

FROM SILOS TO COMMUNITY

The Path to a Holistic Digital Preservation Policy

Laura McCann

New York University
USA

lm103@nyu.edu
0000-0001-7821-3127

Weatherly A. Stephan

New York University
USA

was227@nyu.edu
0000-0002-6381-2036

Abstract – While New York University Libraries has a long history of and commitment to digital collecting and preservation efforts, the institution did not have any policies governing the services and activities of digital preservation prior to 2022. This paper details the creation of a holistic digital preservation policy statement, with contributors from across ten functional units at NYU Libraries. The policy was grounded in the Libraries’ mission and values—including deep commitments to inclusion, diversity, belonging, equity, and accessibility—and drew on themes crafted by all members of the group to ensure their work was represented in the statement. The success of the policy group was rooted in its intentional formation and processes that acknowledged the distributed nature of digital preservation and emphasized the creation of a community of practice. Further, it laid the foundation for a more complete suite of preservation policies and forward-looking conversations about how to enact ethical and sustainable stewardship in digital collecting, access, and preservation practices.

Keywords – Community of Practice, Documentation, Policy, Preservation Strategy, Stewardship

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

I. INTRODUCTION

New York University (NYU) Libraries has had a long, deep involvement in the development of digital collecting and preservation practices. But despite this history and strong institutional commitment, NYU Libraries did not have any policies governing digital preservation prior to 2022. This paper describes the process of developing NYU Libraries’ first digital preservation policy, which required the breaking down of silos to create a community of

practice. Throughout the creation of the policy, the authors recognized the necessity of the distribution of digital preservation throughout the institution, along with the importance of centering ethical and sustainable stewardship practices in our digital-focused work.

From contributing to the development of the Metadata Encoding & Transmission Standard; adopting web archiving for special collections repositories in 2007 to the IMLS grant *Saving Data Journalism* to archive dynamic websites in 2019; launching international postcustodial projects such as the Afghan Digital Library and Arabic Collections Online; the publication of profession-wide standards such as “Digitizing Video for Long-Term Preservation” and “Guidelines for Preserving New Forms of Scholarship”; much of NYU Libraries’ work in digital preservation has been in public, collaborative projects, often supported by grant funding [1-3]. Beyond the in-house research and development department, Digital Library Technology Services, these projects germinated across the Libraries in Research & Research Services, the Barbara Goldsmith Preservation & Conservation Department (Preservation Department), and special collections repositories.

In addition to many public-facing projects, NYU Libraries developed its own digital repository in 2011 and is actively engaged in the preservation of digital content, born-digital media, digitized analog content, and software. While many digital preservation practitioners at the Libraries recognized the importance of collaboration, there was also a

tendency to work solely on localized decisions and technical frameworks without looking toward holistic needs across the institution.

II. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

In the last five years, NYU Libraries has undergone a significant organizational change prompted by new leadership. In 2018, H. Austin Booth was appointed Dean of NYU's Division of Libraries, an organization that includes NYU Press and NYU-TV. Dean Booth reorganized the leadership, creating a flatter organizational structure that enables direct communication between the leaders of all functional groups. The Preservation Department then joined the senior leadership team, providing new opportunities for collaboration on digital preservation.

Following the reorganization, Dean Booth charged the leadership team with the creation of a digital library governance structure that focused on inclusive and equitable practices across digital collecting, preservation, and access in the Libraries. This aligned with one of the top strategic priorities for the organization—digital preservation—along with a growing recognition that areas of digital collecting were not open to all curators and collectors across the Libraries. For instance, when the digital library group was focused on supporting grant funded projects in the special collections repositories, there was no labor or resources to dedicate to new projects or collecting areas outside of grant structures. Furthermore, a reliance on grant funding for digital preservation projects created new work that was challenging to maintain after grant periods ended. This challenge prompted a commitment from the new leadership to the principle of ethical, sustainable stewardship of all collections, but especially when embarking on new digital collections work.

In 2020, senior leadership created a Digital Library Steering Committee to prioritize and resource proposed digital library projects from across the Libraries, inclusive of both general and special collections. The Steering Committee is informed by the work of a short-term Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group, which produced criteria for digital collecting; and ongoing resource, labor, and workflow analyses provided by a Digital Preservation and Access Committee. The governance groups were all intentionally staffed with a balance of practitioners and curators to help

inform each others' work and create a shared understanding of how digital collecting and preservation would evolve at the Libraries.

Into this new landscape, the lead author was promoted to Director of the Preservation Department in January 2021. While, as the former supervisor of preventive, general, and special collections conservation, McCann had established strong relationships with collections managers and subject librarians throughout the Libraries, digital preservation was new to her portfolio. Consulting with the second author, McCann realized that early-stage collaboration and building an inclusive community of practice would be critical to create policy for digital preservation at NYU Libraries [4].

1. III. ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

In her first year as Director, McCann undertook both an external and internal environmental scan. Central in her learning about this area were concepts of the distributed nature of digital preservation from the literature, the work of the digital library governance groups, and, perhaps most importantly, informal connections with colleagues over a long tenure at NYU Libraries. An external review of policies showed diversity of style and scope at peer institutions. McCann's outreach to peer institutions also revealed that these policies were commonly authored by a single individual or single department, and many were focused solely on infrastructure. Considering NYU was already deeply engaged in the work of digital preservation, she determined it was most strategic to focus on a policy statement from which other policies could be developed.

Internally, in order to better understand the digital preservation touchpoints within NYU Libraries, McCann convened meetings with individuals and in small groups with colleagues in disparate departments. The internal environmental scan revealed that many colleagues are engaged in the work of digital preservation, and while there are some strong intra-organizational collaborations overall, other work was siloed. Many colleagues were surprised to learn that other departments were engaged in digital preservation. While this surprise in a few instances was attributed to an individual's narrow definition of digital preservation, usually it was due to the consequence of a large complex organization and the past hierarchical structure that hindered interdepartmental communications. For example, the Collection Management department

regularly determines digital preservation terms on leased e-resources, and the Data Services department had been ad-hoc managing purchased data files on hard drives: both opportunities for collaboration that did not lead to actual connections.

The environmental scan demonstrated the need for an inclusive and representational policy statement that would inform all digital preservation work at NYU Libraries. The lead author set about creating a policy task force by soliciting participants from all units represented on the senior leadership team, with the exception of the administrative units. The Dean and three Associate Deans were purposely excluded from the task force to provide more opportunity for colleagues at different levels in the organization.

The leaders of each unit were asked to nominate potential collaborators who were interested in the process and the goals of the group. While most nominations were for individuals within the reporting structure of the leader's department, there were notable exceptions. For example, the second author comes from a technical services department for archival collections, though on the policy task force she represented the curators in special collections repositories who acquire and appraise digital archives. The Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Belonging, Equity, and Accessibility (IDBEA) Steering Committee, whose co-chairs sit on the senior leadership team, was represented on the task force as well. In addition to the IDBEA Steering Committee and the Preservation Department, the task force had representatives from Collections & Content Strategy; Digital Library Technology Services; Libraries Information Technology Services; Knowledge Access & Resource Management Services; NYU Special Collections; NYU-TV; Research and Research Services; Scholarly Communications and Information Policy; Teaching, Learning, and Engagement; and User Experience.

2. IV. POLICY CREATION

The Digital Preservation Policy Task Force was convened in May 2022 and was charged with creating a concise digital preservation policy statement for the Division of Libraries within a five month period. The co-authors co-chaired the task force. The task force agreed to norms for anti-oppressive facilitation that are widely used at NYU Libraries, and adopted a participatory decision making model for work on the policy statement [5].

Over ten synchronous meetings with one to two weeks of asynchronous work between, the task force proceeded in three phases: research, drafting, and revision.

In the research phase, members shared resources that could inform the group's final product. Excerpts from Trevor Owens's *Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation* and the article "What's Wrong with Digital Stewardship?" formed the core of the group's initial reading [6-7]. The task force reviewed peer institution policies, ranging from public and private local and national institutions, such as Columbia University and the University of California, as well as model policies like the NASIG Model for Digital Preservation Policy. [8-10] Members also explored concepts adjacent to digital preservation work, such as maintenance and broken world vocabularies [11-12]. Throughout this process the group saw that the scope of digital preservation at academic research libraries goes beyond preserving and making accessible digital content to the broader work of helping researchers render their data preservable and reusable. Therefore, members determined that building digital preservation awareness and literacy must be part of the policy statement.

While reviewing the shared resources, each member took notes or highlighted salient points in a communal document, which then guided meeting discussion about the scope and shape of the policy statement. Drafting began with each member of the task force defining the term "digital preservation," surfacing assumptions and gaps in each others' knowledge. From this exercise, the task force defined specific themes that were then expanded into bullet points, with many of the themes taken directly from members' conversation in the shared readings discussion. The members also continued to outline the scope of what they saw as relevant for a policy statement while creating a narrative written policy from the bullet points.

The task force built a review of the completed draft by the senior leaders and department managers into the revision process, including gathering feedback from the colleagues at all levels in the organization who were engaged in digital preservation work. Once feedback was incorporated into the draft, the final version was copy edited before approval by the Dean. The completed policy was circulated to the Libraries in the Dean's weekly newsletter, and published on the Libraries website in

November 2022 [13]. The task force conducted an after-action review, highlighting that clear expectations, strong communication, and a compressed timeline provided helpful support for the creation of the statement. A deliberate representation of all areas of the Libraries also fostered new connections between colleagues and built greater understandings about the complexity of digital preservation needs for those who engage in this work daily.

3. V. POLICY

The broad themes that the task force built out into the policy included a grounding in the Libraries' mission and values, open access, active and iterative maintenance, community outreach and collaboration, stewardship, external partners and tools, and challenges and risks. In writing the policy, the task force thought deliberately about how issues of inclusion and diversity could be represented in the statement, especially when considering the drive to collect digital materials from historically underrepresented communities. In the policy statement, the task force acknowledges the challenge in balancing the institution's commitment to accessibility to researchers with disabilities with the ethics of preserving materials that are restricted from use: "We commit to making material available to the widest possible range of users, including those with disabilities, and to adapting the process for making materials open and accessible as the work evolves. We make this commitment while recognizing that not all content may be made accessible" [13]. Another theme in the policy is the centering of people who do the work of digital preservation, particularly the work of maintenance that is frequently overlooked. Here the task force acknowledges that the work of digital preservation is dependent on having the resources to continually dedicate to the work: "We will meet the challenges of digital preservation head-on with the resources we have" [13].

The policy statement is defined internally as adaptable to changing priorities and needs, and as such, revision is expected: "We continuously evaluate our institutional approach, whether risk-tolerant or risk-averse, and adjust as necessary given the surrounding circumstances [13]." One area that will be considered in future revisions is to specifically call out the relationship of digital preservation and climate change, an area of increased interest and

scholarship, as well as a priority for our University [14-16].

There is wide recognition from the task force and invested collaborators across the Libraries that the policy statement was a necessary foundation for the creation of a fuller suite of digital preservation policies. The policy statement provides guidance for other policies that we know to be gaps. These policies, including digital collection development and repository documentation, are crucial for meeting our commitment to ethical, sustainable stewardship of digital collections.

4. VI. CONCLUSION

With the policy live on the Libraries' website, the task force created a model for how to collaborate efficiently and grow a community of practice. The policy publication also instilled the practice of making institutional policies open and available on the Libraries' public-facing website. The Digital Preservation Policy Statement was the first of its kind to be published on the Libraries' policy page and spurred the publication of other foundational policies, such as the Open Metadata Policy [17]. Both of these policies provide users with email aliases to contact policy groups in an effort to broaden our community of practice.

While the policy statement was successfully launched and supported by the senior leadership and appreciated by many staff who work in digital preservation, the statement did not meet the expectations of some managers and practitioners of digital preservation. These colleagues voiced feedback that this policy statement did not address how digital preservation work is done day to day within departments. Instead, it is intended to provide both a foundation and document the institution's commitment to this work. Other feedback requested that archives be called out specifically. This feedback shows that we still have work to do to broaden our institutional understanding of what digital preservation work is across the Libraries, and reduce the bias toward archives and special collections when thinking about digital work.

We believe that the model for policy creation and growing a community of practice is replicable across the profession, regardless of whether a change in leadership or organizational structure prompts the need. Deliberately engaging all colleagues across the Libraries; setting out with clear, achievable goals,

then mapped into phases for the task force; and breaking down the actual authoring of the policy from capturing notes, definitions, and emergent ideas to bullet points to fully formed prose all contributed to our success. In addition, shared norms and alignment with institutional mission, values, and strategic goals helped both guide conversations and resolve areas of concern. Taking an iterative approach to policy creation ensures it is responsive to rapidly changing needs.

Finally, the policy statement, as well as the model of creating a digital preservation community of practice, provides an entry into challenging conversations about sustainability and ethical stewardship of born digital collections. Resources allocated to large digital collections with complex content must also be carefully considered, from curatorial decisions that are both time consuming and demand a comfort with risk, to the labor needed to accession massive born digital collections. Both as an organization and as professionals, we need to talk through these decisions, document our processes, and consider new opportunities.

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