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Unlocking the Door to Special Collections: Using the Web Combination

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Introduction

The World Wide Web provides a marvelously efficient mechanism for enhancing use of special collections in libraries. Production costs are minimal, the reach is global, and much of the audience is new to the world of rare books, manuscripts, archives, and historical photographs. In addition, a website is available, to those with the equipment, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, at no additional cost. Plus, it is infinitely and immediately updateable, upgradeable, and enhanceable. The web offers much that is useful to special collections; and, by virtue of their content, special collections offer much that is important to the web.

Not in Kansas Anymore

Like so many things in American life at the turn of the century, libraries and the special collections and archival departments within them have been mightily affected by the Internet and the World Wide Web. At some point in the future, it will all seem mundane and commonplace, but today's view of this ongoing transformation provides perspective on how far we have come and how much farther we have to go. Mainframes and MARC eliminated card catalogs and catalog cards from our professional lives; PCs and the Internet have nearly eliminated the standard inquiry letter with (or often, without) the stamped, self-addressed envelope; more powerful PCs, the World Wide Web, and always-on broadband connections are ushering in a world as yet only dimly realized. When we add ubiquitous wireless to this mix we will know "We're not in Kansas anymore."

Accordingly, before we strap on the oft-predicted but never quite realized rocket belts, this might be an appropriate time to look back at the first faltering steps along this path

and to review some of the choices made, the paths taken, the dead-ends encountered or avoided. It is also important to see that what we are doing now is not a break from the past but a continuation of it. There has been a revolution, but like most revolutions, much is retained and carried forward.

Increasingly the network of computers that makes up what we think of as the internet is receding into the background as more and more of us are connected to it. It is, like all good infrastructures, becoming mostly invisible. As long as it works without a hitch, we do not have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. The World Wide Web, as one use of the Internet, is also going to recede into the background. New tools, new formats, and new media will change how the public accesses information and how libraries provide it.

Been There, Done That

The traditional means of library and archival outreach have included exhibits, special events, lectures, activities, publications, and audiovisual presentations.[1] In the last fifteen years or so, we've been increasingly exhorted to be proactive about getting the word out about our holdings (as if we weren't doing that before). Studies of resource allocators have demonstrated that what we hope people know about us is very different from what they do know about us; the Benton Foundation report [2] documents that disparity.

While some say librarians and archivists don't do enough outreach, it is, for many, a matter of measuring priorities and responses. When only ten or twelve people show up at a program, lecture, or reception one wonders whether the time organizing it was well spent. Evaluation of the results of an event or activity is an important component frequently overlooked. Some years back I devised a scheme to test the usefulness of two big display cases on the outside wall of Special Collections facing the heavily used library reserve reading room. I would put up an exhibit or display using materials from our collections. I also included measurement tools. In one exhibit, placards suggested that interested viewers visit Special Collections for more information. In another, prizes were offered for answering simple questions about the exhibit. At other times I just watched to see who was looking at the cases. The response was underwhelming.

After several months I decided that the effort of creating these exhibits, in relation to all other tasks, was not a high priority. When we planned a new building, I purposely did not include exhibit facilities knowing that our staff would probably never expand sufficiently to manage all the items on the list of priorities.

Accordingly, when I compared these meager results of those physical exhibits with last year's 14,000 viewers on our Special Collections website (www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/) I began to see a way to work smarter not harder.

A Website for Special Collections

In late 1994, the University of Idaho Computer Center made it possible to establish an institutional website on their server. They were quick to encourage and emphasized how easy it was to set up a website. They offered instructional courses and made it all seem relatively easy. Which it was in those days. It got much more complicated later.

Finding Web Content

When I began to think about what to put on the World Wide Web to represent our repository, I immediately thought of the brochures, handouts, guides, and inventories that were already being distributed. Almost all were in word processing form and were, therefore, available for digital manipulation. I am a strong believer in retaining electronic files for later use and reuse. I also mine old files for paragraphs and phrases using the search function in the word processor software. The basic description of the collection, now on the web at www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/sc-intro.htm, started as a duplicated handout that was part of the old *Library Guide Series*.

If we had started from scratch, a lot of time would have been devoted to considering the "best" way to present things on the web. Is a hierarchical subject approach easier to use? Can we help the user navigate by developing a "geographical" model; organizing things by location, as some Internet shopping malls have attempted. Do we need a virtual reference desk, reading room, stack area, or conservation department to aid the user in getting around the text that we provide for their assistance? These are valid design questions, but ones that I skipped. I took what was available, threw it into a conversion, and posted it for all to see. Organizational refinements will come later, I thought. And besides, at the University of Idaho, things are on a different scale than they are at, say, the Library of Congress.

But how to convert it to HTML (HyperText Markup Language)? When I started this project, the tools available were very primitive and so I learned HTML the hard way from a list of codes. Now, there are software tools that simplify the coding and viewing of the page. I still find my hard-won knowledge of HTML useful in overruling choices that the software tries to make for me.

The traditional way of learning HTML was to view the source code of a good page and learn from it. However, one commentator noted that this method should be called "defect replication." (Glen Blankenship, "Re: #### Somebody...teach me HTML please!!!!!! ", usenet:comp.infosystems.www.authoring.html, Sat., 20 Jul 1996 12:14:22) For more functional guidance, there are a number of sites with advice; one is the "Web Developer's Virtual Library: Encyclopedia of Web Design Tutorials, Articles and Discussions" (www.wdvl.com/)

Incremental Add-ons

My intent in recoding existing text for the web was to do it simply and quickly. Accordingly, I did not originally bother much about stylistic niceties that I would worry over if the document was going to become enshrined in print for all time. These were provisional documents, in a sense. I could revise them and refine them continuously, but the immediate purpose was to get them out there where they could be, even if haltingly, used.

After posting the introductory materials, I took a hard look at the archival inventories. Inventories are one of the main descriptive tools for archival and manuscript material. I converted nearly 250 inventories from existing word-processing files and loaded them onto the web. Then I proceeded to tackle the OCR (optical character recognition) conversion of the one hundred or so that were created before word-processors. This was partly in response to studies which indicate that researchers most want access to finding aids and descriptions. Daniel German has made this point to researcher Robert Shuster (as posted in an e-mail summary from Robert Shuster to Terry Abraham on Thu 25 Apr 1996 10:21:48). For an example of a simple archival inventory in its current iteration, see www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Manuscripts/mg189.htm.

I want to stress that I do not claim that the pages developed at the University of Idaho fulfill any or all of the goals usually identified for archival sites. My intent was to get stuff up quickly and inexpensively, without any extra expense except my own time. And my time was very much occupied with this task between 1994 and 1996. In late 1996 I was able to go back and add some refinements and correct some errors in the first group of pages loaded; addressing, in the process, some of the criticisms raised by Bill Landis' seminal article on web outreach[3]. In the meantime, however, we had a web presence. There was no point, I reasoned, in waiting until everything is perfect; since perfection is never realized. Since then, we have continued to update and maintain the site and correct errors as they are noticed.

For instance, last year the site underwent another major redesign and incorporated Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to better manage uniform styles and colors across all the pages. Newer trends in description are also being continually monitored. The development of Encoded Archival Description (EAD) has been under review since the beginning. The need for a special browser (or an information-loss on-the-fly conversion to HTML) plus the lack of staff time to properly encode finding aids and registers has mitigated our adoption of this technology. In addition, we have seen no great user demand for this service. Broader developments in the World Wide Web scene suggest that EAD may be superceded by a version of eXtensible Markup Language (XML), a new standard currently under development.[4]

Websites and Web Sights

What is expected of a special collections or archival website? As early as February 1995 Frank D. Jackson of Emory University posted to the Archives & Archivists list a summary of archival use of the World Wide Web[5]:

- Contact Information
- Exhibition Catalogs
- Finding Aids (with keyword searching)
- Hours of Operation
- Introductions
- Lists of Manuscript Collections
- Lists of Other Archival Sites
- Newsletters (current and past issues)
- Oral History Transcripts
- Regulations for Use
- Scope and Content Notes
- University-Wide Records Retention Schedules
- Workshop Announcements

In a study I conducted in June 1996, it was clear that the web was still new to many institutions. Using the database of Repositories of Primary Sources (www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html), I randomly identified one hundred repositories for inspection. Among the surprises was the finding that over a quarter of the sites did not include the name or address of the repository. And less than half the pages included an archivist's name or e-mail address. Only about a third included information on hours that the repository was open. (www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/papers/networth.htm)

Bruce Bruemmer, in a 1997 survey of archival websites, found less than half included traditional archival information such as collection descriptions and inventories. He noted: "the Web, at this point in time, is predominantly used to convey information about repositories, not information held by the repositories."[6] That is, there is descriptive information about the repositories (hours, mailing address, lists of collections) but not digitized documents or books. Today, it seems that these two approaches still divide the field; some repositories concentrate on presenting information *about* the collections, while others jump into scanning and presenting the *contents* of the collection. The Library of Congress is an example of a repository that does both, while other institutions choose one path or another.

Non-Traditional Outreach on the Web

Aside from the exhibit/interpretive aspect of outreach, there are a number of other, more non-traditional, outreach activities that are enhanced by the use of the World Wide Web. Promotional activities of a traditional nature can be given a boost by publicizing them through the institutional web page as well as through institutional and international listservs

and newsgroups. Are you sponsoring a lecture or a fellowship? Publicize it easily on the web and through electronic announcements.

While reference functions are not often considered outreach, they do provide an opportunity for one-on-one promotion and dissemination. Don't we often promote additional services and collections in the course of a reference interview? The same is true of the e-mail inquiry. Do your e-mail messages include a signature line that identifies you and your institutional web page?

One advantage of this reservoir of information about the collections and holdings is that it allows us to transfer the costs of reproduction off-site. While we cheerfully copy an inventory for a distant researcher, I'd much rather refer them to the web page and let them copy it out on their machine at their cost. And we've had researchers appear on our doorstep with a printout in hand, ready to go to work.

While the University of Idaho Library is a relatively small organization and Special Collections smaller still, we have found the internal use of our web page a significant outreach tool. Not only do other library staff now have an opportunity to learn about our collection, but also they can and do use the posted resources to answer questions posed to them. It is just another electronic resource to them, but one that has the added benefit of referring to local holdings. To a certain extent, this is true within Special Collections as well. We now can share our expertise to a greater extent during a time of required cross-training and understaffing. Relying on the web for some common answers also means that similar questions get standardized answers, not answers that are different depending on who is asked. We haven't quite got to the point of posting our file of common questions and their uncommon answers, but I have used some of those questions as jumping off points for our Digital Memories (www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/dgtlcurr.html) exhibits.

Got (e)Mail?

E-mail is increasingly a component of the World Wide Web, rather than a separate entity on a separate network. The expansion of e-mail to the broader population, paralleling the growth of the web, has implications for library and archival websites. In the early days of the web there was substantial concern about the possibility of receiving an enormous overload of reference questions through e-mail. Most institutions had an e-mail link to the person in charge of the web page, not to the reference desk. This concern has either proved unfounded or attitudes have changed to welcome queries via e-mail. Our experience in Special Collections may not be uncommon; our first e-mail query arrived in July 1995; some ten months after we posted the website. The subsequent number of e-mail queries has been entirely manageable, such that we do not bother to keep separate statistics on their number.

Our web pages have generated a small but growing number of e-mail reference requests, often responding to specific information in an inventory or description. Open-ended inquiries often can be referred to the website for additional information. For some telephone inquiries I have asked if they have web access and referred them to a web page. Letters requesting information can frequently be answered by referral to a web page and, if they

include an e-mail address, by sending the page directly to them. In some cases, I have just run a printout of the page and mailed that, snail-mail.

What has been more interesting is the increasing perception on our part that materials on the web are completely different than those in the reading room. In part, this is because we are now reaching a new and often naïve (at least archivally) group of users. These are often people who would not normally have ever considered going to Special Collections (or perhaps even a library) to ask their question. Accordingly, our responses must be carefully worded to educate them without patronizing them.

A further aspect is that powerful web search engines have now made certain kinds of inquiries relatively easy, even if the answer sought is incorrect or misdirected. For example, an e-mail question regarding artificial ambergris (ambergris is normally found in the intestine of a sperm whale, it is used to make scent) arrived here based on a search result that included the inventory to the records of the Ambergris Mining Company in northern Idaho.

Some queries, often from school children, are so broad and general that the proper response is to refer them back to the local library. In many cases, the query starts with the assumption that all relevant materials are found on the World Wide Web and so they start their inquiry there. A recent example, on close examination, is from England:

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> i am a student of The Ridings High School Winterbourn and am
studying physics as one of my A levels.

> the reason for me writing to you is because we have been
asked to pick a material and resurch it, and i could you help
me by sending any infomation you could as an attachment.

> thank you
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Subsequently, I received an apology from the lad's father.

More troubling, perhaps, is the realization, alluded to above, that the web permits approaches to material that have not been completely thought through. We have inventories to bodies of material that are, in part, restricted. Do we put those inventories on the web as is, or just load the unrestricted parts? In another case, we started receiving inquiries about items that were listed in a separate index of correspondence. The index was imprecise and only identified the year of the file, but each year might be as large as four cubic feet. Such an inventory in-house was not a problem; the researcher would identify the year and we would bring out the box(es) for them to search through. E-mail inquiries posed a different problem. Search engines and genealogical sites made it relatively easy for individuals to submit a surname and find an untold number of leads. Dashing off an e-mail request was simple. But at our end, it was not easy or simple. Just to find the letter to respond to the question might mean examining every item in one or more boxes, potentially thousands of loose letters. Limits on our staff meant that we were unable to even begin to look to see if the index properly referred to someone's ancestor. After several such questions, it became apparent

that the index was not functioning because it was so imprecise; accordingly it was removed from the website. The paper copy in our reading room is still available, however, for those who wish to search through the boxes.

Benefits of the World-Wide Web

The printing press revolutionized the western world. Among other things, it created the dichotomy between what we now call archives and libraries. And archives and libraries were to make use of it as an information dissemination tool. Although we are not yet prepared to give up this tool entirely, I would suggest that new technologies are taking over some of its functions. Libraries, for instance, once published their catalogs in books. Online bibliographic systems have assumed that function. Directories of resources and repositories were, not too long ago, published as books. Today, that kind of publication is either online or in some other electronic format, such as CD-ROM.

The advantages of electronic publication for some sorts of materials is quite clear. In online formats, electronic data is easy to update, it is stored in a compressed format until accessed, distribution is solely to those who want the information, and the costs of publication, distribution, and storage are, in some environments, almost nil.

And now we have the World Wide Web. Growing from almost nothing in the last decade, the web is now a significant factor in library and archival publication programs. It has been noted that using the web means the library or archives "is becoming a publishing medium. ....[It] contributes to the scholarly repertoire. [The library's] Special Collections pages are the library's first unique publications."[7] Many archivists, particularly those in academic institutions, found themselves in an "early adoption mode." With access to the computers and the networks, these pioneers were quick to see the outreach benefits of web publication.

There is one other feature of online technology that has been identified as a plus. This is the "dog recognition" factor. According to the famous cartoon, "On the Internet, no one knows you are a dog."[*] In the context of archival sites on the World Wide Web, this means that both the Library of Congress and the local historical society occupy nearly equivalent (cyber)spaces. This is certainly an advantage to the historical society. In fact, in many ways, it is easier for the local historical society to establish and maintain a web presence than it is for the Library of Congress.

There is also a benefit to the larger organization. At the University of Idaho in 1996, the library's web page (www.lib.uidaho.edu/) was recognized by the editors of Point Communications as among the "Top 5 Percent of the Web." This was at a time when 5 percent of the web was a manageable number. The editors explicitly recognized "Digital Memories," a part of our Special Collections effort, as "the real star" of the library's site. "The University of Idaho's Library site brings you all the info you need about the institution's library system, plus some cool add-ons from their Special Collections and

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[*] www.cartoonbank.com/cartoon_closeup.asp?pf%5Fid=22230&dept%5Fid=1001&mscssid=SMTDWC98V6S9 2MD000GPBQXDMETE9PLE

Archives," the review notes. "It's a fascinating piece of the past, and we'd love to see more interpretive pages like this coming online," the Dean of Library Services was quoted as remarking on the benefit to the larger audience of displaying fragile historical documents (*Idaho Register*, 8:43(June 7, 1996) 1). It should go without saying that this kind of publicity is of great benefit to both Special Collections and the library as a whole.

Digital Memories

In January 1995, we took one of the most famous and oft-published photographs from our collection, "S-Bridge train wreck, above Mullan, Idaho, 1903" and scanned it for presentation on the Special Collections web page The ability to scan the image was made possible by another library project that had acquired a scanner. When it was not in use during the lunch hour, I would "borrow" the machine and make a quick scan. Later, through grant funding, Special Collections acquired its own scanner leading to more comprehensive scanning efforts.

Our page on the historical photograph collections (www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Historical.Photographs.html) had a link to small selection of sample images that demonstrated the range of our holdings. But the S-bridge train-wreck was to be the start of a planned series (an irregular series, but a series nonetheless) of images and artifacts from our collections that would be enhanced by some explanatory text. The popular saying is that a picture is worth a thousand words; in our experience a picture requires a thousand words to tell you what it is you are looking at. Each item, whether a photograph, a book or pamphlet, or other item, became the core of a brief, but well-researched, discussion of the item, its meaning(s), and its relationship to our collections. In some cases we have used the Digital Memories forum as a place to reveal little-known aspects of the region's history, or to show how the documentary evidence had been misinterpreted. Over all, each little article demonstrated the breadth and scope of our holdings and provided an interesting story about Idaho's past.

In this way, Digital Memories, as the series was called, became a regular and, as we have seen, well-regarded component of our web publication program. It was also, at least initially, to be the one changing component of the Special Collections web page. The change was thought necessary to give viewers a reason to check back occasionally to see what was new. Statistical records indicated that while there was a jump in accesses when the new Digital Memories page was added, it was the result of other publicity. Accordingly, in the most recent redesign, it became a more static design element.

Many libraries and archives have developed extensive online exhibits (for a list, see www.sil.si.edu/SILPublications/Online-Exhibitions/ or digital publication projects (for one compilation of sites, see www.historian.org/research/links.htm#menu5.) While "Digital Memories," in its small way, shares attributes with those kinds of sites, its aims are more modest. As was indicated earlier, a thematic exhibit (either actual or virtual) is a staff-intensive process and one that exceeds our resources, at least on a regular basis. Digital publication of materials, particularly fragile items, is also extremely costly.

The National Digital Library Program/American Memory Project (memory.loc.gov/ammem/) at the Library of Congress is one of the most fully realized attempts to use the World Wide Web as a surrogate for actually going to a distant library and using the materials on site. According to the FAQ: "The National Digital Library Program is an effort to digitize and deliver electronically the distinctive, historical Americana holdings at the Library of Congress, including photographs, manuscripts, rare books, maps, recorded sound, and moving pictures." In answer to the question, "Will the National Digital Library Program take the place of traditional libraries?" the website notes that "By increasing access to these sources, it will enhance the broad intellectual and research support already provided in libraries and classrooms"(memory.loc.gov/ammem/helpdesk/amfaq.html#1) . This vacuous answer means, I believe, that the traditional role of libraries, and particularly Special Collections, to preserve and make accessible the unique artifacts of our heritage, is not about to disappear in a wave of mass digitization.

In fact, these efforts may prove to be entirely misguided. In the context of keeping such projects focused on the institutional mission, Paula De Stefano notes:

> "[M]uch of what has been scanned by libraries and archives to date are low-use special collection materials, simply because they are "signature" collections. Although these efforts produce educational information sites, rarely do they actually produce a digital collection deep enough to satisfy the broader research needs of the local constituency. In effect, many of these sites are more suitable to the needs of the K-12 audience, rather than higher education. Given the costs of conversion, selection decisions must remain organic to the mission of the parent institution, or the library stands to lose its credibility within the university and its scholarly structure."[8]

An online presence will make the library and the library's collections more visible, and extend it to a broader audience. Those who might never have ventured into the formidable precincts of a special collections library are now able to digitally enter those apparently closed doors, accustom themselves to the resources, and ask their legitimate reference questions. One of the new roles for librarians in a special collections environment will be to recognize that these new users are not less worthy than their previously exalted clientele; they merely need gentle instruction in the use of the materials and the nature of the finding aids.

Previous limitations to the use of special collections are now diminishing. They will not entirely disappear, however, since it is unlikely that digital surrogates of "everything" can be placed on the web, in spite of those requesting and expecting it. Researchers will still need to travel to Moscow, Idaho to view the materials in our collection; but all will be better prepared for having accomplished a certain amount of preliminary work through web-based resources before arriving. Many will have benefited just from learning that the University of Idaho Library does not hold materials sufficient to justify their travel to Idaho. And, in some cases, we will be able to respond to simple requests through e-mail or by sending photocopies of documents.

Conclusions

The World Wide Web has become an essential service of the department of Special Collections at the University of Idaho. Inventories, finding aids, bibliographies, and descriptive materials placed on the web provide global access to information about our holdings. Interpretive materials, such as "Digital Memories," publicize our collections in new ways and to new audiences. While the web will never replace all other forms of communication, it more than complements them. Much of what can be done and has been done can be replicated on the Web, easily and effectively, as reinforcement if not the primary activity. And the potential reach of the web is far beyond what we have previously envisioned.

[Based, in part, on "Net Worth: Adding Value to the Archival Web Site," a paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, San Diego, August 30, 1996 and "The Next Step: Outreach on the World Wide Web," a paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists, Cheyenne, Wyoming, June 6, 1997.]

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4. See "Special Issue on Encoded Archival Description" *American Archivist* 60:3(Summer 1967); also "EAD Help Pages," jefferson.village.virginia.edu/ead

5. Frank D. Jackson, "Internet Gems," Archives & Archivists List, Fri, 3 Feb 1995 10:11:45; see also William Landis, "Archival outreach on the World Wide Web," *Archival Issues*, 20:2(1995)129-147. Jackson's list suggests the range of information that can be made available on the web

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