



## Why Digitize?

*"I hear a lot about libraries and museums creating digital content for their web sites or digital copies of their collections. What is the real benefit?"*

We are living in a digital age, where more and more people do their banking, order movie tickets, and play games with their children, over the Internet. For many institutions, particularly those with a focus on history, their patrons expect to find more and more of the institution's material available on the Internet. Although digitizing collections may not be appropriate in all situations, it has the potential to promote an institution and its collections to a broader audience. Moreover, creating digital surrogates is a method to preserve the original material by limiting excessive use, and providing online access is a helpful tool in supporting education.

## Promoting your collections

Are there patrons out there who should know more about your collections? Do you feel that everyone who needs to know about your organization, does? For libraries, museums, and educational institutions, getting noticed can be a challenge, which is why getting as much word out there as possible is extremely important, not only about what you have, but what you are about.

Institutions that digitize materials from their collections benefit from increased online exposure and traffic, usually from audiences they had not yet tapped. Busy adults and their families may first be exposed to an institution's historical resources through that organization's Web presence. This may occur while individuals are searching for educational programs to attend, looking for old photographs of the town in which they reside, or performing genealogical research. Having primary source materials on the Internet not only provides this exposure, but it may also further pique someone's interest in finding more about the institution. Think about what is more engaging: a site that provides a list of Native American artifacts in their collections, or images on the site that *show* you those artifacts? Once researchers have used a site of digital sources for their research, not only are they likely to search there again, but they also give credit to where they found the material (thus pointing more researchers to the repository's site). In an era where people are reluctant to read massive amounts of text, images of original collections can truly be worth a thousand words.

## Providing Access

Museums and libraries strive to provide informative exhibitions and programs through their collections. In fact, the mission statements of many organizations reiterate the importance of providing access to these materials in order to foster learning and appreciation for the sciences and humanities. With the reality that many institutions have limited staff to provide one-on-one help for patrons, digitization can allow access to heavily-used collections and also serve those physically unable to come to the institution directly. Digital collections provide not only the college student with primary source material for his senior thesis, or an elementary student with images for use in her next school project, but they also permit collection access to a physically-challenged patron who may live only a few miles away, but who could never reach the institution in person. In the shrinking world of the 21st century, an institution's patrons are not just the ones who walk through the door, they are also the ones who visit through the Internet.

## Preserving your collections

Digitization of collections can also help to save materials that are not in the best condition. By providing various images of an 18th-century military uniform which is sensitive to bright light, or a brittle 1887 map which has yellowed and torn along the folds, patrons can access the material without having to view the original. Thus that military uniform can stay in a darkened area and the 1887 map can be safe in an acid-free folder, while patrons obtain the information they seek from the copies provided through a Web site. In the past, such materials were locked away and inaccessible to researchers until money could be raised to conserve the material. But some level of accessibility is achieved through digital copies. Will the original item still need to be pulled from its darkened case or acid-free folder? Certainly. But the general wear and tear from moving the materials around, light exposure, and the like, is greatly minimized, enabling the material to be preserved for an even longer period of time.

## Supporting education

Some of the most frequent users of research materials on the Internet are college, high school and elementary students. When a teacher or professor issues an assignment on an historical topic, what is the first tactic students will undertake? It probably will be a Google search on that topic. If a museum has a strong collection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century farming equipment, wouldn't its staff want a student to find this for a research paper on the tools farmers used for harvesting crops in the 1800s? And what site did Google provide? Is that site a known authority on the subject (for it can be difficult to evaluate how accurate

the content is)? Many museums and public libraries are already actively involved with school groups and education programming for the greater community with a focus on school-aged students. In order to better attract this generation and its teachers, your museum needs to speak its language. If the Internet is the first place a student will look for information, why shouldn't a library provide the student with a relevant site for this information? More recently, some repositories, and more importantly grant funders, have wanted to provide more access to primary sources for younger students, since prior mentality often restricted the use of primary materials to scholars. The digitization of fragile 1800s farming tools provides that access through a medium that allows the original artifacts to be handled less, while allowing younger students to learn *earlier* in their schooling about how to use primary materials (and not just encyclopedias and Google searches) in their projects. Nothing replaces the experience the student could receive seeing or using the original at the museum itself, but providing a digital copy through a medium the student will use first, may get them interested in visiting the museum or learning more.

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