

# Are We There Yet?

## Defining the Traits of a Successful Special Collections Digitization Project

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In this paper, the author will attempt to address the current state of digitized special collections in relation to these issues while providing an analysis of six particular online special collections projects. It is hoped that in performing such an analysis, several desirable qualities of these online collections will be highlighted and taken into consideration as special collections librarians formulate a format and collaborative framework to further promote their unique collections on the Internet.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent, precipitous advances in digitization technology have provided the field of special collections with many opportunities as well as many challenges. Special collections departments have been known for their emphasis on preservation while limiting access to primary source materials to those with serious scholarly interests.<sup>1</sup> Now, however, making such collections available for online access allows special collections librarians to share their resources with a wider audience while also limiting the handling of and damage to rare materials.

Such benefits are a boon to the field of special collections, but they do not come free of complications. In this brave new world of the digitized special collection, several concerns have come to the forefront: the initial cost of digitization; the recurring cost of digital collection maintenance; best practices concerning digital collections architecture; and the training and education

necessary to properly implement digitization projects, among many more.

Never before has there been such demand for access to special collections, nor has there been a time when technology has provided such powerful methods of providing this access. The recent appearance of curricula which mandate the study of primary source materials serves as an impetus to this demand. Such curricula are no longer solely the province of higher education. With the implementation of approaches such as the *Colorado Model Content Standards for History*, special collections departments in academic libraries have seen an increase in inquiries about access to primary sources for K-12 populations.<sup>2</sup> Even in college level curricula which do not mandate exposure to primary sources, it has been noted that visits to special collections have sparked unique interest in students who are usually not very engaged.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to this demand for openness stand traditional perceptions of

special collections as hidden away from the general population of library users.<sup>4</sup> This view comes in tandem with stereotypes of special collections librarians, who are written off as elitists and accused of extreme selectivity regarding prospective visitors to their collections.<sup>5</sup> In the past, such attitudes were simply attributed to the distinct origin and independent development of special collections as a sub-field of librarianship. Generally, service in areas such as public and school libraries, as well as the general collections of academic libraries, has been oriented towards providing access to as many quality resources as possible for as many users as possible. The field of special collections, having in its early years strong ties with the rare book trade, has not always shared the value of access so central to the principals of librarianship.<sup>6</sup>

As hiring practices were quite different from present times, faculty and staff responsible for many early rare book rooms were often drawn from the ranks of the book trade. Many of these individuals had become quite wealthy in their commercial endeavors, and had little regard for the library's tendency towards egalitarianism.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, these rare book rooms, the predecessors of today's special collections, were thought of as curatorial enterprises, established with the purpose of preservation as opposed to use.<sup>8</sup> Those newer to the field are encountering novel attitudes regarding collections policies that have developed in the intervening years. Whereas yesterday's rare book room was mostly a collection of antiquated tomes and singular manuscripts, the inventory of the modern special collections department usually includes a wide array of media including (but not limited to) photographs, music, and video recordings.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, special collections defined by local context are becoming more common. The perceived rarity of an item is no longer

the sole criterion for addition to collections. Rather, the recent trend has been to utilize a variety of resources in an attempt to preserve a snapshot of a given place and time for future generations.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, there is no definitive curriculum for special collections librarianship in library schools.<sup>11</sup> Though definite skill sets and competencies have been explored and proposed, the real education of special collections librarians takes places either on the job or at continuing education institutions such as the Rare Book School.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it has been speculated that attitudes about the profession by its practitioners have been bequeathed on the job from one generation of special collections librarian to the next.<sup>13</sup> Currently, the casual apprenticeship undergone by new special collections librarians is moving towards formal mentorship that not only aims to fill educational gaps left by library school education, but also to emphasize the need for openness and outreach work by the special collections department.<sup>14</sup> The opportunity to display primary resources online offers special collections departments a means to open their collections. Thus they may satisfy increasing demand for student access to such materials in spite of recent cuts in academic library staff and budgets that have constricted the ability to provide such service on a regular basis.<sup>15</sup>

## **POTENTIAL PROBLEMS**

While some scholars have made the assertion that digitization heralds a "golden age" for the field of special collections, this new process does not come without its own particular set of problems.<sup>16</sup> At first glance, the conversion of fragile materials to digital form may seem a cheaper alternative to the indefinite physical preservation of originals. It must be noted, however, that there is little research regarding the long-term viability of digital storage methods. In this respect,

funding remains a contentious issue. At the turn of the century, an estimate calculated by the Library of Congress stated that the human resource costs of maintaining a digital collection indefinitely could easily be double the cost of initial digitization.<sup>17</sup>

It must also be noted that there is little research regarding the long-term viability of digital storage methods. Regardless of funding, the problem of preservation technology raises a number of questions. To date, no digital document has been proven to outlast a document printed on acid-free paper.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is unknown if digitization will be as valuable as current opinions estimate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Through this research, the author hopes to provide a framework by which the effectiveness of an online special collections endeavor may be judged. In critically analyzing such projects from the user's perspective, the following factors will be taken into consideration where applicable: the quantity of content; the quality of content; methods of cataloging content; and information architecture. It is the author's intent to highlight desirable features of each collection that would be beneficial aspects of any standardized formats for online special collections projects proposed in the near future.

## **THE PAPERS OF JOHN JAY<sup>19</sup>**

Assembled under the auspices of the Columbia University Libraries Digital Program, *The Papers of John Jay* is an excellent example of a well-organized online special collections project. The collection provides high quality photocopies of over 13,000 original documents pertaining to the life and career of the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Though this online collection has been digitized and organized online through

Columbia University, it is representative of the physical collections of over fifty cooperating libraries, historical societies, and museums.<sup>20</sup>

The data attached to each document have been meticulously cataloged, which allows users to search for relevant items in the database. For instance, a user is able to search documents by their author, recipient, or date, as a large number of documents are correspondences. Each document has also been assigned a unique accession number, referred to as a *Jay ID* so as to allow for easy retrieval of known items. If desired, queries can be narrowed to search only within the collections of a certain repository, and in this capacity the database can serve as an online finding aid for those wishing to learn the physical holdings of the project's participant institutions.

After performing a search and selecting a potentially relevant document, the user is presented with an abstract of that document. The detail of a given abstract seems correlated to the document's length, with abstracts for longer documents appearing more like independent essays. From the abstract page, the user is provided with a link to the scanned images of the document itself. Using a web browser plug-in called ExpressView, the document opens in a separate window, displaying the scanned image as well as the document's cataloging data. Though the images themselves are of the highest quality, ExpressView allows the user to adjust the image ratio to 25%, 50% or 100% of the document's original size. This is especially important, as all documents are written in cursive hand, most being quite difficult to read at the original zoom setting. The database allows the user the option of downloading scanned images for educational purposes, but this requires the additional download and installation of a separate ExpressView program.

If users prefer browsing over searching, several helpful links are prominently displayed on the project's main page. Each link leads to essays written by prominent Columbia University scholars Richard B. Morris, James Baird and Jake Sudderth. The essays, which have titles such as "Jay and New York" and "The Jay Treaty," are educational in themselves, but more importantly contain links that cite relevant documents in the collection. Thus these essays serve as online pathfinders for users who are unfamiliar with the scope of the collection.

Despite its excellence in several capacities, *The Papers of John Jay* has one critical shortcoming. Unfortunately, many of the scanned images have been cropped, and text around the margins has been eliminated. It is unknown whether such errors have crept in unintentionally during the digitization process, or whether the size limitations presented by scanning hardware may have caused the creation of incomplete files. While users will find many instances in which documents are presented in their entirety, it is of utmost importance that every document is properly scanned.

## **THE WORLD WAR II POSTER COLLECTION<sup>21</sup>**

This collection, produced by the Government and Geographic Information and Data Services Department at the Northwestern University Library, provides open access to over three hundred high quality images of World War II propaganda posters created between 1940 and 1947. Through collaboration with the Library's Catalog Department, each image has been assigned a MARC record and call number, allowing complete integration with the library's NUCat online catalog. These records in turn have been added to OCLC's WorldCat. Additionally, the creation of web-based SGML records for each image

within this collection's database allows for the flexibility of Boolean searching. As these images are originally products of the US Government Printing Office, they are not subject to standard copyright limitations and may be reproduced by users if desired. Upon request, the library can provide interested users with higher quality images than those available in the online database.<sup>22</sup> These high-resolution images, which are available for a fee, can in turn be used to create reproduced images at original size and quality.<sup>23</sup>

The images that comprise the collection are full color and high quality. Though the website is not configured for adjustable picture ratios, the images are sized for ease of viewing. While the project's website states that some original images have been cropped, this has been done to remove items added during archival processing such as color reference cards and internal coding numbers. All images are presented in their entirety and great care has been taken not to omit original portions at the margins.

While standard Boolean search options are available, posters are also grouped by generic topics corresponding with popular poster series of the time such as "Victory Gardens" or "War Bonds." This facilitates easy browsing for those who are not familiar with the types of posters produced during wartime. Though the record of each poster gives only the most rudimentary information regarding context, users are encouraged to contact the librarians at Northwestern University's Government Publications and Maps Department, who will provide basic reference service at no cost.<sup>24</sup>

In summary, this poster collection is well-organized, easy to use, and provides a glimpse of an important era of history for a vast audience. Unfortunately, its main limitation is the lack of contextual

information available. Many similar projects offer at least a few scholarly essays that comment on the importance of the collection in relation to its time period. Though this paucity of background information does not devalue the quality or scope of the collection itself, it could limit the project's usefulness to students and other non-scholar users.

### **THE DUKE PAPYRUS ARCHIVE<sup>25</sup>**

With approximately 1,200 papyrus fragments, the Duke Papyrus Collection serves as an indispensable resource for classicists and papyrologists throughout the scholarly world. The collection is comprised of numerous types of documents and represents papyri in five ancient languages. Most of the collection's papyri are written in Greek, and pertain to commonplace subjects such as business transactions and personal correspondence. A minority of documents, however, represent the Latin, Arabic and Coptic languages (in the standard, Hieratic and Demotic scripts), and some also pertain to literary texts. Given the age of the originals, the vast majority of papyri are fragmentary, and even more complete documents have significant lacunae.

Though the collection has been online since 1995, numerous papyri from this collection have yet to undergo serious analysis by papyrologists. As such, several features of this collection have been created with the papyrologist in mind. The cataloging of the Duke collection has been done according to the Archival and Manuscript Control format. As AMC is a substrate of MARC, this allows for the inclusion of the papyri's records in Duke's online library catalog as well as OCLC. Additionally, each document in the collection retains its original local identification number which appears only in

finding aids at Duke University's physical collection.<sup>26</sup>

The images captured from original papyri are high quality, and have been presented so as to allow variable levels of magnification. This is extremely useful for scholars, as correct interpretation of ancient scripts can only be done under close scrutiny. As a service to papyrologists, the scanned images have also been cosmetically altered (albeit minimally) for ease of viewing. In cases where text has faded beyond legibility, Adobe Photoshop has been used to adjust the image's contrast and restore the text to a quality on par with the original. This has only been done when deemed absolutely necessary, so as to preserve the integrity of the collection's online presence while promoting ease of use for the scholarly community.

For users other than serious papyrologists and historians, the archive also has something to offer. Links on the archive's front page serve as guides for those interested in browsing the collection, dividing papyri into sections such as "Cultural aspects," "Religious aspects," and "Material aspects," among others. Additionally, the collection's front page provides links to several informative essays about the ancient world which give the context to the collection for those unfamiliar with the field. As this collection has been assembled and presented with the scholar in mind, however, its only negative aspect is that it is somewhat lacking in its aesthetics.

### **THE MERCATOR GLOBES<sup>27</sup>**

In the special collections of the Harvard University Library are the only two surviving globes in America produced by famed 16<sup>th</sup> century cartographer Gerard Mercator. According to geographical knowledge of his time, Mercator fashioned a terrestrial globe of the known world. In addition, he later released a celestial globe

that mapped the constellations, which was then sold in tandem with the terrestrial globe. With the technical assistance of Harvard alum and Boston Map Society member Jeremy Pool, the library was able to capture high quality images of each globe and assemble them in a manner that allows a great degree of interaction.

In order to successfully present a three-dimensional item on a two dimensional screen, the librarians at Harvard partitioned the original globes into thirty-two distinct sections and captured images of each section. Given the size of the original globes, sections that were approximately 5" x 5" allowed for complete coverage while preventing unnecessary overlap between images. This allows for a seamless presentation of the images from the user's perspective. Though the original images exhibit the curvature that is typical of a globe's surface, computer-assisted correction has allowed for clear two-dimensional presentation of the images.<sup>28</sup> From the project's main web page, users are directed to select either the terrestrial or celestial globe. The terrestrial globe's main navigation allows users to click on one of the globe's thirty-two partitions to examine the area in detail. This opens a built-in viewing tool which allows users to navigate to particular locations in a partition and accommodates up to 200% zoom. As the Mercator Globes are replete with small annotations, this feature is quite important for those interested in scholarly analysis of the globes. The main page of the terrestrial globe's navigation tool also features a list of links that will take the user to notable parts of the map, such as Mercator's drawings of local flora and fauna or the dedication cartouche.

While the imaging for the celestial globe was done in a manner similar to the terrestrial globe, the navigation tool created for the celestial globe does not allow users

to browse the globe's surface. Rather, the user is presented with a series of pull-down menus that list both the ancient and modern names of the constellations on the celestial globe. Also present are notes regarding the history, mythology and naming of each constellation. Once a constellation has been selected, the user is presented with an image of the constellation that allows for up to 200% zoom. Again, this is an important feature because Mercator's celestial globe contains not only a map of the constellations, but provides detailed drawings of corresponding mythological figures placed over each constellation.

A major weakness of this project is that it requires visitors to use Microsoft's Internet Explorer to fully utilize all aspects of the viewing tool. Without Internet Explorer, users may experience difficulty selecting appropriate images, viewing images in their entirety, and fully utilizing different zoom settings. A notice on the project's main page states that support for other web browsers is forthcoming. Another shortcoming of this project is its lack of integration into any sort of catalog. This lack of cataloging bars users from searching the globes for relevant images, leaving users to browse the general partitions of the globes in hopes of finding relevant information.

## **THE VCU DIGITAL COLLECTIONS<sup>29</sup>**

A growing trend in special collections sees academic libraries serving as archives for local history. Such a project is currently being assembled by Virginia Commonwealth University in the form of its Digital Collections. The aim of the project is to collect multimedia resources relevant to local history in an attempt to create a snapshot of life in Richmond, Virginia. To date, the collection boasts 7,401 items across the media spectrum of photographs, audio recordings, video recordings, and fully

digitized books. The collection is divided into eleven distinct exhibits covering subject matter as diverse as African-American history, the history of nursing at the Medical College of Virginia and local historical architecture. Each item in the collection has been cataloged with controlled subject headings, which allows for standard and advanced Boolean searching. The Digital Library catalog, however, has not been integrated with VCU's general library catalog. All items held in the Digital Collections, regardless of medium or area of interest have been arranged in a similar fashion which allows for a seamless user experience across the eleven collections.

For the purposes of this paper, the author will focus on one particular aspect of the Digital Collections, the Oral History Archive. Currently, this project contains fourteen interviews with four locally prominent individuals: Richmond philanthropist Edmund Rennolds; African-American historian and retired dentist Dr. Francis Merrill Foster; Kathleen Cabell, wife of prominent attorney and political activist Royal Cabell; and Dr. Maurice J. Duke, a local historian and Professor Emeritus of English at VCU. There are plans to further expand the number of interviews and interviewees at a later date. The audio of the interviews have been captured in the format of downloadable .mp3 files, which range from thirty minutes to one hour each. Each interview is accompanied by a print transcription in .pdf form which is fully searchable, allowing users unfamiliar with the collection to find relevant material.<sup>30</sup>

In comparison with other online special collections projects, the VCU Digital Collection is extremely ambitious in the diversity of its material. The inclusion and integration of audiovisual material will be especially important in the coming years as standards of online technology continue to

accommodate new modes of transmitting and recording the human record. Indeed, a major benefit of capturing audio and video of interviewees is that it provides the most accurate method possible for recording information. Caution must be taken to make these multimedia materials available in a wide array of formats, however, as choosing only one format could theoretically limit user access. Another major shortcoming of this endeavor is the fact that the Digital Collections catalog has not been integrated into VCU Library's general catalog. This may isolate the materials so carefully assembled in the Digital Collection from scholars who usually search for materials in the general catalog.

### **THE MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY ONLINE EXHIBITS<sup>31</sup>**

The Special Collections unit at Marquette University's Library has assembled a number of resources for its Online Exhibits project. Materials are primarily visual and focus on the history of the university itself or prominent Catholic figures connected to the university. The six exhibits each feature between nine and twenty images which have not been cataloged to facilitate searching; thus users must browse the captions of each image to find relevant information. Though the depth of each exhibit varies, the Marquette University Library has placed a disclaimer on its front page explaining that the Online Exhibits are not meant to be considered complete or even incipient digitization projects. Rather, they have been placed online with the intention of encouraging use of the university's physical collections. With the exception of one exhibit, the Holloway Papers, this project is of limited value to scholarly pursuits.

The Holloway Papers are a series of World War II-era correspondences between John and Priscilla Holloway, both

Milwaukee residents and graduates of Marquette University. During World War II, John was stationed in various locations throughout the Pacific Theater, and his letters to his wife give a detailed and personal description of this historical period. Priscilla's letters to John, on the other hand, provide an intimate look at domestic American issues that arose over the course of the war. Totalling over 1,300 letters, these correspondences serve as an invaluable resource to scholars interested in the Second World War.<sup>32</sup>

Currently only thirteen of the letters are available in their entirety online. The links to these letters are prefaced by a short abstract explaining the context of the correspondence. Each letter is displayed such that the user can view either a scanned original or a printed transcription. While some of the original documents were created on typewriter, the ink has faded and is in places unreadable; thus, the transcriptions are particularly useful.

While it is understood that the Holloway Papers have been put online only to offer a glimpse of the university's much larger holdings, the organization of the letters leaves something to be desired. The letters are arranged in chronological order, and users can glean basic information from the abstracts attached to each hyperlink. Beyond that, however, the user is left to browse through the letters to find appropriate materials.

## **DISCUSSION**

In taking a closer look at these six online special collections projects, a number of useful and desirable characteristics are noticeable. Projects providing quantity on par with the Papers of John Jay provide a virtual windfall of resources for scholars worldwide. However, the Mercator Globes exhibit proves that a digitization project can be successful utilizing only two unique

items when approached creatively. Though it is desirable to publish as much content online as possible, the success of a digitized exhibit should not be judged by quantity alone. The quantity of material placed online should also correspond with the purpose of the project. Thus, the relative paucity of fully scanned images presented by the Holloway Papers is appropriate, as the exhibit has not necessarily been published for use as a scholarly resource, but rather for showcasing an aspect of Marquette's special collections.

Quality is a great determining factor in the success of online exhibits. Each of the projects examined in this paper provided high resolution images of original materials, and some even allowed for manipulation of image size for closer inspection. Unfortunately, in the case of the Papers of John Jay, some images were cropped, which has compromised the scholarly value of the improperly scanned documents. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that images are reproduced in their entirety.

The level of organizational complexity varies for each project, and there seems to be less need for strict organization in those collections with fewer items. Some level of cataloging, however, is desirable to aid users in finding relevant materials. Where possible, thorough efforts to catalog items and integrate them into a library's OPAC, and even WorldCat, allow these items to be found and seen by users who might not be aware of their existence. Such cataloging endeavors also grant the benefit of increased precision in recalling relevant items after they have been found within a large collection.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The author is aware that this analysis is limited in its scope and highly subjective. In an effort to gain a more objective

perspective, the author proposes that, in the near future, a survey be created and administered to potential users. This survey should be such that it allows users to critique the various aspects of online special collections explored herein as well as other aspects beyond the scope of this paper. Such a survey should also be constructed in a manner which allows for quantifiable analysis akin to market research. The results of such a survey would greatly benefit the process of creating guidelines for the creation of successful online special collections initiatives.

## **CONCLUSION**

By embracing digitization technology, special collections librarians will be able to expand access to their resources to a broader audience than has been possible in the past. Though the process of digitizing materials and maintaining digital collections carries exorbitant costs, the ability to reach new users while furthering preservation of unique items will continue to be a defining feature of the profession into the foreseeable future. Thus it is necessary not only that special collections units are able to produce online projects such as those evaluated in this paper, but also be able to carry out regular critical analysis of these projects in an effort to ensure high quality end results.

## Notes

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