Digitizing Hidden Collections in Public Libraries

Gwen Glazer[1]

| ABSTRACT

Libraries no longer need to prove that they should be digitizing their materials; they just need to find ways to do it. This paper offers an overview of digitization challenges facing small and medium-sized libraries, presents options for large-scale digitization projects, and suggests ways to share newly created digital collections.

No. 1

JUNE 2011

Imagine sitting in your living room, wondering how World War II affected your community. You go to a website — a single, seamless, intuitive portal that includes rare and original materials from thousands of libraries around the country — and, in a few clicks, you find an image of a local landmark that was once a factory, with rows of women in coveralls working at machines. Another few clicks take you to an oral history of a worker in the photo who lived in the next town over; a few more and you're reading a first-person account of the first woman supervisor at a factory three states away.

You look up; hours have gone by, and you know a lot more about the world.

Imagine how students would look at historical research if they could use this website as a starting place. Imagine how researchers could expand their work and connect to entirely new histories. Imagine how the discovery process could change.

Now imagine that every piece of information about every subject on this website — every letter, diary, photograph, video and audio file — is locked away in a giant black trunk. A few people have keys to the trunk, but those people don't know each other and you don't know any of them. In fact, you wouldn't even know to ask for the key, because you don't know the trunk exists in the first place.

How can libraries put those keys into everyone's hands?

Introduction

Public libraries support a common collective mission: providing access to information, knowledge, and resources.

Although the methods and means of achieving this mission grow more diverse over time, ensuring equitable access is a thread of continuity that runs throughout libraries' activities, and as this mission evolves in the digital age, libraries must take innovative steps to realize it.

As community anchor institutions, public libraries must provide an avenue not only to the wealth of information available globally on the Web, but also to locally specific materials that cannot be found elsewhere. In essence, they must keep local history alive and connect it with its greater context. Hidden collections — defined as materials that are not "discoverable by scholarly users… either through digital or analog means"[2] — are attracting increased attention in the library community, which recognizes their importance and the need to increase access to them.

In many cases, however, the opposite scenario is playing out. Some rare materials in public libraries are at risk because of the limitations of their physical locations. Such hidden collections are under threat because they are vulnerable to accidents, theft, and neglect.[3]

But the most important reason is a simple one: "materials that are inaccessible electronically are simply not used."[4] Because people access information online more and more, local hidden collections that are not available online are becoming increasingly invisible — even though their physical access is unchanged.

Creating a visible online presence for these hidden collections would benefit the public immensely. For example, students could study primary sources on major events from a local perspective; Civil War researchers could find untapped treasures currently languishing in basements; genealogists could uncover new information and connect disparate pieces of family trees.

Connecting individuals with the rich archives of public libraries and other cultural heritage institutions benefits both individual communities and the nation as a whole. K-12 students, in particular, benefit from early exposure to primary-source research materials, and putting them online may be the best opportunity to put them in students' hands.[5]

Of course, making these materials available online poses significant challenges. Special collections can be difficult to digitize for many reasons: fragility and instability, format variety, inadequate funding, and many more. Because of problems with physical access and significant backlogs in cataloging and processing, special collections in public libraries are even less likely than general collections to be part of retrospective conversion activities[6] and new digitization projects. Without taking the vital step of increasing users' access to public libraries' hidden collections, we risk losing our own history.

Case Studies

In summer 2010, 60 public libraries offered a glimpse of their hidden collections through an informal four-question survey. Respondents identified materials in their libraries that would benefit from digitization and increased access, and the challenges they face in making these materials available.

Highlight boxes throughout this paper provide a sample of their responses.

Establishing a program that focuses on digitizing hidden collections in public libraries and then creating a single portal to access them would give these materials new life, making them available to everyone from schoolchildren to researchers.

The most interesting and historically valuable items from public libraries' extensive collections — photographs, genealogy records, local newspapers, handwritten letters and scrapbooks, and more — would be rediscovered. A rich digital archive could put the treasures of the country's extraordinary public library system into every American's hands.

Public Libraries & Digital Collections

The American Library Association's (ALA) most recent Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study survey shows that only 35 percent of public libraries offer special collections (such as letters and documents) online.[7] Because digitization has been slower to come to public than academic or special libraries, some public institutions have found creative ways to increase digital access to their collections, applying for individual grants for specific

Case Study: Popular & Vulnerable

Heavy use drives the Independence Public Library in Kansas to want to increase access to marriage records and other materials in vulnerable formats, including manila folders, historic books that are falling apart, and floppy disks that are increasingly difficult to use. "The information is used constantly [and] it would be so wonderful to be able to search the data," wrote a library staff member, but "I am not sure what we need or how to proceed."

projects or joining forces with other public libraries in statewide consortia that have begun digitization projects. Two successful examples, Ohio Memory and Digital Amherst, benefit from these consortia and stand to gain even more through linking their content to a larger system of digitized materials.

The Defiance Public Library in Ohio hosts the Bronson Collection, nearly 800 prints created by an amateur photographer in the early 20th century. These rare prints document scenes from life in Defiance — parades, street scenes, fires and floods, political campaigns, and more — and they provide an invaluable glimpse of everyday life in the Midwest a century ago.[8] Through a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant, the library digitized these photographs; through a project called Ohio Memory, anyone can discover and use the materials online. Digitized historic photographs from the Bronson Collection appear in a "then and now" section about swimming pools on the City of Defiance's website,[9] for example, and spring up in articles on Bowling Green State University's archival collections on subjects ranging from a 1913 flood[10] to campaign stops by Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.[11]

Without funding from the federal government and a nonprofit project, neither Defiance nor any of the public libraries in Ohio's 88 counties — all of which participate in Ohio Memory — would likely be able to make this information accessible at all, and they certainly would not be able to link the photographs to each other in a consistent, searchable interface. Digitization made the Bronson Collection usable by a much wider audience than people who could make it through the doors of the Defiance Public Library.

Another example is Digital Amherst, a project of the Jones Library in Amherst, Mass. In 2010, ALA's Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) recognized the Jones Library as one of three libraries that best used cutting-edge technology in library services. A digital multimedia repository on the history of Amherst, this project is a unique example of a standalone digital portal created by a public library that was experiencing "heavy use" of its special collections and relied on "local community members and academics to help create and provide content for the digital library."[12]

Images from the Digital Amherst collection are appearing online — for example, on the website for the Emily Dickinson Museum.[13] Other projects, such as Greater Rochester History Online and the Oshkosh Public Library's Digital Collections (in Michigan and Wisconsin, respectively) also allow for online access to public libraries' collections.[14]

Case Study: Saving Newspapers

A consistently searchable, more usable collection would help researchers looking at the *Sentinel* newspapers housed at the Clapp Memorial Library in Belchertown, Mass. The historic newspaper represents a "week-by-week history" of the community, and the library keeps hard copies; issues from 1915 through 2004 on microfilm; and issues from 2004 through the present on disks.

Although these examples represent significant accomplishments, they are the exception rather than the rule. Digitizing local collections in public libraries remains largely un-explored but offers tremendous opportunities.

Moreover, these collections and many others contain historically valuable materials that should not exist in isolation. If they were linked to larger projects, their educational and historical usefulness would increase exponentially, and more users would gain access to the material.

Challenges for Smaller Institutions

Most smaller institutions, especially those located in states without strong consortia, face high barriers to entry into the digitization world. While more and more people use (and want to use) libraries' materials online and with mobile devices,[15] smaller institutions generally have the most severe resource constraints in supporting digitization projects. Budget-strapped public libraries, for example, do not have the funding, time, staffing, or access to expertise and technology to devote to large-scale technical projects. Even if they did manage to create high-quality digital files, these libraries typically lack the means to promote them widely.

Undoubtedly, some materials suffer not only from inadequate organization and

preservation, but also from a lack of *real* access — which increasingly means online access. Alone, smaller libraries and cultural institutions simply do not have the capacity to make hidden collections universally available, but the public increasingly expects digital services, including digital collections, to be a standard part of a public library's services.

Several courses of action would help bring these hidden collections to light.

Possible Solutions

Creating a new national program. The most direct and comprehensive way to accomplish this goal would be to create a program that targets hidden collections for digitization and then creates a national digital repository to ensure public access to the digital files.

The federal government funds large-scale digitization initiatives through several agencies and institutions — including the Library of Congress, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the Smithsonian Institution, and others — and could develop a new program. Guidelines from the Federal Agencies' Digitization Initiative provide technical specifications and best practices that could be used as a starting place.[16]

Because of the wide reach and resources of a national program, materials would have the greatest chance of being found and made available to the public. Existing technology, staff skills, and other expertise could be applied to a new program for hidden collections. Pilot projects could begin the program on a smaller scale, testing workflows and models for a larger program.

Incorporating smaller institutions into current Library of Congress or other federal digitization activities. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress jointly support existing initiatives that undertake digitization efforts, such as the National Digital Newspaper Program (which offers access to newspapers published in the United States between 1836 and 1922) and the National Digital Infrastructure and Information Program (which was created by an act of Congress to preserve at-risk historical materials).

Programs such as these could be extended to smaller institutions. Both projects are major initiatives that include a tremendous number of items on a nationwide scale and work with dozens of institutions all over the country.[17] This alternative would require raising significantly more funds or diverting funds from other priorities at a time when funding is especially scarce.

Expanding the IMLS Digital Collections and Content (DCC) project. The IMLS collects information about digital projects from institutions that received funds through its grant programs. Participants can add their own collections to the DCC repository,

Case Study: Bridging the Distance

Connecting local resources would help Weston County Library in Newcastle, Wyoming. The library staff member who responded to the survey noted that distance is the biggest problem: "I have been told repeatedly about various libraries across the state that have good local history/genealogy collections but none is less than a 4 hour drive."

which aims to provide a single interface to access a wide range of content. As of May 2011, the database contained records from nearly 400 institutions; with IMLS' participation, and with an expansion of the DCC project, the organization could be a major player in aggregating digitized materials from public libraries or serve as a model for a new independent repository under the auspices of another entity.[18]

Incorporating smaller institutions in programs of state-level organizations or regional consortia. Entities such as Ohio Memory and the Metropolitan New York Library Council often work with smaller institutions, involve public-private partnerships, and include materials from multiple states or communities.

Although these organizations represent an attractive option in several ways, funding remains a serious problem, and many programs already are stretched to their limits. Additionally, a repository limited to state or regional materials would not reach as many people as a nationwide program.[19]

Developing a mobile digitization unit. This solution could be part of a national- or state-level program, and it could be an ideal way to capture these kinds of local materials.

It would facilitate on-site digitization, which is the Library of Congress' National Digital Library Program's preferred method for handling materials,[20] and having equipment and expertise that can travel from one site to another would significantly lower the

barriers to entry in many digitization projects. Combining the benefits from both on- and off-site scanning, therefore, could result in a cost-effective solution: creating a single lab that can be moved from site to site, digitizing materials "semi-in-house" without extra risk to rare materials but with high-quality equipment and expert help.

Some digitization specialists and contractors, such as ArcaSearch and the genealogy Web site Ancestry.com, offer on-site scanning services or mobile units. The idea of a library or cultural-heritage institution creating a similar unit has been raised a few times in recent years. An LSTA grant in fiscal year 2009 even awarded $13,804 for a mobile digitization center at the Joliet Public Library in Illinois.[21] Although the idea clearly resonates with the library community, the idea of a mobile digitization unit has not yet gained traction on a large scale.

Case Study: Finding a Starting Point

In Honey Grove, Texas, the Bertha Voyer Memorial Library has "an entire room full of collections" including photographs, ephemera, deeds and wills, audio recordings from the foundation's founder, and Valentine's Day cards from the early 1800s. "I just don't know where to start — it's so overwhelming!" wrote the library staff member.

Funding Approaches

Funding possibilities obviously depend on the focus and the size of the program, but a variety of creative options could make a cohesive digitization initiative become a reality.

Options range from a major congressional appropriation for a new program to a small grant from a private foundation for a regional consortium. Making a program a priority in an existing federal or state government program is another possibility, but the outlook for public funding at all

levels of government seems likely to remain unfavorable for at least several more years.

Private philanthropy could significantly aid efforts to create a cohesive digitization program for smaller cultural heritage institutions. Many granting institutions participate in the digitization efforts outlined above; extending their funding, or perhaps forming a collaboration between multiple institutions, could fund a national-scale program, at least temporarily. Many granting institutions also encourage cost-sharing, which could create opportunities for multiple funding sources to work together.

Leveraging **partnerships with other organizations** — such as the Open Content Alliance, the Internet Archive, the American Association for State and Local History, and many more — has tremendous potential to add new dimensions and collaborative energy to a new project. Lessons these organizations have already learned about digitization, content organization, and much more could prove invaluable.

Volunteers could contribute significantly to a national digitization initiative as well, particularly because the project is intended to capture historical materials on the local level. Community interest in genealogy and local history — not to mention a commitment to public libraries — could generate interest and enthusiasm in such a project, as well as help on a practical level. Volunteers could help with tagging and

Case Study: Close to Home

At the Eaton Rapids Public Library in Michigan, the library director suggested that preserving its own institutional history would be a priority. The extensive local history collection includes letters and other correspondence with Andrew Carnegie's secretary about a failed attempt to build a Carnegie Library in the town, as well as 19th-century documents like handwritten minutes from the library board and original army rosters and records from the Grand Army of the Republic.

crowd-sourcing, for example, and a training component could ensure that these contributions would be valuable. Perhaps community members also could be called upon for local fundraising efforts or donations.

Another viable funding model could come from projects run by **major library consortia**, such as the Central/Western Massachusetts Automated Resource Sharing (C/W MARS) group. This group leverages its affiliations to pool digital collections through Digital Treasures, which sets up best practices and a centralized repository for more than 150 members from academic, school, public, and special libraries. The project uses staff time and expertise — in selecting materials for digitization, learning the content management system, creating original metadata and catalog records, and more — and careful supervision from three staff members who work for library systems in Massachusetts. The consortium provided significant funding for the pilot phase, including "discretionary funds to purchase hardware and software and create a new part-time position."[22] To continue past the pilot phase, private funding plays an additional role; a grant from the H.W. Wilson Foundation in May 2008 helped with conversion efforts, and multiple member libraries also won Wilson grants to help with their specific digitization activities.

Support also could come from truly **nontraditional sources**. One idea is a

partnership with an established academic library that has a significant digitization project already in operation. That institution could act as a mentor for small institutions, and possibly contribute funding, staff time, and resources to a project in the public interest.

Another outside-the-box solution could be a partnership with a documentary filmmaker, a TV channel, or another media outlet that would develop a film or TV show about "discovering America's treasures" and create a multimedia experience for viewers. Currently, for-profit companies help libraries in many ways, and although for-profit sponsorship is not suitable for every project, creative nontraditional funding methods are worth exploring.

Conclusion

Efforts to bring hidden collections to light — including digitizing materials, linking them together, making them easily available online, and much more — must open up to public libraries. Their collections hold countless items of proven historical value, and, in the words of one expert, offer a "uniqueness factor" that cannot be replicated.

Deanna Marcum, Associate Librarian for Library Services at the Library of Congress, described digitization in moral terms:

> "[W]e will continue to digitize as much material as we can. And we will take advantage of the Internet for making our resources available worldwide. We must do so to enable people far from our physical libraries to use and enjoy our holdings. Because we now have the means to extend the reach of our libraries, I think we also have a moral imperative to do so…. We now have the

technological ability to operate far beyond our walls. Let us also cross over our walls to help each other do it."[23]

The walls that block hidden collections in smaller institutions from digitization initiatives may be high and intimidating, but they are worth scaling. A program making these collections available to the public worldwide advances the mission of librarianship and speaks to the ideals of cultural heritage institutions all over the country.

NOTES

[1] Much of the work for this paper was completed during my tenure as a Google Policy Fellow at the American Library Association in summer 2010. This paper is not intended to present a full survey of current digitization activities in the library field, but instead to make a case for a comprehensive project that could digitize and aggregate materials in small to medium-sized public libraries.

[2] "Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives." Council for Library and Information Resources. [accessed December 1, 2010 at http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/index.html]

[3] Jones, Barbara M. "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in America's Research Libraries." *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage 5:2.* Fall 2004: 88-105. [accessed March 14, 2011 at http://rbm.acrl.org/content/5/2/88.full.pdf+html]

[4] Jones, 91.

[5] Cleary, Patricia and David Neumann, "The Challenges of Primary Sources, Collaboration, and the K-16 Elizabeth Murray Project." *The History Teacher* 43.1.2009. [accessed March 30, 2011 at http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/43.1/cleary.html]

[6] Jones, 89.

[7] "Public Library Technology Landscape." Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, 2009-10. [accessed July 28, 2010 at

http://www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/2009_2010/al_techlandscape.pdf]

8 "The Defiance Public Library System Digital Archive." Ohio Memory. [accessed December 6, 2010 at http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm4/index_p15005coll20.php?CISOROOT=/p15005coll20]

9 "Kingsbury Park." City of Defiance – Parks & Rec. [accessed December 28, 2010 at http://www.cityofdefiance.com/parks/kingsbury.shtml]

10 McLaird, Lee N. "Weather Disasters in the Great Black Swamp." Bowling Green State University Center for Archival Collections 21:3. December 2002. [accessed December 28, 2010 at http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/cac/ac/page48424.html]

11 "Ohio on the Campaign Trail." Bowling Green State University Center for Archival Collections 23:2. August 2004. [accessed December 28, 2010 at http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/cac/ac/page47991.html]

12 "Cutting-Edge Technology in Library Services." ALA Office for Information Technology Policy. March 2010. [accessed December 28, 2010 at http://www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/CuttingEdgeLibraries.pdf]

13 "The Town & the Times." Emily Dickinson Museum. [accessed December 28, 2010 at http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/town_and_times]

14 For more information, visit their websites at http://grho.rhpl.org and http://oshkoshpub.cdmhost.com/.

15 See "There's an App for That!" Timothy Vollmer, June 2010, ALA Office for Information Technology Policy, available online at http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oitp/publications/policybriefs/mobiledevices.pdf.

16 "Federal Digitization Guidelines." Library of Congress. [accessed March 5, 2011 at http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/]

17 For more information on these programs, visit http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/ and http://www.loc.gov/ndnp/.

18 See http://imlsdcc.grainger.uiuc.edu/about.asp.

19 Other state and regional digitization efforts, many of which include libraries, can be found at http://www.lyrasis.org/Products-and-Services/Digital-Services/Collaborative-Digitization-Programs-in-the-United-States.aspx.

20 Conservation Implications of Digitization Projects." Library of Congress NDLP and Conservation Division. [accessed July 26, 2010 at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/techdocs/conserv83199a.pdf]

21 "LSTA Grant Recipients." Prairie Area Library System. [accessed July 22, 2010 at http://www.palsnet.info/member-services/consulting/grants/lsta-grant-recipients]

22 Gaudet, Dodie, Kristi Chadwick and Jan Resnick. "Digital Treasures: The Evolution of a Digital Repository in Massachusetts," in *Digitization in the Real World: Lessons Learned from Small and Medium-Sized Digitization Projects*. Eds. Kwong Bor Ng & Jason Kucsma. Metropolitan New York Library Council: New York, 2010, pp. 423-34. [accessed March 30, 2011 at http://metroblogs.typepad.com/files/ditrw_26.pdf]

23 Marcum, Deanna B. "Digitizing for Access and Preservation: Strategies for the Library of Congress." *First Monday* 12:7. July 2, 2007. [accessed July 26, 2010 at http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1924/1806]

About the Author
Gwen Glazer served as a 2010 Google Policy Fellow with the American Library Association's Office for Information Technology Policy in Washington, D.C. She is a staff writer/editor and social media coordinator at Cornell University Library, and she earned her MLIS from Syracuse University's iSchool in May 2010.

Acknowledgments
The author would like to thank the many people who contributed to this project:

- Alan Inouye, OITP director, who provided invaluable ideas and guidance;
- Gavin Baker, Larra Clark, Jennifer Hendrix, Erica Pastore, Carrie Russell, Emily Sheketoff, and Jenni Terry, who commented on early drafts;
- Susan Currie, Barbara Berger Eden, Christine Lind Hage, Dottie Hiebing, Wei Jeng-Chu, Maribeth Krupczak, Janet McCue, Vivian Pisano, Marijke Visser, Timothy Vollmer, and Amanda Wilson for their helpful discussions and suggestions;
- Staff at the Library of Congress, National Endowment for the Humanities, Council on Library and Information Resources, and several statewide consortia, who graciously participated in conversations and e-mail exchanges during the early phases of this project;
- The directors and librarians at the institutions featured in the case studies;
- All the survey respondents and library staff across the country who opened the metaphorical doors to their public libraries' collections and digitization challenges;
- Carla DeMello, graphic designer at Cornell University Library, for the image on the first page of this paper; and
- Staff and leadership at Cornell's library for their flexibility and generous support.

Special thanks to the Google Policy Fellowship program for the opportunities, freedom, and funding that made this entire endeavor possible.

The Office for Information Technology Policy acknowledges the American Library Association for its financial support. The opinions articulated in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder.

© 2011 American Library Association. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/.

American Library Association
Office for Information Technology Policy
1615 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W.
First Floor
Washington, D.C. 20009
Telephone 202-628-8410
Fax 202-628-8419
www.ala.org/oitp

The Office for Information Technology Policy advocates for public policy that supports and encourages the efforts of libraries to ensure access to electronic information resources as a means of upholding the public's right to a free and open information society.