

The Political Threats of Vanishing Culture and the Need to Protect Our Future Memory

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ABSTRACT

Written from the perspective of the Internet Archive and the Our Future Memory movement, this article repeats an urgent call for four digital rights that would allow libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural heritage organizations (“memory institutions”) to uphold their shared public service mission of preserving history and providing access to information. The ongoing transition from physical media sales to digital licensing markets has unleashed a new wave of archival ephemerality, which endangers these memory institutions’ core operations and threatens to plunge society into a digital dark age. This article presents this phenomenon of “vanishing culture” as a first-order political crisis by surveying several social contexts wherein that crisis hinders people’s ability to educate themselves and freely participate in public life. To fortify our shared knowledge against that epistemic threat, the article reintroduces the background and substance of the Statement on Digital Rights for Protecting Memory Institutions Online (2024), which came to inspire the Our Future Memory campaign’s growing global coalition. That framework asserts that memory institutions must have practical options and legal protections to undertake four basic practices with digital materials that they were previously allowed to do with physical ones: (1) collection, (2) preservation, (3) access, and (4) collaboration. In lieu of a formal conclusion, the article ends with a call to action, asking memory institutions to sign the Statement, join the movement, and work together to protect their critical role in the digital age.

1. Introduction

We are living through a troubling paradox: Digital technologies have enabled the production and distribution of more information than ever, yet access to that information is increasingly fragmented and fragile. These technologies *should* permit us to engage and learn from all the digital content at our fingertips. Instead, many of the basic rights we grew accustomed to in the physical world are now being overtaken by aggressive market tactics that do not reflect the public-interest values the law was meant to protect. If copyright, privacy, and other regulatory frameworks were designed to balance the interests of creators and users

with the public's need to access and contribute to the wealth of human knowledge, then our increasingly digital information economy has thrown that balance out of whack.¹

In this new media environment, publishers and other content providers have unprecedented power to control knowledge and culture with technical restrictions and exclusionary licensing terms. Governments also have an easier time censoring what people can see by scrubbing their websites and pressuring commercial platforms to do the same. These sudden changes will feel familiar to anyone who has logged onto a streaming service or social media app to find a movie or news story suddenly missing. But for libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural heritage organizations ("memory institutions"), it poses an existential risk to their core public service mission of preserving culture and protecting history. When these organizations can no longer collect and provide access to digital materials, members of the public cannot place their trust in a stable record—which affects their ability to confidently participate in democratic discourse.

We write this paper from our perspective at the Internet Archive, a nonprofit research library that specializes in web archiving, digitization, and the preservation of media in all forms. We feel the harms from these shifts firsthand and hear many of the same complaints from our partner memory institutions around the world. That shared frustration with today's digital landscape has given rise to an emerging consensus among libraries, archives, museums, and their allies, calling for better legal protections and practical options to continue their services and preserve cultural memory in today's information age.

This two-part paper (1) presents the looming threat of "vanishing culture" as a first-order political crisis, and (2) discusses the key role that libraries and other memory institutions can play in meeting that crisis.² In the first part, we examine the underlying causes of vanishing culture and trace its ripple effects along several different facets of modern life: (a) educational resources, (b) journalistic integrity, (c) civic engagement, (d) religious study, and (e) environmental policy. In the second part, we reintroduce a framework of four rights that would ensure memory institutions' ability to work together to collect, preserve, and provide access to digital materials. This framework rests on the simple proposition that memory institutions should be allowed to do the same things in the digital world that they've historically done in the physical world. It originated in the 2024 statement titled *Four Digital Rights for Protecting Memory Institutions Online*³ before it became a global rallying cry for the Our Future Memory movement and its growing list of library, archive, and museum signatories.⁴

Together, these memory institutions are striving to combat the political causes and effects of vanishing culture by speaking with one voice to the importance of memory work in an age of digital ephemerality. That is why we call on all memory institutions, large and small, to sign onto the Statement and join the movement. Individuals and communities need memory institutions to educate themselves and freely participate in civic life, and every time a content provider lets critical information disappear online, it offers further proof that today's

¹ Both copyright and privacy legislation in the United States and Europe have foregrounded the need for balance, i.e., between "the rights of creators, and the needs of users" (from the House Report No. 94-1476 on the 1976 Copyright Act) and between "the protection of natural persons" and "free movement of personal data" (from the European Union General Data Protection Regulation) (see U.S. Congress 1976; European Union 2016).

² We use the term "vanishing culture" from the title of the Internet Archive's inaugural report on the same subject. That report broadly defined culture as "any publicly disseminated human creation," in its attempt to identify the many analog and digital materials now falling into obscurity and oblivion (Messarra et al. 2026, 5n6).

³ See Part 3 for an overview of the Statement's origin story and global reception (Archivo Nacional Aruba 2024).

⁴ Throughout this article, we denote signatories to the Digital Rights Statement and members of the Our Future Memory coalition with the symbol (♾) (Our Future Memory, n.d.-c.).

digital markets alone do not constitute a viable alternative. If things do not change soon, we risk sleepwalking into a future where both memory institutions and the public they serve will become passive consumers, rather than active stewards of human knowledge.

2. Vanishing Culture: A First-Order Political Crisis

Over the last few decades, the accidental and intentional loss of information has metastasized into an urgent and ongoing crisis of vanishing culture.⁵ Knowledge preservation has never been perfect across generations, and many have written about intentional efforts to burn libraries and bomb archives to obliterate cultural legacies and assert political control.⁶ Nowadays, though, this sort of erasure has become an integrated feature of our digital information infrastructure. As more of the public record circulates only in data packets, many have raised the alarm that we are teetering on the brink of a digital dark age.⁷

Last century, it was necessary for creators and their distributors (e.g., publishers, record labels) to sell their work in books, newspapers, records, and other material goods.⁸ People who owned physical media knew it would remain available for future use because they could touch, feel, and keep the objects they had bought. Even better, they could trust librarians and archivists' expertise in acquiring and preserving special materials even when they no longer had commercial value. Now, the shift from physical sales to digital licensing models has complicated the question of what will survive and remain available for years to come. Even more concerning, it has cast into doubt whether the people who pay to enjoy something and work to keep it safe will get to decide.

Today's consumers know the frustrations of "disappearing content" all too well,⁹ but the vanishing culture crisis is so much bigger than paying high prices for the unreliable offerings of a streaming service.¹⁰ It represents a first-order threat to the project of historical preservation and, consequently, the intellectual freedoms and democratic participation that depend on it.¹¹ As computer networks become the default means of disseminating knowledge,

⁵ The Internet Archive (<https://www.archive.org>) is working to document the "ongoing" nature of this crisis by embarking on a series of *Vanishing Culture* reports. The second volume, edited by Ashia Aubrey, Chris Freeland, and Michael Menna, is set to release in 2027.

⁶ Rebecca Knuth (2003, 19–48) develops a theoretical framework and analyzes several modern case studies for this phenomenon in her book *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century*. But this tradition of cultural devastation goes way back, as one can gather from the "List of Destroyed Libraries" on Wikipedia (2026b).

⁷ Public commentators are turning again to this "dark age" language, which was used decades earlier by archival specialists to characterize the epistemic threats of digital ephemerality. James Bridle (2019, chap. 7, paras. 18–26) describes a technocratically engineered "New Dark Age," wherein "we cannot know our own history, nor understand what we are truly capable of," thanks in great part to state agencies' ability to manipulate records behind closed doors. But in a more positive historical account of web-preservation efforts at the turn of the millennium, Ian Milligan (2024, chap. 2) also tells how memory professionals mobilized around the concept of a "digital dark age" to develop systems that could preserve fragile communications transmitted online (see also Kuny 1997).

⁸ For a book-length discussion of this transition, see Perzanowski and Schultz (2016).

⁹ Mark Lemley (2021, 1257–68) introduced the term "disappearing content" to explain media markets' gradual shift away from the "buy-and-keep arrangements" attendant to physical sales and digital downloads.

¹⁰ Several online commentators have begun identifying and critiquing growing costs of "streamflation" (see, e.g., Lawler 2024).

¹¹ Nancy Kranich (2020, 131) offers a thorough explanation why "Democracy is a hollow concept without unfettered access to information," citing Thomas Jefferson to support the proposition that "An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy" (141).

it is growing harder—not easier—to account for everything that is deleted or obscured from public view. If, in 2009, tech reporters saw the remote deletion of George Orwell's *1984* from Kindle devices as a scandalous irony, with Amazon playing the part of the dystopian novel's conspiratorial censor, the Ministry of Truth, then the costs of digital ephemerality and erasure have become an accepted fact of twenty-first-century life (Stone 2009).

Of course, none of this is to say that those engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge should not get to exercise any control or receive adequate compensation for their work. There would be little for memory institutions to do, after all, were it not for these creators' and distributors' contributions. Our point is simply that the customary freedoms we once took for granted have fallen by the wayside in a digital marketplace that pushes content and monetizes attention by restricting consumers' ability to own and cultivate an enduring relationship to the media they pay for. In lieu of selling books and other physical items to eager buyers, many of today's digital publishers have become "data cartels," looking to gather personal information, analyze behavior, and sell what they collect to governments, insurers, employers, landlords, and anyone else willing to pay.¹²

The overall effect is that we are lurching toward something like a peep-show knowledge economy, whose social and political downsides fly in the face of the internet's potential to democratize access. Decades ago, we were led to believe that digital technologies and networked communications would allow anyone and everyone to learn from the aggregate of human knowledge, and we must not lose sight of that promise, even as we come to realize that more information every day is getting published only to disappear into a digital black hole.¹³ It would be well beyond the scope of this article—and an inherently impossible undertaking—to fully document every instance, cause, and effect of vanishing culture. Still, we group several recent and scary trends in an effort to itemize some of the most salient societal impacts. On their face, topical issues in education, religion, and climate change may look entirely distinct, but here we gather five examples to draw out a conceptually coherent surface area for policy intervention. In truth, each and every one of the following urgent concerns subsists, at least in part, on the vanishing culture crisis.

a. Library Holdings and Educational Resources

Can libraries sustainably service students and patrons when forced to rent their collections?

Libraries have historically been a bulwark against the disappearance of culture and remain to this day a go-to resource for textbooks, how-to manuals, and all sorts of useful and educational information. In the traditional sense, a library was "a building with books," where librarians would purchase titles of interest and relevance to patrons, then keep those items on the shelves for as long as would serve that community.¹⁴ In building out these collections, libraries developed their own policies about who could access books and for how long—without the publisher having any say in the matter. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case in the digital age.

¹² For a book-length treatment of this new business model, see Lamdan (2022).

¹³ Wikimedia (♻️) cofounder Jimmy Wales offered a tidy encapsulation of this techno-optimistic outlook when his "Vision Statement" for that organization asked people to "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge" (Wikipedia 2026c).

¹⁴ Scott Douglas (2008, 165) reminds us that, even when libraries functioned primarily as storage and lending centers for books, they became a popular resource and cultural touchstone thanks in great part to those who offered and received these services. "People made the library," he writes. "Without them, all the sacredness was gone. It was *just* a building with books." Emphasis added.

E-book lending works differently from physical lending, and as we are seeing in other media markets, publishers and e-book platforms have shifted their focus away from permanent sales and toward temporary licensing arrangements.¹⁵ This development has squeezed many libraries into the vulnerable (and increasingly familiar) position of a content subscriber, forced to rent rather than own their collections. As a result, publishers and their commercial vendors are the ones who get to decide which books are available, who can access them, and when.

One recent example illustrates the threat of this licensing model to the long-term availability of educational resources. In 2022, the textbook publisher Wiley withdrew 1,300 e-books from a large multidisciplinary collection for which George Washington University had paid a subscription fee.¹⁶ That business decision took effect without any advance notice, right before the start of fall-term classes, leaving students and professors across the institution scrambling in a way that would never have happened if the university had been permitted to own and lend copies of those same books. We risk more incidents like this one if things continue the way they're headed and libraries have to allocate more resources to temporary access that is designed to expire.

b. News Preservation and Journalistic Integrity

What happens when the first draft of history is never saved?

Though news professionals have referred to their work as “the first rough draft of history,” publishers typically left it to others to collect and keep their output safe.¹⁷ By purchasing and preserving stories in their original state, libraries and archives stepped in to make sure that future generations would be able to make sense of the past on its own terms. Even when one day's hot news became butcher paper the next, these memory institutions were allowed—and often encouraged—to preserve that ephemeral “first draft” for posterity.¹⁸ The process was simple, even if it involved complex technologies: Buy what went into print circulation and, where necessary, convert those bulky copies into more compact formats like microfilm and microfiche.¹⁹

Still, the transition to digital news publishing has thrown a wrench into the gears of this system. It's not just that online articles can now be stealth-edited.²⁰ It's that entire swaths of content can go dark when a media outlet pulls materials from its website²¹ or goes out

¹⁵ Dave Hansen, Yuanxiao Xu, and Rachael Samberg (2025) at the Authors Alliance (aa) give an exhaustive description of this phenomenon of “contractual override” in their article of the same title.

¹⁶ For coverage of this debacle, see D'Agostino (2022).

¹⁷ Though not the first to arrive at this language, the “rough first draft” characterization was popularized by Philip Graham, when he delivered the following remark to *Newsweek* correspondents in 1963: “Let us today drudge on about our inescapably impossible task of providing every week a first rough draft of a history that will never be completed about a world we can never really understand” (Ratcliffe 2016).

¹⁸ One prominent example of this understanding is the collaboration between the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress on the National Digital Newspaper Program “to develop an internet-based, searchable database of U.S. newspapers with descriptive information” (Library of Congress 2025).

¹⁹ For a fuller account of this history, discussing the early challenges of having to preserve bulky and fragile newspapers, see Mills (1981).

²⁰ Even reputable news outlets have been caught committing and quietly amending embarrassing mistakes, as many came to learn in 2023, when *The New York Times* surreptitiously deleted “Death” from its published “List of Ways You Can Still Cancel Your Federal Student Loan Debt.” See the fact-check from TruthOrFiction.com (LaCapria 2023).

²¹ This is what happened to MTVnews.com, when its parent company Paramount Global pulled thousands of articles and interviews without warning (see Spangler 2024).

of business.²² In a world where more national and local news sources are available only in digital form, libraries and archives cannot resort to their traditional means of purchasing and preserving stable copies. Instead, they must work proactively to collect online materials before any sudden changes or deletions occur.²³ Though some news organizations have, thankfully, worked to collaborate with memory institutions and improve long-term access to their reporting,²⁴ others have taken an adversarial position to these sorts of preservation efforts (see Deck and Tameez 2026).²⁵ This hostility obstructs memory institutions and threatens them with legal exposure just for undertaking the public service of archiving the news.

The upshot of this paradigm shift is that society's relationship to news media as a "first rough draft" is changing—and frustrating journalism's purpose of promoting public awareness and accountability. If publishers alone get to decide what stories survive, the stable record now housed in archival repositories will gradually turn into a private subscription service subject to ongoing edits.²⁶ That is a chilling prospect and compounding cause for concern when we consider our low-trust information environment and the effects of echo chambers, filter bubbles, and other forms of algorithmic overdetermination in delivering news media to increasingly biased and polarized audiences. If verification has been put forth as one tried-and-true means of combating misinformation, then it stands to reason that things will only get more overwhelming and contentious when even the savviest news consumers cannot access and confidently check the source, date, and other contextual clues surrounding something they see online.²⁷

c. Movement Archives and Civic Engagement

Will change still look achievable when history is reconstructed entirely by those in charge?

In the last century, activist movements tended to promulgate off-screen and off the airwaves in pamphlets, zines, and other DIY formats. Now, the popularity of political engagement and activism online raises long-term questions for the many grassroots campaigns that benefit from the internet's powers in message amplification. It all goes back to an urgent point Gil-Scott Heron (1970) was making when he wrote his famous spoken-word poem, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." In a world where the powers that be operate dominant systems of communication, the brave few trying to change the world must seek alternative means to build real community and preserve its legacy. Otherwise, resistance movements that try to hold governments, corporations, and other powerful actors accountable risk exposing themselves to punishment and erasure on today's megaplatforms.

²² This is what happened to Gawker.com after Hulk Hogan sued Gawker Media Group for invasion of privacy and forced the company to file for bankruptcy (see Chappell 2016).

²³ For a description of this race to preserve, see Kahle and Bailey (2024).

²⁴ The Texas Digital Newspaper Program and its contributions to the Portal to Texas History offer an excellent example of successful newspaper-library collaboration (see University of North Texas Libraries, n.d.; see also "The Portal to Texas History," <https://texashistory.unt.edu/>).

²⁵ For instance, some news publishers decided to limit the Internet Archive's access to their websites out of a stated concern that AI companies would train their models on that material.

²⁶ While it is true that some well-resourced publications do offer paid subscriptions for archival access (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *Publisher's Weekly*), those services offer little guarantee that their databases are complete or unedited. What's more, library access to these databases comes with the same expensive and restrictive licensing terms that we see with e-book licensing agreements.

²⁷ In their rigorous overview of eighty-one scientific papers from across the world, Anastasia Kozyreva and colleagues named "lateral reading and verification strategies" as one of nine proven methods for combating misinformation (see Kozyreva et al. 2024, 1044).

For one, as challenging as it's been to collect and preserve the posters, handouts, and other materials that brought about women's suffrage, Black civil rights, and other key social reforms, even those fragile materials have far greater durability than the hashtagged tweets and comment threads that can be silently altered or deleted at any moment. The prospect of "under-the-radar censorship" may sound like the work of Orwell's Ministry of Truth, but it's a recurring theme in human history now rearing its head in today's age of digital ephemerality.²⁸ Last year, Google undertook an overnight campaign to delete hundreds of YouTube videos pertaining to alleged human rights abuses in Palestine (Mazurov and Valdez 2025). According to public reports, Google did so at the behest of the United States government's efforts to enforce sanctions of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other cooperative efforts to investigate war crimes.²⁹ That is just one conspicuous example of online services undertaking censorship in the name of compliance.

Even worse, it's impossible to learn from what's been lost, since YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms do not keep lists of everything they've deleted from people's feeds. That is why vanishing culture poses an existential threat not only to public awareness, but to the very tradition of participatory democracy. Reform movements thrive on the rich history of people trying (and sometimes failing) to bring about change, so whether or not you want Gil-Scott Heron's type of "revolution," these media effects concern just about anyone who thinks society could be better and that everyday people should have a say in the direction of its improvement. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) offers a perfect case study: Though that interracial, nationwide coalition dissolved in 1970, the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP) emerged to "preserve and extend" its struggle for racial equality by digitizing its records for a new generation (SNCC Legacy Project, n.d.). If that effort helps us see the archive's value in shaping future democratic participation, it also begs the question of what could happen were we to lose all reliable documentation of movements past.

d. Communities of Faith and Religious Study

Can digital technologies help sustain faith without exploiting the faithful?

Bibles and other religious texts would seem like the ones *least* likely to disappear, given their astounding proliferation in material formats across the globe.³⁰ Still, that does not mean their sacred contents cannot be taken in by the ebbs and flows of digital ephemerality, or that their very ubiquity does not make them a target for other sorts of information manipulation. If anything, the unique connection that worshippers have to these written works offers a clear window into the ways that vanishing culture controls and exploits people's choices, as it destabilizes the record upon which they must base those choices. It's one thing for TV watchers and podcast listeners to accept the feedback loop between data collection, advertising, and

²⁸ For a full video explainer on recent instances of "under-the-radar censorship," see Lorenz (2026).

²⁹ It is worth clarifying that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act that the Trump administration cited as authority for its ICC sanctions expressly limits the president's power to prohibit the flow of "informational materials" from other countries—"regardless of format or medium of transmission" (see Mazurov and Valdez 2025; International Emergency Economic Powers Act 1994).

³⁰ The Guinness World Records (n.d.) website names the Christian Bible as the "best-selling book of all time." But more fundamentally, the material proliferation and endurance of sacred texts owes to their "iconic function" in religious practice. "*Scriptures are icons*," James W. Watts (2008, 137) writes. "They are not just texts to be interpreted and performed. They are material objects that convey religious significance by their production, display, and ritual manipulation."

algorithmic preferencing on their streaming apps.³¹ It's another when that business model comes for the chapters and verses people use to cultivate their relationship to faith—which is one of the most personal, private relationships they will ever have.

Too many of the most popular religious spaces online tend to exploit individuals by purporting to support their worship. Look no further than the advent of Bible apps like the King James Bible Study app or the YouVersion Bible, which have both racked up millions of downloads.³² Though these services provide instantaneous, worldwide access to scripture in thousands of different languages, they have also been called “data devils” for their business model of collecting and selling personal information (see Hodge 2019).³³ Unlike the paper Bibles you can find in a church, library, or hotel drawer, these apps can and do spy on their readers. What's more, they use the data they collect to influence what users can and cannot see through the selection and presentation of different passages. Rather than prioritize spiritual discernment, these recommendation engines use pattern recognition and predictive modeling to maximize engagement.³⁴ A single service may present different perspectives of scripture at different times, and without the ability to compare across apps or even within updated versions of the same app, one simply has to believe these platforms when they say that “the differences in the verses do not alter any core doctrines” (YouVersion, n.d.).

None of this is to say that digital and networked technologies cannot be a great boon to believers in an age of declining religious participation,³⁵ as they allow people to connect and share in the unprecedented distribution of theological texts.³⁶ Really, it's to emphasize that those benefits depend upon digital intermediaries handling devotional materials with the same care and respect that allowed those materials to accrue meaning as manuscripts and printed books. Many librarians and archivists understand this weighty responsibility, and thanks to their careful efforts, religious scholars of different faiths can now consult a growing digital catalog of canonical and instructional texts online. Their work photographing aging, at-risk manuscripts³⁷ and curating open repositories of high-quality theological scholarship³⁸ is a testament to the potential of preserving and providing digital access to religious thought and history. But it's also an indictment of other outfits' systematic efforts to capitalize on devotion, muddy the waters, and compromise adherents' ability to worship in good faith.

³¹ Messarra (2026, 14–15) touches on this “datafication of cultural consumption” (and cites several authorities supporting it) in his individual contribution to *Vanishing Culture* (see also Chester and Montgomery 2024; Lamdan 2022).

³² On the Google Play Store, the King James Bible Study app had more than ten million downloads as of April 2026. YouVersion had more than one hundred million.

³³ Tim Hutchings (2017, 210) noted that YouVersion's 100 percent free status depended upon its identification and utilization by publishers “as an opportunity to promote their products.”

³⁴ These powers of algorithmic preferencing are brought further to light by the rush to incorporate chatbot and other AI features into these services (see Jackson 2025). More than a decade earlier, Nir Eyal (2013) had already identified YouVersion as “a case study in how technology can change behavior when it couples the principles of consumer psychology with the latest in analytics.”

³⁵ Pew Research found in a recent study that the global population of religiously unaffiliated persons rose by nearly a percentage point (Hackett et al. 2025).

³⁶ For a comprehensive survey of scholarly approaches to various religions' interactions with digital technologies, see Campbell and Cheong (2024).

³⁷ The Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML, n.d.) (ἱμ) has worked for more than sixty years to photograph aging religious manuscripts from all faiths, with special attention to at-risk collections in Iraq, Ukraine, Gaza, and other war zones.

³⁸ The Open Access Digital Theological Library (n.d.) offers a cataloged collection of high-quality materials from institutional repositories, scholarly societies, and stable public domain collections.

e. Scientific Records and Environmental Policy

How can we hope to track and mitigate ecological shifts without a stable record?

Climate change doesn't happen overnight: It's gradual and all but impossible to detect without sophisticated approaches to robust evidence and trustworthy information. That is why "cumulative data" need to accumulate—which is to say, persist in time. It's not just that we can better observe the effects of industrialism on natural landscapes by looking at old paintings and photographs.³⁹ It's that the very foundation of experimental and observational science rests on recorded findings, not forgotten ones.

The stakes of this high school lesson are now being thrown into stark relief, as we bear witness to the United States government's systematic efforts to scrub tax-funded environmental assessments from the web.⁴⁰ These peer-reviewed national reports are of immense help to state and local administrators, particularly since the most recent study came with an interactive atlas of county- and community-specific data. Though physical copies of past reports are still stored in the library of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the federal government essentially implemented an access embargo on officials, advocates, and scientists working to build and research climate-conscious policy. Harvard climate scientist John Holdren called it a "demolition of science infrastructure"—not just by redirecting funds or firing professionals, but through the leveraging of digital controls (Borenstein 2025).

In a world where *-gate* has become a familiar suffix, it's no secret that officials sometimes hide or destroy records to misrepresent state action.⁴¹ Still, the context of climate change brings to life how the short-term effects of information manipulation are only compounded by the long-term effects on the education of a public that might otherwise push for better policy. National, state, and local officials will certainly have less to go on when preparing communities for a warming world. But even worse, curious citizens are now being stymied in their individual efforts to research and understand the differential impact of a global phenomenon that is as hard to fathom as it is to detect. Just a few months ago, the EPA removed the user-friendly environmental justice mapping and screening tool, EJScreen, replacing its infographics and tutorials with an error message: "Sorry, but this web page does not exist."⁴² That sort of misleading disavowal isn't new for many climate-change denialists, but here, it's being delivered in the simple language of a technical restriction.⁴³ As a single example, it paints a vivid picture of how vanishing culture can fuel the collective amnesia that, historically, has clouded environmental awareness and kept people from asking more of their elected officials.

³⁹ In one recent study, Hana Skokanová and her coauthors selected, localized, and analyzed 112 landscape paintings from Moravia and eastern Bohemia between 1728 to 1976—not only to demonstrate these artworks' accurate depiction of the local ecology, but to trace the effects of "afforestation of less fertile soils" and "spread of built-up areas" in the second half of the twentieth century (Skokanová et al. 2021, 122).

⁴⁰ For coverage of these takedowns, see Borenstein (2025).

⁴¹ In 1989, long before its usage in "Monicagate," "Bridgegate," and "Beergate," the *Oxford English Dictionary* defined *-gate* as a "terminal element denoting an actual or alleged scandal (*and usually an attempted cover-up*), in some way comparable with the Watergate scandal of 1972." Emphasis added.

⁴² The Environmental Data & Governance Initiative (2025) covered this development in its online article "EPA Removes EJScreen from its Website."

⁴³ Wikipedia's (2026a) nearly twenty-year-old page on "Climate Change Denial" offers a history and taxonomy of efforts to downplay the effects of global warming, from public commentary about cold weather to systematic efforts to dispute and obstruct scientific research.

3. Memory Institutions' Key Role in Meeting the Vanishing Culture Crisis

If the examples above manifest some of the most acute symptoms of today's vanishing culture crisis, then the cure must begin with an acknowledgment and recommitment to the memory institutions that exist to prevent it. We selected these different areas of concern to illustrate that vanishing culture is not just one thing. It is a systemic as well as an epistemic threat, affecting countless communities through all sorts of media technologies. That does not mean vanishing culture is an inevitable byproduct of technological progress. To the contrary, it is a policy choice—one that, together, we can change.

Historically, memory institutions coevolved with the producers of human knowledge and cultural expression. Just as scholars, artists, and other creators must rely on previous advancements to inspire and support their work, memory institutions would have nothing to preserve were it not for these bright minds' productive industry. This reciprocal relationship can work beautifully, where dedicated professionals are able to responsibly collect and preserve the materials that bring special value to their communities, and where members of the public are able to browse and contribute to secure repositories. That said, it has never been perfect. Every library, archive, and museum must make tough choices in deciding what to leave and what to keep, even where outside forces like fires, floods, and war do not put their holdings at risk. Moreover, like all institutions, memory institutions have internalized social biases that sometimes prevent them from building representative collections and making them freely and equally accessible to every member of the public. In confronting these difficulties and improving their services, memory workers have developed a unique appreciation for the fragility and profound importance of a stable, dependable record. That is why they were among the first to see the dangers of vanishing culture in our digital information environment—and why we must look to their well-honed methods to ensure that our cultural heritage does not disappear.

Indeed, after decades of research and advocacy on this topic,⁴⁴ memory institutions and their allies are beginning to coalesce around a simple statement of principle: *If we want to preserve the cultural output and historical record of our increasingly digital world, then we must allow these organizations the same rights and responsibilities online that they previously held offline* (Our Future Memory, n.d.-d.). This most recent statement of the problem had its beginnings in 2022, when the Internet Archive convened and distilled the feedback of librarians, lawyers, and technologists into an articulation of library practices as basic rights, called *Securing Digital Rights for Libraries* (Bailey and Menna 2022). When presented with a draft of that report at the Library Leaders Forum in San Francisco, Peter Scholing of the Biblioteca Nacional Aruba saw its promise for the at-risk archives of his island nation. He wanted to collaborate on making an even broader statement encompassing *all* memory institutions, their distinct collections, and their diverse approaches to the project of preservation. The result was the Statement on Digital Rights for Protecting Memory Institutions Online, which Aruba became the first country to endorse in April 2024 (Adams).⁴⁵ After that, once organizations around the world

⁴⁴ As early as the 1990s, papers about preservation issues posed by “restrictive intellectual property and licensing regimes” were being presented at the General Conference for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (see Kuny 1997, 3). In the United States, the American Library Association (2025) (ALA) had already adopted an interpretation of its Library Bill of Rights focused specifically on digital access and security issues. That interpretation has since been amended four times, in 2005, 2009, 2019, and 2025.

⁴⁵ The authors of this article were behind the drafting of that Statement.

began independently signing their own versions of the Statement, Internet Archive Europe⁴⁶ launched the Our Future Memory campaign as a way to give memory institutions and their allies a rhetorical framework and community network to advocate and implement these four rights (Our Future Memory, n.d.-a.):

1. **TO COLLECT MATERIALS IN DIGITAL FORM**, whether through digitization of physical collections, or through purchase on the open market or by other legal means;
2. **TO PRESERVE DIGITAL MATERIALS**, and where necessary repair, back up, or reformat them, to ensure their long-term existence and availability;
3. **TO PROVIDE CONTROLLED ACCESS TO DIGITAL MATERIALS** for advanced research techniques and to meet patrons where they are—online; and
4. **TO COOPERATE WITH OTHER MEMORY INSTITUTIONS**, by sharing or transferring digital collections, so as to aid preservation and access (Our Future Memory, n.d.-d.).

These rights shouldn't be controversial. If anything, their familiarity ought to signal that traditional principles can help guide our path forward in today's treacherous information environment. That is how Stephen Wyber (2025) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) put it when he explained his organization's reasons for joining the coalition and signing onto the Statement: "What struck us about the Our Future Memory campaign is, firstly, that it looked obvious, but then that realization that it is necessary to state the obvious, to point out that some of these old guarantees, some of the things that we used to take for granted, we can't anymore." It is precisely because these four rights are both "obvious" and at grave risk that so many different kinds of memory institutions see themselves, their work, and the survival of that work in the Statement.

Critically, this alignment arises primarily from memory institutions' sense of duty, not their self-interest, or even their justifiable fears about the unprecedented challenges wrought by the digital age. Memory institutions are, to a degree, defined by their pursuit of a public service mission, not a profit margin. That orientation is what allows them to play their critical part in our information ecosystem and preserve niche, culturally specific materials irrespective of commercial viability. It is also what has motivated Our Future Memory signatories to stand up for the moral imperative behind their practices. That is how Hannah Whelan from the After Violence Project laid it out when she characterized the Statement's four rights as a "critical condition" for that organization: "The communities we work with, namely people impacted by police brutality, mass incarceration, and the death penalty, deserve archives that can collect thoughtfully, preserve carefully, and share their stories without interference" (Menna 2026).

In what remains of this paper, we spell out why each of these four rights—collection, preservation, access, and collaboration—is absolutely necessary to mitigate the vanishing culture crisis and restore a healthy information environment.

⁴⁶ Internet Archive Europe is an independent research library based in the Netherlands. Though a separate legal entity from Internet Archive United States and Internet Archive Canada, it works together with these mission-aligned organizations in support of the Our Future Memory campaign. See <https://www.internetarchive.eu/>.

Collection

To steward information responsibly, memory institutions must be able to select, acquire, and exercise discretionary control over their materials. Those practices were a given in the age of physical distribution, when the act of *buying* a book typically meant *owning* that object and, as a result, deciding what to do with it. Still, that given came under pressure in the digital age once libraries had to adopt integrated collections strategies to better service their patrons and tap into the wealth of online materials.⁴⁷ If, early on, the prospect of a perfectly networked infrastructure had some wondering whether collection development might become obsolete, today it takes only one web search to know that the internet is far from a well-indexed catalog—and that there are still great benefits to letting specialists select, itemize, and curate helpful information for their respective communities.⁴⁸ That work requires building and managing reliable digital collections, which in many cases is becoming harder for memory institutions to do.

Above, we discussed how libraries are being strong-armed into temporary licensing agreements, which keep them from developing the collections they need to perform their most basic functions.⁴⁹ Some providers prevent libraries from filtering out unwanted content by only offering bundled packages,⁵⁰ whereas others prohibit digital access altogether.⁵¹ These restrictions also loom large for archives and museums, now that many pertinent cultural objects are moving from attics and basements to proprietary platform servers.⁵² Essentially, by wrenching control over what resides in the custody of memory institutions, content providers make themselves the sole arbiters of how materials are documented, where they are stored, and when they can be retrieved and displayed. In this respect, collection is both the starting point for all memory work and an essential prerequisite for the other three rights.

Preservation

The core function and most familiar feature of memory institutions is that they preserve knowledge and culture for coming generations. The entire project of history depends on this process, which means that it depends on the ability to keep and transmit information across time.

⁴⁷ The “Collections Grid,” developed by Lorcan Dempsey and Eric Childress, offers one illustration of how libraries have adapted to this complexity. For an overview of that heuristic, see Dempsey et al. (2014, 16–17).

⁴⁸ John Kennedy (2006, 8–9) offered a prescient and eloquent takedown of this “utopian” vision in his short, book-length overview, *Collection Management: A Concise Introduction*:

[I]t is useful to consider for a moment what those who see no future for collection management in an internet-dominated environment are in fact predicting. It is not merely a world without paper-based books and journals. . . . In this world there is no need in any institution to download materials and hold them for reasons of reliability or convenience in local networks, an activity which would create a digital collection and require the selection skills of collection managers, and some policy or methodology for periodically ‘weeding’ the caches of downloaded material.

⁴⁹ Juliya Ziskina (2023) at Library Futures (📖) gave an overview of this problem—and suggested several pathways to meet it—in her policy paper *Toward a New Access Paradigm: Digital Ownership for Libraries and the Public* (see also Hansen et al. 2025, 705–20).

⁵⁰ Librarians were complaining about the inability to pick and choose materials from Hoopla even before a wave of low-quality AI slop arrived on the platform (see Woodcock 2022; see also Maiberg 2025).

⁵¹ This is the business strategy that Amazon adopted at the beginning of this decade (see Statt 2021).

⁵² For example, archivists, technologists, and other professionals at the Strong National Museum of Play describe how console games are often walled off by digital rights management (DRM) access controls, how web-browser games are not always downloadable, and how many of today’s “digital-born games require online services and servers in the form of developer-run servers or cloud-based services (e.g., Google services, Facebook)” (Bensch et al. 2023, 27).

To the layperson, preservation may look like a static act of storage—say, a warehouse full of dusty books and paintings—but that wasn’t true even before the advent of digital technologies. Many ancient Greek texts only survive thanks to the diligent labor of medieval scribes, who copied and translated those works from fragile papyrus to durable vellum manuscripts.⁵³ That process of preserving by reformatting is of even greater importance in our era of accelerating media turnover. Today, memory institutions must be able to continually transfer aging data into new containers, lest we lose troves of knowledge to “bit rot” and other kinds of information degradation.⁵⁴ By the same token, if these institutions are unable to digitize and extend the life of fragile artifacts, then rare manuscripts, vinyl records, VHS tapes, and other obsolescing media will wither away in time. Memory professionals have specialized in these and other modes of active, constant conservation, which is why we must trust their expertise if we want to stem the tide of vanishing culture.

Access

If the laborious work of preservation allows aging information to survive, then why undertake that process for an object no one can behold? The value of any memory institution’s materials can only be realized when people are actually able to experience their contents, whether by seeing or hearing a record from the past or by playing a retro video game. For this reason, data scientists follow the tenets of information retrieval, which teach the design of systems to store *and* deliver information in a manner calculated to meet individuals’ “information needs.”⁵⁵ Memory institutions understand this principle well, even if they must grant and limit access in accordance with the nature of their collections and the public they serve. Some might follow the “free to all” model of a lending library, allowing people to borrow books on and off the premises.⁵⁶ Others might follow the “look but don’t touch” model of a typical art museum, trying to keep irreplaceable treasures safe and secure.⁵⁷ Access policies must be tailored to the specific demands of a collection and its users, and it’s precisely because memory institutions have proven methods to meet a wide range of possibilities that they must be allowed to confront the difficulties and sensitivities of handling digital knowledge according to *their* standards—not the terms of service thrust upon them by a commercial platform.

Collaboration

No single memory institution can preserve the entirety of human culture, and the ability to pool resources and coordinate workflows has long been foundational to library, archive, and museum functionalities. Interlibrary lending was so critical to twentieth-century information stewardship that Congress encoded it into the 1976 Copyright Act (see § 108(d), (e),

⁵³ The staple scholarly account of this generational process can be found in *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Reynolds and Wilson 1991).

⁵⁴ Trevor Owens (2018, 14) retheorizes this active and ongoing practice of “conservation”—and explains why “digital media should be understood as part of a *continual process of remediation*”—in his now essential book. Emphasis added.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Bernard J. Jansen and Soo Young Rieh’s (2010, 1517) streamlined rearticulation of the canonical definition by C.J. van Rijsbergen (1979): “*information retrieval* is finding material of an unstructured nature that satisfies an information need from within large collections.”

⁵⁶ The motto, “free to all,” is carved above the center doorway of the Boston Public Library (n.d.), which claims to be the first free municipal library in the United States and “the first public library to lend its books.”

⁵⁷ Scholars like Constance Classen (2007, 899) have researched how early museums did not always prohibit the handling of their items—and how, for some, “notions of civility evidently included being allowed to handle museum pieces, even small items stored away in the doors.” Her article proceeds to elaborate on how early curators balanced this demand with the need to secure and preserve valuable and delicate items.

(g)), and for many museums looking to repair transgressions of the past, cross-border cooperation is what is currently enabling the secure return and restitution of cultural property.⁵⁸

If anything, digital technologies have only increased the need for coordination in the structuring, cataloging, and processing of collections. That is why standards-setting efforts like the Open Archival Information System and the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative (DCMI) have stressed the promise of interoperability—not just conformity—in the development of best practices to ensure reliable service (see Consultative Committee for Space Data Systems 2024, sec. 6).⁵⁹ Unfortunately, commercial content distributors have different priorities, which can obstruct or outright deny opportunities for memory institutions to collaborate. For example, while OverDrive has allowed some collective bargaining with library consortia in the e-book licensing space, it limits many libraries' ability to share the access they've bought⁶⁰ or disclose the terms of their agreements.⁶¹ More than an operational frustration, these efforts to silo information are anathema to memory institutions' long history of working together to improve their operations and serve the public.⁶²

4. In Lieu of a Conclusion, a Call to Action

If, as we have come to learn, the dangers of vanishing culture extend well beyond our computer screens and into political reality, then these four digital rights do more than protect the basic functions of memory institutions. Really, they offer a coherent defense of those institutions' shared mission and special functions in a changing world, where that critical, time-honored work is under greater threat than ever before. As guardians and stewards of cultural heritage and scientific knowledge, memory institutions ensure that the historical record remains reliably available to the public. They do this by working collaboratively to collect, preserve, and make information accessible where and when people need it. That is not the way that commercial content producers and distributors operate—even if platform technologies have endowed those entities with new power to pursue higher profit margins by dictating what people can see, where they can see it, and for how long.

Thankfully, memory institutions are not sitting idly on the sidelines and watching this nightmare scenario unfold. True to their collaborative ethos, they are demonstrating that a collective voice is a stronger voice, as they join the Our Future Memory coalition in support of the Statement on Digital Rights. Libraries, archives, and museums of all shapes and sizes

⁵⁸ Ernesto Ottone, Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO (2024), explained the need for ongoing communication and bilateral cooperation at a 2023 roundtable. "Return and restitution are not the end of a process," he remarked, "but the beginning of a relationship based on broader, forward-looking cooperation."

⁵⁹ See also the DCMI's explanation of its initial motivations to achieve "rough interoperability across languages and disciplines through a core of shared semantics" (Dublin Core, n.d.).

⁶⁰ Some organizations, like the Boston Library Consortium (2025; see also 2024a, 2024b) (↗), are working to adopt, normalize, and periodically update "Resource Sharing Policies" for their own interlibrary lending and delivery services—including with "digital assets."

⁶¹ In a wonderful example of resource sharing, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC, n.d.) (↗) hosts a repository of contracts that libraries and consortia have reached with large publishers. Other materials on the website offer guidance on how to counteract confidentiality clauses and nondisclosure agreements.

⁶² Indeed, collaboration among memory institutions can extend well beyond day-to-day functions and into the realm of advocacy and fundraising. On this point, the Association of Research Libraries (↗) published a helpful article by Guy Berthiaume (2020, 6), reflecting on his service as librarian and archivist of Canada and emphasizing how a series of summits in the second half of the last decade equipped galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) with "a narrative for the entire sector" and "a study of the value" that these memory institutions provide the public.

are encouraged to sign the Statement because we are most vulnerable when we stand alone.⁶³ Together, our voices can speak with greater authority to policymakers, rightsholders, and funders, making it harder for legal and technical restrictions to marginalize our role. If we do not move fast, we risk falling backward into a dark age of forgetting, where the never-ending flow of new content forces us to lose sight of the cumulative history of human knowledge—and the essential workers that kept it safe.

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⁶³ The instructions for downloading and returning the Statement can be found at the Our Future Memory (n.d.-b.) website. It is a statement of principle with no legal or financial commitment, and after your signed form is verified, your institution's name will be added to the webpage's "Signatories List."

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