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Session IV: Custodianship of Digital Collections

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Many people have heralded the electronic age as a way to create a paperless society and cut down on the document overload. But electronic documents have spawned the ability to save multiple versions of a work.

- Since the Library of Congress is obviously a repository, what should it be collecting?

- What should it be preserving?

- An electronic environment brings out special concerns about which version of a work should be collected. An author can change a document in a moment, and then other people down the line can also change it. Where will the Library of Congress fit into this electronic environment?

Now that publishing is moving toward digital dissemintation, many works will be created electronically rather than on paper. As artists create works that are exclusively digital, what does this do to the role of the institution as a custodian of information? What happens when there is no difference between a copy of a work and the original? The work "original" will have new implications as works are created in, rather than converted to, digital form.

Copyright

Copyright law must be examined to ensure it is broad enough to cover electronic copying practices. Two issues must be considered: how does the Library manage copyright using computer systems and networks, and how does it enforce copyright law in a digital world?

The subject of scanning paper documents brings up further questions about the Library's future role. One participant suggested that libraries still will want to keep physical artifacts in addition to digital objects. For legal purposes, they will must be able to point to the original. As a record of culture, the original is essential. One participant suggested that the Library might become a registry for scanning, much as it serves as the registry for copyrights. People then would have

a central source for information on which items already had been scanned into digital form.

Royalty Payments

The issue of royalty payments must be addressed in a new way, so that authors and publishers can continue to be compensated for their work. One participant suggested that publishers are limited the number of documents they allow online because they do not want to part with their valuable products. Publishers are accustomed to getting compensated for the distribution of a work, and they are fearful that the electronic environment will make it easier for people to copy a work without payment. Many companies do not know how to deal with the rights to electronic objects, and that is impending their business. As electronic business becomes more commonplace, people will need a directory for finding the proper recipient of royalty payments. The Library is working on an electronic directory of copyright owners, but the deposit using the new electronic system is currently voluntary.