

Visual Materials Session Review 2007

Session #: 804

Session title: Preserving Context and Original Order in a Digital World

Number of VM Reporters contributing comments: 2

Reporter 1's VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 2-5 years

VM Specialization: Generalist

Reporters 2's VM experience level:

Archives Profession: 0-2 years

VM Specialization: Generalist w/ significant VM

Speakers:

Rebecca Johnson Melvin, Chair (University of Delaware), Abigail (Adams) Griner, (University of Georgia) "Where's the Context? Enhancing Access to Digital Archives", Jeanne Kramer-Smyth (University of Maryland) "Communicating Context: The Power of Digital Interfaces", Jean-Francois Blanchette (UCLA Department of Information Studies) "All Context, No Content: Preserving 30 Years of Electro-acoustic Music at the IRCAM"

Description from program:

Although digitization projects are now common, users and archivists are uncovering problems understanding the context of digitized analog materials. Explore the obstacles surrounding this task and learn how to improve "analog" techniques in the communication of context. When done correctly, digitizing a collection enables all the same opportunities for communicating the archival context with which we are familiar, and it may revolutionize how archivists and users interact and understand our records in a digital world.

Summary of session:

The session was initiated with concerns about students and researchers increasingly using digitized objects out of context, without regard to source information, functional relationships, or an understanding of their original role in a collection. While digitization projects increase the opportunities for access to archival holdings, the potential for digital objects to become orphaned or disembodied from their original contexts poses problems that has not adequately been addressed by archivists, researchers, programmers or vendors.

Panel of 3 speakers; chair had to leave early and time ran out for the last speaker (Blanchette) so his session about the Electro-acoustic music was significantly shortened.

All three used power-point presentation.

Adams-Griner presented first and key issues discussed were context lacking in online collections of digitized material and that providing context is not so difficult since we have been doing it in analog for a long time. She argued that archival documents can only be understood in context in which they appear with the inclusion of historical notes/sketch, provenance and original order. She mentioned the SAA Code of Ethics but my notes are spotty here- I think her point was that archivists providing access to documents (physical or online) should insure the integrity of the documents in our collections by providing as much context as possible. She questioned the differences between the in person experience via the reference interview for example and the online experience which is inherently flat and de-contextualizing. She

acknowledged the fracturing nature of search engines makes the problem worse. She showed examples of what we can do online when posting exhibits and the like to bring some context to digitized collections such as: good linking back to the homepage with a historical note, sufficient description in the header or footer to let online researchers know where the item came from and how it fit into the whole site, contact info for the physical archive, timelines (including original order of documents- filmstrip technique), link back to finding aid with more detailed description to support individual digitized items. She also addressed incorporating user-interaction into sites (NARA footnote project allows for annotations and transcriptions to be posted by users). Careful selection of items is key- can ramp up digitization slowly but be thoughtful about what you start with and let users know what is in collection even if you have not digitized it all (via finding aid, metadata). In closing she called for standards/policy regarding digitization projects and that user studies are needed to understand interactions and observe behavior and she recognized that providing this much context/description might not make for the most creative/rich user experience.

Kramer-Smyth spoke next and she focused on digital interfaces ability to provide context and a rich user experience. She discussed interface design principles such as “don’t make me think”, thoughtful navigation and useful search results. She stressed careful planning and communicating with web designers and other technical personnel about some of the basic issues of archival relationships that would need to be communicated that the IT folks may not be familiar with. She provided a rich user-experience example of 1 item digitized well with loads of extra features such as mapping, audio, zoom/transcription and argued that this 1 item- representative of your archive or exhibit would suffice over lots of items poorly digitized (see Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History). She touched on many of the same issues as Adams-Grainer such as using timelines, breadcrumbs, linking into finding aids.

Blanchette had a totally different approach and focused largely on the question of what are we trying to preserve and the problems of preservation of the digital object when compared to the analog object (bit of a philosophical angle). He discussed issues of authenticity, look and feel, behaviors, relationships of digital versus analog materials and asked what are the essential characteristics that should be preserved by archivists given the SAA code of ethics concerning authenticity (archivists should not manipulate/interfere with documents yet they need to in the computer world’s variety of document rendering). He calls this the archivists’ dilemma and says we need to figure out the priorities, the essential characteristics to be preserved. He notes the lack of consensus on metadata to validate and interpret these files. He said we need to look at the programs as one level of authenticity separate from the intellectual content of the files and make choices on what and how to preserve and provide access to the intellectual content foremost. This will encourage creative readings/use of the material by researchers. Blanchette skipped ahead to the end of his talking points as he ran out of time. He ended with the call to archivists to work on creating the tools that will transform content so that archivists and researchers can adopt it to new constraints/technologies. We should document as much context as possible now to aid in this because the loss of cultural context is the greater loss (as opposed to the loss of rendering systems such as VCR’s, 8-tracks). Documentary role for archivist is key here.

As users have become more and more reliant on searching and gathering results outside of archival repository websites, this brings up the need for archivist to 1) meet users where they are already searching by ensuring access to collections materials in common search interfaces (ie Google) or online reference sources (ie Wikipedia), to 2) facilitate access that provides adequate contextual information for any given digital object, either by displaying this information with the object and/or encouraging users to link back to their repository’s website where users will encounter contextual information, and, when possible, to 3) give users the opportunity to link out to other related contextual resources when these exist outside of the home repository.

Since there is no real time research or reference encounter between users and archivists online, Abigail Adams discussed how the need for contextual information is even more acute in digital environments where archivists cannot predict who will be looking at collection materials nor what background these users might bring to their understanding of the materials. Ultimately, each of the presenters noted that archivists and programmers should be cognizant of the multiple ways in which users might encounter a digitized object or record (either through Google, an aggregate search, or through the repository's own website), planning ahead to ensure that regardless of where this information is encountered, it is always consistent and thorough, leading users back to the collection for context and, when possible, branching out to encourage users to understand relationships between the collection and other resources.

Jeanne Kramer-Smyth emphasized the need for interface designs that are simple, clear, consistent, and both encourage and facilitate users hunting for more information. Examples of effective approaches to interface design that display contextual information included showing a single, representative record with contextual information, showing multiple records in context, and approaches to multi-record views. She advocated that even with limited resources, archivists could provide selected, representative digitized samples of collection materials with fully fleshed out contextual information that would give users a taste of what is available in analog/physical form. Important concerns that should be addressed by interface designs for digitized collection materials should include giving the user an indication of where she is within a collection and how/where else she might look for related resources.

Session strengths:

Speakers were passionate about their topics. Two of the presenters had very strong visual examples that did a good job illustrating their talking points. The speakers re-enforced some common themes across the panel.

The examples given were especially helpful both in looking at the possibilities for presenting context and in showing what work still needs to be done in supporting users' understanding of context in an online environment where records are often searchable, though subject to decontextualization. The session was also useful in pointing out the necessary conversations that need to happen between archivists and web designers and/or programmers and software vendors.

Each of these presentations will be made available on the unofficial SAA conference wiki (www.ibiblio.org/saa2007/index.php/Main_Page) and Jeanne Kramer-Smyth writes frequently about these issues on her blog at www.spellboundblog.com.

How effectively did the session address the topic as proposed in the program?

The session was fair at addressing the issues between analog and digital contextualization. I thought a good deal of terrain was covered- maybe too much in fact. It would have helped me to have handouts of resources covered and also for a live internet connection since many of the visual were web-based and relied on functionality. The use of capturing software to simulate the web environment in Kramer-Smyth's presentation was slick and strong but at times felt like it would be overly complex for many to implement with out very robust IT support. In this respect it was good to have some basic practical tips in Griner's presentation compared to the slicker demo in Kramer-Smyth's. There was a happy medium lurking between the two. Blanchette's presentation did not fit in as well due to its theoretical nature and we never got to hear about the music project which might have grounded his talk. He did provide some interesting points about questioning the archivist's key duties and the archivist as documenter of culture.

The session description aptly indicates that approaches to providing contextual information "may revolutionize how archivists and users interact" – the panelists each presented much for archivists to chew on in terms of how we can better support users need for contextual information. The session overall served not just to explore how context can and should be presented with digitized collection materials, but

also to re-emphasize our professional responsibility to, and the importance of, communicating context in any access system, digital or analog.

Toward what experience-level was session geared?

All levels but some knowledge of presenting digitized materials/web work would help.

The session was a bit uneven in addressing multiple experience levels. The initial presentation offered an overview of the role and responsibility of the archivist in providing access to contextual information, which could have applied to novices and generalists while still engaging seasoned professionals by both applying these responsibilities in the digital realm and showcasing thoughtful examples from existing repository websites. The second presentation was perhaps the most useful for a range of attendees, providing examples of interface designs that support discovery of contextual information, and thinking through the choices that archivists, not necessarily programmers, can make in selecting and working with software packages to meet these goals. The final presentation was engaging, though much more academic and theoretical than the tone set by the session description and the previous two panelists. By focusing on both analog and digital audio formats, this presentation was much more narrowly focused and it was difficult to apply the panelist's ideas to the broader set of concerns faced by providing collection contexts in a digital environment.

What topics (broached or implied) merit further development in future sessions or articles?

The need for baseline standards in soliciting and adopting user-generated contextual information. How can users contribute to building context for collection materials, and how can archivists make these contributions useful?

Given that providing context might require more time and effort in a digital environment, several session speakers have advocated for digitizing selected materials and adding contextual information as possible. How can we reconcile this approach with other voices heard throughout the conference that digitization should, in many situations, be approached as an all or nothing effort?

Approaches to educating web designers, programmers, and vendors about archival concepts and how to best represent these in digital environments – it would be interesting to have a session devoted to case studies where archives have successfully partnered with designers and/or programmers to present contextual information, especially if these include user studies.

Archivist as documenter of culture and flexibility of the archival profession in the context of digital preservation (inherent manipulation of documents). Does the SAA code of ethics need to be revisited in this context? Standards for digitization projects with regards to preserving as much context as possible-what is practical? What should archivists keep in mind when discussing web applications with developers? Keeping up with new multi-media and (buzz-word alert) Web 2.0 applications that will serve our users, attract new ones and convey the context of items in archives.