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Maximizing Good: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Minimal Description for Online Archives

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Abstract: Minimal descriptive practices have been embraced by archives over the past fifteen years for their efficiency and practicality. This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of minimal description within the context of digitized collections and evaluates them against the assumptions made by cultural heritage professionals. It considers whether minimal description provides digitized collections with sufficient metadata to meet MPLP's user-centered goals of improving access, sufficient context to ensure collections are understandable within their digital environments, and sufficient framework to facilitate data exchange across systems, all while considering MPLP within archival ecosystems that impact labor and resource allocation. The authors offer a set of questions under four themes that challenge these assumptions and promote critical evaluation of professional norms related to minimal description of digitized collections. Recommendations are presented that realign methods to develop nuanced strategies that maximize our ability to steward our collections, respect our labor, and serve our users.

Introduction

> *"As you dig your teeth into your assumptions, your teeth become sharper. You can dig deeper. It's not easy, but it is worth it. The truth, as they say, hurts. But they also say it sets you free."*
> *— Vironika Tugaleva, "The Art of Talking to Yourself"*

As archivists, librarians, and digital repository managers, we wear many hats. We work to preserve and protect collections, we work to connect users to the knowledge contained in those collections, and we work to transform collections through technology as we anticipate future research methods. These key—at times aspirational—functions energize our duties even as they compete for time and resources (as they so often do!). This makes critical evaluation of our own methods difficult. Yet to succeed in our multifaceted roles, we must be willing to interrogate our assumptions and to build evaluation into our most basic processes. For that reason, our primary goal is to foster a culture of inquiry and exploration, even if that means asking questions that may be complicated to answer or questions that may not have any answer at all.

One of our profession's prevailing assumptions is that minimal description is a sensible—if not preferable—practice with the gains in efficiency well worth its immediate shortcomings in intellectual control or user access. This area is ripe for critical reflection as little consideration has been given to the

effect that minimally processed collections may have on subsequent curatorial activities like digitization and online representation. As we interrogate our daily practices and challenge our assumptions about minimal description, which is best articulated in the methodology of "More Product, Less Process," we are confronted by the messy realities of our work. Indeed, we gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of minimal methods with an eye toward developing more sophisticated approaches. Rather than relegate descriptive practices to one of only two choices—minimal or full—we can develop nuanced strategies that maximize our ability to responsibly steward our collections, respect our labor, and serve our users as partners in their research endeavors.

Since its arrival over fifteen years ago, More Product Less Process (MPLP) has informed the way that archivists navigate their work, making its way into the professional vocabulary and leaving an indelible mark on the literature. Indeed, few archivists are unaware of Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's "Low-Calorie, High-Fiber" approach, which sought to minimize backlog and introduce baseline metrics for processing. As they aptly described the challenges that many archivists faced, the duo made a case that minimal practices ought to be the go-to model for all arrangement, description, and preservation activities unless otherwise warranted. In so doing, they prioritized access to collections over unsustainable professional practice, ultimately shifting archival focus to user needs. Quite simply, they challenged their profession with a compelling question: what is the least we can do to get the job done in a way that adequately meets user needs both now and in the future (Greene and Meissner 2005)?

Even though its reception in formal venues has been generally positive, MPLP remains debated in casual discourse and even the occasional peer-reviewed publication (Cuervo and Harbeson 2011; Phillips 2015; Van Ness 2010). Minimal descriptive practices have appealed overwhelmingly to workplace sensibilities that venerate efficiencies, but it has also triggered thoughtful consideration of what has been lost. Most notable is Cox's discussion of "maximal processing," which considers the potential long-term impact of minimal description on discovery (Cox 2010). These efficiencies have prompted minimal practices to expand and evolve so that what was once proposed as a processing methodology for modern, paper-based collections has since morphed into a toolbox of practices that archivists have connected to nearly every aspect of archival administration and, most recently, digitized collections (DeRidder, Presnell, and Walker 2012; Evans 2007; Jackson 2012; Miller 2013; Sutton 2012).

This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of minimal descriptive methods within the context of digitized collections and evaluates them against the assumptions made by cultural heritage professionals. It considers whether minimal description provides digitized collections with sufficient description to meet MPLP's user-centered goals of improving access, sufficient context to ensure collections are understandable within their digital environments, and sufficient framework to facilitate data exchange across systems, all while considering MPLP within archival ecosystems that impact labor and resource allocation.

Impact of Minimal Description on Digitized Collections

At the same time archives have embraced the MPLP framework, funding agencies have prioritized online access to collections as researcher expectations for the same have grown. Administrators and practitioners have responded to these pressures, at times with little consideration of the fundamental assumptions that have informed decisions about the tools and systems or workflows and practices. This, in turn, has led to several problems: a glut of digitized resources with sparse descriptions, online

interfaces that place users into a confusing world of hierarchical description, rigid systems and workflows that are unable to adapt to changing technologies and user needs, and workers who continue to generate scans with minimal description but without understanding how or if their efforts are useful to researchers. The four statements below identify specific assumptions that often inform decisions about online access to archival collections and explore the unintended consequences when put in practice.

Assumption #1: Digitization of minimally processed or unprocessed collections allows for quick online access. Increased online access is equivalent to increased (meaningful) use.

Although digitization unequivocally gives users and researchers greater access to materials that would otherwise require an in-person visit, how effective is online access when discovery is limited due to minimal description? Case studies and organizations have made the argument that any online access is better than no access, an insight shared broadly across the profession during the recent pandemic (Dorpinghaus et al. 2019). Yet this is often coupled with the attitude that digitization is a magic bullet for access as cultural heritage workers abdicating further responsibility and additional stewardship once it is digitized and online. Those responsible for stewarding these collections conceptualize digitization as a means to an end rather than foundational jumping off point for enhanced access.

Digital records with detailed, item-level metadata receive more use due to better search retrieval. Whereas complex digital objects, particularly those with minimal description, lack that same level of access. As large-scale and full collection digitization projects have become the norm, adoption of practices that recycle minimally processed archival collection metadata and represent digital objects based on finding aid structures (one folder = one digital object) the item-level description is replaced with metadata that may never have been intended for the digital environment. Context assumed in one metadata standard is often missing in another. Users may only retrieve an object's parent record which is necessarily described less specifically than items within the folder. They are then left with the task of navigating a long list of "child objects" sometimes with no more description than a date range or vague title. While some users may expect this as "all part of the archival research experience" when working in-person with physical collections, little data has been collected about online users' tolerance for extensive clicking and review of digital images. What we do know is that users often use what they can easily find.

In addition to ease of access, one of the prevailing benefits of researching with digitized online content is the perceived ease of search and discovery. While there may be data about a particular place, event, or person in a collection of, for example, letters or diaries, minimal description means that these digital objects may not appear in search results despite containing information useful to the researcher. While the authors are not advocating that every diary entry receive a thorough summary, it is useful to consider how existing description will lead to successful search and discovery when selecting a collection for digitization for online access.

With this in mind, what research opportunities do users miss out on when discovery is difficult? "With minimal processing, we are creating a whole new generation of hidden history." (Cox 2010) What does it mean if many users either walk away frustrated and without resources or with something that is "close enough" when the actual gem remains hidden in the deluge of digitized content? How do our

decisions on processing and digitization impact whole fields of potential intellectual exploration? As underrepresented voices and community collections are prioritized for digitization, what does our level of metadata investment say about our commitment to responsible stewardship of these cultural resources? It is time to include a digitally focused metadata strategy in all decisions about processing and digitization. Avoiding these decisions "for now" and pushing this hard work "down the road" or "downstream in the workflow" assumes a vague future scenario when these answers will magically materialize. In the meantime, more and more digital objects are created every day.

Assumption #2: Users understand how to navigate archival discovery tools and description well enough to successfully conduct their research online.

Do users understand the nuances of archival description and context within the online environment? While a small percentage of researchers can answer in the affirmative, many users are not familiar with the concept of a finding aid or hierarchical description. Discovery of digitized archival resources is limited in multiple ways, but particularly when it comes to users' level of digital proficiency and ability to navigate complex relationships between digital objects.

Online archival collections are used by a range of users with different needs, expectations, and research skills. From undergraduate students seeking primary resources for a course assignment to a community member researching their family's history to a postdoctoral fellow doing in depth research on a specific topic, individuals are using online resources differently. Some are seeking to simply satisfy the requirements of an assignment, others are looking for the mention of a specific name or place, while others are looking to better understand the landscape of a topic during the context of a particular time and place. Each of these users come with a different set of understanding of how archives in an online environment function and are willing to put in different levels of work to find what they need.

In the pre-online period, users would visit the physical archive, assuming they could work around the barriers to researching in person, where an archivist could provide a level of scaffolding to help find relevant resources. However, as more collections are available online, the door is open to new users who arrive with little or no foundational skills in researching with archival material, to no fault of their own. This does not present a problem if the digital library interface is intuitive and metadata is sufficient for successful discovery. Knowing that is not always the case, the onus is placed on the researcher to actively seek out the archivist for help. Considering power dynamics and lack of time and other resources, users may not often contact the archives for assistance.

Other users have needs beyond online discovery and access. Research methodologies in the Humanities and STEM alike require access to large datasets that can be used for computational processing and other forms of analysis. In turn, archives are experiencing a rise in researchers seeking large dataset downloads or computational tools as part of online digital libraries (Green and Courtney 2015). Archives are often at a loss on how to meet these needs as mainstay tools and systems have yet to add such features.

To what extent are our systems (and the extent of our metadata) designed for the "super users" that are steeped in the world of archival research? Or are they actually designed for archivists and to work within our existing practices rather than provide the best experience for users? Is the scaffolding we provide appropriate and meeting users where they are (e.g., hover text rather than a five-minute video tutorial)?

A single digital library system cannot be built to meet the needs of every user. How can we adjust our systems, descriptions, and workflows to meet the varying needs of most users? Whose needs are prioritized when making decisions regarding description and digitization? To explore this problem further, we need to plan collaboratively and strategically, and seek feedback from users while preferencing their needs over the easiest or most cost-effective solution from the archive's perspective.

Assumption #3: Tools and systems will improve over time to solve known interface problems and increase interoperability.

Although users of online archival collections are diverse in experience and needs, they are united in a desire for a seamless, efficient, and simple research experience. Digital libraries have modeled themselves after online retail sites with consistent features like search filters, user accounts, and shopping carts. This reduces some of the entry barriers to using online archives. Yet, one key difference between online archives and online retail sites is that archives often must maintain some sort of relationship (either flat or hierarchical) between items. Some content management systems have done better at maintaining the hierarchical relationships of a collection, series, folder, and item (e.g., ArchivesSpace public user interface and ArcLight) while others (e.g., CONTENTdm and Omeka) work under the assumption that items will have sufficient metadata for discovery. In each of these environments, the role of minimal description greatly impacts successful discovery of archival resources that meet researcher needs. Or, just as importantly, allows researchers to quickly and accurately assess when a digital library does *not* have what they need. This in addition to the vernacular of archives ("finding aid", "scope and contents", "series") leaves some inexperienced or new users confused by digital libraries and hesitant to return.

Additionally, users must contend with navigating through the different tools and systems within a single archive. Users may start on a digital library and then be required to set up an account to request copies or perhaps navigate to a different tool to schedule an appointment for viewing in person. Each of these with a distinct look and feel. And this is just for access to archival resources; users may also be working with the library catalog, research guides, and have separate accounts for interlibrary loans. Likewise, if a researcher is utilizing digitized collections from different institutions, they are likely to encounter differences between those systems in regards to navigation, faceting, hierarchy, and levels of description.

How does this lack of consistency between digital library interfaces disadvantage users? What role does the home-grown or highly customized digital library play in a seamless research experience? How could user experience improve if minimal description is no longer acceptable for the online environment? It is time for the profession to explore breaking from the constraints of minimal description and traditional archival description structures for online digital content altogether.

Assumption #4: We can tackle that in a future phase. Or: Minimal description, while not ideal, is a necessary/adequate way to deal with persistent resource limitations.

When physical collections are in need of more detailed description, digitization can be seen as a salve to processing the physical collection. Particularly in visual resources collections, digitization is seen as

a way to gain intellectual control via item-level description of the collection, but this perpetuates disjointed decision-making often resulting in circular thinking. Greene and Meissner (2005) explain,

> One of the first questions to ask in any digitization project is "Does the intellectual quality of the source material warrant the level of access made possible by digitizing?" One can posit this as a chicken/egg problem—how do we know if the collection is good enough to digitize if we haven't already described it to the item level? But more practically, if arrangement and description of the analog material depend on an initial assessment of the value (or intellectual quality) of the collection in the first place, then finely processed collections will by definition be good candidates for digitization and require less additional descriptive work.

It is time to include a digitally focused metadata strategy in all decisions about processing and digitization and address the chicken and egg question head on earlier in the curation process, as suggested in the OCLC Report, "Total Cost of Stewardship" (Weber et al. 2021). This approach not only addresses prioritization needs, but overcomes cases where the MPLP or minimal description approach to digitization ends up as an excuse for under-resourced and understaffed institutions to continue to justify their lack of investment in archival labor. While new methods can be applied to newly acquired collections, previously processed collections may require more difficult decision-making about revisiting description levels and resource allocation. Fortunately, many information professionals have begun strongly advocating for the need to do reparative work on collections, including redescription of materials. This is an optimum time for a reflection on the past decade's trend to prioritize digitization and online access above all else.

This is a call for change not only to cultural heritage institutions but also to those funding that work. The over reliance on grant funding for many aspects of our labor continues to create an unfair dependency on contingent and precarious positions, putting undue stress on information professionals (Rodriguez, et al. 2019). Further, reliance on piecemeal grant funding (especially for projects that utilize minimal description or MPLP practices) for specific projects acts to mollify the larger issues of under-valued and under-paid labor, few permanent positions, and lack of resources. Have we used MPLP as a short-term fix to long-term problems rather than devoting the time to evaluate and create ways to relieve the inequitable labor issues in our field, advocate for better funding, and make our labor more visible to our users and stakeholders (Williams 2016)? When digitization projects rely on time-based funding, often minimal description is the necessary route for completing the project within the scheduled parameters of the grant. Additionally, understaffed institutions may rely on minimal description workflows to complete projects, particularly when there may be one or a small handful of employees dedicated to digitization. As information professionals continue to find workarounds to a lack of investment in our repositories and our labor, we and our users are disadvantaged. Any large-scale digitization project that utilizes minimal description should be evaluated closely to ensure that the resources dedicated to the project are truly resulting in increased discovery and useability of the collection(s) while supporting ethical labor practice for the information professionals tasked to do the work.

Changing Practice

The challenges that have emerged from the assumptions identified above are widespread and have deep roots. As such, they demand creative solutions driven by tough questions and routine evaluation of existing practices. As we challenge individual, institutional, and professional norms, we can leverage ambitious practices that impact strategic development and planning, fair labor and ethics, technological tools, and assessment. We propose the following plans to accomplish this:

1. Create a plan for digitization at the point of curating and/or accessioning collections and have a hard conversation about prioritized work across the organization. Consider the life cycle of collections and align resource-heavy descriptive steps like processing and digitization together. Address descriptive needs in requests for external funding and eliminate digitization that does not include funding for description at the level needed.

2. Radically rethink the role of digital object representation (including finding aids) in the online environment. Work to retain valuable context, but also embrace the transformative nature of digital and online research by letting digital assets and metadata move out of, between, and through archival constructs. Where possible, implement systems that enable this transformation in both data models (linked data) and user interfaces (visualizing relationships and connections).

3. Do better for workers by thinking about the compounding effect of constant grant-funded and time-bound project deliverables. Avoid potential harm to contingent workers temporarily employed on digital projects and address workload for all employees, especially during (increasingly permanent) periods of resource scarcity.

4. In direct defiance of minimal practices, flip the whole system and invest in reparative description and work toward more inclusive metadata overall across systems. Develop metadata strategies that add value in broad and sustainable ways such as: alignment with the Santa Barbara Statement on Collections as Data (Padilla et al. 2019), normalization and cleanup of data for future interoperability and migration between systems, and/or assignment of RightsStatements.org controlled vocabularies.

Action & Evaluation

Many of the questions posed throughout this piece do not have clear overarching answers. Yet they do articulate the need for both reflection *and* action. There is work to be done. The following can be used to challenge assumptions and make decisions that push beyond ambitions to action and continuous growth.

Online Access

In order to appropriately utilize its limited resources of staff time and digital storage space, an archive must strategically select collections for digitization and online access. Ensure digitization is considered during donation, accessioning, and processing. Be realistic and honest when discussing digitization with donors, curators and collections managers, administrators, and users. Do not make promises without considering the short and long-term implications.

The foundational marker of research value will often be a motivator for digitization, but archives should also recognize reasons *not* to digitize or to postpone digitization and online access.

- Does the existing descriptive metadata provide enough context for understanding the items when in the online system?

- Does the existing descriptive metadata include natural language, controlled vocabularies, or full text transcripts in searchable fields that will allow for adequate discovery?

- If not, what is a realistic estimate of how much effort is required to expand the metadata sufficiently? Can aspects of this work be automated? Who will be responsible for this work and do they have the capacity? How will this impact other priorities?

- Has the collection been processed to a level that merits digitization? If there is little meaningful description do not digitize. Stop the cycle.

Usability and Navigation

Rather than prioritizing expedient online access, seek a balance between access, discovery, and positive user experience for all users. If we fail to do this, our digital libraries will become confusing networks of millions of digitized objects that may be accessible but remain largely undiscoverable for most users. Many archives are already standing on this precipice and find themselves, toes perched over the edge, realizing something must change.

Now is the time to pause and reflect, to gather data and consider long-term implications.

- What do we know about our users? Take time to gather feedback and conduct user experience studies, no matter how small in scope. Document findings and use them to inform and prioritize iterative interface changes that benefit the majority of users.

- What technical methods can be leveraged to extract useful information from the finding aid, such as collection notes and series and subseries information, for display at the item-level view to improve use of collections with minimal description?

- How can we collaborate with allied professions to update standards and design tools that offer a more cohesive, intuitive, and meaningful experience for a majority of users?

Tools and Systems

There is no one system that addresses all of the challenges in online discovery. The diversity of organizational needs has led to a plethora of digital library systems that prioritize different basic elements of archival description and access. It has been resource intensive to develop and customize these systems, many of which attempt to support minimal description, and it is even more intensive to transition out of these systems into something different. Rather than attempt to design tools and systems that support traditional archival practices, consider how discovery and meaningful use can be improved by breaking away from the rigid structures of conventional description.

- How can tools and systems prioritize features to support linked open data and the use of collections as data? How well is your data optimized for discovery outside of the local system? Can data be easily shared via an open API or SPARQL endpoint?

- Can we build systems that provide discovery and meaningful use of digitized archival materials without relying on the structure of the finding aid? Can the information from the collection guide be structured differently for online access?

- When the system is determined to be the problem, can an improvement in the data itself solve any of the issues? Would data clean-up help users more than adding a new interface? Could centralizing description and reusing data across functions improve discovery as much as a new interface? How ready is your data to move across systems if this is the only solution?

- When choosing a new architecture, many organizations think they are unique in their struggles and must build a unique system to fix the problems. Is this really true? What are the implications of selecting a homegrown development path: in the context of sustainability, interoperability, and getting locked into yet another "custom" way of doing things? Rather than invest in highly customized solutions, cross-institutional partnerships must be strengthened and community collaboration increased to build open source and interoperable tools, and invest in iterative improvements to metadata and interface design.

Prioritization and Labor Issues

The profession is in the midst of a labor crisis. Our stated priorities and needs have vastly outpaced our resources and evidence of this is seen in the nearly ubiquitous backlogs. These growing backlogs have rarely even begun to address born digital archives and online access. So what questions can we ask to make better decisions about priorities and responsible assignment of work?

- Question existing priorities. Ask, "why these activities first"? Determine if they are clearly aligned with strategic planning and values of the organization. How often are priorities reconsidered? Whose voices are heard in the process? How can these priorities remain agile in a rapidly changing world?

- Challenge assumptions about new collections coming in. Is the organization realistically capable of providing access to this collection in a way users expect? What metrics could be developed using tools such as the recent OCLC report, "Total Cost of Stewardship" (Weber et al. 2021)?

- When institutions do not have the resources, are grants or project-based funding the only option? Is it possible to break free of the external funding treadmill and make long-term investments in labor to support description? If not, is it worth the harm these positions perpetuate?

- If relying on term positions is the only way to provide access, what guidelines are in place to ensure equitable labor practices? Are these aligned with national conversations in groups working on improving contingent labor practices such as the *Collective Responsibility* National

> Forum on Labor Practices for Grant-Funded Digital Positions white paper (Tillman and Rodriguez 2020)?

In their support of MPLP, Greene and Meissner had argued that "a sign of professional maturity would be for us to own up to the limitations we work under" and then adapt our methods to align with those limitations. After all, simply doing the same thing while expecting different results, they reminded us, is the very definition of insanity (Greene and Meissner 2005). As a profession, we need to embrace this challenge, by critically evaluating the utility of what we do and realistically aligning our methods to develop nuanced strategies that maximize our ability to steward our collections, respect our labor, and serve our users.

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