

The Impact of Digitizing Special Collections on Teaching and Scholarship

Reflections on a Symposium about Digitization and the Humanities

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The Impact of Digitizing Special Collections on Teaching and Scholarship: Reflections on a
Symposium about Digitization and the Humanities

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For now and for the foreseeable future, any serious reader will have to know how to travel down two very different roads simultaneously. No one should avoid the broad, smooth, and open road that leads through the screen...The narrow path still leads, as it must, to crowded public rooms where the sunlight gleams on varnished tables, and knowledge is embodied in millions of dusty, crumbling, smelly, irreplaceable documents and books.

—Anthony Grafton, “Future Reading,” *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2007¹

I was spending a lot of time in the Quaker collections that are housed at Haverford College. The website of Haverford’s library was set up in such a way as to almost force me to notice that many of the texts I needed to read were available in EEBO (Early English Books Online)². It didn’t take me long to figure out that EEBO could be accessed through Temple’s libraries. Although I loved working with the originals to be found in Magill [Library at Haverford], I also loved using Temple’s EEBO. I could access EEBO from my dorm room and from the Tech Center as well as from [Temple’s] Paley Library. Being able to access texts through EEBO made it easy for me to immerse myself in the texts I was writing about.

—Clay Boggs, Class of 2007, Temple University

I saw that note your office sent me inviting me to attend a workshop on helping students develop informational literacy. Please don’t take this personally, but I have to confess that I cannot for the life of me imagine a worse waste of my time.

—Anonymous Faculty Member, Temple University

We need to recognize the business we are all in is an industry of scholarship.

—Barbara MacAdams, University of Michigan

It has always been true; the project—not the discipline, not the field—is the unit of scholarly behavior.

—Paul Courant, University of Michigan

A long and winding road

University faculty and scholars demonstrated their uses of rare books and archives—in both digital and physical forms—to an audience of RLG Programs partners at a symposium in Philadelphia on June 4, 2008. Tony Grafton’s recent article in *The New Yorker*³ provoked the theme of the symposium: we’ll be travelling both the wide smooth road through the screen and the narrow difficult road of books and archives for a long time to come.

The audience of librarians, archivists, museum professionals and senior managers discussed administrative issues and opportunities for the use of digitized special collections. The academic speakers, however, spoke to us directly about their expectations of special collections and proposals for collaboration with scholars. These scholars emphasized the critical roles rare books, archives and other materials play in both teaching and research, and called for specific directions for libraries and archives to take in the near future. The *primary* users of *primary* resources presented clear imperatives for collections and custodians: work with faculty to understand current research methods and materials; go outside the library or archive to build collections and work with faculty; and continue to build digital and material collections for both teaching and research.

Research: The process is painful; the byproducts transitory

The scholars presented diverse research strategies. Anke Timmermann (Chemical Heritage Foundation) explained her work with medieval and Renaissance manuscripts for the history of alchemy. Her scholarship requires not only digitized pages from disparate collections, but high quality images so that she can painstakingly transcribe texts and recreate networks of scribes. Douglas Reed (Government, Georgetown University) demonstrated his project to examine the roles of class and race on school desegregation in northern Virginia. His project led him to uncover school records not held in a traditional library or archival setting (“in a storage room, converted from a locker room, adjacent to a gymnasium in a middle school...knock on door 7 of the gym and ask for Val”). Reed mapped data geographically with GIS to expose neighborhood patterns. The results are substantial, but “the process is painful.” (Reed spent four or five years on this project.) Zachary Lesser (English, University of Pennsylvania) demonstrated DEEP (Database of Early English Playbooks)⁴, built with a colleague over many years to track details of the performance, printing and

marketing of Renaissance playbooks. When asked, Lesser explained that while EEBO⁵ provides access to an enormously broad and comprehensive collective collection, DEEP plumbs details germane to a very small circle of researchers.

While their research strategies vary, the scholars unanimously called for expanded collection and digitization of primary sources. Reed combined local school district administrative records with census records and maps. Timmermann works in collections with manuscripts not previously identified by scholars or librarians. In both cases, the scholars uncovered primary materials—in the course of doing their research—that were either not well-known or not already in good custody. Reed called on librarians and archivists to consider identifying “orphaned archives”—records that are not formally archived and will remain in living institutions as functioning records.

While there may be a mandate for documentation strategies, we have a chance to enlist scholars to contribute the scans they create in the course of their research so that others can access them. Digital versions of unique materials can be “collected” by libraries and archives, along with the scholarly results. Expanding on his assertion that the project is the unit of scholarship, Paul Courant (Economics and University Librarian, University of Michigan) said that the monograph or the journal article as an expression of scholarly output is an accident of history. Going forward, Courant expects to see more scholarly outputs that take the form of something other than (easily acquired, described, preserved and delivered) text-based products.

Call for action:

Researchers who create new sources of scholarship (images, data, electronic tools, etc.) are interested in the long-term viability of these materials, but it’s not top of mind for them. They are interested in how librarians and archivists could aide them in creating and collecting research resources. We must ensure custodianship of their discoveries and we must ensure that these important scholarly results will be included in collections.

Teaching: New (and old) scholarly methods

While technology for research is a on a rocky road, using digitized sources for pedagogy is useful and exciting. David Harrington Watt (History, Temple University) said, “Being able to learn and teach in a digital world is a wonderful thing.” From a professor’s perspective, it is much easier now for students to find and select appropriate scholarly materials online. Lesser combines digitized Shakespeare playbooks in EEBO with the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* in order to integrate students’ knowledge about primary sources with secondary sources. He follows up his EEBO assignments with a visit to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Pennsylvania, where his students learn differences between Penn’s copy of Shakespeare’s First Folio, for example,

and an image of the Folio in EEBO. While his students say that EEBO has made their work easier, they feel overwhelmed by the resources available to them.

Both of the faculty speakers said they miss the community of faculty and students in the analog world. The steps leading to the library provided a venue for gossip, and students and their professors could see each other working in the reading room. Watt observed that the disconnected digital library—“our new capacity for using the library without going to the library”—“makes it hard for us to realize the communal nature of our project.”

Scholars seek librarians who will provide content for their classes. Watt would rather not have librarians preaching to faculty about “information literacy,” but encouraged us to offer help presenting the variety of resources to students. (“As long as you don’t embarrass us, we’re extremely grateful for the help.”) When we digitize primary source material from various collections, professors can use them in large lecture courses, with hundreds of students. It would be impractical to incorporate original materials into courses of this type, but digitized materials are perfect for training students en masse and preparing them for scholarly research. Courant (here with his faculty hat on) recommended librarians collaborate with faculty on scholarly methodologies for the use of authoritative sources. As Watt said, “there is now no excuse whatsoever for teaching courses that do not involve having students work with primary sources.”

Researchers urged their librarians and archivists to get out of the stacks. One could hear in the speakers’ remarks a call for an “embedded librarian” (and a related view of the archivist as “field agent”). At Temple University, a librarian holds office hours in the history department. Lesser said that the discussion of introducing technology into the classroom is over, but now faculty need help planning when and why to use it. He also said that, ironically, students now need to be reminded of the importance of secondary literature.

Call for action:

Special collections librarians and archivists should find ways to work in academic departments, like their colleagues in core collections. We must find ways to network with faculty on campus in order to learn about various projects underway, and to learn ways the library could help. We can offer to help faculty members learn about new sources of information, but we mustn’t lecture them (the term “information literacy” is particularly cringe-worthy). We can take advantage of digitized primary source materials to create new opportunities for teaching appropriate scholarly methods, even in large survey courses.

Metrics: Know thy scholars

A major take-away point from the symposium was: know your scholars. The RLG Programs partners engaged with the call for measuring and evaluating the impact of special collections on research. Alice Schreyer (University of Chicago) spoke of the plusses and minuses of existing metrics in special collections, and called for unified practices. Patti Martin (CDL) added that it's not enough to count clicks or views; metrics need to be qualitative, too. Courant had a slightly different view, drawn from his experience as a university provost. Courant says a provost is looking for a few top faculty members to say that special collections (digital or not) are valuable for research. Without faculty voices, all the metrics we have may be worthless. Ultimately, what matters is that scholars find and use primary materials, and view the library (and its collections) as a valuable resource.

Call for action:

Although we need evidence of the impact of digitization and the unique collections themselves, quantitative metrics aren't enough. We must make sure libraries and archives both measure use of special collections and work with faculty to demonstrate their value for excellent research.

Licensing and third-party agreements: The good, the bad and the ugly

Lesser called EEBO the “most important non-human thing in my life” and despaired that not all can use it. “What can be done,” Watt asked, “to make sure that graduate students who are working at schools [with fewer resources] have adequate access to digitized primary sources?” Precisely because Temple, a campus with modest special collections holdings, invested strategically in licensed resources, the university now has access to digitized primary source materials that have made a huge difference to Watt's research and teaching. Institutions that are licensing materials must ensure that agreements provide for the long-term accessibility of the materials. Once a scholar has cited something, they should be assured that they (or their readers) will be able to get back to that resource.

Courant counseled that, since libraries and archives will rely at least in part on third parties to assist with the digitization of their holdings, our agreements must ensure the results are widely available for scholarship. Researchers from many institutions use the materials of any given special collection or independent research library. Care must be taken to assure maximum benefit for the scholarly community in the long term while balancing the needs and expectations of commercial outfits.

Call for action:

We can consider compromising on a temporary embargo on universal access to digitized special collections, as long as our contracts ensure that ultimately the content will be openly accessible. The special collections community should come together (much as the moving image community did in the “Lot 49” meeting⁶), to articulate common principles for third-party contracts to digitize special collections materials.

Librarians: Custodians or service providers?

The introduction of digital surrogates changes the paradigm both for researchers and for those who tend special collections. Robin Adams (Librarian and College Archivist, Trinity College Dublin) talked about the risk of losing our vision. Working in a new paradigm is not easy. Barbara MacAdams (University of Michigan) commented, “What makes scholarship move and go, when done at its best, is work done at the margins.” Adams spoke of a “gap” between faculty expectations and the instincts of librarians as “keepers.” We need to continue our “opportunistic acquisition of tomorrow’s special collections,” preserve those collections, *and* find new ways to provide access to all the collections. Adams reminded us that treasures that were once accessible only to a select few are now accessible to everyone. Watt said that accomplishments like EEBO and WorldCat⁷ were once hard to imagine; we ought to be working on the next “inconceivable” undertaking.

Call for action:

Librarians shouldn’t abandon traditional responsibilities as we look to new ways to provide value to our institutions. Researchers, faculty and librarians can take more opportunities to see things from each others’ perspective.

^{1,3} Grafton, Anthony. 2007. “Future Reading.” *The New Yorker*, November 5. Available online at: www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/11/05/071105fa_fact_grafton.

^{2,5} Early English Books Online. Available online at: eebo.chadwyck.com/home.

⁴ Database of Early English Playbooks. Available online at: deep.sas.upenn.edu/.

⁶ Brantley, Peter. 2007. “Moving Images: Digitization for Access—Lot 49.” O’Reilly Radar [blog]. July 15. Available online at: radar.oreilly.com/archives/2007/07/moving-images-digitization-for.html.

⁷ WorldCat. Available online at: www.worldcat.org/.

Appendix A

Digitization and the Humanities: Impact on Libraries and Special Collections Symposium

Held in conjunction with the RLG Programs 2008 Annual Partners Meeting on June 4, 2008 at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in Philadelphia, PA.

Symposium agenda and presentations are available online at:
www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02c.htm

Session 1: Scholars' Perspectives: Impact of Digitized Collections on Learning and Teaching

A recording of this session is available online at:
www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02-Symposium.htm (.mp3: 21.39 MB/1 hr. 2 min.)

- **How has the Availability of Digitized Primary Source Materials Changed the way Teachers Teach and Students Learn?**
Presented by David Harrington Watt, Director of General Education Program and Associate Professor of History at Temple University.

Paper available online at:
www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-04a.pdf (.pdf: 559K/12 pp.)

- **Primary Sources, Digital Facsimiles and Analytic Databases**
Presented by Zachary Lesser, Assistant Professor, Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania.

Presentation available online at:
www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02ib.pdf (.pdf: 38K/7 pp.)

Session 2: Scholars' Perspectives: Impact of Digitized Collections on Research

A recording of this session is available online at:
www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02-Teaching.htm (.mp3: 21.28 MB/1 hr. 1 min.)

- **What do They Think They're Doing? History, Alchemy and the Digitization of Manuscripts**

Presented by Anke Timmerman, Historian, Chemical Heritage Foundation

Presentation available online at:

www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02ie.pdf (.pdf: 472K/10 pp.).

- **Of Locker Rooms and Silos: What if we had Digital Archives in Places No One Expects Them?**

Presented by Douglas S. Reed, Associate Professor, Department of Government, Georgetown University.

Presentation available online at:

www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02id.pdf (.pdf: 1MB/20 pp.).

Session 3: Librarians' Perspective: Impact on Collections

A recording of this session is available online at:

www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02-Librarians.htm (.mp3: 28.18MB/1 hr. 22 min.).

- Talk by Paul N. Courant, University Librarian and Dean of Libraries, University of Michigan.

- **Impact of Digitization on Libraries and Special Collections**

Presented by Robin Adams, Librarian and College Archivist, Trinity College Dublin.

Presentation available online at:

www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02ia.pdf (.pdf: 1.95MB/20 pp.).

Appendix B

A list of symposium attendees is available online at:

www.oclc.org/programs/events/2008-06-02b.htm.