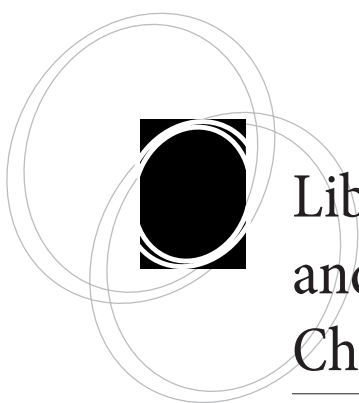


Editor's Note

In the summer of 2024, Clifford Lynch announced his retirement as executive director of the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) after 28 years at its helm. CNI quietly launched a project to create this Festschrift to document and honor his legacy. Authors began contributing articles in early 2025, with a planned publication date of July 2025. Since the final membership meeting of Cliff's tenure was April 7–8 in Milwaukee, the plan was to surprise him, surrounded by colleagues and friends, with a presentation of the table of contents of this special issue. However, just two weeks prior to the meeting, Cliff's health worsened; he was told about the Festschrift and received project details and articles. Though unable to attend in person, he participated in the CNI membership meeting via Zoom and also virtually joined his retirement reception, which included readings of excerpts from each article in this volume. Sadly, on April 10, 2025, Clifford Lynch passed away. Festschrift contributors wrote their articles prior to his passing, and we have chosen not to alter their original language.



Libraries, Digital Libraries, and Data: Forty Years, Four Challenges

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abstract: *Digital libraries* is an umbrella term that encompasses the automation of library services, online catalogs, information retrieval systems, multimedia databases, data archives, and other Internet-facing collections of digital resources. Clifford Lynch has played pivotal roles in the technical development, institutionalization, policy, practice, and dissemination of digital libraries for more than 40 years. Beginning with his foundational role in building MELVYL for the University of California in the early 1980s—the first Internet-native online open access library catalog—through his convening roles in open access and open data in the twenty-first century, his career is marked by multiple milestones of innovation. Clifford Lynch's career has traced the trajectory of digital libraries and knowledge infrastructures. Over the course of these 40 years, research libraries have faced four categories of challenges: invisible infrastructure, content and collections, preservation and access, and institutional boundaries. These challenges have become yet more complex in an era of open access, open data, and evolving regimes of intellectual property and scholarly publishing. As the digital library communities have merged and diverged over this time span, we collectively face challenges for at least the next 40 years to sustain access to current resources while growing the next generations of digital libraries and librarians.

The Dawn of Online Catalogs

Clifford began his pioneering career in research libraries when he joined the University of California Division of Library Automation (UC-DLA) in 1979 to lead the development of MELVYL, the first major online library catalog designed for Internet access.¹ In these early days, universities were constructing their own automated library systems for access via campus networks or dial-up modems. The nascent market for automated library systems did not yet scale up to the needs of large, distributed institutions, whether university or public libraries.



Following a path parallel to Clifford, the author began her career in library automation as systems analyst for the Dallas Public Library, with primary responsibility for developing an online catalog. Written in assembler language on the City of Dallas mainframe computer system, the catalog went live for patron access in late 1978 on CRT (cathode ray tube) terminals.²

Also in 1980, the Council on Library Resources (CLR, which became the Council on Library and Information Resources [CLIR] after merging with Commission on Preservation and Access) funded the first major study of online public access catalogs.³ (The terms *online public access catalog* and the associated acronym, OPAC, were coined by the study participants.) Partners in the CLR collaboration included UC-DLA, the Research Libraries Group (RLG), OCLC (then known as the Ohio College Library Center), and the Library of Congress. The Research Libraries Group later was acquired by OCLC, and their databases were merged. Clifford was the delegate for the University of California. I was a delegate for RLG, based at Stanford University, where I was a doctoral student and research assistant on the OPAC project. Later I represented OCLC in several OPAC studies.⁴ The CLR study laid the groundwork for technology, governance, and usability of automated library systems as the market and technologies began to mature.⁵ Our collaboration on the CLR study led to a 40-year conversation with Clifford about libraries, information technologies, infrastructures, institutions, policies, and much else.

Emerging Knowledge Infrastructures

Only in the early 1990s, as the Cold War ended and as Western countries lifted their technology blockades to the Soviet Bloc, did the Internet become a functioning international infrastructure with open interconnections across countries and sectors. MELVYL, as the first Internet-facing online library catalog and probably the largest, included resources from what were then the nine campuses of the University of California (UC). MELVYL became an international digital library. During my years of teaching library automation and information retrieval at UCLA, beginning in 1983, and as a Fulbright Professor in Budapest in 1993, MELVYL was a primary instructional tool. The UC-wide catalog offered far more resources and search capabilities than anything else publicly available at the time, especially in Hungary or Central and Eastern Europe.

While Al Gore did not invent the Internet, as an oft-refuted urban legend claims, he did play important roles in information policy that enabled international network interconnections.⁶ At the Inaugural World Telecommunication Development Conference in 1994, the new policy was announced as the Global Information Infrastructure (GII).⁷ As the GI became a functioning infrastructure, the library world was well positioned to take advantage.⁸ The vision of the GI as a “global digital library” built upon investments by the library community in technology, standards, institutions, and infrastructure, such as the MARC (machine-readable cataloging) format, Text Encoding Initiative, Dublin Core metadata, Unicode, OCLC, and RLG. National libraries also played important roles in developing information infrastructure within and between countries. Clifford was on the front lines of the GI, writing about such topics as research integrity, persistent identifiers, search technologies, and digitization.⁹ All the while, he was advancing the digital library services of the University of California and pursuing his doctorate in computer science at Berkeley.



As terms such as *information infrastructure* came into common usage, scholars began to explore the historical origins of infrastructure in railroads, radio, telecommunications, finance, and other sectors.¹⁰ Infrastructures are comprised of interacting technical, institutional, policy, and social components that evolve over time. Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, taking a socio-technical perspective, identified eight dimensions of infrastructure, a model commonly recognized in the information science community. In their model, infrastructures are (1) embedded in other social arrangements and technologies; (2) transparent, supporting tasks invisibly; (3) spatial or temporal in scope; (4) learned as part of membership in an organization; (5) linked with conventions of practice in regular work; (6) an embodiment of standards; (7) built upon an installed base, inheriting capacity and limitations; and (8) become visible upon breakdown, when they cease to function as expected.¹¹ Concerns for libraries, digital libraries, and data are now subsumed in the context of knowledge infrastructures—defined as “robust networks of people, artifacts, and institutions that generate, share, and maintain specific knowledge about the human and natural worlds.”¹²

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The mid-1990s were optimistic times for library technologies, but online public access catalogs (OPACs) were fledgling systems that remained difficult to use.¹³ In response to a groundswell of interest in advancing information retrieval technologies, a coalition of 10 United States funding agencies, led by the National Science Foundation, launched a 10-year (1994–2004) multidisciplinary funding program known as the Digital Libraries Initiative (DLI).¹⁴ UC-Berkeley was among the funding recipients, and again Clifford played a role. Of the countless number of papers resulting from 10 years of the DLI, the best known is the PageRank algorithm that became the basis of Google Search, initially a poster presentation at a DLI all-hands meeting at Stanford University.¹⁵ Sergei Brin and Larry Page, who created Google as a DLI project, were doctoral students in computer science at Stanford under the supervision of Hector Garcia-Molina and Terry Winograd. Similarly influential within the digital libraries community was the research agenda that established basic principles for interoperability and infrastructure.¹⁶ Clifford Lynch and Hector Garcia-Molina later revisited these interoperability issues as technology evolved.¹⁷

It was during the DLI that Paul Evan Peters, founding director of the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), died suddenly. Clifford was the only imaginable candidate with the breadth of knowledge and deep engagement in the community to step into the CNI role in 1997. We in the University of California were sorry to lose him, but he remains close to the community. Clifford frequently visited UCLA to guest-lecture my library technology courses and to meet with others on campus. As of this writing, Michael Buckland and Clifford continue to offer a Friday afternoon seminar at UC-Berkeley on information systems.

Diverging Communities

While the DLI was a coalition of libraries and computer science researchers, the focus of these communities soon began to diverge. By the latter 1990s, computer scientists were



framing digital libraries as advanced information retrieval systems that supported content in multiple media. Libraries, in contrast, viewed digital libraries more holistically in terms of serving the information needs and uses of user communities.¹⁸

The latter 1990s, in Clifford's early years as director of CNI, were marked by a series of existential challenges to research libraries. In the 1970s era of library automation,

. . . Clifford was among the first to address questions of authenticity, integrity, and digital stewardship as concerns of policy and practice.

computer scientists too often asked, "Why does the library need a computer?" Twenty years later, the next generation of computer scientists—and some university leaders—asked the inverse question, "Now that we have computers, why do we need libraries?" Clifford addressed these challenges head-on in a series of papers aimed at library, technology, academic, and policy audiences.¹⁹ In these and other talks and papers, Clifford was among the first to address questions of authenticity, integrity, and digital stewardship as concerns of policy and

practice. Assessing the past and future of digital libraries, Clifford commented that the term *digital library* had become an oxymoron, disconnected from libraries as institutions or the practice of librarianship.²⁰

Clifford's public talks were already legendary, anticipating technology and policy trends several years out. Also legendary was his travel schedule, flying around the globe to attend conferences and meetings on countless topics related to networked information. Clifford is the ultimate networked individual who transports news across community boundaries. No amount of reading about current developments in information technology and policy could result in as much knowledge acquisition as listening to one of his talks or better yet, a long after-hours discussion. He is among the few speakers who can present a coherent framework over the course of an hour, from a few bullet points jotted on a notecard. Until video recording became common practice, few artifacts—and no slide decks—of those influential talks remain.

In the three decades since the launch of the DLI, research on digital libraries has expanded across domains of knowledge and communities incorporating content in more media, both digitized and born digital. The Joint Conference on Digital Libraries (JCDL) series launched in 2001 as a partnership of two computer science societies, the Association for Computing Machinery and Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) with the explicit goal of bringing the library and computer science communities together.²¹ Later efforts diverged, with JCDL becoming dominated by computer science and engineering research, where much more funding for research and travel is available. JCDL continues to attract international participants and holds conferences in the United States and abroad. It was joined by the European Conference on Digital Libraries (ECDL) (later known as the the International Conference on Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries, TPDL), the International Conference on Asian Digital Libraries (ICADL), and numerous smaller conferences and workshops that bridge communities.



Four Challenges for Libraries

While the growth of research and publishing in digital libraries advanced the technological frontier for multiple economic sectors, public concern focused largely on the *digital* rather than on *libraries*. The library community was decreasingly visible in conferences and journals about digital libraries. As we entered the twenty-first century, four challenges for libraries in a digital age came into view: (1) invisible infrastructure, (2) content and collections, (3) preservation and access, and (4) institutional boundaries.²² None of these challenges are yet resolved, 25 years on. Rather, they have changed in form and scale over time, becoming ever more critical for the future of libraries and librarianship.

Invisible Infrastructure

By the year 2000, a troubling refrain was emerging, perhaps common to all except humanities scholars, that people no longer visit the library because everything they need is online.²³ A defining characteristic of infrastructure is that it is invisible until it breaks down.²⁴ Invisibility is a sign of success, in that libraries were serving their communities so effectively that their existence was receding into the background. Invisibility is also a sign of failure, in that the substantial expertise, labor, and resources necessary to provide those services goes unrecognized. In times of shrinking budgets, invisibility is especially dangerous.

The work of Clifford and CNI has been essential to maintaining the visibility of library systems and services in the broader educational and policy communities. Access to information is seamless only to the extent that systems are interoperable, which requires substantial investments in technical standards, and deep expertise in knowledge organization. Technologies and partnerships that developed in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, such as digital object identifiers (DOI), Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID), and Crossref, are the foundation for today's access to bibliographic content. They have become the invisible plumbing of knowledge infrastructures to those outside the library and information technology community.

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Content and Collections

The rise of digital libraries put the notion of library collections into sharp relief.²⁵ Research libraries were less able to compete for status based on the sheer number of volumes they acquired. Access to content, whether owned, licensed, or linked, became a growing concern. Here again, Clifford helped to lay the intellectual groundwork for maintaining the coherence of library collections, whether physical or digital, local or remote.²⁶ As the library and computer science communities diverged, so did concerns for coherent knowledge organization. Libraries catalog materials they acquire to sup-



port the information needs of their communities. They have far less control over how remotely accessed content is organized. Library catalogs increasingly are subsumed

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under content management systems, and users find their way into many of these resources via search engines external to library control.

Preservation and Access

Despite the lack of agreement on what constitutes a library “collection,” the need to preserve collections in ways that they remain accessible became a growing challenge. Here again, Clifford waded through the sea of

definitions of *preservation* and *access* to offer a path forward.²⁷ He called attention to the crises ahead as physical materials were crumbling and as publishers controlled access to digital content, without assurances of sustaining the viability of those resources. As a member of several study panels convened by the U.S. National Academies, Clifford made sure that concerns of the research library community were represented.²⁸ The lack of coherent economic and policy models for preserving and sustaining access to digital collections remains a massive problem for libraries—past, present, and future.

Institutional Boundaries

Collectively known as *memory institutions*, libraries, museums, and archives are tasked with organizing, preserving, and providing access to knowledge in various forms. Despite their common interests, each of these institutions has distinct histories, practices, and theoretical frameworks for collecting and organizing knowledge. Digitization has blurred the boundaries between types of artifacts, such as books, records, and objects, and between institutions. Determining who collects what kinds of content and who sustains access for future generations becomes even more complex when publishers lease access to content, and as research data repositories are hosted by funding agencies or as independent entities. The CNI community has broadened their tent over the last several decades to include more stakeholders from archives, museums, data repositories, publishing, technology, and policy to negotiate boundaries and partnerships.²⁹

Open Access, Open Data

Electronic publishing began in earnest in the 1990s and became the norm by the early twenty-first century, contributing to massive changes in the publishing industry and in library services.³⁰ Scholars initially lacked trust in online journals, leading to hybrid journals published in both print and digital form, and to complex debates over which edition constitutes “the version of record.” By 2001, Clifford was exploring “the future of the book” as a metaphor for rethinking the roles of cultural artifacts and intellectual property in an increasingly digital world.³¹

The apparent ease of digital distribution obscured the labor and costs involved in scholarly publishing, leading to claims that “information wants to be free” ... and ex-



pensive, an aphorism attributed to Stewart Brand.³² Anarchy in the early days of digital publishing gradually gave way to massive restructuring of the publishing industry and to many flavors of open access distribution. Setting aside complex formulas of who pays for what, when, and how, a simple definition of *open access* is that content is free to the reader. Various colors of open access are now the norm in scholarly publishing, promoted by governments and funding agencies in much of the world.

Open access and related developments in scholarly communication brought opportunities to research libraries but also wrought restructuring across the four challenges identified in the previous section.³³

Library investments in infrastructure continued to expand as collections diversified in format, content, and contract. Sustaining access to materials not owned by library institutions was a growing problem. Memory institutions began to work more closely across boundaries on matters of knowledge organization and access. Again, Clifford and CNI gave voice to library perspectives on digital

preservation, institutional repositories, economics of digitization, misinformation, and university roles in disseminating scholarship.³⁴

Educational implications of knowledge infrastructures were another growing concern in the first decade of the twenty-first century. CNI provides a bridge between research libraries and university infrastructure as a partnership between the Association of Research Libraries and EDUCAUSE. This partnership was leveraged to good effect by addressing new models for learning and for open educational resources made possible by new infrastructure investments.³⁵

Roughly parallel in time with the growth of open access publishing, if somewhat slower to reach critical mass, was growth in open data policies. Open data, in the simplest definition, is releasing datasets associated with scholarly publications.³⁶ Digital datasets are an unusual category of materials that rarely are collected by libraries, archives, or museums. Discipline-specific data archives, where they exist, are the more common home for such resources. Data formats, content, and scale vary by orders of magnitude from astronomy to archaeology, and for everything in between. CNI and Clifford addressed these challenges to universities early on, articulating characteristics of, and requirements for, stewarding datasets.³⁷

Managing research data is a growing priority for the scholarly enterprise, leading to broader concerns for research data infrastructure.³⁸ Funding agency requirements for sharing research data are based on solid arguments for leveraging investments in research, promoting transparency, and reproducibility of findings.³⁹ However, individual researchers often have few incentives to share their data. They also have valid concerns about misuse, misinterpretation, and misappropriation of their work. Making research data FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable) remains complex, labor-intensive, and expensive in most disciplines.⁴⁰ Making research data sustainable for the

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long term involves an array of economic, social, institutional, and infrastructural challenges. The lack of sufficient data management workforce comprised of data librarians and archivists is central to these challenges.

The Next 40 Years

Online public access catalogs were known initially as “online card catalogs,” reflecting the technological transition underway. Few of today’s students grew up with card catalogs, making card-based user interfaces appear antiquated. Librarians have invested more than 40 years of labor in adapting standards and practices for knowledge organization to a world of digital content and networked institutions.⁴¹ An existential challenge for libraries is to maintain continuity with centuries of cataloging practice while developing modern practices that interoperate with technical standards developed (and controlled) by other agencies, such as the World Wide Web Consortium.

Today’s generation of “digital natives” bring their knowledge of search engines and web-based interfaces to library catalogs and databases. User training in online searching is a foregone task.⁴² However, keyword searching alone is insufficient to exploit the full power of library cataloging systems that employ nuanced distinctions between editions, formats, languages, similar author names, and other bibliographic details. Library users who employ skills learned on web search engines rarely know what they are missing unless they consult librarian experts. A larger concern is that many library users assume that everything they need exists online, in digital form. Vast amounts of valuable scholarly material exist only in physical form, large portions of which are minimally described or remain uncataloged. Hidden collections abound. When cultural collections are lost due to fires, flood, climate change, war, or other disasters, the world may lack records of what existed. More than 20 years ago, Clifford warned us of the coming crisis in sustaining access to these resources, proposing digitization at least as backup against disaster.⁴³

A looming challenge for the next 40 years is how to sustain access to the vast resources of digital and digitized content now held by libraries, museums, archives, governments, business, and individuals. Most physical artifacts such as books and journals can survive by benign neglect. Digital resources

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survive only by continual refreshment and migration to new technologies. Research datasets are especially fragile because they often rely on custom software tools and platforms that evolve rapidly.⁴⁴ Underlying these infrastructural challenges for sustaining access to scholarship are human resource constraints. The necessary workforce of skilled librarians, data managers,

data archivists, and data curators is sorely lacking in universities, research domains, and in other sectors of the economy. This problem is not new, nor are the reasons for the lack of workforce investment simple.⁴⁵

The better the technology and infrastructure, the less inherent is visibility of the investments made by libraries and librarians. More than ever, CNL and other library leaders must make visible the invisible roles of their institutions.



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For those readers accustomed to the more readable APA format of publication, the author's version of this article is available open access in the University of California eScholarship Repository at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6dn9z9k6> and also will be available in arXiv.org.

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Appendix

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