

Institutional repositories: essential infrastructure for scholarship in the digital age.

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Institutional Repositories:

Essential Infrastructure For Scholarship In The Digital Age

Clifford A. Lynch

In the fall of 2002, something extraordinary occurred in the continuing networked information revolution, shifting the dynamic among individually driven innovation, institutional progress, and the evolution of disciplinary scholarly practices. The development of institutional repositories emerged as a new strategy that allows universities to apply serious, systematic leverage to accelerate changes taking place in scholarship and scholarly communication, both moving beyond their historic relatively passive role of supporting established publishers in modernizing scholarly publishing through the licensing of digital content, and also scaling up beyond ad-hoc alliances, partnerships, and support arrangements with a few select faculty pioneers exploring more transformative new uses of the digital medium.

Many technology trends and development efforts came together to make this strategy possible. Online storage costs have dropped significantly; repositories are now affordable. Standards like the open archives metadata harvesting protocol are now in place; some progress has also been made on the standards for the underlying metadata itself. The thinking about digital preservation over the past five years has advanced to the point where the needs are widely recognized and well defined, the technical approaches at least superficially mapped out, and the need for action is now clear. The development of free, publicly accessible journal article collections in disciplines such as high-energy physics has demonstrated ways in which the network can change scholarly communication by altering dissemination and access patterns; separately, the development of a series of extraordinary digital works had at least suggested the potential of creative authorship specifically for the digital medium to transform the presentation and transmission of scholarship.

The leadership of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the development and deployment of the DSpace institutional repository system <<http://www.dspace.org/>>, created in collaboration with the Hewlett Packard Corporation, [End Page 327] has been a model pointing the way forward for many other universities. In 2003, with funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and other sources, MIT's DSpace is scheduled to be replicated at a number of additional institutions around the world; the software has also been released publicly under an open source arrangement, greatly lowering the cost and development barriers to implementing repositories for all institutions. The MIT software is not the only option available, although I believe it is the most general-purpose; for example, there is software from the University of Southampton in the U.K. <<http://www.eprints.org/>> designed more specifically for institutional or disciplinary repositories of papers, as opposed to arbitrary digital materials.

Over the past few months, I have had a number of opportunities to speak about the roles and significance of institutional repositories as a strategy for supporting the use of networked information to advance scholarship, notably at a workshop jointly sponsored by ARL, CNI, and SPARC in Washington, D.C., at the DSpace launch celebration at MIT, and at the University of Tennessee and the University of British Columbia. While video recordings of some of these events are available on the Net, this article is an attempt to summarize and articulate the views I've expressed at these various events about the nature and functions of institutional repositories and their role in transforming scholarship.

Defining Institutional Repositories

In my view, a university-based institutional repository is a set of services that a university offers to the

members of its community for the management and dissemination of digital materials created by the institution and its community members. It is most essentially an organizational commitment to the stewardship of these digital materials, including long-term preservation where appropriate, as well as organization and access or distribution. While operational responsibility for these services may reasonably be situated in different organizational units at different universities, an effective institutional repository of necessity represents a collaboration among librarians, information technologists, archives and records managers, faculty, and university administrators and policymakers. At any given point in time, an institutional repository will be supported by a...

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