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Digital Delivery of Interlibrary Loan and Democratic Digital Collection Development at Stanford

by Glen Worthy (Humanities Digital Information Service, Stanford University Libraries and Academic Information Resources, in Stanford, California)

Summary

Under two successive grants provided by the California State Library with Library Services and Technology Act funds (FY 1999-2000 and 2000-2001), and then through calendar 2002 under internal funding, the Stanford University Libraries created and implemented a pilot project to provide digital delivery for interlibrary loan (dd-ILL) of out-of-copyright, monographic materials. The project demonstrated successful solutions to two distinct sets of problems: first, it assisted in and expanded the day-to-day work of our traditional interlibrary services; and second, it contributed to longer-term goals of building digital library collections.

Delivering digital surrogates to remote patrons alleviated concerns for the safety and preservation of rare or fragile materials. In this way, dd-ILL made possible ILL circulation of previously non-circulating materials, and thus extended the range of materials delivered through ILL (and, incidentally, increased the fill rate of loan requests). By focusing on monograph-length items, the dd-ILL program also provided unique selection principles for augmenting our own digital library collections. Unlike thematic or collection-specific projects, which are chosen by faculty or librarians, materials chosen through dd-ILL reflected the needs of broader-based user communities, including users from non-research universities and public libraries. This implies a radically democratic, user-based method of digital collection development, one driven by the community perhaps most likely to benefit from the collection it is helping to create itself. Thus, in addition to expanded ILL service, the digitization of ILL-selected materials functions as a collection development tool and as the impetus for longer-term digital collecting initiatives.

The dd-ILL program had an overwhelmingly positive response both from remote users and from the Stanford staff whose materials have been digitally delivered as ILL items; indeed, the dd-ILL program jump-started a series of user- and librarian-initiated requests for the digitization of out-of-copyright monographs, and the body of digital work created during three years of dd-ILL now forms the core of a Stanford digital collection of pre-1923 holdings. Compared with the output of our current digitization technologies, efforts, and plans, this core (just under a thousand titles) is quite modest; still, it’s a proud part of our digital library collections.

dd-ILL and Traditional ILL

dd-ILL significantly expanded current practices in electronic ILL, for example, Ariel: first, the scope of digitized materials was extended (and indeed, restricted) to monographs — that is, to items of scope significant enough to merit consideration for inclusion in a permanent digital collection, and with existing descriptive metadata rich enough to facilitate later discovery. Second, it was anticipated that there would be no paper copy produced at the receiving end, as there usually is in the Ariel workflow; here, delivery of ILL materials was, at least potentially, entirely digital.

dd-ILL was created as an experimental project to offer complete, out-of-copyright works in digital form in response to users’ requests. This scan-on-demand service for monographs was apparently the first of its kind in the world (though the Library of Congress inaugurated a very similar, though unrelated and less ambitious, digitize-on-demand service almost simultaneously with Stanford). The program continued on page 49.

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Voice

The third way to look at reference content is in terms of its voice.

Voice is the sum total of how we present the knowledge we’ve gathered. The number and size of volumes to the design of pages and navigational tools. Then we get to the words on the page or screen, the content itself. An encyclopedia’s voice should not resemble the cacophony of Iron Chef. Nor should it resort to the jargon and passive prose that makes some academic language an exclusive tongue that others cannot understand.

But too much editing risks losing an article’s personality, passion, and humor. That’s why creating an appealing voice for their publications is such a challenge for publishers. Here are some signs of a well-conceived and edited reference work, one whose voice is right: Articles on similar topics are organized similarly, and openings provide elementary facts and immediate context for the topic. You know right away why any given article is in the work and what you will get out of it. Sentences are reasonably short, the language is vivid and active, and there are plenty of facts as well as thoughtful explanation of what they mean and why they might matter.

An essential component of the relationship between the reader and the work is the assumption that we are all striving to understand and grow in knowledge together. Any note of superiority should be scrubbed from a reference work. In fact, I see interactivity as an important need. In the future encyclopedias may well become venues where scholars, inside and outside the academy, will ask and respond to questions and connect with one another.

In 1995, we decided to add sidebars of primary text to articles in the Encyclopedia of World Sport, and we’ve done this ever since. In World History we are adding short quotations from figures as varied as Sophocles and Darwin, Martin Luther and Jimmy Carter. These kinds of additions are popular because they add something essential to the voice of a work: human stories. They connect abstract knowledge with the concrete realities of human experience.

Conclusion

I’d like to conclude with another strongly held belief: that the publisher has a responsibility to think critically about how closely the work produced matches the original intention, and the description provided to readers. Samuel Johnson, creator of the first authoritative English dictionary, said, “There are two things which I am confident I can do very well. One is an introduction to any literary work, stating what it is to contain, and how it should be executed in the most perfect manner; the other is a conclusion, shewing from various causes why the execution has not been equal to what the author promised to himself and to the public.”

Conscious of the flaws in our work, we always try to admit where we fell short — for instance, in failing to include that article on light pollution I mentioned above.

But we don’t grow our own corn, and farmers have adapted. They grow new varieties that stay sweet in the bin, in the bag, even in the refrigerator. The corn from Taft Farms is about as good as it gets, but these new varieties just aren’t the same. They are sweet, but they are starchy too, sticky in the mouth instead of tender fresh like old-fashioned varieties. Agriculture is changing, both for good and ill, just like publishing. External pressures and social changes mean that we may be producing the equivalent of the sweet but sticky new corn varieties. Publishers aren’t so very different from farmers, really, trying to get the best, most profitable crop they can. We ask the same questions small farmers do: How can we stay in business doing something we love? Are we contributing to sustainable (knowledge) communities? And maybe, when we have a moment to reflect on both past and future, we wonder how to recapture the elusive sweetness of old-time corn on the cob.

Watch for Part II coming soon. — KC

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was received with enthusiasm throughout the library community, for some obvious reasons: because of their age and fragility, many of the works scanned and delivered through dd-ILL would not otherwise have circulated, so use of digital surrogates not only helped to preserve these works from excessive handling — more importantly for non-Stanford users, it created much better opportunities for access to rare and unique content.

The project workflow was fairly simple: any request coming in to regular ILL that met our dd-ILL selection criteria (out-of-copyright monograph) was routed to dd-ILL, where our staffpaged the book, sought permission of the cognizant curator or of Special Collections staff if the book was fragile, then scanned and converted the book to PDF for delivery. Of course, only non-destructive scanning methods were used: the primary tool for this was an overhead (planetary) book scanner. PDF was chosen as the delivery file format because it is both ubiquitous and neatly-packaged (and thus easily delivered); we employed uncorrected optical character recognition (OCR) to make the PDF both more or less easy to create, and more or less searchable; and we chose the “image plus hidden text” PDF format so that, no matter what the OCR accuracy rate (which was always far too low for plain-text output), the user could see a page image as close as possible to the page original. When the PDF file was created and basic quality control completed, we moved it to a designated space on our own Web server, then informed the requesting library of a URL where the file could be retrieved. This URL was intended to remain constant, both for the delivery of the ILL request and for eventual integration into the digital library collection. Within a relatively brief period of time after delivery to ILL patrons, these same URLs were driven into our catalog (and matched to the catalog record for the print original) in order to facilitate seamless discovery via mainstream tools, and direct access to the digital surrogate.

Although we experienced occasional delays due to staff learning curves and to rough edges in our processes and technologies, we still met our goal of efficient ILL practice with rather striking consistency: throughout the project, the average time from initial request to desktop delivery was five to seven days, well within the norms of traditional interlibrary loan.

dd-ILL and Digital Collection Development

Aside from the creation of an innovative delivery method for handling ILL requests, one of the fundamental principles of dd-ILL was the establishment of a new tool to augment Stanford’s digital library collection: vor populi. This collection of scanned books is thus unique in its scope and focus: because the books were all requested through interlibrary loan, we assumed that they are both not widely held in American libraries, and of particular interest to current researchers — otherwise, it is not likely that they would have been requested through ILL in the first place.

Although Stanford now has greatly expanded and automated a book digitization program that supports a large number of projects, each with its own selection principles, the dd-ILL project was our first to concentrate on out-of-copyright monographs; indeed, although the out-of-copyright designation was initially chosen simply to avoid rights and intellectual property issues, we later acknowledged its value as a principle of digital collection development, and have undertaken a new project to digitize general out-of-copyright holdings in the Libraries. The dd-ILL corpus is being integrated into this larger collection.

How, then, did the composition of this “democratically selected” digital collection turn out? Just under half the titles are in languages other than English. The vast majority are in the humanities and social sciences, and of these about 35% came from Special Collections. We suspect that the reasons for this are related both to the relative longevity of works in these fields and to the out-of-copyright right of our digitization selection criteria. A different, and unexpectedly important, subset of our dd-ILL collection was a direct result of our out-of-copyright selection criteria: a significant number of requests came directly via our Earth Sciences Library for unpublished theses, dissertations, and field reports from the discipline in which older research largely retains its value over time. Although these titles constituted only about 6% of the total, this was about three times more than from all other science and engineering branch libraries combined.

As for the age of this collection, imprint dates of digitized titles ranged from 1574 almost to the present; the vast majority, more than 90% of titles, are pre-1923. (The remaining 10% were selected for digitization based on other “out-of-copyright” principles, such as the public domain nature of government documents, Stanford o’ Stanford-affiliated intellectual property such as theses and technical reports, and a few non-U.S. publications that are in the public domain in their countries of publication.) About 25% of the total were published between 1900 and 1923; about 50% from 1800 to 1899; just under 10% from 1700-1799; and about 5% from the late 16th and 17th centuries.

Cataloging, Discovery and Access

Ironically, today’s digital library environment is generally still quite limited in true cross-collection searching opportunities. Significant bodies of digital material are still discoverable only within their respective information silos, each with its own search apparatus. For a startlingly large quantity of digital library resources, in order for a patron to find what she wants, she must first know which database, digital collection or e-book service her desired title is in. While the standard online catalog may seem to have passed in some digital Utopian sense, it still provides far and away the best opportunity for discovery of electronic resources.

Fortunately for our dd-ILL collection, as for any collection of digital surrogates of existing print materials, the existing catalog record provides by far the simplest, most complete, and most direct discovery interface for our patrons. For all of these reasons, after dd-ILL patrons were notified of their “pickup” URL, we simply batched loaded these same URLs into the corresponding catalog records, where they can be searched as a collection (using the keyword “dd-ILL,” which appears as part of each URL in the record), or — much more likely from a user’s point of view — discovered spontaneously and serendipitously as the result of a standard search. Instead of a user first wanting “something digital” then going “somewhere digital” to find it (obviously not a likely scenario), the dd-ILL files are immediately discoverable (and deliverable) to anyone searching a particular author or title (which happens thousands of times a day).

Approximately 23% of the total digitized titles have print originals housed in remote storage; 30% of the total are in (non-circulating) Special Collections and 10% of the total in locked stack or other non-circulating collections — thus well over half of the titles which are of limited access in print form, even to Stanford users, are now immediately available to them as digital surrogates, directly via the catalog. These 600+ digitized, limited-access titles are, of course, just a tiny drop in the eight-million volume bucket of the Stanford Libraries. But the fact that these titles are to some degree both user-selected and access-restricted makes this drop a rather concentrated one.

Conclusions

Although Stanford’s Digital Delivery of Interlibrary Loan program has been on hiatus since 2003, it has survived in spirit: many of its principles and practices, especially in the realm of cataloging and discovery, are being applied in many ways today. The dd-ILL project was one attempt to make a place for rare and unique books in the digital library environment. Although it did not achieve the scale we had hoped for, we are proud of the project’s many contributions to the digital libraries community.

Expanding the ILL Role
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This is a work in progress. Swem Library's Interlibrary Loan, Collection Development and Acquisitions departments have made a commitment to work together, to improve access, service and our library's collection. Traditional ILL, while filling the important information need, does nothing to improve a library's collection. A collaborative project such as this, however small to start out with, is a move in the right direction. 

Endnotes


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of digital collection development, have become part of our continuing efforts. We have acquired and developed more automated scanning technologies that have dramatically increased the volume of digital surrogates we create from our print collections. But among the first projects undertaken in our high-volume scanning operation was a collection of "top-circulating" titles from our print collection in the public domain — a democratically selected collection that is being digitized for open access, just as the dd-ILL collection was. The principle delivery format, at least for the time being, is still the page-image-plus-hidden-text flavor of PDF. And although we have moved somewhat away from simple direct access on a Web server to more sophisticated delivery environments, even here we continue to emphasize the importing of links to the digital surrogate from the print title's catalog record as the primary discovery tool.

Stanford's dd-ILL program was a brief but important effort to combine innovative ILL services with innovative collection development principles—particularly for digital collection development. We are proud of the popularity of the service, the population of the collection it created, and of its lasting impact on our expanding digital collection efforts.

Endnotes
1. Contrary to our expectations, we discovered, both through occasional problem reports and via an end-of-project questionnaire, that a significant portion of our patrons did, in fact, print out the books we had scanned.
2. The choice of file format has important long-term implications for the digital collection development aspect of this project: PDF has, as a proprietary and evolving file specification, had known longevity and obsolescence issues. Still, certainly over the course of the dd-ILL project and since its end, the files we've created have remained readable in current versions of Adobe Acrobat. We hope that Adobe continues in its course of backward compatibility. But for preservation purposes, we scanned at minimal best-practices resolutions, and archived all original tiff files. We believe that the creation and retention of both file formats allowed us to serve both short- and long-term access needs.

Acquisitions and Interlibrary Loan Together: Good Marriage or Will George W. Bush Object?

by Joe Badics (Acquisitions Librarian at Eastern Michigan University)

Eastern Michigan University is a comprehensive institution with slightly less than 20,000 FTE students. It plans to soon offer its third doctorate program. The library has over 750,000 volumes, with over 3000 paper periodical subscriptions and access to thousands of others electronically. We purchase over 16,000 monographs each year. During 2003 we initiated approximately 2100 borrowing requests while receiving almost 8500 lending requests.

The staff members of the Circulation Department at the library performed all interlibrary loan duties for many years. In September 2000 the borrowing function was transferred to the Acquisitions Department to ease the load on the Circulation staff. We decided to implement the II.Liad software in January 2003, and the lending component was transferred to the Acquisitions Department since we were successfully handling the borrowing end, and splitting a commonly traditional library department was causing some confusion.

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