

Digital Collections at the Dr. John Archer Library: Position Paper

by

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My vision for digital collections at the Dr. John Archer Library of the University of Regina has been years in the making and has changed over time. It was formed by my work creating digital collections at the University of Oregon, through extensive reading, and by attendance at workshops and conferences around the world where I have had the opportunity to interact with some of the world's leaders in the field.

The starting point for me in discussing digital collections is this: just as a traditional library is about the collections and the services and not the online catalogue or a library's web pages, digital collections are about the collections and the context, and not the technology. Technology should be as unobtrusive as possible. Technology is a tool that is utilized to create, archive, and provide access to materials; it does not dictate the extent or direction of a digital collection.

In the numerous presentations I have done on digital collections, I always ask myself and the audience why an institution should create digital collections. "Because everyone else is doing it" is not a sufficient reason.

I have always listed my rationale for creating digital collections as some version of the following:

- To provide new or expanded access to materials of scholarly, cultural and historical interest:
 - Providing access to a body of relevant material is the reason that a library or an archive builds any collection.
 - Digital collections enable people from around the world to utilize materials without having to visit the owning institution.
 - Digital collections enable users to have access to materials 24 hours a day.
 - Digital collections reach a wider audience, many of whom would not otherwise engage with such materials, such as school children, people who work during the day, people who are housebound, etc.
- To provide access to and awareness of unique or under-utilized materials:
 - An institution should not undertake digitization unless it has unique or rare items or collections that merit wider exposure and that can be suitably represented by digital surrogates.
- To explore new delivery mechanisms for content:
 - Full-text searching capability for textual materials allows people to uncover hidden gems of information more quickly and can be sufficient reason for digitizing some materials.
- To broaden access to physically fragile materials:
 - The first digital collection undertaken at the University of Oregon was an extensive collection of glass-plate negatives of historic photographs that

were so fragile that only a handful of carefully selected people were ever permitted to handle them.

- To preserve some at-risk materials:
 - There are times when an original item is so fragile that it is essential to migrate it to a new format in order to preserve access to it. Digital surrogates sometimes provide the best option for preservation.
- To provide some recovery mechanisms in the event of a disaster:
 - Digitizing a portion of unique collections allows for some ongoing access in the event of a natural disaster
- To strengthen and build partnerships and collaborations with other cultural heritage institutions or user groups:
 - Digital collections often require collaborations between different groups in order to select, describe, and provide appropriate context and provide unique opportunities for exploring and enhancing collaborations.
- To archive born-digital content:
 - An institutional repository, such as the University of Regina's Campus Digital Archive, is an example of a new expression of the traditional library/archival responsibility of archiving important content on behalf of an institution.
- To help shape the digital landscape:
 - Digital collections must be developed using prevailing standards for digitization, description, and preservation if they are to have lasting value. The way for an institution to help shape the evolving standards is to be part of the community of users and contributors of digital content.
- To draw people in to use the full collection of original materials:
 - Few (if any) institutions have the resources to digitize all the worthwhile collections. Digital collections can serve as an entry point that makes people aware of the existence of a collection and to draw them in to use the full collection, with all their contextual complexity.

In my presentations on digital collections, I always emphasized that the scanning and even the metadata application were relatively straight-forward, once standards had been determined. The most challenging – and the most important – aspect of digital collections is what I used to call the “contextual wrapper.” Once a technical blueprint for projects is established, the majority of time and effort in digital projects goes toward compiling and presenting the contextual wrappers. Mark Vajcner, in his thesis proposal “Context and Digitization: Towards a New Model for Archives” explains the importance of context for digital collections extremely well. Without context, you have nothing more than a set of pretty pictures or scanned pages of text.

The University of Regina's Dr. John Archer Library has undertaken the implementation of a campus digital archive (CDA). All of the materials being collected in the digital archive are the same types of materials routinely collected now in paper form by University Archives, including the extensive publications collection and faculty files. The CDA ensures that the Archives can continue to build these collections in an environment that is increasingly turning to exclusively digital methods of distribution.

In the realm of digitized collections, the only collections that we have that merit digitization are the unique and rare materials housed in Archives and Special Collections. One example is the digitization of the slides of the work of Joe Fafard. The slides have been scanned but the development of a means of accessing, describing, and building the contextual wrapper remains to be done.

I am proposing to formalize the development of digital collections for the University of Regina's Dr. John Archer Library under the purview of University Archives for the following reasons:

- The collections that we would digitize will come from University Archives. The born-digital materials that we are archiving already fall within the mandate of University Archives.
- The expertise to develop the contextual wrappers and to work with community partners to build useful digital collections resides in Archives.
- Strong digital collections experience and training resides in Archives:
 - Mark Vajcner has taken a year's education leave to develop additional expertise in this area, with his work towards a Ph.D. in Information Science at Edith Cowan University, specializing in digital collections. He has published and presented on the topic of digital archives.
 - Crista Bradley has experience with the implementation and maintenance of a digital records management system and will be leading the Archives' development of a plan to manage university records in all phases of their lifecycle, including those in the CDA.
 - Mark and Crista have both served on the Saskatchewan Digital Alliance and Mark continues to represent the Dr. John Archer Library in this venue.
 - Mark and Crista are both heavily involved with the Saskatchewan Council for Archives and Archivists (SCAA), the body that is driving archival digitization in Saskatchewan via the Saskatchewan Archival Information Network. SAIN is the gateway for coordinating our province's contributions to Archives Canada.
 - Crista has curated a virtual exhibition for the SCAA based on her thesis research.

The Library Digital Collections Administrator position as detailed in the accompanying position description will report to the University Archivist, Mark Vajcner. Although leadership for digital collections will rest with University Archives, it will be necessary for many other areas of the library to contribute time and expertise. Staff in Technical Services, Systems, and Research Services will continue to assist with the digitization, description and submission of digital content; liaison librarians will be involved in promoting digital collections as one of many library services available to students and faculty and in identifying new partners with whom the library can partner in the development of digital collections. Just as all staff have been involved with the development of traditional collections and services, so too will everyone have a role to play in the development of and access to the library's own digital collections. Just as

traditional library services have evolved and continue to evolve over time, so too will digital collections and our approach to them evolve.