

Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group 2008: Digitization Project Case Studies

ABSTRACT

The Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group (LCCDG) of the Book and Paper Group was pleased to host a panel discussion on “Digitization Project Case Studies” at the 2008 AIC meeting held in Denver, Colorado. This topic was conceived following the lively brainstorming session held during the joint Electronic Media Group (EMG)/LCCDG discussion group at the 2007 AIC annual meeting in Richmond, VA. In preparation for the 2008 discussion group, the LCCDG co-chairs Sarah Reidell and Laura McCann recruited book and paper conservators to present short, informal case studies of digitization projects that incorporate conservation workflows. The five panelists selected represented a full range of digital imaging projects, from cooperative efforts with large corporations to in-house reformatting efforts. Each panelist shared a short presentation on a digitization project from their institution; described the size and scope of the project, funding source(s), staffing, project workflows, selection criteria, conservation treatment workflows, and treatments; and concluded with analyses of lessons learned and recommendations to colleagues. After presentations, the moderators led a question-and-answer session between the enthusiastic crowd and the five panelists.

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Priscilla Anderson, collections conservator in Baker Library Historical Collections at the Harvard Business School, shared details of Baker Library’s in-house subject-based digitization project, “The Development of American Capitalism,” which

This open discussion took place on April 24, 2008, during the AIC 36th Annual Meeting, Denver, CO. The moderators organized the panelists, led the discussion, and recorded notes. Readers are reminded that the moderators do not necessarily endorse all the comments recorded and that although every effort was made to record proceedings accurately, further evaluation or research is advised before putting treatment observations into practice.

produced a web-based virtual collection of approximately 1300 special collection items including unbound sheets, photographs, and bound volumes. Anderson described how digitization projects vie for the time and attention of the Baker Conservation staff as they review material, determine whether each item needs pre-scan or post-scan treatment (including what level of treatment), rehouse each item, and/or define special handling requirements during scanning. Pre-imaging assessment decisions represent difficult and often significant compromises but in this case were required to meet tight timeframes for digital imaging and were critical to achieving department goals. Collection materials returned for post-scanning assessment and treatment are often considered differently than the regular workflow because the existence of the high-quality, easily accessible scan presumably reduces the likelihood of a patron wanting to use the original item.

Heather Hendry, paper conservator in the Harvard University Library, Weissman Preservation Center (WPC), discussed her experience as a conservator dedicated solely to digital imaging projects. Harvard University’s cooperative efforts to manage simultaneous, special collections digitization projects have provided the WPC with an opportunity to refine the conservation component of these projects over time. Each project builds upon the experience from previous projects, especially in developing flexibility in work spaces, tools, techniques, and staffing. These cumulative experiences have helped to establish relationships between conservation, special collections staff, and the digitization department. Efficient management of time and work enables treatments to be tailored to the object’s needs and project time requirements. Treatment to prepare objects for digitization ranges from surface cleaning to more complex and extensive conservation. Tight deadlines for treatments are met by using a combination of conservators, technicians, and student assistants, as the complexity of the treatment requires.

Mary Oey shared her experience as conservator of music manuscripts at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, which in 2007 received a donation to conserve and digitize the library’s music manuscript collection. Her presentation

covered the planning and beginning stages of implementing a conservation and digitization project led by the conservation department. The project goals were not only to increase access to the collection via the World Wide Web and improve condition of collection, but also to advance professional standards of best practices for photographic digitization and to provide a working model for similar endeavors. Conservation treatment aimed specifically at both ensuring physical stability of manuscripts during imaging and improving the visual suitability of content for online publication. Commonly performed treatments included, tape removal, removal of old mends, aqueous treatment, and mending. Less frequent treatments were stain reductions and binding treatments.

Shannon Zachary, head of conservation services of the University Library at the University of Michigan, and Holly Robertson, head of preservation services at the University of Virginia Library, both spoke about cooperative mass digitization ventures with Google, Inc. The Google partnerships vary among institutions, but generally Google provides the equipment, space, and staffing for scanning as well as legal costs. The partner libraries are responsible for planning, publicity, public-relations, work-flow supervision, preparation of volumes, and supplying cataloging data. According to the partnership agreements, Google partner libraries are not permitted to disclose how many books have been scanned, where the books are scanned, or how the books are scanned, but all other information about the project can be shared. Google partner libraries, while not permitted to discuss the methodology of the digitization, are able to visit the facilities and inspect the operations.

The University of Michigan was one of the five original institutions to partner with Google and plans to digitize the entire print collection of the University Library. Conservation staff from all five early partners were involved with the project from the beginning stages, working with Google staff on the cradle design and developing handling policies. Zachary observed that overall there was less impact on the conservation, book repair, and bindery preparations units than anticipated. This was attributed to the fact that Google staff rejects material in poor condition, such as brittle books. These rejected volumes are sent to either a commercial bindery or the conservation lab for simple treatment (e.g., board reattachment using dyed Japanese paper) and then resubmitted for imaging by Google when possible. Plans exist to digitize the remaining volumes, mostly brittle books, independently of the Google project. Zachary commented on the irony that this new mass reformatting project systematically rejected precisely those volumes that the preservation and conservation community would judge most in need of reformatting.

The University of Virginia (UVA) partnered with Google soon after developing a preservation program. As UVA's first preservation officer Holly Robertson spoke on her experiences navigating the challenges of working on a high-profile,

mass-digitization project. The physical conditions of the library collections prompted the additional allocation of preservation funding, particularly for commercial binding, since due to the specific UVA-Google contract all volumes must be bound and in good condition to be digitized by Google. Volumes requiring more than two hours of conservation treatment and brittle books were returned to the stacks. Other volumes were either treated in-house by preservation staff or sent to the commercial bindery. Robertson emphasized the need to visit scanning facilities, work closely with the partner staff/library administration to ensure proper handling of the volumes, and to communicate with other conservation professions involved in similar projects.

DISCUSSION SESSION

The second part of the LCCDG session was a half-hour discussion with questions from the audience and led by co-moderators Sarah Reidell and Laura McCann. Two major themes emerged in the discussion: the impact of digitization projects on conservation/preservation departments and the ethical implications of changes in treatment decision-making.

A common theme from the panelists was the ethical issue of adapting and redesigning conservation treatment to facilitate scanning. Panelists noted a shift from stabilization treatments for handling and use in a reading room towards treatments concerned with the requirements of imaging systems. Structural reinforcements and stabilization treatments were utilized with less frequency in contrast to humidification and flattening of materials for imaging. An example of a scanning-oriented treatment includes removing old repairs that obscure text. Another subset of questions raised along this theme was the weighted pre-selection of materials slated for treatment based on their ability to maintain the demands of a digitization workflow. Several of the case-study projects noted that objects requiring more intensive treatment were often excluded from the conservation queue so as not to slow down the imaging system. Another of the ethical implications raised was a greater elevation of aesthetic over physical characteristics, a by-product of the increased and rapid sophistication of imaging equipment and software. The issue of treatment documentation was addressed by all the presenters. The Baker Library at Harvard Business School uses an adapted short paper form to record treatment for its digitization project. Heather Henry and Mary Oey described database documentation systems used at their institutions. Michigan maintains dated information sheets that describe repair techniques and materials. The limited treatments currently carried out at the University of Virginia are statistically recorded in ARL fields.

The impact of digitization projects on existing conservation workflows and staffing was discussed. At the University of Virginia the partnership with Google has resulted in

departmental expansion. Similarly, other institutions report creating new positions or hiring contract conservation staff specifically to meet digitization demands. When new staff hires are not possible and the digitization projects represent additional workloads Anderson emphasized the importance of using time-management strategies such as time-blocks or percentage allocations.

SUMMARY

Overall, the implementation of digitization projects provides an opportunity to recalibrate conservation and preservation efforts within the library and museum community. One point made clear by these presentations and the resulting discussion is that the conservation community gains much by sharing and cooperating within and outside of itself. Misperceptions about non-disclosure agreements often unnecessarily isolate institutions and those working on digitization projects. Focused and project-based employment is increasingly driving hiring strategies and serves as a challenging platform for conservators at all stages in their careers. Communicating our collective accumulated knowledge through conferences, listservs, formal and informal articles, and personal communication benefits the projects, the health of our cultural collections, and our profession.

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