A DISCUSSION OF HARVARD LIBRARY'S STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Advancing Open Knowledge

November 2020

HARVARD
LIBRARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About Harvard Library

We are the libraries and archives of Harvard University.

At Harvard Library, we are champions of curiosity. We aim to be global leaders in expanding world knowledge and intellectual exploration. We engage with our communities in the creation and sharing of new knowledge, connecting them with the vast collections that we curate and steward through collaborations around the world. At its core, our mission for over four centuries has been to advance the learning, research, and pursuit of truth that are at the heart of Harvard. Our efforts are motivated and powered by working collaboratively, embracing diverse perspectives, championing access, aiming for the extraordinary, and always leading with curiosity.

Purpose

We champion curiosity for the betterment of the world.

Vision

We aspire to be global leaders in expanding world knowledge and intellectual exploration.

Mission

We are expert partners on the pathways to knowledge. We engage with our communities in the creation and sharing of new knowledge, connecting them with vast collections that we curate and steward with collaborators around the world. At its core, our mission is to advance the learning, research and pursuit of truth that are at the heart of Harvard.

Values

Lead with Curiosity. We expand intellectual frontiers and remain in awe of what we do not yet know.

Seek Collaboration. We bring people and ideas together from within and beyond because we believe partnership creates more interesting results.

Embrace Diverse Perspectives. We cultivate and celebrate diversity in our collections and our community to construct a more inclusive and just world.

Champion Access. We enhance access to information and advance inclusive models of scholarly communication.

Aim for the Extraordinary. We drive progress and deliver the unexpected, building on our past and forging the future.

Introduction

In early 2020, Harvard Library articulated a core set of values, and our purpose, vision, and mission. Days after this strategic foundation was completed, it was put to the test by the sudden sheltering in place required by the coronavirus pandemic. It has continued to guide us through this intensive year of developing new ways of working, as we seek to protect the health and safety of our community while delivering on our mission. We have built upon our values as we reckon with not only the pandemic but with racial injustice, the climate crisis, political upheaval, and significant financial constraints. Throughout, we have focused very deliberately on guiding the pragmatic steps of today with our vision for the future.

Advancing Open Knowledge takes our vision – we aspire to be global leaders in expanding world knowledge and intellectual exploration – and discusses broad strategies for achieving it in the years ahead. The document pertains to Harvard Library as a whole, a collaborative federation of the libraries of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the professional schools, and departments responsible for system-wide services. *Advancing Open Knowledge* captures the priorities we have in common, with the understanding that there will be variations in specific goals and objectives in libraries across the system, driven by the contexts of their academic units.

This document began as a discussion paper prepared by the Vice President for the Harvard Library and University Librarian and Roy E. Larsen Librarian for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, to reflect ideas arising from discussions with numerous stakeholders in the previous year and to engage staff in taking them further. The Harvard Library Leadership Team reviewed and embraced the discussion paper in the first months of 2020. It was revised for the pandemic context in April, and from May through September staff across Harvard Library were encouraged to discuss it in their units and committees. They were asked to consider the highest priority issues to be addressed in the information landscape, the particular strengths we bring to bear on those issues, and the strategic directions we should set. At its planning retreat in October, the Library Leadership Team discussed that input, and supported this revised *Advancing Open Knowledge* paper as one of its guideposts.

The context in which we are operating has changed dramatically over the course of this conversation and this tumultuous year, but it has also affirmed our steadfast commitment to our essential purpose and values. Now more than ever, we are proud to champion access and embrace diversity, for the betterment of the world.

A Global Knowledge Commons

Scholars and the general public today are in the midst of a critical moment in our knowledge environment. Innovations in technology have raised expectations that any information we want, from any part of the world, is now available at our fingertips and always will be. In reality, the information globe is still dominated by the wealthiest nations, trustworthy information can be hard to find, and it can be gone tomorrow.

These problems feel all the more urgent today. We have seen an erosion in the public trust of institutions that have traditionally been sources of trustworthy information – our universities – and we are seeing expanded expectations for immediate access to open knowledge in the pandemic. The physical distancing required by the pandemic has highlighted both the benefits of how far libraries have advanced in the digital era and how much farther we need to go.

That distance has been highlighted further by the intensified racial justice movement of 2020. We recognize that issues in the information environment have disproportionately harmful effects for some groups, depending on factors such as race, ethnicity, economics, technical limitations, and disabilities. In all we do, we are seeking to become a truly antiracist research library that addresses issues of bias and minimizes all forms of oppression.[1]

In considering these issues and Harvard Library's strengths, we believe we are uniquely positioned to help shift the information landscape towards a more equitable, diverse ecosystem of trustworthy resources. Harvard Library has a long history of collecting the world's knowledge, at a scale unmatched by other academic libraries, with a goal of preserving and making it as widely accessible as possible. This is in the context of an academic institution that has also led the way in policies that enable the open sharing of research publications with the world.[2]

Today, in addition to stewarding vast collections and open digital content, we see opportunities to help empower communities in all parts of the world to produce, share and retain ownership of their local research outputs and cultural resources. We believe that scholars at Harvard and everywhere will benefit from collaborative networks that support equitable access to a diversity of content, easy engagement with trustworthy information, and thoughtful preservation for the future – a global knowledge commons depicted in the following image.

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[1] See "Our Commitment to Antiracism," https://library.harvard.edu/about/about-harvard-library#values

[2] Harvard Library Office for Scholarly Communication, "Open Access Policies," https://osc.hul.harvard.edu/policies
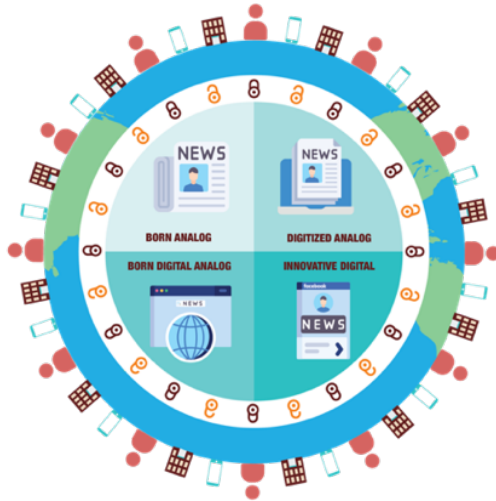
Image: Research libraries in a global knowledge commons

Information in all its forms – or call it content or data – is at the core of this global knowledge commons. As formats have evolved, we have tended to manage them as the separate quadrants shown in the image: born analog materials, such as books; digitized versions of those analog materials; born digital materials that resemble their analog ancestors, such as electronic journals; and innovative digital forms such as searchable data sets ranging from research results to social media. Increasingly, we are seeing a need to think more holistically about these forms of information. They all involve "collection development" that seeks to ensure we are surfacing a diversity of sources and voices from around the world. They beg for effective discovery mechanisms that cross the boundaries of separate information repositories. And, they all require curation and active management of content over time.

The reason libraries have existed, of course, is not for the collections themselves but for the people who use them. Those people are depicted on the surface of the globe, along with physical spaces housing tangible objects and learning spaces, and machines that interact with online data on behalf of humans. Each of these human and machine interfaces should be able to draw from and contribute to the information at the core of the global knowledge commons with ease. To facilitate those actions, we provide a layer of distributed, open, interoperable infrastructure and services – the continents of the globe – and a layer of policies that open up access and protect rights as appropriate.

One of the key points is that knowledge is both global and local: we aim to surface local creations and make them accessible in all parts of the world, to ensure a rich diversity of perspectives and cultures. Another key point is that this is a collaborative endeavor. We need to work together, across multiple stakeholder groups, to develop interoperable infrastructure and human capacity that will better meet local needs.

All of this is the concern of research libraries, and particularly Harvard Library.

Building on Harvard Library's Strengths

Harvard Library is entering a new phase in its evolution, and we are assessing where we can have the greatest impact in advancing the global knowledge commons described above. We recognize that one of our overarching strengths is that we are respected and recognized throughout the world. We want to use this strength, with humility and a deep sense of responsibility, to make a difference in the world.

In articulating these directions for Harvard Library, we are supporting an inspiring narrative about Harvard's service to the world, as stated by President Lawrence Bacow. In a speech at Peking University, President Bacow observed: "Sharing the riches of learning more broadly is one of my aspirations for Harvard and for all higher education. Our excellence can – and should – help to make the world better for individuals who may never set foot on our campuses." He continued: "Our institutions have a responsibility to contribute positively to our own societies and to the national good, as well as the world at large."[3]

Our banner of *Advancing Open Knowledge* is intended to evoke the full sphere of data at the core of the global knowledge commons and the people relying upon it. It is worth noting that we are intentionally going beyond the terms "open access" and "open science," which are sometimes interpreted narrowly. Instead, we are using the term "knowledge," taking inspiration from the broad definition of "science" that open science embraces, encompassing all disciplines: "the state of knowing; knowledge as distinguished from ignorance or misunderstanding."[4]

Harvard Library has many strengths, but it stands out in several areas that address particular issues and gaps in our current landscape. These are described below as strategic directions for Harvard Library as a whole, directions that both support and inform the goals and objectives of units across the system.

Diversify and expand access to knowledge

One of Harvard Library's defining strengths is our collections. They are vast – we are the world's largest academic research library – but more importantly they reflect the global reach and depth of the university's remarkable academic programs and history. They are the result of centuries of international collecting, they include valuable ephemeral materials, and they span a very broad range of specializations. We are fortunate to have a network of expertise across the system focused on

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[3] Lawrence S. Bacow, "The Pursuit of Truth and the Mission of the University" (speech, Beijing, China, March 20, 2019), https://www.harvard.edu/president/speech/2019/pursuit-truth-and-mission-university

[4] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Definition of Science," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/science

stewarding vulnerable and critical resources, from a diverse set of perspectives. Many areas of the collections have played a role in the creation and development of academic disciplines and continue to reflect the history of those fields. In other words, our collections differentiate us from other academic research libraries and contribute significantly to world knowledge.

Going forward, a key priority will be ensuring that our collections are not only diverse in the sense of global breadth, but also in the voices and perspectives represented. We will continue to build remarkable collections, in collaborations across campus and with peer institutions. We will increase our focus on acquiring and creating digital content that is as open as possible. In our digitization, we will seek opportunities to open or improve access to knowledge in all fields, including supporting our users in pursuing antiracism through their research, teaching and learning. Tangible collections remain a key component of our vision: for example, a printed format is often the only option for publications supporting the diversity of voices, perspectives, disciplines and regions of the world we aspire to include in our collections.

Looking specifically at Harvard's premier holdings of rare and unique material, we aim to not only advance research and teaching activity on campus but to contribute to a broader corpus of scholarly resources available to scholars, citizens, and students around the world. We are also seeking to advance a shift in emphasis, from physically acquiring records to having creators retain custody while we help facilitate long-term access.

In the digital realm, we plan to advance innovations that enable equitable opportunities for a diversity of voices to be shared and heard, from and in all parts of the world. Harvard was an early player in library digital initiatives and the open access movement and led the way in many respects. Now, fortunately, there are many other institutions playing significant roles. We want to ensure that our continuing efforts complement theirs and that our work addresses key issues we are observing in the landscape. We believe that not all countries are as well represented in the published record as they could be, and greater effort must be made to bring prominence to the full range of global scholarship. For example, we are concerned about publisher oligopolies and models that rely on article processing charges: they exclude authors and institutions who cannot afford those charges, and that burden falls disproportionately on the global south and less affluent institutions in the global north. Building on our experience of managing one of the earliest research repositories, we will advance a new model of a distributed repository network and publishing services that exemplify collaborative, equitable approaches to scholarly communications and enable seamless access to a range of digital content, such as research data as well as open access publications. This will include applying the significant experience and expertise of our staff in the policy matters at the heart of equitable open access, such as copyright, data governance and institutional open access policies.

As well, Harvard has a strong tradition in open education, as seen in HarvardX. Working with campus partners, Harvard Library will help promote the use and creation of open textbooks and other open education resources. We are also interested in engaging with local communities and less affluent countries in curating open content for use in a variety of learning settings.

Harvard Library gained its collections strengths because it made bold moves at various points in its history. It is now time to make another bold move, to create networks of sustainable open knowledge and deliberately diversify our collections even further, for the benefit of communities around the world as well as Harvard scholars. At the same time, as we focus on this expansion of access to knowledge, we aim to develop a more diverse staff and create a work environment and organizational culture distinguished for its inclusivity and sense of belonging.

Enhance discovery and engagement

The people of Harvard Library are as much a defining strength as our collections. We believe that our ability to deliver on our mission depends on the expertise of our staff and the partnerships they build with faculty, students and staff across the university, and with colleagues nationally and internationally. Working together, we focus on user needs as the driving force for everything we do. Often that means specialized services for particular sets of users, and just as often it means creating a seamless user experience across the multiple libraries and services – at Harvard and beyond – that people need in the course of their research.

Within our global knowledge commons paradigm, we noted that people and machine interfaces should be able to draw from and contribute to the information at the core of the global knowledge commons with ease. Harvard Library has several key attributes that position us well to enhance discovery and engagement, not only at Harvard but in the information world at large, and this will be a primary focus going forward.

Following on the theme of diversifying and expanding access to knowledge, we cannot stress enough the role that Harvard Library plays in facilitating the creation and dissemination of knowledge emanating from Harvard. Sharing Harvard's knowledge with the world is a fundamental aspect of our mission. Often libraries highlight the discovery stage of the research lifecycle, such as librarians' roles in raising awareness of information resources and teaching techniques for navigating them most effectively. That is crucial, but we must also emphasize our help in sharing and promoting research outcomes as a critical element of the research lifecycle. In large part, the ways in which research is shared will determine how other users can discover and engage with it.

Regarding the discovery and use of collections, we have long had teams dedicated to both infrastructure enhancements and user-driven design. And, while many of our peers have now caught up and passed us in terms of local digital infrastructure, our digital collection stewardship experience will be invaluable to the collaborative open infrastructure we envision. Our goal is to enable inclusive, user-centered applications that draw upon multiple different information repositories. This is a considerable challenge as well as a high priority, particularly given the complex discovery environment that has evolved at Harvard and the siloed nature of many systems.

We are one of only a handful of libraries that still has significant expertise in the structured metadata that brings people to information. We are active in national and international initiatives such as Linked Data for Libraries, and we see opportunities within the university's research programs and information technology services to explore the application of artificial intelligence to metadata, a current gap in research libraries. We plan to define the kinds of impacts we seek to support with metadata, and how to assess that impact, and apply metadata expertise to practices that will have the greatest impact within resource constraints.

Human expertise remains a key element of how libraries contribute to teaching, learning and research experiences. For hundreds of years, Harvard's librarians and archivists have excelled at connecting researchers with information and stories not yet told and facilitating the creation and sharing of new knowledge. Today, we do that through a myriad of methods that leverage digital services and tools, as well as through individual consultations and classes. This includes investing heavily in delivering information literacy and data literacy programs that support students as savvy content consumers and creators. As the pandemic began, we increased our focus on supporting excellence in virtual teaching, learning and research, and we expect to build further on those initiatives in the years ahead. Virtual consultations and classes, digital course reserves, enhanced scan and deliver services, increased levels of chat reference, and new media services are just a few of the priorities that will benefit students and researchers no matter where they are working in future.

Although the pandemic has highlighted the importance of virtual information services and resources, it has also highlighted the value of face-to-face interactions and engagement with our remarkable tangible collections. At Harvard, our library spaces, in-person services, and tangible collections are woven into the fabric of the campus. We also recognize, however, that reading room access is inherently limited to individuals who can avail themselves of opportunities to visit us. So, as well as providing access to open digital content, Harvard has a particular interest in providing pathways to materials that are not online. The pandemic has pushed the boundaries of that access, with efforts to convey the intrinsic value of a physical object to remote users. We will continue to seek ways for the virtual reading room experience

to match or even augment the engagement of in-person interaction as much as possible, while also looking forward to welcoming users in person as circumstances allow.

In the years ahead, we will be seizing opportunities to partner with our users – whether they are instructors, students in virtual classrooms, advanced researchers, administrators seeking access to their historical records, or scholars in rural communities or developing countries – to enable inclusive, user-centered services that are embedded where they are needed and that connect seamlessly with multiple different information repositories.

Preserve for the future

As one of the most comprehensive research libraries in the world, and a leader in preservation, Harvard Library has a strong sense of responsibility for the stewardship of collections for future use. This pertains as much to born-digital content as to our analog collections and the digitized surrogates created from them. In addition to the digital assets we acquire from around the world, born-digital content includes the digital scholarship and research data that is produced by our researchers and students, the digital records of the university, and the content that we create in delivering our services. We are not in this alone: our decisions about what to preserve are made in the context of the responsibilities of other memory institutions and opportunities for collaboration with peers.

With all of this in mind, long-term stewardship requirements must be considered at the beginning of the information cycle, and they underpin all of our goals. We see a number of high priorities that we must address going forward.

Harvard Library has had a robust digital repository service in place since 2000, providing secure, monitored storage and preservation services for more than 106 million files in many different digital formats. We are in the process of assessing how to update and scale this service to meet growing and more complex digital preservation needs, in collaboration with colleagues at other institutions. A key focus will be support for the preservation of vulnerable audio-visual collections and their use in teaching and learning.

As we look at these digital preservation needs, we do so in the context of our broad vision for collaborative information networks that enable seamless access to a wide range of digital assets. We plan to modernize and rationalize our repository approach with a goal of disentangling preservation, asset management, and access while exploring opportunities for interoperability between systems.

Another key aspect of our thinking is that any view into the future must include a focus on the environmental impact of our practices, as we grapple with the climate crisis. Various groups and individuals within the Harvard Library are already engaged in planning for more sustainable choices in both print and digital preservation, and we see this as one of our key priorities moving forward.

As we stated at the outset, we believe that preservation is one of the key issues to be addressed in today's information landscape. We also see it as one of the greatest opportunities for collaboration between institutions that are inherently committed to ensuring that information is not only accessible and usable today, but far into the future. Harvard Library is one of those institutions, and our depth of experience and expertise in this arena make us a valuable partner.

Concluding Remarks

At Harvard Library, we plan to bring our strengths to bear on several key issues in the current information landscape. We are concerned that the information globe is still dominated by the wealthiest nations and by inequitable systems of producing and sharing knowledge – systems that are not fully representative of all voices. We are witnessing considerable disinformation and distrust in sources of trustworthy information, and discovery mechanisms are far from ideal. We are also very concerned that preservation of information, particularly digital information, is an unsolved problem: information can be here today and gone tomorrow.

Underpinning these issues is the fact that they have disproportionately harmful effects for some groups, depending on factors such as race, ethnicity, economics, technical limitations, and disabilities. In all we do, we are seeking to become a truly antiracist research library that addresses issues of bias and minimizes all forms of oppression.

We are setting our directions under a broad banner of *Advancing Open Knowledge*, building on the concept of a global knowledge commons. In addition to stewarding vast collections and open digital content, we want to see communities in all parts of the world empowered to produce, share and retain ownership of local research outputs and cultural resources. We believe this will benefit scholars at Harvard as well as people around the world. We envision collaborative networks that support equitable access to a diversity of content, easy engagement with trustworthy information, and thoughtful preservation for the future. Thus, our three key directions under the broad banner of *Advancing Open Knowledge* are: Diversify and Expand Access to Knowledge; Enhance Discovery and Engagement; and Preserve for the Future.

Collaboration is a theme running throughout our priorities. Harvard Library itself is organized on the premise that there are significant user benefits to collaboration across the libraries of the university. Our development of services is dependent on strong academic partnerships, and we collaborate with multiple services on campus to leverage each other's strengths in the information realm. Perhaps most importantly for all of our stakeholders, our partnerships extend well beyond the campus. The collaborations we undertake with peer institutions and others around the world will be essential for developing the interoperable infrastructure and human capacity needed for the information experience we all desire in our local communities.

Advancing Open Knowledge is a high-level discussion of our aspirations to be global leaders in expanding world knowledge. As we engage in specific initiatives across the Harvard Library, we invite continuing discussion and input from our users and partners. Comments are always welcome at harvard_library@harvard.edu.

Acknowledgements