

Seeking Sustainability

Ricky Erway

RLG Program Officer OCLC Programs and Research

Ricky Erway was product manager for RLG's Cultural Materials and Trove.net services. Here she summarizes some of the outcomes of this experience, focusing on efforts to make access to the digitized special collections of cultural heritage institutions self-sustaining.

The document consists of 3 sections: the main report itself plus 2 appendices. Appendix A provides a summary of why the Cultural Materials and Trove.net services were discontinued, written in February 2007, during the period of RLG – OCLC combination. Appendix B presents a selection of Trove.net user feedback.

Background on the RLG Cultural Materials initiative

Cultural Materials got its official start in November 1999, when a group of RLG members met to plan a cultural heritage initiative with the following goals:

- Increase awareness of the institutions and their special collections
- Work together to address some of the issues surrounding the digitization and description of cultural materials
- Adopt a collaborative approach to the management of rights
- Develop a body of digital surrogates and related descriptions for the works and artifacts documenting culture and civilization collected by libraries, archives, and museums
- Provide access to that resource for educational use
- Identify ways to reach new audiences
- Explore means for sustaining such an activity and returning revenue to contributors

The Cultural Material Alliance was formed in January 2000 as RLG members began self-selecting to participate, and a policy advisory group was assembled to represent the larger group. By August of that year collections were being proposed for inclusion in the new service, and by April 2001

agreements were in hand that specified terms and conditions for use and that enabled RLG to offer the service. In November 2001 a preview version was released, and in January 2002 the service was launched.

In addition to the policy advisory group, which laid the groundwork, other advisory groups were formed to guide the effort. The description advisory group provided guidance for describing the collections, and the surrogate advisory group provided guidance for digitizing various types of original materials. A content development advisory group assessed the nature of the growing resource and suggested areas for targeted content development. Another advisory group provided input on the evolving interface, and an instructional technology advisory group identified ways to make the content most useful in the classroom. By 2006, fifty-four institutions had joined the Alliance. Thirty-six institutions had contributed 117 digitized special collections, creating the Cultural Materials subscription resource, which represented a quarter of a million works (which, in turn, represented almost a million digital objects). About 50 institutions subscribed to Cultural Materials.

The Cultural Materials subscription service addressed the need expressed by alliance participants to serve the educational and research communities, but alliance participants also wanted to reach new audiences and explore new means of sustainability. To do this, with the guidance of the policy advisory group, we began planning a public Web site with low resolution, watermarked images, and brief descriptions. Trove.net was launched in October 2004. A large subset of the images in Cultural Materials (about a quarter million images that the contributors believed to be free of rights issues) were made available in Trove.net. Internet search engine indexing of Trove.net content allowed people from all walks of life to discover the riches in the collections from the world's libraries, archives, and museums.

It also allowed us to explore many opportunities for exposure of the collections on the Internet, and ways to license the content.

When RLG and OCLC combined, it was decided we would cease offering RLG Cultural Materials and Trove.net. (For more on that decision, see Appendix A.)

Accomplishments

We were an international alliance: of the 54 alliance participants, twelve were from the UK and another ten from Canada, Europe, Asia, and Oceania.

Resulting documentation included agreements for collaboration, terms of use, Descriptive Metadata Guidelines, guidelines for Preparing Digital Surrogates, and a report on the use of images in the classroom.

Those who used Cultural Materials appreciated that it cut across disciplines, provided access to previously inaccessible materials, and had consistent terms of use. Each item could be viewed within the context of its collection, but the interface also enabled making unexpected connections across collections.

Partnering with stock houses for licensing took advantage of commercial experience and precluded the need to develop and market capabilities that were not core to RLG's mission.

Through Trove.net the collections and their contributing institutions reached far broader audiences than they typically had been able to reach, and many more people discovered special materials from member collections than would have through the subscription service alone.

Perhaps the most noteworthy accomplishments were in the participant experience. Those involved with Cultural Materials had an opportunity to:

- See their content being accessed in multiple places simultaneously
- Gain experience with aggregation and see local content in a larger context
- Assess the potential for reaching broader audiences
- Learn about how metadata choices play out in an aggregated environment
- Learn something about the use of their collections

Exploring new models for sustainability

When we started planning for the Trove.net service, Internet sites were looking (and paying) for content. We anticipated that we would be able to subsidize the service with licensed content arrangements with other Web sites. We engaged consultants to sift through the possibilities and talk with publishing houses, news agencies, reference sites, search engines, and print-on-demand sites, but by the time we were actually ready to roll, the Web had evolved to paid inclusion.

We did arrange one partnership with LookSmart's FindArticles service. Trove.net images appeared in FindArticles results, but the shared advertising revenue from that venture was not nearly enough to warrant the effort. We had also hoped that we might find a corporate sponsor for the site, but came up empty there, too. We tried advertising (both by buying AdWords and Yahoo! Sponsored Search words and by having AdSense ads on the Trove.net site), but the former cost far more than it returned and the latter brought in less than \$2000 a year.

Our best hope seemed to be licensing the images. In the early days, we thought we might set up a licensing facility ourselves. It didn't take long to see that it was worth working with an established

commercial stock house, not just because they had all the systems set up for finding images, determining fees, and accepting payments or billing. The major benefit to us was that they have established client bases of editorial publishers and commercial advertisers. People who license images do not typically start with a Google search (or a Trove.net search). They go to a service they know and trust—and where they have an account. Most stock houses have account representatives who work with clients to find the most appropriate images and to ensure that they get the licensing terms they need. There was no way we could undertake the marketing necessary to become a destination site. Institutions with significant name recognition, like the Smithsonian and New York Public Library, can attract a fair bit of business that way, but they still miss a lot of the big publishers, ad agencies, and other big spenders.

Some of the Trove.net contributors were hesitant to participate because they thought Trove.net licensing might eat into their own licensing activities (which often help to defray staff and equipment costs). I think, however, that people who were used to going to a particular institution continued to do so and that the Trove.net activity brought the institution's images to new audiences.

After conversations with many stock houses, we elected to partner with Index Stock Imagery because they were willing to work with all of our content, while the top-tier stock houses would have chosen a small fraction of only the highest resolution images. From a purely monetary viewpoint, one of those top tier stock houses probably would have brought in more revenue, but we wanted all the contributors to have the experience of making their images available for licensing. Index Stock also had both a personal and a commercial portal, as well as a pretty good list of textbook publishers as clients, which we believed was our target market.

At the time, we thought this was just the first of many stock-house partnerships to come. This was not to be, however. One of the two largest stock houses was not interested in historical content. The other was interested in a very small subset of our content and a large mid-tier stock house was quite interested in representing our content. We were still negotiating with these stock houses when the decision was made to curtail efforts.

Our experience with image licensing

In the three and a half years of our agreement with Index Stock, 986 images were licensed. Index Stock indicated that the reason we didn't see more licensing activity was the low resolution of most of the images. For this reason, most of the images were made available on their PhotosToGo service (primarily for personal and small business use of lower-res images), rather than on the Index Stock site (for commercial licensing).

Most (937) of the 986 licenses were issued through PhotosToGo (with charges ranging from 10 cents to \$600, but most were under \$10). The remaining 46 licenses were divided among other

uses: textbooks, websites, foreign use, books, pamphlets, calendars, invitations, and brochures. The licence fees ranged from \$30.28 (for a foreign use) to \$1,000 (for use in a pharmaceutical booklet).

Overall, the average license fee was \$27.19 and the median fee was \$7.92. The total fees collected were \$26,810.57. RLG's portion of that was \$13,405.29 and the agreed-upon split with contributors was 70:30 (\$9,383.70 RLG: \$4,021.59 Contributors). Nineteen of the thirty-one Trove.net contributors saw some licensing activity. Revenue returned to the institutions ranged from under a dollar to over a thousand. Clearly no one was getting rich!

For comparison sake, a local professional photographer has 2000 high-quality photographs at several stock houses. The most lucrative of the stock houses is bringing him about \$35K a month in licensing royalties. The secret? High-quality images of high-quality photos of high-interest topics. Too often we had none of the three. The market for historical imagery is small, but a top-notch stock house selecting just the best of our images might have done fairly well.

The vast majority of our traffic came from search engines, and tended to be very specific queries for a person, company, or location. For the most part, these were the only queries that both matched our descriptions and rose to the top of search-engine result lists. The feedback we received was very interesting. A number of people who had found a person or place of interest to them wanted to supply additional information or corrections. About a fifth of our feedback was from people who had something similar to what they found in Trove.net and wanted to find out its value or wanted us to sell it for them or just wanted us to know that they had it. Many had questions related to their topic of interest that I could answer with a Google search. And some appeared to be communications from people who just wanted someone to talk to. But many were from people who wanted to license the image for a particular purpose. Since very few inquiries at Trove.net were from publishers or corporate advertisers, I assume that those people went right to Index Stock, or were able to navigate to Index Stock from Trove.net without making use of the feedback button. Since the feedback is wonderfully illustrative of the types of people who found themselves at Trove.net and their queries and purposes, I've provided a sampling (see Appendix B).

Our attempt with Trove.net to put the images on the open Web, where users are looking, was a step in the right direction. However, we learned that the bulk of inquiries that made it through to Trove.net were from people doing very specific searches, typically for ancestors. Although we had lots of interesting content related to the great quantity of more general searches, we didn't achieve the ranking that would push Trove.net content near the top of search-engine result lists.

Reflection

Despite the lack of success in our exploration of new business models, some of the feedback made us feel that our efforts were worthwhile. For instance:

I stumbled across an image of my father, Pfc. James Y_____. Nobody in my family was aware of this photo, and the caption told more about his war service than any of us knew about. I would like to have a high-resolution copy of this photo and find out if other images still exist. I sincerely appreciate any help with this, since my father passed away years ago without ever discussing his war experiences.

So it is important, as always, to remind ourselves that it is the collections that matter and that the connections we enable between people and collections are perhaps the best measure of our success. Just as things were changing as Trove.net evolved from conception to reality, things have changed since then. But unless we reflect on and learn from our experiences, we're not moving forward.

Appendix A

The RLG Cultural Materials Initiative: Looking Back, Looking Forward.

Ricky Erway, product manager

February 2007

This text is excerpted from an email message sent to all Cultural Materials Alliance participants during the period of RLG-OCLC combination, at the time of the decision to cease offering RLG Cultural Materials and Trove.net.

While there is much to be proud of, we have also learned a lot during the Cultural Materials initiative. The content did not develop as we had hoped it would. In the end there was not much digitization done specifically for Cultural Materials. While there was interest in identifying content strengths and weaknesses, there was not much appetite for addressing them, even when funding was provided. We never managed to leverage the aggregation as a means of motivating institutions to re-gather dispersed collections or to create first-time-ever virtual collections around important people, places, and events.

Most collections in Cultural Materials were also freely available on institutional Web sites, and much of the digitization had been done some time ago; the resulting images were of too low resolution to garner much licensing interest.

We were reminded just how much metadata matters. Many of the records in Cultural Materials were pretty skeletal. Where there were more words, there was more chance of being found. We had sheet music collections from three contributors. One of them provided pretty full records and only that contributor had any sheet music licensing activity. We learned through our stock-house experience that our descriptions aren't appropriate for those looking for things like "a couple in love, silhouetted against a pastel sky" or "a woman in red stiletto heels." We might

have images that fit the bill, but the searchers wouldn't find them, given the way we've described them. Metadata helps people find things, but only if it includes the words searchers use.

In learning about how academic users searched in the Cultural Materials subscriptions service, we learned that the power of our integrated interface (much admired by librarians) was possibly too subtle or sophisticated for many who are now accustomed to a simple Google search, resulting in a large set of relevance-ranked results.

We didn't attract as many subscribing institutions as we had hoped. Cultural Materials was a hard sell. Whereas an art image resource has instant appeal to art history faculty, Cultural Materials had a multitude of themes—but no critical mass in any one of them. Lack of a specific audience made it difficult to pitch to potential subscribers. This same difficulty made it difficult for subscribing librarians to engage instructors and students and encourage use. Cultural Materials was not alone in this—other initiatives have faced similar challenges in finding audiences for aggregated digital collections. Five years into this effort, we still have a lot to learn about end-user expectations and emerging uses in this rapidly transforming environment. Instinctively, we know audiences exist—finding them and engaging them is another matter entirely.

Cultural Materials cost a lot to maintain and adding new content was very labor-intensive. The revenue did not begin to cover its costs. The challenges of making Cultural Materials into a self-sustaining enterprise were tied to larger environmental features—it remains to be seen if anyone else can make a similar venture recover its costs. Not being self-supporting would not necessarily have led to terminating the activity, but declining contributions and the low levels of use indicated to us that the project had run its course.

Finishing one chapter; beginning the next

The primary value of the Cultural Materials Initiative was to join together to tackle challenging issues. While those challenges have largely been explored, it seems evident that there is still an appetite for a shared framework that would support collaborative selection decisions and working together to create a cohesive whole. Cultural Materials wasn't the right vehicle to address all of the issues; many still need our attention: rights to and reuse of aggregated content; learning more about user expectations; investigating new kinds of partnerships, exploring the market potential for "long tail" aggregations. We recognize this larger context and that there still is a need to address these challenges collaboratively.

We believe we did the right thing to create the initiative, the community gained by participating, we all learned important lessons, and we'll move forward with the benefit of that experience. To succeed today we realize that we need:

- a more robust technical framework
- a more streamlined and less costly way to grow content
- more compelling reasons to digitize and share collections

- more effective ways of promoting the content for teaching and research
- a better way for users to access that content

It should be made explicit that the decision to end Cultural Materials is not something that OCLC decreed after the merger, but something that was under discussion before the combination with OCLC and that RLG staff advocated during the subsequent planning for the future of the service.

In the combined OCLC/RLG organization, RLG Programs will continue to work with its partners to investigate topics of interest. Related topics already on our work agenda include: assessment of mass digitization partnerships, large-scale digitization of special collections, and investigating new scholarly research enabled by these efforts.

While the Cultural Materials Alliance has been superseded by the maturation of institutional digitization efforts, we believe that together we can address many remaining challenges—collaboratively working to streamline production, taking full advantage of today’s environment to bring our rich resources to researchers in the most effective ways.

Appendix B

A selection from Trove.net feedback

Note: All feedback included a link to an image; comments here have been edited for brevity, including the omission of opening and closing niceties.

Intended Uses

- I work for Simonds International of Fitchburg, MA. We are celebrating our 175th anniversary in business in 2007 and I am researching the history of the company for an anniversary booklet. You have in your collection 2 images from 1876 - a Simonds Manufacturing Company price list and an advertising piece. We would like to explore the possibility of getting digital copies of these and also the possibility of including them, with permission, in our anniversary booklet.
- I am a student at Columbia University helping to find images for a documentary entitled, Labor of Love. It tells the hidden stories of the over 200,000 women in the greater New York metropolitan area working as nannies, babysitters, housekeepers, elderly caregivers and cleaners..., from hardship to empowerment. And, it follows their efforts to join with other workers to organize for change and bring respect and dignity to the entire workforce. The images we hope to use are...
- We are making a documentary about Sophie Tucker for Public Television. Who do we talk to about getting permission to show these 5 images of sheet music art?
- We are embarking on a project in Roatan, Honduras, that among other things would include providing this historical map to all of the classrooms on the island. In order to defray the cost of printing and distributing this map to the schools, we would like to try to sell some. Would there be a hi resolution image available for printing a poster?
- I would like to know if there is a way to obtain print or printable electronic copies of the 4 Florence Fay song book pages displayed on your site. We are expecting a new niece soon

who will have that name and think the music and lyrics to that song would be a wonderful gift. We would be willing to pay for the copies and limit their use as described above.

- I found under your website a poster from the Japan Paper Company. Is it possible for me to get a copy of it? I am writing a history of this company and it is an item that I didn't know existed until I found it on your website.
- I am writing you from the Photographic department of the Centre national de l'audiovisuel Luxembourg. In our archives, we have a panoramic photograph by Joseph M. Maurer (Fourth International Pageant of Pulchritude and Tenth Annual Bathing Girl Revue, Galveston, Texas, 1929) which we bought in 2002 from a relative of the Miss Luxembourg represented in the picture. We would like to publish a poster with the above mentioned picture.
- Just wondering if there was any way we could get permission to use the picture of Sonoma County's first jail (Sonoma Adobe). We are putting together a department yearbook and that would be a great addition to have.
- I'm working on a project for school and I need french posters of World War 1... I found a poster called "souvenez-vous de la Belgique" on www.trove.net. I need a bigger one, or better quality.
- My uncle, Tom S_____, informed me that the photo taken of my father was at the YMCA in Nebraska. My father recently passed away, in June of this year and my family is in the process of putting together a scrap book of him. If my dad's picture was used in a publication, is it possible that I may purchase one?
- I was so excited to see the picture called Time out for refreshments at a party for Nisei Soldiers... March 3, 1945. Mrs. Thomas R_____ was my grandmother. I would like access to this picture if at all possible. I am a Social Studies teacher in New York State and would love to have this photo included in the Regents exam for the 11th grade assessment.
- I have looked for this music for some time. I am happy to find it. I would very much appreciate knowing how I could get a copy of this sheet music and if there are any recording of the song Washington Waddle.

Informational Feedback

- I have just accessed your web site to see a picture which is titled Mortimer F_____, Jr. Mortimer F_____, Jr. was my father. This picture is of me.
- I found the following [has] been wrongly spelled please correct it as follows: Madura is another religious place in North India but this temple is in Madurai at South India.

- This photo is of Ferdinand Ellerman at the focus of the 60foot Solar Tower Telescope - not the 150foot.
- There is a photo listed as "John D. M_____ winces after confrontation of anti-racism group in his office" credited to Christopher Springman. This photo is of my dad John P. (Philip) M_____. It was taken in the summer of 1968 when my dad was director of the Postal Data Center in San Mateo. (My dad died a short time later - April 1969 from a massive heart attack.) Please correct it to show that he is John P. M_____, not John D. M_____. And, if you would like to know everything my dad did to combat racism and to promote minority hiring, I would be happy to speak with you about this subject.
- [This is] Albert Bender, 1866-1941. Great friend of Diego Rivera/Frida Kahlo. Known in San Francisco as "St. Albert" for his generosity to artists. Helped Ansel Adams publish his first book.
- Title [Dome?. San francisco?] 1922 creater Johan Hagemeyer. I've seen photos of this in an old album when I was a kid. This is the dome of the old Emporium building in San Francisco.
- You have the wrong Isle Margarita for your print of the sinking of the S.S.Independence, she sank off the Coast of Mexico, 22 deg North, off Baha, California
- This was a nice treat. My mother is pictured in the center of the photograph, Mrs. Tommy I_____. I believe she was 19 or 20 years old. She's 81 years old today and living in Gardena, CA. We showed her this picture, but she didn't have a big reaction, just said "Oh my, I don't remember that"!
- Is the baby F_____ a girl or a boy? No information on this at all. Please let me know asap as I'm doing a project on the internment camps and am writing a poem to this photo.
- In a family history I am working on there is reference to the 'famous Springvale Station'. How do I find out why it is referred to as 'famous'?
- In conducting an Internet search on my father's name, I was delighted to find a photo in your collection that I had never seen. Our family was interned at Poston, resettled in Chicago and remain here to today. The photo shows Marian Ta_____ and my father Sakae To_____ at Matsumoto's art repair shop. Would it be possible to get a copy?
- I am a decendant of Hannah and Jasper G_____. You have pictures of their grave markers. Please tell me where they located? They died in Suffolk New York Jasper 4-17-1718. So far I have found a half dozen ancestors within 10-20 yrs of the Mayflower landing.

- I was totally surprised to discover your website when I did a google search on/for the Metropolitan Refining Co., Long Island City, N.Y. My grandmother worked there many years back. I was hoping to find greater information on the Metro. Company in hopes of finding out more of her history. My Grandmother was my Best Friend! Are you able to lend any direction that would assist in my quest? I am aware that in my research, some information may be a matter of confidentiality. However, I am able to supply a birth and death certificate proving she is to me as I report. Helen B_____ (maiden name) was born in Memphis, TN. back in 1920. She did however misreport her date of birth much of her life as many good women will.
- I stumbled on your site while looking for works by my great grandfather, Emmanuel W_____, who was a San Francisco artist in the late 1800's. One of your listings mentions his name. Could you possibly be kind enough to tell me what his connection to this item is? He may have been the cover illustrator. He usually signs EW, or E W_____, somewhat concealed at the bottom of his artwork.
- I found this picture through google. the officer sitting down is frederick L_____. i am researching my family's genealogy and frederick is my husband's great uncle (several generations past). my husband's grandfather was named after the same frederick in the picture and we have carried the tradition down through the generations. my son is R. Frederick L_____ IV. finding this picture is so amazing and exciting for me.
- I did a search on Google for the Kellshore Hotel and your site was the only one that came back in the results. I'm moving into this apartment building in the next month or so and am trying to get some information on it. All I know is that it was a hotel built in 1913. Do you have any other information on it or know where I might look?
- I was hiking today in the granite dells, north of Prescott Arizona, when I came across an old rusted piece of metal (a can lid I think) with the encription,"CPW Santa Cruz."When I got home I researched the name and found it to be an old blasting powder company in Santa Cruz. You have this company on your website so I thought I'd just let you know. I brought it home with me.
- you may not be who im looking for but i have a brass punch clock dated back to 1861 with your name on it ive owned it for 25 years and was interested now to find out about it i punched in the name on the clock and this page came up would you happen to no anything about it its solid brass and has a paper in side it with clock times on it even that has buerk on it [later] yes thats the clock but i dont have the keys and i just found the picture collections of california souvenir has in trove net [later] its defanetly the clock i have only

mine doesn't have a pin on the bottom of it mine has a key hole can you tell what it was made for and why

- To my great surprise, I found a reference to the artworks by my father in your site. It appears that the pictures are in a book "Theatermalereien..." Can you tell me who published it, where and when? I know that he did a lot of this type of design, in fact, I have a few of his originals. My parents came to this country in 1923 from Germany. I have also found some of his work on a site of the University of Rochester. I do have a number of his original water colors and oil paintings, as well as photographs of portraits of German princes he painted, but am working to compile as large a group of copies of his work as possible to pass on to our children, grandchildren and now great-grand children. [later] My father's activities as an artist in the 1920s are a void for me, so this is a real great new step.

Personal Reactions

- How might I obtain a copy of "Triboro Hospital for Tuberculosis, Parsons Blvd., Jamaica, New York. Utility room with Dora K_____". It is a photo of my Mom who died 45 years ago. Have any others of her?
- I was browsing and came across your web site and to my amazement found your 1905 photo of San Francisco Police Officers in Chinatown. One of them is my grandfather - - Daniel C_____! Is there a way I can have access to the photo?
- I found a picture of Crystal Lake, WI taken by my grandfather Albert A. K_____ in 1913, on your site. Is there any way to secure a copy from you that might be reproducible?
- In the Trove.net Philadelphia Centennial Collection there is an advertisement circular by Sam'l F. P_____, Manufacturer of Oatena, 1431 Market Street, Philadelphia, Penn. He was my Great Great Grandfather and I greatly desire to add a representation of this circular to my family files.
- We are doing research on our family, "B_____, " and found your photo entitled, "Down the Lane, B_____ Farm, June 3, 1888." Would it be possible to get some background information on the source or origin of the photo? We would be greatly interested if it is connected to our family.
- I entered my grandfather's name, Joseph D_____, into Google, and it popped up with an image of his Miami home, circa 1953. How did it end up on your website? How can I get a copy of it?

- I am looking for any Camp Sevier pictures, postcards, etc during the WWI Greenville SC era. I would like to purchase any I can to add to my personal collection
- I was searching your web site and found several pictures of my grandfather Roscoe F. S_____, an astronomer that worked at Mt. Wilson Observatory. It would be nice for my family to acquire copies of some of these pictures since we do not have them at this time.
- I stumbled across an image of my father, Pfc. James Y_____. Nobody in my family was aware of this photo, and the caption told more about his war service than any of us knew about. I would like to have a high-resolution copy of this photo and find out if other images still exist...how might I go about this? I sincerely appreciate any help with this, since my father passed away years ago without ever discussing his war experiences.