Before leaving the Getty Museum some years ago, I went through an exercise with staff from the library and the museum to see how difficult it would be for Getty collections to expose non-bibliographic cataloging information (metadata) in the Open Archives Initiative (OAI) Protocol for Metadata Harvesting. This Getty metadata included pointers to digital surrogates (resources), making them available in another protocol (FTP, in this instance) and to anyone harvesting the metadata. With the OAI harvesting, a simple URL reference in each XML record triggered the subsequent FTP download and the association of resources with metadata. After a few bumps, this worked relatively well. We were convinced that the model could be a simple, low-cost alternative to the cumbersome and resource-intensive models for contributing to aggregate resources. Properly configured, a single export routine could make metadata and resources available to OAI exposure at the same time the resources were published to other venues such as websites and in-house kiosk information systems.

Another important aspect of that exercise was to encourage participation. To create an environment in which it is easy to find, for example, all paintings by Rembrandt Peale and the associated archival materials, the strategy needs to envision the participation of many small, understaffed, and underfunded collecting institutions. Thus the bar for cataloging and technical investment must be as low as possible without impairing simple but effective online discovery. We began to explore models where key aggregators like OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) might host open-OAI servers as well as publicly available services like vocabulary-assisted searching, where collection management and cataloging application vendors might provide an export mapped to the XML schema, and where big institutions might provide services to smaller ones in regional or intellectually affiliated consortia.

Taken together, this could serve as a model for the useful exposure of potentially all repositories of unique works in museums, archives, and libraries, which are among the key data repositories for scholars in the humanities. Moreover, the model immediately pushes exposure and access up to the network level in a way that makes resources predictably available to any institution or individual interested in exploring and aggregating for any purpose, from large-scale service providers (ARTstor) and portals (EUBAM) to very-large-scale resource aggregators (WorldCat), to very small and individual research projects or single-classroom teaching. The exercise was not meant to memorialize these specific technologies or service providers, which will undoubtedly change, but to explore a relatively easy method for exposure at the network level.

Yet this model still seems far beyond our reach in the humanities. I can see several reasons:

1. What OAI refers to as “resources” most archives and museums refer to as “assets.” Assets are thought to be proprietary and are frequently expected to make money for the institution that has the burden of managing them (or the privilege of doing so, if we recognize management as a consequence of acquisition). This has a long tradition in collecting institutions. Museums often require even scholarly publications to pay significant image licensing fees, and for many archives, the success of a PBS documentary elicits regretful groans of wanting to share in the money. Although an argument can be made that these attitudes are shortsighted or even simply wrong, they are also completely understandable in institutions that are habitually underfunded and understaffed. It is, indeed, an explicit government expectation in many countries that national museums “use” their collections as assets in this way. All of this leads to severe gatekeeping, fully at odds with the openness implicit in moving to the network level.

2. Even with (and sometimes especially with) the research community, there is a mistrust of intentions and a feeling among professionals who manage collections that they must enforce the proper use of resources (this view is more understandable if the resources are considered as assets). This covers a wide range of behaviors—from knowing who has a resource to knowing how it is being used (e.g., not being reproduced inappropriately or with insufficient color management). Although no such controls truly existed in the analog world, the digital ease of high-quality resource distribution inevitably leads to yet more restrictive gatekeeping. The extent to which such controls seemed to work in the analog world was based in the trusted ethical habits of professional
recognize that ensuring attribution and authenticity in a digital environment is what they really want. But the digital environment that most of them know is not sufficiently built out to engender and maintain their trust.

4. Institutions and individuals are having a difficult time setting aside old, comfortable models for new ones. Deliberate limitations on quality and quantity in available metadata and resources are seen to ensure the viability of traditional modes of scholarly communication. This view has been offered either as a principled decision or as one prompted by seemingly intractable traditional funding models. A statement released by the Association of American University Presses in February 2007 defended these traditional models: “The increasing enthusiasm for open access as a model for scholarly communication, which grew out of pressure to relieve the financial burden on libraries of maintaining subscriptions to STM journals, presents new challenges and new opportunities for university presses. In its pure form, open access calls for an entirely new funding model, in which the costs of publishing research articles in journals are paid for by authors or by a funding agency, and readers can have access to these publications for free.” This obviously raises the question of what business university presses think they are a part of: publication, or research and education? What single body other than the university or the research center itself (a) employs the researchers, (b) provides subventions for press runs of fewer than 500, and (c) comes up with the budget for the library to buy the subsidized but still expensive books for the researchers they employ? Could it be that we are expecting too much in the way of critical-path decisions on institutional policy and intellectual property from publishers comfortable with or desperate to preserve a traditional model, from librarians just sufficiently well funded to be content with their own and publishers’/distributors’ traditional roles, and from museum directors satisfied with traditional benchmarks of exhibition attendance and acquisition capacity?

5. For all the reasons above, it is difficult even in well-funded institutions—with some obvious exceptions—to find the money for item-level cataloging and digitization of large bodies of resources. Smaller institutions don’t get even this far, stopped in their tracks by the cost of owning the technology and managing the commercial applications.

Versions of these issues can be found nearly everywhere, not just in the humanities. This is simply one arena where the characteristic of openness—a characteristic that efficient networks and interoperability assume—makes opportunities seem scary and so, without other motivation, not entirely worth pursuing.

Clearly, the technology that is available to make the network—or some subsets of it—behave in a way that protects deeply engrained notions of maintenance of authenticity and security of attribution for scholars has to be extended broadly and in a manner that is visibly reliable to those who may have little technical experience but who are vital to continued scholarship and communication with general audiences. Our ability to realize more efficient scholarship based in information and communication technologies far outpaces our institutional capacity to make policy, financial, and organizational decisions that would support this scholarship. Although changes in collecting institutions and in academe suggest positive movement here, the siren song of traditional practice may quiet only with the passage of a generation or with the rise of new leadership.

Notes
3. For a not entirely random example, see <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research.aspx>.

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