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The “voice of a distinct community”: Foreword to *Harvard Library Bulletin*

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When we began planning the relaunch of *Harvard Library Bulletin* as an online, open access publishing portal, we could not have known that the common expectations and opportunities we were addressing would become paramount in Fall 2020. Given the physical distancing precautions required by the COVID-19 pandemic, providing equitable digital access to information and cultural resources is now more important than ever before.

As I write this I am working remotely, far from my Widener Library office. If I could be there, I would be browsing the back issues of *Harvard Library Bulletin* that sit on my shelves, pulling multiple volumes at once and enjoying the feel of turning pages, while perusing decades of scholarship and writing based on Harvard’s collections. Instead, I am appreciating the ability to dip into the contents of those volumes whenever I want, with the easy reading experience of Harvard Library’s Mirador Viewer and [the digitized volumes deposited in DASH](#), the repository we use to share publications with the world. I am one of the many people who are grateful for the collaborations that have created the open digital infrastructure that allows us to create, discover and access collections online, from wherever the pandemic keeps us.

In the months leading up to this point in time, I have found myself wondering how many— all?—of the university librarians preceding me at Harvard felt they were at a critical juncture in the history of our library and the profession. Without doubt, we are a library that has evolved continuously over nearly 400 years. There have been many pivotal points in our history, from the collection of theological books that John Harvard donated in 1638, to the fire that destroyed the entire college library collection in 1764, to the expansive world-wide collecting of subsequent centuries, to the groundbreaking digital initiatives of the twenty-first, and other developments too numerous to name.

One of those predecessors, Keyes D. Metcalf, who served as director of the University Library and librarian of Harvard College from 1937 until his retirement in 1955, has been very much on my mind. Metcalf launched *Harvard Library Bulletin* in 1947 in the wake of another tumultuous period, following World War II. In addressing intense pressures on library spaces and collections, Metcalf embraced two principles still relevant today: coordinated decentralization and interlibrary collaborations. In Metcalf's time, these principles were seen in the strengthening of a network of distinct libraries across the campus to serve the needs of specific user groups, and inter-institutional initiatives such as the Farmington Plan, an early form of collective collecting that focused on acquiring foreign materials. I like to imagine that Metcalf would be thrilled to see how these principles are playing out in our digital age.

Today, we have an opportunity to extend the principles of coordinated decentralization and interlibrary collaborations to an international ecosystem of open, interoperable digital infrastructure that has the potential to transform how we create and use knowledge. Harvard Library aspires to advance a global knowledge commons in which all communities retain control of their own scholarly outputs and cultural properties and share them openly for the education of others. We aim to diversify the information we can access by enabling new models of scholarly communication that will be far more equitable and sustainable than ones that evolved from an old print paradigm. The new models we envision will counteract existing biases towards the interest of the global north, provide greater transparency in peer review and quality control mechanisms, and remove access and publishing cost barriers. As well, we have a particular interest in providing pathways to materials that are not online—the remarkable, charismatic, tangible collections that are a hallmark of Harvard. We believe that the intrinsic value of an object continues to be important and want to ask what we can do to push the boundaries of that access with virtual services.

Harvard Library Bulletin, in its new open access form, makes a strong and fundamental contribution to this vision. It is moving from print and subscription-based to online and open access. It is the voice of a distinct community, and it can be heard around the world for free.

It is not only this openness that excites me about *Harvard Library Bulletin*, but that it will engage readers in contemplating the evolution of the library at this point in time. For example, over the past six months, we have seen not only the impact of the global pandemic but also a rising tide of outrage over continuing racial injustice. How will we, at Harvard Library, make a

difference? In his [foreword to Volume 1, Issue 1](#), Metcalf noted that the *HLB* was being published “in the belief that one of the great libraries of the world cannot meet in full the responsibilities inherent in its position unless it has a regular publication which will make known to the Harvard community and to the scholarly world in general its collections, its experience, and its ideas.”¹ While I recognize the hubris in this statement, I also share the sentiment. With all of our good fortune, surely Harvard Library can truly advance equity, diversity and inclusion, and become an exemplary anti-racist research library.

Harvard Library recently articulated a [core purpose, vision, mission, and set of values](#), to say who we are, what we care about, and the value we bring to the world. The words we chose emphasize curiosity, progress, collaboration, diversity, and access. They speak to the strengths of the Library’s nearly 400-year history and our aspirations going forward.

The issues of the new *Harvard Library Bulletin* will reflect our values, and we hope that our readers will help us shape our continuing journey by engaging with the stories and ideas we share. In keeping with its original intent, *HLB* will represent all parts of the Harvard Library system. Across each of Harvard’s Schools and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences we have libraries that provide collections, services, and spaces tailored to their academic programs and research. Common to all of these libraries are system-wide services enabling the creation, discovery and sharing of information in all its forms. Together, we aspire to be global leaders in expanding world knowledge and intellectual exploration.

In closing, I would like to offer sincere thanks and congratulations to the [individuals and teams](#) responsible for the relaunch of *Harvard Library Bulletin*. Mitch Nakaue, Scholarly Communication Librarian, has brought the passion of new possibilities as well as great expertise to this publishing venture. Anne-Marie Eze, Editor-in-Chief and Director of Scholarly and Public Programs at Houghton Library, guided the relaunch with her deep understanding of what it means to engage researchers with the intellectual treasures of Harvard Library. Both had ongoing guidance and support from Tom Hyry, Florence Fearington Librarian of Houghton Library and Director of Arts and Special Collections of Harvard College Library.

A library is only as great as its people. I am continually inspired by the stories of those who came before us to build the incredible collections and services of Harvard Library. In the

¹ Keyes D. Metcalf. “Foreword,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 1 no. 1 (1947): 5-9, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41649163>.

days ahead, I know I will be inspired by the contributions of current staff and scholars that will be captured in *Harvard Library Bulletin*. This is not only the work of today, but the promise of a bright future for the library of tomorrow.

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