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Free is the Best Price: Building Your Collection of Primary Sources with Free, Online, Digital Collections

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Free is the Best Price: Building Your Collection of Primary Sources with Free, Online, Digital Collections

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ABSTRACT:
This session focused on the extensive range of open access, online collections available through the digitization efforts of libraries, museums, and archives. The issues discussed included how librarians can find and evaluate these collections and improve user access to them by adding them to library collections.

Introduction

Libraries, museums, archives, and other cultural institutions invest significant money, staff time, and infrastructure into digitizing some of their most important and fragile collections, to increase the availability of these materials to distant researchers and to protect the materials from overuse. Humanities researchers, and especially students without the time or means to travel to far-off archives, now can see and use materials previously inaccessible. Anecdotally, however, it seems few faculty and even fewer students are aware of the proliferation of these digital collections. Some traditional users of the library may be accustomed to focusing their discovery efforts within our library systems and building, through catalog and database searching and physical browsing. And thus excellent digital libraries may languish online, unknown and unconsulted by their intended audience.

One possible solution is for libraries to more formally add such libraries to their collections.
However, commonly, libraries have two listings of materials: those we've purchased and those we haven't. Those we have purchased are cataloged and made discoverable in our library systems. Those we haven't are linked (along with purchased collections) in our subject guides. Some libraries do add selective free resources to their catalogs and A-Z lists, but this practice is not consistent or standardized (at my own library at Portland State University, this option rests with the subject librarian, and we may not track these resources like we would those we purchased).

Yet our users want information; they care not whether a good quality item was digitized by a vendor and made available in a commercial database or if the item was digitized by the library itself and made available online for free. Indeed, shouldn't we trust collections organized by the hosting library itself just as much as a for-profit publishers'?

And here we have an opportunity for libraries to fill in the gap between our users and these excellent, free collections. One issue we face is our own discovery: how do we find the best digital libraries when there are no comprehensive listings of them? And how do we evaluate them? In this session at the Charleston Conference, we brainstormed discovery techniques for librarians and started a short list of some excellent digital libraries.

Discovery

Open access digital libraries often are not promoted aggressively by the hosting institution, and there exists so far no one database or website listing these digital collections—perhaps because pf our lingering sense that such online collections may be ephemeral. Another issue is the rapid growth of these collections, which expand as newly digitized materials are added. Finally, lack of awareness is a major concern. At the Charleston Conference, session participants said they learned of some collections through word-of-mouth, often from other librarians or professors. However, we can use some methods to discover these collections ourselves. At the session, we discussed a range of discovery techniques. Here are strategies for finding these collections:

Google

Search for the phrase "primary sources" and the name of a topic. Or, search for the name of a state or country or topic with the phrase "digital library."

Pathfinders and Subject Guides

The History Section of the American Library Association (ALA) Reference and User Services Association

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(RUSA) authored a website on online primary sources, but, as of this writing, it hasn't been updated in several years and refers people to a website at the University of Washington. However, other librarians in various libraries across the country keep lists of useful digital libraries. You can find these by searching through specific institutions, but it may be more efficient to search for them through Google including by using the search parameters mentioned above. As one example, Lee Sorenson at Duke University Libraries maintains an excellent subject guide on images, with an extensive listing of free, online sources.

Reviews and Magazines
Library Journal and *Choice* occasionally review open access collections. *Digital Libraries* Magazine lists many collections as well.

Funders
An audience member at the Charleston Conference suggested looking up projects supported by large-scale funders, for example, the National Endowment for the Humanities.

OAISTER and WorldCat
These OCLC databases do include archival and digital resources, which can be helpful if tricky, as "digital" may refer to the finding aid rather than the collection itself. However, if you find an interesting item or collection in OAISTER or WorldCat, you can then visit the holding library's website to see if they have any digitized any of the materials of interest.

Faculty and Students
Researchers and faculty often know of some top digital libraries in their areas of specialization. And students may as well.

Evaluation
Criteria for inclusion can be formal or informal. At a presentation at the Electronic Resources & Libraries Conference in 2011, George Stachokas proposed a schema for classifying free electronic resources, to track and maintain them. His key criteria are scholarship, whether an item is peer-reviewed, academic, technical, or popular; anticipated persistence of the resource; the entity who created the resource; the compatibility of the resource to the library's collections; and the convenience of the resource for the user, i.e., whether it requires staff mediation. Stachokas suggests that this schema will help libraries determine how to track, catalog, and provide access to these resources.

At the Charleston Conference, session participants also mentioned that subject librarians may consult faculty for input into evaluating content.

Digital Collections
At the end of the session, we focused our conversation on specific digital collections and libraries that we know and recommend to our users. This list includes collections with regional, historic, and thematic content. Some are large and international in scope, while others are local and focused. Although this list is short, it offers a hint of the vast array of excellent content already available to us and to our users.

The World Digital Library http://www.wdl.org/en/

Digital South Asia Library http://dsal.uchicago.edu/

Travelers in the Middle East Archive
http://timea.rice.edu/

Internet Sacred Text Archive http://www.sacred-texts.com/

Internet History Sourcebooks Project
http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/index.asp

Digital Scriptorium
http://www.scriptorium.columbia.edu/

Perseus Digital Library
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collections

The American Memory Project from the Library of Congress
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

Tibetan and Himalayan Library
http://www.thlib.org/

Early Canadiana Online
http://www.canadiana.ca/en/home

The Holocaust Museum Digital Library
http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/

Documenting the American South
http://docsouth.unc.edu/

The West Virginia Division of Culture and History Online Exhibits
http://www.wvculture.org/museum/exhibitsonline.html

New Jersey Digital Collections
http://slic.njstatelib.org/NJ_Information/Digital_Collections

Historic Pittsburgh
http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh/

Ad*Access from Duke University
http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/

Conclusion

Open access, digital libraries hosted by museums, libraries, and cultural institutions include extensive and excellent content of great relevance to academic researchers, including faculty and students, but these collections often lack easy discoverability. Libraries can facilitate access by seeking out these collections and adding them to our catalog or A-Z lists.

Reference

Stachokas, G. (2010, February), "The Necessity, Opportunity, and Challenge of Managing Free Electronic Resources: Schema for Classification." Paper presented at Electronic Resources & Libraries Conference, Austin, Texas.