**Diverse Digitization: Ethics of Inclusion in Archives and Special Collections**

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Arguably the most critical value of librarianship is maintaining and promoting access to information. With increasing reliance on technology in modern society, the expectations of this access evolve, and we begin thinking of new methods of making resources available that never existed before. Presently, the digitization of sources is at the center of this evolution, appealing to educate at a broader scale, regardless of physical location. However, with this comes the question of content: what should archival and special collections prioritize in their digital content? In a profession that values equity as much as access to information, it is vital to carefully consider the selection of these increasingly accessible resources, especially regarding underrepresented communities and cultural knowledge.

Research articles and case studies that focus on the ethics of digitization present a few key themes that shift into the profession’s goals. Three of these goals are: increasing the visibility of previously misrepresented or underrepresented communities, preserving cultural history, and using digitization to incorporate diverse materials into educational curricula while maintaining the quality of the materials. By pursuing these goals, librarians and archivists seek to increase access to information to enrich education and research opportunities for the public.

# Increased Visibility

One key area of thought in recent times is the importance of visibility and representation. Seeing oneself represented in the world in some capacity can profoundly impact not only self-esteem but also educational interest and continued research in topics that need supplementation. The digitization of special collections makes it possible to increase access to information more variedly. This could potentially expose larger numbers of people to previously underrepresented communities. For example, collections such as the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives or the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) moving out of private spaces and into public and even digital spaces fulfills the aspiration to increase visibility in the LGBTQ+ community (Boutchma, 2017). Increasing visibility can serve worldwide populations such as this but can have just as many benefits in accessing local history. For example, the preservation of an African American newspaper in Saint Petersburg, Florida called *The Weekly Challenger* serves as a historical landmark for the local community. This case exemplifies the use of digitization when physical materials are not guaranteed to serve in the future, as many issues of *The Weekly Challenger* were water damaged, torn, or faded (Cardwell, 2018). Digitization of special collections is known to increase longevity. This newspaper, which served an oppressed community and contributed to local culture, brings new value to digitization by increasing visibility to people who can personally identify with the materials.

Increasing visibility begins with a goal, then a plan. Institutions such as the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) and Louisiana State University Library Special Collections have published works detailing the ways that they continue to work towards making their collections more culturally diverse and accessible (Ziegler, 2019), sharing both the processes that worked and those that did not. In both of these cases, the ideal place to start was to state the goals of the collections, then establish “clear and achievable benchmarks” to work toward (Luke, 2022). UTA’s central idea in curating the digital collection was to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the UTA community. They enacted this by increasing the access to materials that had been more difficult to track down previously, such as literature written by African American authors (Luke, 2022). Similarly, LSU Library Special Collections set forth their own goals to diversify their collections, better representing African American materials and other previously underrepresented materials, and seeking to correct instances of racial prioritization in collections. (Ziegler, 2019).

Not all materials are created equal, and there is some discussion on the other side of this issue about some materials that might not need increased visibility. The right to be forgotten, formally introduced in 2016, is primarily used to enable people to remove personal information from widely available sources for privacy purposes but is also an applicable concept when considering harmful or offensive materials (Manžuch, 2017). The LSU Special Collections, in addition to increasing diversity and access to information in that regard, sought to add inclusion criteria to counteract the local history of racism that caused the low visibility of diverse materials in the first place. In doing so, they began actively removing harmful language and terminology in their sources (Ziegler, 2019). In another example, a University of Nebraska campus newspaper introduced in 1921 called the *Awgwan* raised questions about ethical digitization. The newspaper was famous for its offensive content, which often included racist, sexist, or xenophobic comedy. Though this newspaper might be considered part of local culture or history, its potentially harmful content causes ethical issues in a widely accessible digital format (Brink, 2016). Pondering the possibility of harmful content when digitizing materials helps to improve access to helpful information and focus visibility initiatives on diverse educational information.

**Preservation of Cultural History**

Increasing the visibility of underserved populations within special collections is a necessary benefit of access to information through digitization. However, properly representing cultural information in these practices is a massive responsibility that requires careful consideration. When special collections go about digitizing their collections, they must be aware of the materials’ significance and how those materials reflect their cultures and communities.

Ethically, there is certainly a right and wrong way to digitize cultural or heritage information. A thread that runs through research on this subject is how vital it is to include the subjects in the conversation, referring to a specific ethnic group or race, nationality, LGBTQ+ materials, etc. This is an especially prevalent issue regarding indigenous materials in special collections, indigenous cultures being infamously underserved throughout history. Barbara Mathé of the American Museum of Natural History Research Library wrote in 2014 about including indigenous materials in digital archives. In her research, Mathé found that many and arguably most of the photographs in American collections of indigenous people were taken without consent and, in numerous cases, carelessly mislabeled (Mathé, 2014). The issue of consent in taking someone’s photograph for museum purposes notwithstanding, refusing to correct misinformation and making it freely available to the public is something that cannot continue for the sake of authenticity and proper representation.

As well as the integrity of the material, some discourse arises on whether some cultural materials should be in widely accessible special collections in the first place. Zinaida Manžuch’s article, *Ethical Issues in Digitization of Cultural Heritage,* discusses the consistently ignored concept of respecting cultural customs when collecting information. Some materials in indigenous cultures are considered sacred knowledge not to be shared (Manžuch, 2017). These materials should arguably not be in a non-indigenous collection to begin with, let alone a worldwide digital format. In instances such as this, some things are better kept from large-scale consumption.

A critical thing for librarians to remember when moving to digitize cultural materials is the benefit of collaboration with the communities themselves. This strategy has already proven merit within digital collections such as the Pei Jones Collection in New Zealand. The descendants of Māori political leader and historian Pei Jones and the Museum of New Zealand collaborated to make both the physical and digital collections rich in culture and correctly interpreted (Whaanga, 2015). Even before then, in 2013, Ellen Cushman shared the Cherokee Nation’s digitization of educational media in Cherokee history and language and the concept of taking traditionally colonized collections and transforming them into accurate and educational tools for truthful information (Cushman, 2013). These collections are excellent examples of archives working with communities to create the most compelling and authentic collections of indigenous materials.

**Educational Use and Quality of Information**

When undertaking as massive a task as digitizing special collections, product quality is an ongoing consideration. It acts as a goal for institutions to work toward while digitizing collections. Shan C. Sutton’s article responding to the “More Product, Less Process” approach to digitization sought to measure the pros and cons of such large production digitizing. In this article, Sutton asserted that “institutions can seek an appropriate balance in increasing the production of digitized content while ensuring that appropriate levels of quality are met to effectively provide online access to their archives and special collections.” (Sutton, 2012). In coming to this conclusion, Sutton discussed that the creation of metadata by an increasing number of people could cause overwhelming change to digitization processes. Similarly, Manžuch details the ethical dangers that can arise with widespread access to information to be shared and manipulated: “the ease of sharing and introducing changes to digital files complicates the task of protecting personal information contained in digitized documents and ensuring their trustworthiness.” (Manžuch, 2012).

Finally, the all-encompassing issue of funding also affects the digitization of collections. The fight against marketability in special collections is already present. However, when adding larger and larger potential audiences or users to the equation, the use of information value brings new issues. Digitization is not a cheap venture, so when collections seek to digitize, they will often need to pitch it as a business idea, presenting its merits. The question of funding can introduce the phenomenon of measuring the value of materials and, therefore, can profoundly affect the selection of digitized materials. This encroaches on the ethics of digitization because it means that the heaviest wallet with stake in the collection can manipulate the most prominent materials and how resources are distributed to authenticate them. This impacts both of the previous digitization goals: preserving cultural history and increasing the visibility of underrepresented communities. Manžuch presents these issues as "selection biases and limitation of access." (Manžuch, 2012).

Librarians and archivists are well aware of these issues and are constantly battling to maintain values simultaneously. In the goals for the Pei Jones Collection, the collaborators sought to prohibit value taxes on the materials in an attempt to exempt the materials from measuring quality in comparison to other materials, for example (Whaanga, 2015). In many cases, finding alternative methods to raise funds, such as donation or commercial ventures through the institution itself, help to keep the control of materials in the hands of institutions committed to their own goals and values for digital collections (Manžuch, 2012). These ventures are unquestionably effortful but offer many benefits to the quality and integrity of digitization.

**Conclusion**

Three ethical considerations within digitizing special collections regarding diverse materials are increasing the visibility of previously misrepresented or underrepresented communities, preserving cultural history, and using digitization to incorporate diverse materials into educational curricula while maintaining the quality of the materials. A few common strategies are present.

Firstly, digitization initiatives in diverse materials should always begin with clear and attainable goals or statements, serving as guidelines for the process and mission statements to present to stakeholders. During this process, one thing to keep in mind is making these goals and statements realistic and achievable, setting measurable outcomes with clear indicators of change. Secondly, concerning cultural information, the point of collaboration is stressed. When curating a digital collection of indigenous materials, for example, communicating with members of the indigenous community in question and determining the materials' authenticity is vital. Along with this, it also helps to keep in mind that distributing this power to individuals can also have complications, so it is ideal to have a small and responsible group of contributors is ideal. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a priority in diverse digitization should be action. As methods and technology evolve, more information contributes to increasing diverse materials in widely available formats, and therefore courses of action will undoubtedly change. Making the jump to begin these initiatives makes the most significant difference in maintaining the values of diversity and access to information, and then the methodology comes with time and planning. Taking action to uphold these values is a notable beginning and serves the profession and the world.

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