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Collaboration: Paradigm of the Digital Cultural Content Environment

Anne Cuyler Salsich

ABSTRACT. Government grant-funding agencies have spawned an explosion of images from historical collections on the Internet. They have encouraged collaborative projects in which institutions share resources for capital-intensive digitization projects. These Web “exhibits” are neither publications nor exhibits in the traditional sense, most often without identified authors, curators, designers, or sources. Reviews in journal literature are one mechanism for accountability, but not all humanities journals offer exhibit reviews. In those that do, the space allocated in history and archival studies journals reveals the relative importance they place on peer review of these exhibits, compared to that for book reviews. The type of analysis in these reviews is nearly always strictly textual, and does not address the interplay of text, image, and design in Web exhibits. The lack of historical context for visual sources in digital media is of concern for those in the archival, art history, and other cultural studies disciplines and professions. Sheer numbers of digitized items may be a worthy goal for textual materials; visual sources require interpretation and context to render the complexities of their meaning. Collaboration on digitization projects must go beyond financial resource sharing to include involvement of experts in content areas for visual resources.

KEYWORDS. Visual resources, Web exhibits, journal reviews, digitization projects

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative digital projects are a relatively new incarnation of the traditional museum or library exhibit involving the collaboration of several institutions to bring an array of works together for special consideration in a public sphere. Yet they are essentially different in so many ways as to become a new paradigm in presenting cultural heritage objects to the public. It appears from reviewing current literature and the Web sites of federal grant programs that there has been an escalation of activity with regard to collaborative digital content projects within the last several years. Collaboration appears to be an emerging business model as well, which leads one to suspect that the digital phenomenon has spawned a major change in all aspects of information management, communication, and the expression of leadership, and not just in the museum and library spheres.¹

While most archives have a Web site that at the least functions as a kind of online brochure for their program, it is only relatively recently that archives have entered the digital content world in the sense of contributing substantial numbers of digital files of collection items to a shared site, rather than keeping it all on their own sites. Conversely, libraries of all kinds have been collaborating on a global scale since as early as 1967, when the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) was founded as a “nonprofit, membership, computer library service and research organization dedicated to the public purposes of furthering access to the world's information and reducing information costs.” WorldCat, OCLC’s bibliographic database of library holdings, is a subscription service to which libraries all over the world submit their catalog records and utilize on a daily basis for copy cataloging. Now OCLC is again exerting its leadership, this time in targeting special collections materials for the development and marketing of its digital services

and management software. OCLC holds workshops and symposia throughout the country on digital projects and grant-writing to support them. By promoting digitization as a tool for access and preservation for special collections materials, OCLC has left the library arena and entered in to the world of the archives and museums.²

A bibliographic database of catalog entries is a very different animal from a digitized primary source collection, which entails yielding a portion of the irreplaceable treasures that archivists have labored and expended funds to protect, conserve, and describe for public access, and essentially publishing them in a visual format, at considerable expense, with an unknown life span. A catalog is, like its namesake, a collection of descriptive information representing available works; a digital collection of primary materials, on the other hand (to push the metaphor further), is the store. The creation of digital collections, I would argue, has more in common with publication or exhibition than it does with typical library functions of providing catalog access to published works. The special collections departments of libraries and archival repositories in academic libraries are, for the most part, under the administration of library directors who have minimal training in archives administration, and it appears that these areas are the source of much of the locally generated digital collections.

Another question the creation of digital collections raises is that of whether anyone will bother to visit archives or support their missions if access becomes free via the World Wide Web. For publicly supported institutions, the question is not crucial, but for private historical societies, many of which have long histories and rich collections, it is a potential roadblock to the exhilarating prospect of unparalleled access to a truly integrated collection of primary materials from our nation's history. This also raises two more troubling questions: 1) Is the public aware that only a fraction of the archives' collection is online (and therefore only a select slice of

history as well), or do they assume that what they see online is what exists, and 2) Does digital access justify the expense of an electronic archive for which (possibly costly) digital preservation concerns may continually or intermittently arise? Another question involves the context of digital objects. When an artifact or document is removed from its physical context and displayed as an electronic file along with thousands of objects—possibly from other institutions—on the same flat screen, is its power and meaning truly accessed? These questions have led the writer to explore where the impetus and rationale for collaborative digital “archive” projects comes from, and whether Web sites and their digital cultural content, at least as we know them today, have the accountability and the value that exhibitions and publications have had in providing the kind of access that historical collections deserve.

THE IMPETUS

The impetus for creating digital cultural content collections comes from a variety of factors. The prospect is exciting and impossible to resist to many librarians, archivists, and curators, and there is the possibility of winning new constituents and dazzling potential donors. And certainly the myriad of personal computer users are eager to further explore the world and its history from the comfort of their homes. Institutions are also encouraged to engage in digital collection development by such vendors as OCLC, which has pioneered the development of a digital file management software, CONTENTdm, and is vigorously marketing it through nationwide workshops, symposia, and an effective assistance program.³ The primary thrust for digital cultural content projects, however, comes from the Library of Congress, the Council for Library and Information Resources and its Digital Library Federation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and most recently, the National

Publication and Records Commission. Their influence is most readily perceived and felt at the local level through the power of grant programs.⁴

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), an independent federal agency created in 1965, is the greatest source of federal funds for humanities programs in the country, with a fiscal year 2007 budget request of approximately \$141 million, down from \$162 million in 2004. In recent years the awards, which are normally for two years, have ranged from \$80,000 to \$400,000 for digitization projects. Applicant institutions must match this funding to cover 50 percent of the total cost of their projects. Two of NEH's grant programs provide awards for digitization: the Division of Preservation and Access, with grants to preserve and create access to humanities collections, and the Division of Public Programs, with implementation grants for humanities projects in libraries and archives. The former encourages digitization of collections to enhance their accessibility as an eligible activity for funding. The latter, which supports activities that use a range of formats, includes Web sites along with book and film discussion programs, exhibitions, public conferences, forums, and symposia in their list of supported programs. With regard to digital products, NEH emphasizes that projects whose core content consists of collections of digitized documents and media should "feature additional content or activities that provide a context and an interpretive framework."⁵

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), another major federal agency with a grant award program, receives funding through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) and the Museum Services Act. The fiscal year 2006 appropriation was \$247,144,000, down by \$15,096,000 from the appropriation for 2004. The library portion was the lion's share: \$210,597,000. The organization's online mission statement in 2004 served as a clarion call for partnerships to expand the educational benefit of museums, libraries, and archives of all kinds.

IMLS research has shown that inter-institutional partnerships can increase access to information, enhance education, attract new audiences, and expand the reach of programs. In 2004, to be eligible for The Partnerships for a Nation of Learners Community Collaboration Grants projects, a proposal had to include collaborations between a public broadcasting licensee and a museum or library, or preferably, all three.

Since that time the IMLS has changed its direction. In July 2006 the rhetoric about partnerships was confined to one type of grant, the National Leadership Grant. The program statement reads, “The Institute particularly encourages projects that meet community needs through innovative collaborations between museums and libraries and with other organizations as appropriate. Partnerships between libraries and museums are particularly encouraged under this program.” One of the three categories of funding in this program is called "Building Digital Resources." This category supports “projects that preserve and enhance access to valuable library resources; support the development of tools to help libraries (and other collection holders) manage and share digital assets; address the challenges of preserving and archiving digital media; and enhance interoperability, integration, and **seamless access** to digital assets, particularly projects that are of statewide, regional, thematic, or national scope.”⁶

While the Library of Congress does not award grants, as the largest library in the world it has exerted considerable leadership in the area of digital library development. Its National Digital Library (NDL) Program developed one of the largest noncommercial intellectual content collections on the Internet. The American Memory Project, begun with a pilot program from 1990 through 1994, hosts a staggering 8.5 million American historical items, in collaboration with thirty-three institutions nationwide. Beginning in 1996, the Library sponsored a three-year competition with a \$2 million gift from the Ameritech Corporation to enable a wide spectrum of

American cultural heritage institutions to digitize American history collections and make them available on the American Memory site.⁷

A number of well-funded grant programs clearly exist for cultural heritage institution digital projects, and several of them specifically encourage collaborative projects. These agencies now have a track record of funded projects, some of which can be readily accessed via the Internet, posted on the agencies' sites. We know that online programs are generally greeted with enthusiasm. But to what degree have these projects, aside from the review panels of the granting agencies, received peer review from the museum, library, archives, historical society, and scholarly communities? How successfully do these online "exhibits" present historical collections in this relatively new format that demands very high visual literacy, subject area specialization, computer competency, and optimally, superior design skills as well? In the publishing world, teams of editors, designers, marketers, and production staffs have traditionally spent considerable time in preparing a book for publication. The reputations of the writers and the publishing houses are at stake, and the market exerts pressure on the creation of viable products. But who are the nameless writers of Web site content, particularly when the projects are collaborative? Are these authors specialists in the history of the objects and their contexts, now presented in digital form? Have they analyzed the effect of placing one image against another, and how the user's access points will affect the apprehension of the material?

ACCOUNTABILITY

Some responsibility for providing a venue for peer review of digital exhibits lies with scholarly journals in the library, museum, technology, history, and archives fields, and some of them have risen to the occasion.⁸ The Society of American Archivists' journal, *The American*

Archivist, has only recently changed its manuscript submission policy to include Web exhibit reviews, and has not published any as of September of 2006. *The Public Historian* (National Council on Public History), the *Canadian Historical Review, Notes* (Music Library Association), the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *Journal of American History* all devote space to media reviews. *The Public Historian* reserves space for film and electronic reviews in one section; even more noteworthy is the dedication of review space specifically for Web site reviews in the *Journal of American History (JAH)*.⁹ Remarkably, *JAH*'s Web site reviews appear concurrently on the Web site *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*.¹⁰ In all there were eighty reviews published since June 2001 under the editorship of Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason University. The goal of both the Web site and the journal reviews is to “offer a gateway to the best Web sites and to summarize their strengths and weaknesses with particular attention to their utility for teachers.”¹¹

The *JAH/History Matters* reviews generally tend to be four to six paragraphs in length, occupying one to one and one-half pages of the printed journal. Each issue usually runs four to six Web site reviews, for a total of about as many pages. The June 2004 issue, for example, carried six Web site reviews in six pages; the book reviews, 151 in number, were generally two pages, but occasionally were more than five pages. That issue also included an exhibition review section, as well as ten original, scholarly articles. The Web site reviews are critical and insightful on the content presented and the sites' utility for students and teachers. One reviewer stated that his assigned site, *The Plymouth Colony Archive Project*, was beyond the scope of a short review. The review guidelines (which are lengthy, and reveal the editor's sophisticated grasp of the medium) indicate that the 500-word limit, considered a standard length for book

reviews, is strictly enforced. One wonders, then, why book reviews in the *JAH* sometimes go on for more than seven pages.¹²

In the back pages of *The Public Historian* one can find at least one Web site review per issue, running two to three pages. In the Winter 2002 issue Cathy Stanton contributed a film and electronic media review essay entitled “Historians and the Web,” following a panel discussion hosted by the Massachusetts Historical Society that featured the creators of three Boston-area Web sites. The article achieves far more than a single Web site review, the author having benefited from the free exchange of perspectives and ideas from the panel and its audience, and from the opportunity to make comparisons and draw some general conclusions regarding the medium for presenting “critical, innovative, scholarly history to a broad audience.”¹³ On the positive side, she observes, “the Web is providing at least a partial way to fill the scholarly-popular gap.” But she concludes with a critical, cautionary note:

As yet, though, there appears to be limited actual exchange between the producing scholars and the consuming public. As the sites and the Web itself continue to mature, it seems important to note whether this kind of interaction evolves as well, or whether the Web is facilitating, rather than any shared sense of history or intellectual inquiry, a more fragmented and personalized approach to the materials of the past.¹⁴

While Stanton’s analysis and observations are useful and insightful, and Web site creators would do well to read her essay, one finds that the discourse is still more of a project review than a critique of the success or failure of the sites’ integration of textual, design, and visual elements

in an electronic medium for cultural content. In fact, her review provides not a single frame as illustration, which seems odd given that the projects are visual in nature.

Web site reviewers have a rather daunting task, if they are to take their role seriously. In the postmodern intellectual climate, Web site creators are perhaps even less exempt than historians from the charge that they are, as Francis Blouin stated about archives, “not neutral parties in the process of exploration of the past.” The archives is already the product of a mediator’s understandings, assumptions, and political and social allegiances. The digital collection on a Web site reflects another layer of filtering and interpretation, without footnotes. Blouin’s article in *Archival Issues*, “Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory,” would serve the reviewer of a digital cultural content Web site well in its analysis of archives in complex terms, both as repositories of collections and as places of inquiry and interaction with cultural heritage materials. His conclusions exhort his peers and specifically the NHPRC to rethink their work and research priorities in light of postmodernist notions of memory and history, and seem cannily apropos for the digital cultural content project manager as well.¹⁵

For analysis of all of the elements in Web sites, the museum world, as one might expect, is way ahead, judging from two journals, *Archives & Museum Informatics* and *Museum International*. *Archives & Museum Informatics* is an organization with a journal of the same name, based in Toronto and published by the well-respected Kluwer Academic Publishers in the Netherlands. The organization, headed by David Bearman, provides conferences, consulting and research services, and publications, with a mission to “chronicle the development of interactive multimedia in museums and the impact of the Web on digital museums and libraries.” With a majority of its articles devoted to technical issues, the journal is a reflection on the seriousness

with which the Canadian archival and museum communities study the implications of new technology, although Americans are frequent contributors.¹⁶

Three lengthy articles on Web applications for cultural content appeared in a 1998 issue of *Archives and Museum Informatics*, in the wake of the first International Conference on Museums and the Web in 1997. One of these, by Anne Van Camp of the Research Libraries Group, lobbied hard for the advantages of building a “seamless web of access.”¹⁷ But the most intensely analytical article, from a visual standpoint, was authored by Jennifer Trant, who in 1999 was a partner in *Archives and Museum Informatics*. Her article, “When all You’ve Got is ‘The Real Thing’: Museums and Authenticity in the Networked World” critically analyzes museum Web sites with regard to their presentation of visual and textual material, with a heavier emphasis on the interpretation and context provided. Trant credits the crisis in the new digital landscape to the dramatically altered roles of authors, editors, publishers, distributors and consumers. In this context, “Museums find themselves unable to rely upon the semiotics of a century of museological symbols that have enabled them, in public buildings and spaces, to create the aura of authenticity and rarification cultivated to communicate the uniqueness of each of [the] artifacts, and the seriousness of the educational experience.”¹⁸ Here the word “Archives” and “Special Libraries” could stand in place of “Museums” as the subject.

The figures in Trant's article demonstrate the shortcomings of several personal gallery sites, as opposed to museum sites, with reproductions of art works: the lack of information on their original size, position, or placement, as objects in the physical world, and manipulated or altered images. In her view the key to a good museum site is “the depth and breadth of the content that museums can provide,” and in the ability to demonstrate the physicality, or “thingness” of a work.¹⁹ She also suggests that museums might provide the Web site visitor with content that

can't be experienced elsewhere by building museum-to-museum connections through links. The traditional focus of museums is upon specific collections, which she maintains is one of the weakest points in museum Web sites.

As much as this may run counter to traditional instincts to keep museums visitors 'within the walls,' it is critical for the creation of meaningful pathways into and through digital cultural heritage collections. Finding things on the Web is as much about the links one follows as the place one starts. If cultural heritage institutions are not building richly interconnected spaces, that reflect the concerns of visitors—person, place, time, subject, theme—then they risk having visitors bypass carefully structured sites, to use the unstructured word-based search engines as a finding aid instead.²⁰

Trant argues that museums need to ensure that their own discussion of documentation standards takes place within the larger context of the development and application of metadata. Only this will ensure that cultural heritage resources are used alongside those of the library or archival community.²¹ In her discussion of authentication tools and technology, she is critical of watermarks and Digital Object identifiers. Trant suggests that the Platform for Internet Content Selection, or PICS, may have more appeal for those concerned with the creation of trusted networks of authoritative information, but qualifies the suggestion:

However, museums can't rely upon technology to create the needed information genre—the quality cultural heritage Web site. Instead, cultural heritage institutions have to look to themselves and each other to build an interlocking

series of paths and links that move the visitor through an information space that is recognizable as trustworthy, and interesting.²²

While Trant's advocacy for the adoption of uniform standards and connectivity is in agreement with Anne Van Camp's argument for a "seamless Web of Cultural Research Resources," Van Camp envisions "seamless" in a way that museums might find troubling. She posits that the Archival Resources (now ArchiveGrid) service by the Research Library Group (RLG) is the "most advanced example of consortial presentation of information about primary source materials." The service includes the entire RLIN-AMC file of collection level records plus full-text finding aids from institutions using Encoded Archival Description (EAD).²³ But notice that this is information *about* primary source materials, not representations of or digitized files of same. For actual primary source documents, photographs, films, and other cultural heritage content media, "seamless" would not, in Trant's view, provide the context and content that such materials require.

CONCLUSION (AND QUESTIONS)

It would appear, then, that archivists and museum professionals, who care for and understand unique historical materials and their "thingness," have a critical role in collaborative cultural content Web site projects. Primary sources stripped of their contexts lose their meanings, and consequently their appeal, to Web site users without the benefit of the training and ongoing work that archivists, curators and historians can bring to bear. Librarians without training in history, and particularly in the history of photography, are least equipped to provide historical context for photographic objects, and must not hesitate to bring qualified professionals in as collaborators for their digital projects. While the work of librarians in the creation of WorldCat and other

bibliographic tools has resulted in wonderful access systems for locating published works and manuscript collections, the online catalogs are simply huge databases of searchable catalog records, not an exhibit or a publication. The latter would best begin to describe a digital image collection on the Internet. For Trant, the better museum Web sites still provide “walls,” however permeable, that identify the institution and the voice of the curator in the creation of a trusted, interesting experience for the visitor. In a consortial Web site with nothing more than a credit line to identify the source, the cultural institutions and the long history of accountability they have earned through the work of successive generations of curators and archivists, as well as the provenance and historical context of the cultural resource, will disappear into thin air.

From where, then, will come the support needed to care for and interpret the physical originals--the photographs, paintings, prints, broadsides, maps, furnishings, costumes, cars, and myriad other forms of material culture? If their meaning and power as objects, created within the context of a human culture, are stripped away in the process of mounting images on Web sites that provide no interpretation or context, the institutions that care for their physical form may lose support for necessary preservation measures and curatorial staff positions. I would argue that knowledgeable staff and subject area specialists must be involved in digitization projects. Web exhibits can be powerful tools for bringing collections to a world of Internet users, but without interpretation by professional archivists, curators, and historians, a Web exhibit is little more than “eye candy,” devoid of meaning, and of fleeting interest.

NOTES

1. See Lorraine Segil, Marshall Goldsmith, James Belasco, *Partnering: The New Face of Leadership* (New York: American Management Association, 2003).

2. Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), <http://www.oclc.org>, accessed 11/19/2004.

3. OCLC Web site, <http://www.oclc.org/services/preservation/default.htm>, accessed 7/16/2006. I attended one of these symposia in October 2004, hosted by the Cleveland State University Library. It was well-organized and informative, consisting of case studies presented by digital project managers/librarians, and a how-to presentation by an OCLC representative. The message was upbeat and can-do, with a plug for the software product and their other digital services. Participants were given access to a Listserv and were sent follow-up communications inviting them to attend the next OCLC-sponsored symposium, on grant-writing for digital projects.

4. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) of the National Archives & Records Administration (NARA), has awarded grants since 1964. The NHPRC has statutory authorization through fiscal year 2009 to receive up to \$10 million in annual appropriations for grants. As stated on the Commission's Web site, the NHPRC "promotes the preservation and use of America's documentary heritage essential to understanding our democracy, history, and culture." The Digitizing Historical Records grant program in 2006 intends to allocate one to three awards of up to a total of \$150,000 each. Each project may be up to three years in duration. The program requirements make no mention of funding for collaborative projects. See National Historical Publications and Records Commission, United States National Archives & Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/about/>, and <http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/press-releases/grants.html>, accessed 7/16/2006.

5. National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://www.neh.gov/grants>, accessed 11/19/2004.
<http://www.neh.gov/news/archive/20060206.html>, accessed 7/16/2006.

6. Institute for Library and Museum Services, <http://www.ims.gov/>, 11/19/2004; 7/19/2006. I emphasized "seamless access" to draw attention to the phrase, which will be taken up later in this paper.

7. Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/about/index.html>, accessed 11/19/2004. It should be noted that the American Memory Project is "closed." This writer, on behalf of the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS), attempted to make an arrangement similar to that enjoyed by the New York Historical Society. That institution's Civil War photographs are represented on the American Memory site, giving the New York Historical Society's collection primacy and access enjoyed by no other repository in that subject area. The WRHS Civil War collections are extraordinarily rich and deep, yet visitors to American Memory will never know of the existence of this and other outstanding Civil War photograph collections in other repositories.

8. See also a published guide to history content Web sites by Dennis A. Trinkle and Scott A. Merriman, *The History Highway 3.0: A Guide to Internet Resources* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 3rd edition, 2002). The work does not provide reviews for individual Web sites; rather, short descriptions are provided. Inclusion of a Web site is its endorsement, having passed the criteria set out in the section entitled "Evaluation of Internet Content," by Jessica Lacher-Feldman, 26-32. In Chapter 41, "Digital Collections," only three metasites and fifteen general sites are listed, 600-605.

9. *The American Archivist*, The Society of American Archivists, Chicago, Illinois. *The Public Historian*, National Council on Public History, University of California Press, Berkeley, California. *Canadian Historical Review*, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Department of Canadian Heritage, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada. *Notes*, *Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association*, Music Library Association, Middleton, Wisconsin. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Washington, D.C. *Journal of American History*, Organization of American Historians, Bloomington, Indiana.

10. *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>, accessed 11/20/04.

11. Web Site Reviews, *The Journal of American History* 91 no. 2 (September 2004): 732.

12. John Saillant, "The Plymouth Colony Archive Project," *The Journal of American History* 91 no. 1 (June 2004): 347. *The Journal of American History* Web Review Guidelines, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/jah/>, 11/19/04.

13. Cathy Stanton, "Historians and the Web," *The Public Historian* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 120.

14. *Ibid.*, 125.

15. Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* 24 no. 2 (1999), 101-112.

16. Archives & Museum Informatics, <http://www.archimuse.com/>, 11/18/2004. *Archives and Museum Informatics: Cultural Heritage Informatics Quarterly*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands. *Museum International*, UNESCO, Paris, France.

17. Anne Van Camp, "Building the Seamless Web of Cultural Research Resources," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 12 (1998): 287-292. David Bearman and Jennifer Trant, "Interactivity Comes of Age: Museums and the World Wide Web," *Museum International* 51 no. 4 (1999): 20.

18. Jennifer Trant, "When All You've Got is 'The Real Thing': Museums and Authenticity in the Networked World," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 12 (1998): 108.

19. Ibid., 114-115.

20. Ibid., 119.

21. Ibid., 119.

22. Ibid., 123.

23. Anne Van Camp, "Building the Seamless Web of Cultural Research Resources," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 12 (1998): 289.