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Acquiring Minds Want to Know -- Digital Scholarship

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Acquiring Minds Want to Know —
Digital Scholarship

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Digital Scholarship
A new form of scholarship has emerged in recent years named “digital scholarship.” I have seen it defined as online publishing or digitized material presented online, or, in other words, scholarship that appears in a digital form. However, a more compelling definition treats it as scholarship that depends entirely on being digital, i.e., it is created, carried out, and disseminated entirely digitally. In essence, it is not possible without digital technology.

This is an important distinction. Many scholarly materials can be converted to a digital format, and as desirable as that is, most of them function quite well without being digital. Scholarship that is dependent on being digital is different. It is often highly visual and visually oriented. It may contain text but may also be a study of text. It may combine many different data types, systems, and software. Often digital scholarship takes the form of stand-alone projects that are not integrated with other digital works. However, there may be nothing that prevents this from happening, rather, by being digital, the possibilities for collaboration, sharing, or re-purposing are enormous.

Digital scholarship has evolved as scholars began to realize the potential of digital technology to transform their work, both research and teaching. The results of digital scholarship are displayed and disseminated digitally, often through a specially developed Website. The results may never be published in a peer reviewed journal or in a scholarly monograph. Information about, or deriving from, the project, may be published. This change in publishing and dissemination of results is part of what makes digital scholarship so different from digitized scholarship.

Many good examples have come out of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, a center at the University of Virginia that is housed in the library. Its goal is “to explore and expand the potential of information technology as a tool for humanities research. To that end, we provide our Fellows with consulting, technical support, applications programming, and networking publishing facilities. We also cultivate partnerships and participate in humanities computing initiatives with libraries, publishers, information technology companies, scholarly organizations, and others interested in the intersection of computers and cultural heritage.” (http://www.iath.virginia.edu)

One of their more famous projects is that of Edward L. Ayres, The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War. This ambitious work captures the experience of two different communities, one Northern and one Southern, throughout the Civil War. It was conceived as a hypermedia archive of newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, maps, church records, population census, agricultural census, and military records. The site says that “Students can explore every dimension of the conflict and write their own histories, reconstituting the life stories of women, African Americans, farmers, politicians, soldiers, and families. The project is intended for secondary schools, community colleges, libraries, and universities.” (http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow/choosepart.html#story)

The Valley of the Shadow combines new and digitized sources to create a new work of scholarship. It gains part of its appeal and strength by melding teaching and research — an excellent example of how digital forms of scholarship can be used to enhance the learning experience.
A Recipe for a Successful Digital Archive: Collection Development for Digital Archives

by John McDonald (Acquisitions Librarian, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91125; Phone: 626-395-6427; Fax: 626-792-7540) <john@library.caltech.edu>

At the 2002 Charleston Conference this past November, I was fortunate to sit on a panel addressing issues in Digital Archives. Along with my presentation about Caltech's Digital Archive initiative, CODA (http://library.caltech.edu/coda), the panel included presentations by librarians at MIT about their DSpace project (https://hpsds1.mit.edu/index.jsp), from Ohio State about their Knowledge Bank (http://www.lib.ohio-state.edu/KB/indexe.html), and from director of production at JSTOR (http://www.jstor.org). This session highlighted the varying approaches that academic libraries and non-profit institutions are taking towards digital archiving of materials.

These project descriptions have led me to believe that we are at the right point to shift the focus of digital archive development from the technical to the methodological. We now need to apply collection development techniques to digital archives to make them useful, utilized, and important. I originally wrote that Caltech's recipe for building our digital archive project included six ingredients: an entrepreneurial attitude, iterative process, learning to communicate, collaborate, define and refining roles, and patience. The new recipe will include a seventh ingredient: content.

Basic issues for digital archive development have in the past focused on technology — how to get an archive up and running, how to maintain it, how to fund it, how to staff it, etc. Most of these technical issues have now been solved or are being tackled on a grand scale (Eprints, DSpace, etc.) and there are now multiple technological approaches to building a digital archive. Content has not been at the forefront of digital archive projects in the recent past, but now should be. Some digital archive projects have been scattered out of necessity — items placed in the archive were readily available, easy to put there, either since they were already digital documents or were the easiest to convert, or were unique items that received special funding to convert (maps, images, etc.). Focusing on content, just like libraries in general, is what will drive digital archive projects in the future. Digital archives will be needed and used only if the content is relevant, accessible, and properly promoted. Digital archives are not only archival projects in the traditional sense but also libraries and need to apply principles of each to develop a common theory of digital archive collection development.

Collection development is built around the identification and evaluation of materials based on demand, quality, cost, and other local factors including storage and access points, both physical and bibliographic. The number one consideration for selection of materials for inclusion in a collection is demand from the primary user group, for current or future use. Selectors define their primary (i.e., faculty and students), secondary (i.e., community members), and tertiary (i.e., other libraries) user groups and select items that they feel meet the needs of those users. This demand is balanced with quality of the material and its cost — both initial and ongoing costs of the item and its processing and storage. In addition, local factors, such as space, language, and the ability to access the item (physical or bibliographic) can be taken into consideration.

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