Going Digital, Experiences at the Wellcome Library

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29th annual IATUL conference
Auckland University of Technology, April 2008
The Wellcome Library

• Part of Wellcome Collection, a major new £30 million public venue in London developed by the Wellcome Trust

• Wellcome Library is one of the world’s major resources for the study of medical history, 750,000 books, 250,000 pictures

• More than 30,000 readers visited us last year, including historians, academics, students, health professionals & consumers, journalists, artists & members of the general public
The Wellcome Library goes digital

• Library acknowledges that born digital material will form part of its future research collections

• Increasingly archival materials, especially ‘personal papers’, are produced in digital form only, today’s email & word processed documents are tomorrow’s research material

• If we don’t engage with born digital material then Library collection growth is going to be limited

• ‘Going digital’ presents many challenges, but material inherently flexible, new access & dissemination tools can help us build new services
The digital problem

• Issues well known, are well documented & not discussed here

• Conceptual & competing frameworks for dealing with digital material already exist, we struggle to chose which to use

• Digital preservation problem is increasingly about fitting the theories into practice & finding tools to serve those theories

• Our problem becomes how do we identify & apply most appropriate ‘solutions’ when none is a ‘complete’ solution
Our digital ‘Nike’ strategy

• Digital Curation in Action Project, begun 2005. Long term activity examining how the Library will bring born digital material into its collections - we just did it!

• Looking to create a hybrid solution both digital & physical collections, digital isn’t ‘instead of’, it’s ‘as well as’

• Learning by doing acquiring ‘real’ digital material from our donor/creator community & working out how to deal with it as we go

• We’re not working in isolation, project & ad hoc collaboration with other institutions valuable way to build capability & gain experience

• Is it risky? I’ll let you know
Archivists rule the world

• Support of the archival staff is essential, going digital is changing their work patterns, but archival practice is proving relevant to the management of digital material

• Archival workflows can be modified to accommodate digital material

• Using archival practice allows Library to use existing skills/staff to build a sustainable foundation for dealing with digital material

• Archivists supported by one new FTE, a Digital Curator, role to adapt archival practice & support archivists with technical issues

• To date this has proved a robust & flexible approach
So how will we do it…?

• Material will not be stored permanently on portable media
• Always retain an unmodified ‘original’ permanently
• Current material - produce a ‘preservation master’ – actively manage the preservation master, dissemination manifestations derived from it
• Legacy/obsolete material – normalise to an ‘open’ format, eg OpenOffice, - the ‘preservation master’ - actively manage the preservation master, dissemination manifestations derived from it
• Create descriptive & administrative metadata as the basis for resource discovery & future life cycle management
• Technology watch monitors material ‘at risk’ & prompts for action
How are we supporting this…?

• Process of donor/creator education & awareness promoting that we are now collecting born digital material, eg digital curation information on our Library website

• Staff development/training, internal & public courses, membership of Digital Curation Centre & Digital Preservation Coalition

• Developing tools/processes to support staff & donor/creator community, eg FAQs, new donor/loan agreement

• Good internal communication, sharing ideas & being prepared to change & be flexible, eg regular meetings
New workflow practical example

• Create activity log for each transfer
• Acknowledge receipt of material by letter, enclosing FAQ outlining what our processes are
• Anti-virus check – month in quarantine - anti-virus check - confirm with donor/creator material as ‘clean’, or otherwise
• Create manifest listing all material in transfer & send to donor/creator, transfer donation to network storage & verify
• Create (Manually) TechMD, eg DRIOD, checksums & file on network with activity log & copies of correspondence etc
• Create working ‘copy’ of material for archivists for arrangement & description, either on CD or network fileshare
• Send transfer media down salt mine for 18 months, just in case, then dispose
Technical issues

• Going digital is not easy, we don’t have end to end management tools, much work still manual, so time consuming

• No integrated way to automatically create administrative metadata, created manually using Droid/PRONOM

• Don’t yet have a repository to store material, so no active management or access

• Learning how to work with digital material without breaking it takes time & practice, eg normalisation techniques

• Real material = real lessons
Problems

• We have no mandate to collect, no obligation to donate so have to work hard to secure all material. Our archival ‘lag’ is between 10 & 15 years, too long for digital material

• Changing donor/creator roles Archivist/Records Manager Vs IT Manager

• Archives managers unfamiliar with providing digital material, makes them nervous

• IT managers may not understand point of long term preservation
Acquisition issues

• Acquiring digital stuff is no more or less easy than acquiring physical stuff

• Acquisition can be time consuming with no certainty of success, we don’t yet have regular established transfers

• Finding it harder to acquire material in mid-career & less certain that material will have future significance

• None of which have simple answers
What lessons have we learned?

• Born digital acquired on same principles as other material, we collect it, manage it, make it available for the long term

• More difficult than we thought, digital preservation & life cycle management of born digital material isn’t a push button activity

• More time consuming than we thought, accession/ingestion process is time consuming & laborious

• Need new tools to help store, manage & make stuff available

• Automation of processes will be essential, but can be difficult to build

• Collaboration & co-operation are successful strategies
Interesting side effects

• Experience with digital material is changing roles within the Library, strengthening the role of the archivists

• Focus on digital material is raising expectations of what we will hold in the future

• Different requirements of digital material are challenging ways we think about engaging with physical material, reassessing roles & responsibilities within the Library

• Changing the ways we want to record & document our interactions with physical material & its creators
Conclusion

• ‘Going digital’ presents many challenges, not all have immediate solutions

• Sound archival practice & a ‘just do it’ approach proving very flexible & relevant, we learn by doing

• Experience with digital material changing roles within the Library

• Different requirements of working with digital material are challenging the ways we think about engaging with physical material & so our practice evolves

• Project & ad hoc collaboration with other institutions valuable way to build capability & gain experience
For more information

On the web

• Wellcome Trust – www.wellcome.ac.uk
• Wellcome Library – http://library.wellcome.ac.uk
• Digital Curation at Wellcome – http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/node288.html

Published articles

• Ariadne Magazine, Hilton & Thompson, ‘Collecting Born Digital Archives at the Wellcome Library’ - http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue50/hilton-thompson/
• Ariadne Magazine, Hilton & Thompson, ‘Further Experiences in Collecting Born Digital Archives at the Wellcome Library‘ - http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue53/hilton-thompson/
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Thank you
Questions now, questions later…?

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