

Cultural Institutions in the Digital Age: Finding Common Ground

University of Kentucky

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Thanks, for that kind introduction.

It's was especially nice to be invited by Terry who has been so helpful to me in his various roles which intersect with mine: his service on the Advisory Committee on the Records of Congress and the Kentucky Council on Archives to name just two.

And it's nice to be back in Lexington where I have had lots of friends in the libraries for many years and so pleased when I heard the good news that Terry had been named Dean.

I am especially pleased to be here to help celebrate your new Center of Excellence documenting the Works Progress Administration the records of which represent some of the most important and interesting in the holdings of the National Archives, both in Washington and in the FDR Presidential Library in Hyde Park.

Terry has asked me to talk about one of my favorite topics—digitization—and how the National Archives intends to make all 12b pieces of paper available to the world. Yes, 12b. That translates into 1.4m trees. Laid end to end they would circle the globe 87 times. And that's just the paper. We have 40m photographs, miles and miles of video and film, and hundreds of terabytes of electronic records, the fastest growing component of the records of the country.

The National Archives is responsible for the records of all of the 250 Executive Branch agencies and departments and the records of the President. Although the National Archives was not created until the Franklin Roosevelt Administration, our records go back to the beginning, including the journals of the Continental Congress and the Oaths of Allegiance signed by George Washington and his troops at Valley Forge. And of course the Charters of Freedoms—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. We started collecting electronic mail during in 1982 and have 2.5m electronic mail records from the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations combined, 20m from the Clinton White House, and 210m from the George W. Bush administration.

The National Archives developed its first comprehensive Digitization Strategy in 2007. Although many of the concepts articulated in that strategy hold true today, we are

currently creating a new strategy which build on the original effort, but accounts for the many changes that have occurred in the intervening years. Five years is a long time in the world of technology!

So, what has changed since 1977?

First, strategic use of social media tools has enabled us to provide easier access to more records than ever before, and has helped us to engage citizens where they are, with low barriers to participation and easy engagement with the records. The use of social media is now pervasive across the Federal Agencies and in the White House. There are now more than 1500 Federal Government domains and thousands of websites on those domains. Most agencies have a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. All 15 of the President's Cabinet agencies have at least one Twitter account. And a survey of 3000 Federal managers found that a quarter of them use Facebook for work purposes. At the White House, a New Media Team, is pushing the envelope in new and creative uses of social media.

Second, we are more experienced. Experienced in working with external partners on digitization projects. Experienced in understanding the tremendous inefficiencies involved in having to capture data and metadata after scans have been made. Experienced in engaging the public through the use of new media tools. We simply know more about how we can do digitization than we did just a few years ago.

Thirdly, we have embraced the President's Open Government directive which mandates that every agency rethink how they do their work and interact with the American public, around the principles of Transparency, Participation, and Collaboration. We are exploring staff participation in digitization projects as learning experiences for all staff to understand that the work that we do needs to exploit technology to provide access to the records of the country and we are learning from how others outside of the National Archives are approaching the same work.

Our new strategy sets out to describe a vision of digitization at the National Archives and the ways we could achieve that vision over the next few years. Our goal is that one day all of our records will be online. The National Archives will rapidly and efficiently convert traditional records to digital form for easy public access and use, and improved preservation. Together with born-electronic records, all of our records will be made available digitally. Some staff and public have said that this is an absurdly impossible goal and we should not raise expectations by saying we will attempt it. Others have commented that they cannot understand why we haven't done it already. In our view this goal helps the National Archives to set our sights higher and encourages our agency to be a world-class leader in digitization.

The journey that records take from creation in the agencies to access and use by the public must be quick and efficient. That means we must focus on agency records management with an eye toward what is needed for digital public use. It means we focus on coordinating digitization throughout the agency, so we digitize traditional holdings once and use the digital copies many times. And it means we automate our efforts as much as possible, investing in new agile technologies to support those processes. We prioritize based on public feedback. We measure how long it takes. We improve continuously. We act as one agency from head to tail in our handling of digital records.

Envision this:

Citizens will be able to easily access digital copies of our records and use them on any number of levels, from simply viewing the records to uploading their own digital copies of our records. Citizens will be empowered to tag, comments on, describe, transcribe, translate, datamine, download, and mash up our records. They can create their own interface to our holdings, incorporate our records into their own digital apps and games, and participate in any number of digital communities, including communities by the National Archives, of like-minded citizens. They can visit any one of our research rooms to participate in a scan-a-thon. They can easily provide us with digital copies they created from our holdings during their visit to any one of our research rooms across the country. They can find and share our records on their favorite social media sites. They can ask us a question about our digital records online, and we will answer.

Staff will be able to make digital copies of records at the National Archives and easily save and use them in any number of ways, including contributing to the public catalog. For example, a reference archivist will be able to make a digital copy of a records requested by a researcher and easily provide the copy not only to the researcher, but just as easily, and simultaneously, submit it to our catalog. Our digitization labs will have the processes supported by agile and scalable technological tools to efficiently digitize records – whether it is a single page or a large series – and easily provide those digital copies, with standardized metadata to the catalog. The National Archives will declare itself a digital agency as of a certain date, and determine from that day forward, initial processing of traditional holdings will include digitization. Day forward digitization will stop it from contributing from the backlog of un-described, un-digitized records once and for all.

Federal government agencies will be able to rely on the National Archives for an integrated, easy-to-use records management environment, with standardized metadata guidelines based on access and preservation needs. Agency records managers will easily identify, capture, and make available their records. The National Archives will require agencies to digitize their traditional permanent records with appropriate standardized metadata for public access as a condition of transference to the National Archives. This effort could create new efficiencies with the potential for cost savings across the government.

Partnerships will continue and expand with digitization partners to help us work toward the goal of digitizing all of our holdings. We will share our open source code, our successful practices, and our lessons learned with our peer institutions. We will collaborate on larger digital efforts such as the Digital Public Library of America, with our colleagues, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress. We will continue to reach out to associated organizations such as the Society of American Archivists, the International Conference of Archivists, Federal Agencies Digital Guideline Initiative, state archives, and others to share and learn from their digitization experiences as well. And we will continue to support public initiatives such as the Yes We Scan effort, listed on the White House Petition website.

Let me close with a few words on how I think we can fulfill this vision and better prepare the next generation of information professionals. My entire career has involved responsibility for records, archives, special collections and manuscripts, traditional library services, and museum management. I was even an adjunct faculty member at Simmons for many years.

Most recently I have been struck by the lack of convergence of the programs that train these professionals and the missed opportunities of instilling the special values of libraries, archives, and museum in a single professional degree and experience. I am convinced that we have more in common than we have acknowledged. We have much to learn from each other and my eyes have been opened by the work begun at the National Archives by our first Wikipedian in Residence who has introduced me to the GLAM community—Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums. I've waited a long time to have my community recognized as GLAM!

So, I will be convening a meeting of archives, libraries, and museum folks to talk about the convergence of our missions and the skill set necessary to accomplish our work. And most importantly how we can work together to create the next generation of professionals in our institutions.