

Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group 2007: Digitization and the Role of the Conservator

ABSTRACT

The introduction of digitization projects has changed the nature of the work conservators perform. We have become increasingly involved in selecting materials, providing conservation treatment before and after scanning, educating digitization staff, and preserving newly created digital collections. The 2007 Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group (LCCDG) presentation attempted to identify key issues of concern library conservators have surrounding digital activity and digitization with an innovative brainstorming session. The results will be used to plan and inform future LCCDG programs.

INTRODUCTION

During the Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting of the AIC on April 18, 2007, the Electronic Media Group (EMG) generously hosted the Book and Paper Group's Library Collections Conservation Discussion Group (LCCDG). The session was facilitated by Steven Puglia (preservation and imaging specialist, National Archives) of the EMG and the two LCCDG co-chairs, Christine McCarthy (University of Chicago) and Sarah Reidell (New York Public Library). A packed crowd of over a hundred participants identified key areas of concern about digitization and digital reformatting during an innovative "brainstorming" session. The brainstorming session format was meant to provide a creative breeding ground for future

potential LCCDG program topics and to identify areas of concern for library conservators. Such a large crowd was unanticipated and included not only conservators from library and archival collections but also from museum collections, as well as digital preservation and electronic media specialists.

DISCUSSION TOPICS AND DATA COLLECTION

Brainstorming is a technique that facilitates and encourages open discussion as it helps to identify key issues. There are no boundaries to the number of ideas that can be generated and the only limit is time. The many issues of concern to library conservators vary widely based on individual roles and responsibilities, the institution, and the nature or kind of digitization under consideration.

The session participants were asked to count off and split into three breakout groups. This allowed for smaller, more manageable, and more diverse discussion groups. Each group of about thirty participants was led by one of the joint EMG-LCCDG facilitators who also acted as timekeepers. Each group identified two volunteers: a recorder to capture ideas as they surfaced from the group and a reporter to present the group's list to the larger group at the end of the session.

The three groups each spent an equal amount of time on three main topics: electronic media and preservation, digital activity and the institution, and digital activity and the conservation lab. The first topic was aimed at exploring the critical areas of concern about training, technical infrastructure and support, preservation of born-digital objects, and treatment documentation. The second topic focused within the institution on digital activities, projects, workflows, and the impact on use and access. The third topic narrowed in on how digital activity impacts roles and responsibilities, decision-making, and treatment within the conservation lab. In a very short amount of time, just over fifteen minutes, the brainstorming format generated

This open discussion took place on April 18, 2007, during the AIC 35th Annual Meeting, April 16–20, 2007, Richmond, Virginia. The moderators organized and 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.

lively and open discussions with a high volume of ideas and comments.

BRAINSTORMING RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Participation in the brainstorming session was so excited and productive that there was no time for a vote on the top five issues across the three topic categories. In order to identify the priorities of the session participants and critical areas of concern for our profession the comments were analyzed and tabulated.

Each of the ninety-plus comments from the 2007 EMG-LCCDG brainstorming session was assigned one or two descriptive keywords to identify the underlying subject or idea. The keyword frequency is just one indicator of the importance of a particular subject to the LCCDG audience but may help to identify areas where the preservation and conservation community might benefit from further discussion.

In order of highest frequency to lowest, the top five keyword phrases for the discussion session as a whole were “standards and definitions,” “expectations,” “procedures, how-to, and recommendations,” “cross-disciplinary involvement and communication,” and “workflow.”

When discussing the most common keyword phrase—standards and definitions—it was clear that this is the area of largest overlap with other specialties and disciplines and thus called for the most articulation. Some comments focused on the need for access to agreed-upon technical standards for masters and backups related to imaging, scanning, and preservation. Others called for definitions of “best practice” before, during, and after digitization. Discussion on the ethics of conservation treatment prior to or after scanning segued neatly into questions on the philosophy and ethics of what we, as conservators, want to accomplish with conservation treatment. A cluster of comments touched on the idea of copyright, authenticity, access restriction, and issues of ownership of digital information.

Establishing and managing expectations, both within the professional field and within the institution, was the second most prevalent idea. Several ideas broached the subject that digital reformatting is not a panacea and that “digital doesn’t capture everything.” Some comments touched on the idea that there is widespread lack of confidence in institutional commitment to digital reformatting, noting that “they already don’t maintain ‘regular’ collection storage.” Other comments called for clarification on how digitization fits into the bigger picture of preservation. Concern also surrounds development and funding, particularly on the fact that many digital reformatting projects are grant driven rather than an institutional prioritization.

The practical nature of conservators and preservation specialists was displayed in the third-most prevalent theme with many questions on procedure and “how-to.” One

prevalent comment concerned the difference in selecting material for digitization juxtaposed with selection for conservation treatment. The notion that conservation as a part of a digital workflow might warrant different treatment options and levels of intervention called for clarification on what those treatment differences were among different institutions. Recommendations for handling standards and instructions for many different varieties of formats or physical conditions were sought. Participants also expressed their need for recommendations related to the technical aspects of digital hardware and storage.

Improving cross-disciplinary involvement and communication was the fourth-most common idea. This concept relates closely to establishing and managing expectations. A glossary for digital media, preservation, and project management was nearly unanimously supported. Such a glossary would help define terms and standardize usage across different fields and could “involve more scientific and technical specialties” in conservation. When the comments on “preserving born-digital” were shared several groups wondered if we are witnessing the birth of a new specialty. Digital records and treatment documentation were used to illustrate the point that conservators generate “grey literature” which is not widely disseminated or accessible to researchers.

The fifth-most prevalent topic concerned workflows. This topic matches closely the call for procedures and recommendations. Attention was directed to the perceived differences in general versus special collections and the question of whether or not they required different patterns of work. This led into comments on how large-scale digitization projects were related to ad hoc projects like exhibits, Web site creation, and highlights on “treasures.”

CONCLUSION

Unanticipated participation from AIC members across disciplines and the enthusiastic response of BPG and EMG members indicates the strong interest and necessity that exists within the conservation field with regard to the impact of digitization on the work of conservators. The lively discussion and data analysis conducted after the session highlight the need for further exploration to clarify how we define digitization and sift perceptions from realities. It also highlights the need to seek additional venues for cross-disciplinary discussion both within AIC’s ranks and with other allied professional organizations and experts outside of the conservation community. It is hoped that this discussion will serve as a springboard for additional cooperative programming within AIC and set the stage for larger organizational partnerships that will help conservators to find the answers they need to define their roles and responsibilities in the era of digital collecting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The co-chairs of LCCDG wish to thank Sarah Stauderman for extending the invitation to LCCDG to participate in EMG's discussion slate at the 2007 Annual Meeting. LCCDG also wishes thank Steve Puglia for his assistance and willingness to share his expertise in preparing and moderating this very exciting and productive session.

APPENDIX: BREAKOUT GROUP COMMENTS

Topic 1

What are the critical areas of concern for conservators with respect to electronic media and preservation?

Top five themes

1. Standards and definitions
2. Expectations
3. Procedure, how-to, and recommendations
4. Media obsolescence and migration
5. Cross-disciplinary involvement and communication

Individual group comments:

Access to agreed-upon standards for masters, backups related to imaging, scanning, preservation
 Before you create digital things, is your institution ready/able to commit?
 Born-digital more serious [issue], no back up
 Brittle books; preserving digital output and printed output
 Care and handling of materials being digitized, damage
 DAM systems (Digital Asset Management)
 Defining what characteristics you want to retain in the copy, especially metadata
 Definition of intent
 Digital doesn't capture everything (e.g. chemistry)
 Digital photographic documentation standards
 Display equipment, preservation, access to
 Documentation of a whole workflow (for specific media), e.g., video (source material, examination, transfer, quality control)
 Educating public about what digital preservation means
 Expectations; "what can Photoshop do?"
 Glossary; preservation vs. management
 Imaging is not always the best way to capture information
 Lack of confidence of permanence of digital media
 Long-term preservation of surrogates
 Machine-dependent magnetic media
 Media and formats obsolescence, migration
 Metadata, types of metadata
 More scientific specialties involved
 New specialty? "Preserving born-digital"
 Preparation of materials prior to digitization

Preservation masters in digital form, how will they be preserved

Preservation of born-digital objects

Preservation of databases

Preservation of digital data

Preservation of equipment

Preservation of originals after digital surrogates are made

Preservation of surrogates

Preservation of Web-based art

Staff? Who is the manager of preservation data?

Standards for documentation: sizes, formats, etc.

What does "preservation digital librarian" mean?

Topic 2

What are the critical areas of concern for conservators with respect to digital activity and the institution?

Top five themes (including ties)

1. Standards and definitions
2. Expectations
3. Procedure, how-to, and recommendations; Workflow (tie)
4. Staffing and prioritizing; Selection (tie)
5. Cost and development

Individual group comments:

AIC's role in leading this area
 Asset management
 Authenticity; how do you know?
 Best practice for before, during, after
 Centralized model vs. individual repository
 Contractual obligations, large commercial partnerships
 Copyright, restricting access based on copyright
 Costs: direct scans and associated costs (conservation preparation, scanning, preserving digital objects, metadata, cataloging)
 Costs: where [in the budget], is it the best use of funds?
 Development; grant-driven rather than institutional prioritization
 Digital documentation; formats and standards (PDF, TIFF, etc.)
 Do digitization projects have an impact on conservation lab workflows? Is it the same as exhibits? Are there curators involved?
 Failed projects! Redigitization
 General vs. special collections, difference in workflow, requirements, etc
 Handling standards
 Hardware and storage: what are the recommendations?
 How to handle oversized, complicated formats of original object
 Issues of ownership: who owns the information?
 Lack of confidence in institutional commitment; they already don't maintain "regular" collection storage

Level of preservation: data, digital object, context, emulation
 Prioritize type of treatment
 Relationship of paper copy [original object] to digital image
 Selection for digitization vs. selection for treatment
 Special projects staff: who, knowledge base
 Timing for checking, validation (how often)
 Use after digitization; proposed study to compare use after exhibits, surveys, etc., vs. digitization
 Where does the activity occur? Is it in Preservation/Conservation or somewhere else?

Topic 3:

What are the critical areas of concern for conservators with respect to digital activity and the conservation lab

Top five themes (including ties)

1. Standards and definitions
2. Cross-disciplinary involvement and communication
3. Expectations; Technical (tie)
4. Ethics
5. Use and access; Workflow (tie)

Individual group comments:

Budget lines, long-term effects of “soft funds”
 Catalog system and video art/electronic collections
 Color management
 Communicating about proper standard for preservation-quality digitization
 Conservation of digital media
 Database systems
 Digitization as replacement for conservation
 Effect of Google project
 Ethics of conservation treatment prior to scanning
 “Grey literature” not known about or accessible to public
 How does it fit into the bigger picture of preservation?
 How long do you save it? (AIC’s “best effort”)
 Image analysis, treatment documentation
 IT: relationships with, education and information from, communication with
 Keeping everyone in the loop
 Large scale projects vs. ad hoc (exhibitions, Web sites, treasures)
 Managing the documentation resources when you’re done
 Philosophy, ethics, and overview of what we want to accomplish
 Putting conservation documentation inside MARC 583 field [library conservators were familiar with that term, many other conservators had never heard of it, need cross-communication within field]
 Standards: like microfilm
 Strategies
 Treatment options
 Use and access of conservation documentation

What is AIC’s role?

What is the purpose if treatment changes [the object]?

Where do we get expertise or information?

Where does this happen? In the lab or somewhere else [IT]?

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