

Preparing collections for digitisation: The case of religious archives in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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This article seeks to suggest some of the steps that archival repositories with religious archives should adopt when preparing collections for digitisation. The proposed resource manual is based on a survey using questionnaires, observation and interviews that was conducted between 2011 and 2012 in archival repositories with religious archives in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa to ascertain their readiness for digitisation. The findings revealed that the lack of adequate housing facilities and the need to promote access were incentivising the need to pursue this expensive but noble venture. In other words, the two models of digitisation preferred by these archival repositories were on demand and user initiated, respectively. Despite the great enthusiasm by these surveyed institutions to leapfrog into the digital era, the study concluded, *inter alia*, that there was a need for the repositories to ensure that their analogue material was meticulously organised before embarking on digitisation. Other pertinent issues included the need for pragmatism, laying parameters in as far as the scope and purpose of what such a project would aim at, identifying resources (human, technical and financial), the benefits to be derived from the digitisation, time framing, transforming the organisational culture, copyright issues, metadata provision, collaborating and selection of content to be digitised. These recommendations come against a backdrop of the poor state of religious archives in the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries (PCTL) and the need for these repositories to strategically position themselves for the inevitable digitisation, thus ensuring the survival of this record in the long term. It was Bailey who advocated that information professionals need to recognise that although technology moves quickly, with organisations slow to change, we need to work to expedite our responsiveness to change, whatever its pace.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: There is need for archival repositories to move with the times in search of relevance in this InfoTech world; hence, in some academic circles digitisation has been viewed as the microfilm of the new millennium. The proposed resource manual could therefore promote best practices in their digitisation efforts.

Introduction

The onset of technology has had a tremendous impact on the information landscape in as far as electronic information is created, disseminated and stored. As a result of technology, analogue material is being digitised to facilitate preservation and access to users. In spite of the benefits occasioned by this technology, a number of challenges confront information professionals as they need to reinvent themselves to keep pace with the ever changing technological world. Institutional repositories, whether they are libraries, archives or museums, need to move with the times in search of permanence and relevance to safeguard themselves from this digital apocalypse.

Cumming and Knight (2012) observed that as a result of the exponential growth in information wrought by technological changes, archives may not survive as information is being lost. After analysing a variety of social media systems which were widely used during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, it is estimated that 11% of social media content pertaining to the revolution is already lost (SalahEldeen 2012). A holistic or total archives approach is therefore needed to ensure that there is a continuum of management that takes care of records; not only for business purposes, but the work goes beyond the preservation of permanent value records.

This digital continuity or archiving approach as proposed by the Queensland State Archives (2012) could be a model to be adopted by new entrants into the digital field, as it will serve as a guide on best practices in digitisation. The vulnerability of information in digital form calls for

practices that will ensure that it is available for posterity, or in the long term. Amongst these practices, *inter alia*, are issues of organising analogue material, defining a digitisation strategy, identifying models for digitisation, provider and user induction, selection of content, capacitating, copyright laws, collaboration and practical obscurity.

Analogue material to be organised first

Hofman (2012) aptly observed that the risks related to digital records are quite different from those associated with paper records. Of fundamental importance, however, is the fact that records are created properly right from the beginning, both conceptually with proper metadata describing the context, content, structure, appearance (and if applicable, behaviour), and technically, for example file format. Preparation may include, *inter alia*, any of the following (Roberts 2008):

- conservation treatment, ranging from wholesale cleaning and re-housing to tape and staple removal and repairs of individual documents
- ensuring that records are in correct order and identifying missing items
- identifying fragile items whose condition may prevent digitising or require special treatment
- moving the records safely and securely to where the digitising will be done
- setting up a suitable space for storing the records during the digitisation process
- establishing a file-naming structure or protocol for the image files to be created in the project.

In addition to this physical preparation, it is also important to ensure that the items are correctly arranged and described. Without this, digitisation will do little to improve access to the records (Roberts 2008). Rutner and Schonfold (2012) agreed and reiterated that online finding aids are critically important to today's researchers, and archives should consider these a priority service that they provide. Even if detailed finding aids cannot always be created as a result of resource constraints, expedited approaches to creating more basic discovery mechanisms may be a way to shed at least some light on otherwise hidden collections.

Define your digitisation strategy

Each archival organisation needs to establish its own internal priorities for digitisation. Roberts (2008) noted that it is fundamentally important to have a clear understanding of the benefits that an archival repository wishes to gain. Each may do it differently, but The National Archives (TNA) UK and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) have published digitisation strategies on the web. Both of these have been subject to end user comment and refinement. Important parameters that need to be taken into consideration in helping you to define your purpose, however, include the following (Roberts 2008):

- determine whether the benefits will justify the investment
- seek funding
- establish criteria for measuring success
- identify which archives to digitise.

In the case of religious archives, the focus could be on high-value, high-use or at-risk records and these, for example, could be maps, building plans, title deeds, reports, minutes of board, committee and council meetings, registers of baptismal, marriage, burial, banns, confirmations and services, memorandums of agreements, oral history recordings, sermons, creeds, hymns, prayer letters, testimonies, publications, for example newspaper cuttings, brochures, parish magazines, photographs, and so forth. The majority of the surveyed archival repositories had records dating back as early as the 19th century and such records because of their intrinsic value could be prioritised for digitisation. FamilySearch is one partner institution that can assist with digitisation of registers pertaining to baptisms, marriage and deaths (Engbjerg 2013).

Identify models of digitisation

Bettington (2012) stated that digitisation strategies determine the means that archival institutions undertake digitisation and for many, digitisation is a multi-pronged strategy, involving in-house digitisation as a primary strategy. Generally, the three models of digitisation in use are commercial, on demand and user initiated. NARA and TNA UK provide classic examples of commercial digitisation, whereby partnerships are non-exclusive, that is to say, no single partner will be sought to digitise the materials but that different set of partners are welcomed for different sets of materials. This model was not popular with the surveyed archival repositories and the reasons are not difficult to determine. There has been pointed criticism of such commercial arrangements as a result of copyright subversions as this constitutes information imperialism or digital capitalism¹.

On demand digitisation

This remains a popular model with most of the surveyed archival repositories as the focus is on high-value, high-use or at-risk records. Examples of such records include registers pertaining to baptisms, marriage and deaths and church council minutes. Once digitised, the plan is to make them available on the website or in the cloud – the virtual archives concept which will render the physical presence of reading rooms unnecessary. This National Archives of Australia model is attractive but archival institutions need to do introspection with regards to the sustainability of adopting this model.

User initiated digitisation

This model focuses on what end users want digitised. In other words you define your primary and secondary user groups by identifying your current users and potential users of the materials you would digitise. This model requires careful planning and strategic thinking considering that digitisation is far from cheap and that not all material is worth digitising. The majority of the surveyed institutions favoured this model as well.

¹There is one school of thought, which holds the polemic view that schemes to digitise Africa's heritage per se are a form of neo-imperial information grab in the form of digital capitalism. See, for example Lor (2008:119), Limb (2002:51–57, 2007:19) and Britz and Lor (2003:160–173).

Induction for the providers and users

The fear of technology remains one of the impediments to the success of any digitisation program. Commenting on this issue of computer phobia (Asogwa 2011) stated that as a result of inadequate skills in information technology in Africa, many traditional librarians and archivists are conservatives and have phobia for computers. Because of generation gaps between the new and old professionals, computers are perceived as a threat to their status as experts. In consequence, this means that the successful application of technologies requires changing the organisational culture to facilitate mind-set transformation or enculturation.

Siller (2012) aptly remarked that it seems incongruous that we spend so much time and effort evaluating information management systems, designing the 'perfect' controls and training personnel (all of which are important) but we ignore basic cultural elements concerning our organisations. It is because of this failure to cultivate the right organisational culture at the workplace that explains why technical knowledge remains a serious problem in Information Communication Technologies (ICT) development. Keakopa (2008) noted that Africa lacks skills and that it is important that appropriate knowledge and skills are part of the human requirements in Africa. Issues of ICT training need to cater for both the provider and the user.

Capacity

Digital projects are expensive and the issue of sustainability remains an Achilles heel for many archival repositories. The expenses are resource oriented in view of human, financial and technical requirements. A cocktail of issues need to be factored and these include infrastructure, expertise, equipment, storage, money and copyright requirements. The commonly held perception that the lack of funding is an impediment to digitisation can be misleading as you might have the money but do not know where to start, hence it is imperative to have a digitisation strategy in place.

Content selection

Roberts (2008) observed that it is a common misconception outside the archives community that whole archival collections can be, or should be digitised. The reality is very different: the resources required to undertake a digitisation project, particularly the preparatory stages, mean that most archives cannot hope to digitise more than a fraction of their collections. Inevitably, therefore, a selection has to be made. There are two choices to be made and it is either the digitisation is preservation or access oriented or both. Where the purpose is to preserve the original records, priority should be given to the following types of records, to minimise damage or deterioration through use (Roberts 2008):

- records that are fragile or in poor physical condition
- records in physical formats which make use of the originals which tend to be awkward or risky
- records that are frequently requested and used.

On the other hand, where the purpose is to make the records more accessible, the following types of records are likely to be of higher priority (Roberts 2008):

- the most popular series or groups of records
- photographs and other pictorial materials, which tend to have wide appeal and interest
- records to be included in interpretive products like for example online exhibitions, galleries, multi-media products and so forth.

Once this identification process is concluded, another management decision has to be made with regards to whether the digitisation will be done in-house, outsourced or through collaboration with other archives. Doing the digitisation in-house gives an archival institution greater control over its resources unlike outsourcing whereby the potential for copyright subversion is great. Collaboration with other bodies reduces costs, equipment and expertise and (Cumming and Knight 2012; Roberts 2008), noted for instance that collaboration can allow recordkeeping professionals who may not be completely proficient in the technology to learn from system owners and ICT and enhance their skills. For the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries (PCTL)², collaboration with FamilySearch and Digital Imaging South Africa (DISA) could foster best practices in digitisation.

In addition, collaboration could be the gateway for a number of archives to build a virtual collection of thematically related materials. As for the latter, the networking of resources through a portal of religious archives for example could go a long way in cementing partnerships, professional collegiality and best practices in digital archiving. Once a portal is established, the Theological Cluster of libraries currently in place in Pietermaritzburg will not only have online a catalogue of books as is presently the case but snippets of archival material and preferably finding aids pertaining to the various religious denominations thereby enhancing research and scholarship.

Copyright

Understanding the legal framework with regards to right of ownership is critical when selecting content for digitisation. Asogwa (2011) correctly noted that one of the most important selection criteria for digitisation will be the copyright status of the original materials. Millar (2010:201) pointed out that according to most interpretations of the law, placing a document or an image in an internet-accessible environment is, in effect, publishing it and rightly so in view of the fact that if it is copyrighted, why put it online. It therefore follows that the archivist must consider copyright, privacy and publicity rights as well as other donor restrictions when deciding whether or not on digitising anything in the archives (Millar 2010). Another critical issue to be considered is that in situations whereby donor assistance is sought, the institution

²PCTL is an association of the libraries of the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), St. Joseph's Theological Institute (SJTI), Cedara, the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (SRPC), University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Congregational House of Formation (CHoF), Anglican House of Studies (AnHoS), SeithMokitimi Methodist Seminary (SMSS) and the Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI).

should always ensure that copyright remains vested with it to avoid subversions and other unforeseen misdemeanours. Allied to the foregoing is the issue of practical obscurity which has copyright connotations and need to be addressed from the word go in any digitisation project.

Practical obscurity

Bettington (2012) cited Dagleish (2010), who commented that the issue of practical obscurity is all about whether we can in theory make available online any and all material which we can legally make available in our public reading rooms, and not, why not, and on what basis do we limit access to material online which we would make available in our reading rooms. In Africa, as a result of the lack of inadequate infrastructure, bandwidth problems, power outages, fears of copyright subversions, and so forth, researchers will still need to visit the archives to conduct their research. If ever there is digitised material online, an archival repository will need to ensure that it has a takedown policy which spells out guidelines on the circumstances in which it is appropriate for material to be removed, for example because of copyright infringement, cultural sensitivity, and so forth, and the circumstances in which it is not.

Collaboration

Collaboration at local level remains vital and the theological network of libraries currently biased towards analogue material could be further boosted through the provision of online finding aids. Rutner and Schonfold (2012) correctly observed that archives should work together to develop, support and/or promote discovery tools that make archival finding aids more readily accessible and cross searchable. Cataloguing and discovery services that cross institutional boundaries are becoming increasingly important, and archives should determine whether and how these services can best accommodate their finding aids and support the needs of researchers.

Metadata

Once collections are digitised, providing the descriptive tools to facilitate discoverability is mandatory, hence Millar (2010) defines it as information that describes the context, content and structure of the material and illuminates other information that helps the archivists or user contextualise and use the material. According to Bettington (2012), record metadata refers to all the structured information that needs to accompany the object to describe its characteristics and provide management control. This instruction tool is data about data and the archivist will therefore need to identify the equipment used (software and hardware), the date and time documents were created, the action officer (who did it) and any other information that explain why it was created (Millar 2010).

Conclusion

Preparing archival material for digitisation is a resource oriented process that requires careful planning and

pragmatism. What needs to be ironed out from the onset is to establish whether the digitisation is preservation or access oriented or both. Once this purpose is defined, a decision has to be made on what to digitise and ensuring that the technical requirements are specified in order to execute the program. Digitisation does not come cheap and neither is it a guarantee that the availability of funds is a recipe for success, hence the need for planning and sound management decisions. As noted by the Queensland State Archives (2012), digitisation is not simply a question of technology but requires a broader approach that considers and addresses the wider business, policy, information management and budgetary issues.

Cullingford (2011) agreed and noted that in any digital project or managing any digital material, the choices of file formats, file naming, metadata, storage and standards will affect whether the material is to survive and be useful into the future. In addition, the issue of collaboration cannot be over-emphasised as all stakeholders and key players, that is, librarians, archivists, systems analysts, programmers, end users, and so forth, must work towards ensuring the success of the digitisation project. Finally, in today's Web-driven information culture, which some have labelled the digital era and electronic age, there is a need to keep pace with technology to ensure that the preserved record is available in the long term.

What needs to be borne in mind as observed by Findlay (2008), is that digital media is fragile and hardware and software becomes rapidly obsolete, presenting challenges to the archivist and requiring more proactive intervention in the life of the record and the systems that generate them. Cullingford (2011) echoed similar sentiments and stated that archivists, librarians and curators need to understand the life cycle of digital objects with regards to creation, use, management and delivery. Each stage needs careful planning to ensure digital assets continue to be useful and retrievable into the next stage.

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