

### **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.



# Afterword

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Diane Goldenberg-Hart

## Transitions

**A**fter nearly three decades at the helm of the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), Clifford Lynch's retirement marks a new era for the organization. It follows a period of some transition that began with the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic, when CNI, along with so many others, wrestled with reconceptualizing long-standing operational models. CNI's programs had operated nearly exclusively in person, including—and perhaps most significantly—membership meetings, its signature event. In-person meetings of member representatives have long served as the cornerstone of CNI's activities, enabling attendees to learn about new developments, to network with one another, and to foster collaborations. The core model had remained largely unchanged for decades. At the time of the shutdown, CNI was preparing for its Spring 2020 Membership Meeting, which was to take place March 30–31 in Southern California, an epicenter of the pandemic in the United States.<sup>1</sup> On March 10, Cliff announced that the in-person spring meeting would be canceled, to be replaced with a virtual meeting.<sup>2</sup> The virtual event was designed to account for time zones and “Zoom fatigue” (a new concept at the time). Sessions were scheduled during a limited set of hours (to not overtax attendee attention) that could work comfortably across North American time zones. Presentations were spread over nearly nine weeks (March 30–May 30) to retain the original program and yet limit the number of talks per day. Ever attentive to late-breaking news to incorporate into meeting programs, CNI issued an additional call for proposals on topics related to the pandemic to add to the existing lineup.<sup>3</sup> About 70 presentations were made over the course of that meeting, and Cliff personally introduced nearly all of them.

Though CNI membership meetings eventually returned to in-person-only events, the pandemic experience led to an array of online programming that continues as of this writing. During the shutdown, CNI began holding small, informal, virtual meetings with member representatives, known as Hallway Conversations. These online get-togethers provided opportunities for the kinds of serendipitous encounters people missed when

they could not gather in person. With Cliff's light facilitation and easy, warm manner, the program became, and remains, popular. The number of breakout sessions offered at in-person meetings was greatly reduced. Nearly all presentations are now recorded and posted publicly, as are videos from the Pre-recorded Project Briefings Series, a quarterly program born of the pandemic era, that continues to serve as a supplement to the in-person events.

Experimenting with virtual offerings also demonstrated that some previously in-person-only programs worked better online, such as Executive Roundtables, a program to bring together member teams for discussions on a predetermined topic. Virtual Executive Roundtables have made feasible broader organizational representation and participation. Library leaders had been the primary participants when roundtables were held only in person. Now, virtual roundtables typically include representatives from a variety of units that serve, in addition to the library, as key partners in the deployment and stewardship of campus networking programs and infrastructure. Depending upon the topic, participants may represent an institution's office of research, campus information technology, instructional technologies, or research computing, for example.

Early in the pandemic, Cliff recognized the profound impact the shutdown would have on the research enterprise, and he was concerned that little attention was paid to the broad ramifications of the emerging research crisis. As a result, CNI quickly organized an Executive Roundtable on the topic. The call for participation yielded an overwhelming response, ultimately resulting in four separate convenings with different participants. In total, about 60 individuals from 30 member organizations participated, representing a wide range of campus units.<sup>3</sup> The strong desire for opportunities to engage with colleagues, to compare experiences across organizations, and to share challenges and strategies was palpable. CNI's roundtables provided a vehicle for that purpose, as well as allowing a glimpse into what was happening on campuses across North America and perhaps to glean some sense of where things might be headed. Understanding the evolving nature of institutional responses to the crisis, Cliff called for two subsequent follow-on roundtables to continue exploring how operations were impacted and strategies were evolving. The research enterprise series demonstrated how CNI's agility, under Cliff's stewardship, allowed it to serve its community quickly as a venue for engagement and connection, as well as a valuable and trusted information resource at a time of urgent need.<sup>4</sup>

### **CNI and What May Lie Ahead**

A survey of members conducted in the months following Cliff's retirement announcement, shared at the CNI Fall 2024 Membership Meeting, indicated a high level of satisfaction among its members. The vast majority of respondents gave high marks to the overall value of membership, deeming it either "excellent" (47.8 percent) or "good" (44.4 percent).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, survey results signaled that networking and collaboration opportunities, as well as access to information on emerging trends, were among the primary benefits members valued most. These elements are key components of CNI programming and hallmarks of Cliff's personal style and interests. Time and again, survey responses echoed members' deep appreciation for CNI as a trusted source for



information, updates, and connections to others. In addition to affirming much of CNI's standard practice, respondents expressed a strong desire for several of Cliff's leadership traits to be reflected in a future executive director, including, for example, the ability to synthesize and communicate complex issues in an accessible manner, and deep personal engagement with the community.

Naturally, the survey also reflected desire for some change. For example, some comments called for increased opportunities for collaboration and for a greater diversity of participation. Several themes that ran through the feedback highlighted the inherent tensions and difficult trade-offs between certain choices. The intimate nature of CNI meetings was lauded, and its small size was praised as worth preserving. At the same time, there were calls to increase the number of representatives permitted to attend, and the suggestion that tiered membership dues (or membership categories) might allow for a greater number of organizations to join. Both suggestions would likely lead to increased attendance, thus a declining sense of intimacy among meeting participants.

CNI's next director will have much to consider in plotting the organization's future; who that person will be remains unknown as of this writing. The survey results may provide a glimpse of possible outlooks, but the resounding approval of CNI and its programs by its members, and the high value they place on the organization's work, leave little doubt that Cliff's visionary leadership has contributed significantly to the digital information landscape and its community. He has provided CNI with a solid foundation for whatever may come next.

### Acknowledgments

In July 2024, when Cliff informed me of his intention to retire the following summer, I began thinking about how best to mark the occasion—a Festschrift in his honor came immediately to mind. Cliff was known for his humility and unassuming nature, so it seemed unlikely that he would agree; certainly, if it were to happen, it would have to be done surreptitiously. At the time, it seemed like an implausible plan, and yet, remarkably, here we are.

There are many people to thank for helping to make the implausible a reality, beginning with Cecilia Preston, Cliff's spouse, who encouraged the idea, and Andrew Pace of the Association of Research Libraries, who approved the project. Charles Watkinson, University of Michigan associate university librarian for publishing and director of the University of Michigan Press, and Doug Goldenberg-Hart, a longtime publishing professional, helped brainstorm the best path forward. Barbara Klein Pope at Johns Hopkins University Press enthusiastically embraced the prospect of publishing the collection as a special issue of *portal*. She subsequently introduced me to William Breichner, the press's journals publisher, who was an essential partner in stewarding the project through the inception and launch phases. Ellysa Stern Cahoy, *portal* editor, graciously agreed to publish the collection as a special issue of the journal and was a supportive partner in editorial decisions. The contributions of production manager Mary Muhler and copyeditor Sara Dreyfuss were indispensable.

We were fortunate to work with an amazing set of authors. I am beholden to them for their thoughtful contributions, helping to document all that Cliff has meant to our

community. They vividly recounted how he has managed to be so effective at his craft, often corralling disparate factions at critical junctures, gently nudging a unified way forward, and nearly always effecting constructive progress. One of the most difficult tasks we faced early on was narrowing the contributor list, and, in the end, we had to make some difficult choices. Cliff has worked closely with so many talented people throughout his career, spanning countless organizations, sectors, and disciplines across the globe—I truly wish we could have included them all.

An ambitious project like this does not happen without a great deal of work by many dedicated people. So, in addition to those already mentioned, my very special thanks and profound gratitude go to the core team that brought everything together so beautifully: Paige Pope of CNI, who was (and is) always at the ready to help with everything and anything that needed doing/catching/remembers; Nancy Maron of BlueSky to BluePrint, who managed the project expertly, helped keep it on track, served as indispensable liaison with the *portal* team, and provided keen insights and perspectives that added immeasurably to the final product; and CNI's Associate Executive Director Emerita Joan Lippincott, who, in my mind, was the only person who could do justice to the task of editing this collection and did so magnificently. Sincere thanks are due also to Sharon Adams, Maurice-Angelo Cruz, and Jacqueline Eudell of CNI for their help in keeping the operational wheels turning while this Festschrift took shape in the background. They have served loyally as CNI's backbone for decades, and the organization would not be what it is today without their hard work and dedication; I am grateful and fortunate to have them as colleagues.

And finally, to Cliff, who has dedicated himself to establishing and bolstering connections across the library and information technology communities and beyond with boundless generosity and unwavering patience and kindness. He has, seemingly, always had time for anyone who asks, accepting nearly every invitation to visit, consult, speak, contribute, or serve on advisory boards, committees, or working groups, regretful on the rare occasions when he has had to decline. This collection serves to document some of the profound ways that Cliff has influenced the impact of digital technologies and networking on scholarly communication, the research enterprise, information access, digital preservation, data stewardship, teaching and learning, and so many other areas. His legacy will be enduring.

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## Notes

1. Sean Greene and Andrea Roberson, "How the Coronavirus Flooded California and Swamped L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/projects/connecting-california-covid-cases-la-surge/>.
2. Coalition for Networked Information, "Cancelling San Diego Member Meeting March 30–31; Virtual Spring Meeting Launched," March 10, 2020, <https://www.cni.org/news/cancelling-san-diego-member-meeting-march-30-31-virtual-spring-meeting-launched>.
3. Coalition for Networked Information, "Call for Additional Project Briefing Proposals; CNI Spring '20 Virtual Meeting," April 2, 2020, <https://www.cni.org/news/call-for-additional-project-briefing-proposals-cni-spring-20-virtual-meeting>.



4. Clifford Lynch and Diane Goldenberg-Hart, *What Happens to the Continuity and Future of the Research Enterprise?* report of a CNI Executive Roundtable held April 2020, <https://doi.org/10.56561/RVTM6833>.
5. Clifford Lynch and Diane Goldenberg-Hart, *What Happens to the Continuity and Future of the Research Enterprise: Looking to 2020–2021 and Beyond*, report of a CNI Executive Roundtable held September 2020, <https://www.doi.org/10.56561/QKSP3945>; Clifford Lynch and Diane Goldenberg-Hart, *Beyond the Pandemic: The Future of the Research Enterprise in Academic Year 2021–22 and Beyond*, report of a CNI Executive Roundtable held June 2021, <https://doi.org/10.56561/MWRP9673>.
6. Andrew K. Pace, “Update on Leadership Transition,” Opening Plenary, CNI Fall 2024 Membership Meeting, December 9, 2024, <https://www.cni.org/mm/fall-2024/plenary-sessions-f24>.

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