

Where is digitization going?

The opportunity to participate in the recent Library and Archives Canada consultation process which included a two part discussion on opportunities for the newly minted institution and about the future of grant based funding is prompting me to admit that I really know very little about the prospects for using digitization as a tool for the development of archives programs.

Working by analogy digitization has some of the attributes of micrographics programs. We use the technology to assist in the conservation of originals that are either in wider demand from users at multiple locations or becoming too fragile for regular use. Digitization also seems to be like electronic commerce. We place digital copies of our fonds level description and other guides to collections on the web in order to advertise our resources and attract a broader and possibly paying clientele. The perceived requirement that to survive in the current political environment publicly funded institutions need to broaden our user base indeed was a major thrust of the Library and Archives Canada presentation to consultation participants. Also, digitization is a cost effective way to publish recognizable portions of our documentary heritage whether the unique item, groups of items related to a specific theme, or less often complete fonds or collections.

One of the realities of living in a “just in time” universe is that we no longer live on a ‘what have you done for me lately’ planet but rather in a ‘what are you doing for me right now’ living room or work station. I fear that the immediacy of the digitally produced archives are both attractive and stressful. The attractiveness is our gaining much needed programs funding and recognition from our sponsors and the support of colleagues in related disciplines and their partners in government agencies.

The stress has been most visible in the struggle of over two archival and library functions, the place for descriptive standards (meta-data) and the inclusion of whole fonds or collections in projects. Without the meta data there will be nothing behind what the screen reveals as the immediate view to encourage the longer term use of our resources. If we only digitize partial fonds or unique items we create educational and other resources that are wear-dated and will not assist in our mission to preserve for the future.

What potential is laying ahead? Are archives prepared to devote some of their small core resources to digitization programs? Are we willing to trust in the future potential of digitization as an essential part of our archival tool kit or will we just use it as and when it suits us?

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