieran O'Leary noted a similar situation with policy aligning with wider organizational strategy. It is early days for the new digital preservation policy at NLI and anticipated that an annual review may be necessary initially, but that it may be possible to align policy review with the five-year strategic planning cycle in the future.

Communicating policy, internally and externally - How policy is communicated both internally and externally will have an impact on implementation. Panelists explored different communication strategies and their efficacy in their unique organizational contexts, highlighting the need for ongoing communication throughout the development process to ensure all stakeholders remain informed and engaged.

Communication is a key part of Martin Gengenbach's role at NLNZ. As a relatively new employee, his first year has largely been about communication – talking to key stakeholders and finding out what their challenges are, as well as understanding how policy has been created and maintained in the library in the past. He noted that it is OK to over-communicate and that providing multiple opportunities for comment and feedback is not a bad thing. He recognizes that whilst he may think about policy all the time, other stakeholders within the organization are being pulled in many different directions. Frequent communication in a number of different ways helps to keep policy in their minds.

Elizabeth England described how NARA keeps stakeholders informed and engaged through their digital preservation guidance group. This group includes representatives from across the organization, including the custodial units responsible for records received from three different

areas of government that supply records to NARA. Having input from all of these different areas (all with different regulations) helps to keep the digital preservation strategy broadly relevant to all stakeholders.

Framing policy as present state or aspirational - Depending on the existing state of digital preservation operations, the digital preservation policy may be framed as an aspirational statement of intent ("we will"), or an articulation of current practice ("we do"). Panelists shared their perspectives on the factors that impact how an organization may choose to frame their policy.

The most recent digital preservation policy developed at NLI was intended to reflect present state, but external feedback given on an early draft highlighted that use of the future tense in policy statements led to it being misunderstood as aspirational. This issue has been resolved in its latest version. Whilst most of the policy reflects current state, there are a few areas within the policy that mention areas of work that will be developed in the future. NLI plans to implement annual check-ins using DPC's Rapid Assessment Model and ensure that continuous improvement is at the heart of their digital preservation work.

Martin Gengenbach's initial impressions of the existing NLNZ policy manual when first encountering it was that it reflected the present state. In this case, the policy statements were very specific and granular. In actual fact, it had been developed as the organization tried to understand how they would use their digital preservation repository rather than based on processes that were actually operational. The rewrite of this policy will more closely reflect the fully functional digital preservation program and will aim to be present state. It was also noted that the new policy will be higher level, leaving out much of the procedural detail which is more suited to other forms of documentation.

Elizabeth England noted that the original 2017 strategy was deliberately aspirational. It had been developed after a gap analysis was carried out, and the policy was very much intended as a way of committing to bridge those gaps that had been identified. In the more recent revision of this policy, many of those aspirational statements now reflect the current state. The updates made to the policy

included reframing the language to use "we do..." instead of "we will...".

Turning aspiration into operation - Ensuring the successful implementation of a policy demonstrates accountability and builds trust in an organization's digital preservation program. Panelists were asked to reflect on how new policy can support existing procedure; where policy and implementation combined can identify and resolve gaps in current practice; and how thoughtful implementation can support later policy goals.

The NLI policy has an implementation and next steps section which is aimed to help move any aspirational goals forward. The close alignment of their policy with DPC's Rapid Assessment Model has also helped with highlighting concrete steps that could be taken to improve, and the planned yearly cycle of RAM assessment will continue to move this forward over time.

At the NLNZ the current priority is to make sure the policy is in alignment with current operations.

Elizabeth England described a "push versus pull" between policy influencing practice versus practice influencing policy. She noted that her revision process includes creating documentation about elements that have moved from aspiration to operation.

Lessons from the future – This panel discussion was all about lessons from the future and the panelists have clearly all learned much from their work in this area. They were asked to summarize the key messages they would pass back to their past selves at the beginning of their digital preservation policy journeys.

Martin Gengenbach noted the importance of setting goals from the outset. He stressed the benefits of ensuring that you have a clear understanding of why a change to policy might be necessary in your specific context. Reviewing these goals regularly is also key.

Elizabeth England chose to flag up the value of documentation. Documenting the process of creating or revising your policy or strategy will be a huge help to your future self. Recording why you made particular decisions, why you worded something in a particular way, and of course, whether your policy is aspirational or present state

will be incredibly helpful to anyone who comes to revise it.

Kieran O'Leary recognized the value of engaging all relevant stakeholders as early as possible in the policy creation or review process. Having a steering group with all the right people around the table was hugely beneficial to the work on preservation policy at NLI.

IV. CONCLUSION

While generic good practice guidance (such as that found in the DPC's Digital Preservation Policy Toolkit) can be helpful for those who are getting started with writing or reviewing policy, it is also helpful to hear the experiences of different organizations who have tackled this challenge. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to preservation policy and each organization must find a unique approach to meet their own needs. This panel session provided an opportunity to learn about how this task was approached in practice and to discuss key themes across different contexts, highlighting both contrasting approaches and parallels.

1. REFERENCES

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