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What are digital libraries? Competing visions

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Abstract

Research and practice in digital libraries (DL) has exploded worldwide in the 1990s. Substantial research funding has become available, libraries are actively involved in DL projects and conferences, journals and online news lists proliferate. This article explores reasons for these developments and the influence of key players, while speculating on future directions. We find that the term 'digital library' is used in two distinct senses. In general, researchers view digital libraries as content collected on behalf of user communities, while practicing librarians view digital libraries as institutions or services. Tensions exist between these communities over the scope and concept of the term 'library'. Research-oriented definitions serve to build a community of researchers and to focus attention on problems to be addressed; these definitions have expanded considerably in scope throughout the 1990s. Library community definitions are more recent and serve to focus attention on practical challenges to be addressed in the transformation of research libraries and universities. Future trends point toward the need for extensive research in digital libraries and for the transformation of libraries as institutions. The present ambiguity of terminology is hindering the advance of research and practice in digital libraries and in our ability to communicate the scope and significance of our work.

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