New Directions for 21st Century Digital Collections

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ABSTRACT
Across disciplines, new types of digital collections are changing the way we access and preserve information. While scholars, data curators, librarians, archivists, and preservationists all approach digital collections in their work, key questions remain as to how to conceptualize and collaborate in our efforts. This event gathers scholars and practitioners from libraries, archives, data curation and digital humanities to discuss the challenges of 21st Century digital collections.

Keywords
Digital collections, archives, preservation, curation

INTRODUCTION
Collecting and sharing digital assets is everyone’s business—from traditional information organizations, like libraries and archives, to public trusts, such as the Internet Archive, and from ubiquitous, large-scale data providers, like Google. Digital archivists, librarians, data curators, and preservationists stand at this crossroads, questioning both the enduring value of data, but also its permanence. Writing twenty years ago, Hedstrom (1991) cautioned that, “the word archive has lost much of its traditional meaning and associations,” and that, “archivists have literally lost control over the definition of archive” (p. 336). Tibbo (2003) notes that, “for archivists, archiving is a complex process that can range the lifecycle of information and that involves an array of different functions.” and that, “Archiving always has the goals of preserving and making accessible documents, records, and other data of enduring value (p. 8).

Planning and managing digital collections for current and future access and re-use is a significant challenge in our contemporary information landscape, transcending sub-domains under the umbrella of information science, including the fields of archives, digital preservation and curation, and records management. With differences in our own approaches, how can we begin to engage with communities of stakeholders? And, further, how should or do we transfer our institutional, traditional digital collection practices and approaches to engage and inform personal digital collection practices in a climate with unlimited possibilities for collections?

The theoretical gap for digital collections lies in the lag of theory to account for actual objects, combined with the exponential rate of increase and network effects of digital “things” created, circulated, collected and deleted all the time. This session will provide attendees with the opportunity to participate in an active discussion with a diverse group of panelists about the present and future of collecting in the digital age.

DESCRIPTION
The continuing evolution of Web authoring services, moving from personal Web pages to blogs to Flickr to Twitter to Facebook, to name just a few, can be seen to both enrich our cumulative cultural record, but also to complicate it. We have ambiguity in how we talk about approaches to digital content into the long term among sub-domains in our broad field. For example, how can we help others (and even ourselves) distinguish between back-up and preservation? How do we, as information professionals, engage with communities of diverse, distributed producers to facilitate the persistence of the cultural record, both at a personal or known level (ourselves, our colleagues, friends, families, etc.) and for society overall?

In regard to value, what of the “attic metaphor”: Is digital attic a potentially more reflective term than digital archive, library or repository? Attics contain stuff we might use infrequently or at some potential point in the future, as well as stuff we no longer use but still feel we need. Attics, though, may also contain stuff we no longer use and once thought we still needed, but we haven’t thought of in so long, we may very well have no idea it is up there and/or have no idea why we ever thought we needed it in the first place. How do we make informed determinations on what to keep and what not to keep, and how do we translate our experiences and knowledge to personal digital collectors.

The intended outcome of the panel is to engender a network of sharing, cooperation and potential collaboration among researchers, practitioners and educators across our field’s varied sub-domains and related disciplines. The panel is

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planned to be informative, innovative and interactive. The structure will serve as an informal, critical Delphi approach (Linstone & Turoff, 1975), with each case study and discussion building on the previous toward some shared understanding of concepts central to digital collecting. Each of the invited panelists deal with digital collections in one way or another at the physical, conceptual, or logical level, and this varied experience will enable meaningful discussion. ASIS&T provides an excellent opportunity to bring together different voices from our field to the national stage. As the notion of digital collections and the culture of collecting becomes increasingly important in other fields, like digital humanities, critical textual studies, and identity studies, this venue provides excellent opportunity to bring voices from our contemporaries in other fields to the discussion.

AGENDA
The panel will begin with a brief welcome by the panel moderator and organizers, describing the motivations and goals of the panel session, followed by brief introductions of the panelists. Next, we will invite panelists and audience members to offer their personal responses to the question “What is a digital collection?” We will return to this question at the end of the panel as well.

In order to delve into the issues that confront digital collections, the organizers will present several examples of digital collections that resist or complicate traditional expectations and approaches to institutional collecting, with a ten minute round of discussion immediately following each case study. These brief presentations will serve as a platform for discussion among panelists and the audience around three themes:

- Making determinations on what should be saved, preserved, authenticated, and made available for access and reuse into the future.

- Sharing and exchanging perceptions on key conceptual terms and approaches, and the logos of digital collections. More specifically, what do each of us, grounded in our own sub-domains and our traditional notions, “bring to the table.”

- What is the boundary, if there is one, between digital collections, digital archives, digital libraries and digital repositories?

Following the case study presentations and Q&A, panelists and audience members will be invited to share and discuss a series of provocative questions to facilitate further exploration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in today’s collecting culture, particularly as relates to the archival concept of enduring value and the trend in personal digital archiving. The panel will conclude by revisiting the opening question discussion by asking: Do we have a unified vision of what a digital collection is in our field? Or, more to the point, should we?

AUDIENCE AND OUTCOMES
Aimed at scholars and practitioners who work with, design for, and provide access to a diverse realm of digital collections, this panel seeks to create dialogue surrounding the big picture of digital collections. By reaching across the silos of digital curation, preservation, archives, and information retrieval, we hope to spur collaboration and future work in this area. The panel discussion will be recorded, and the resulting transcript will be made available.

PARTICIPANTS
Amelia Abrue (Organizer) is a Ph.D. candidate at the Information School at the University of Washington. Her dissertation, “Sharing and Saving: Collaborative Collecting in Social Media”, analyses archiving and collecting practices in social media platforms. She has worked as a librarian and archivist and in industry research.

Amelia Acker (Organizer) is a PhD student at the Department of Information Studies at UCLA. She works at the intersection of archival studies and technologies of communication. In her research she studies mobile social technologies, electronic records, digital collections, and archival system design. Her dissertation examines the material constraints of transmitting and storing electronic records created with mobile computing devices.

Dr. Carolyn Hank (Moderator), is an assistant professor at the School of Information Studies at McGill University. In her research, she examines scholars’ informal communications and interactions in the contemporary networked, co-produced, digital environment, with a particular focus on how scholars’ digital production behaviors impact future communications of our scholarly and cultural record, both in terms of the informational value and the associated technical and regulatory frameworks in which these activities take place. At McGill she teaches in the areas of digital preservation and access, digital curation, human information interactions, and research methods, and is an instructor in the Digital Curation Professional Institute, organized and hosted by the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Amy Buckland (Panelist) is the eScholarship, ePublishing & Digitization Coordinator at McGill University Library, where she is responsible for scholarly communication, publishing initiatives and making rare items from special collections available to the world thorough digitization. She is the president-elect of the Eastern Canada Chapter of the Special Libraries Association and publishers of the Library Student Journal. She was recognized as a “Mover and Shaker” by the Library Journal in 2008 and an SLA Rising Star in 2010. She also was a recipient of the Librarian Excellence Award@McGill in 2010. She loves information almost as much as Fluevog shoes and thinks academic librarianship is ripe for a revolution.
Dr. Lynn Silipigni Conaway (Panelist) is a Senior Research Scientist at OCLC Research. She leads the OCLC Research User Behavior Studies & Synthesis activities theme. Her responsibilities include research projects that directly involve OCLC libraries and users.

Dr. Elin Jacob (Panelist) is an Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Indiana University Bloomington. Her areas of expertise include classification and categorization; indexing systems as cognitive scaffolding and the design and evaluation of ontologies and metadata schemas.

Dr. Matthew Kirshenbaum (Panelist) is an Associate Professor in the department of English at the University of Maryland and Associate Director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITTH), an applied thinktank for the digital humanities. He is also an affiliated faculty member with the Human-Computer Interaction Lab at Maryland, and a Vice President of the Electronic Literature Organization.

Dr. Gary Marchionini (Panelist) is Dean and Cary C. Boshamer Professor at the School of Information and Library Science (SILS) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A past president of ASIS&T (2009-2010), his varied research interests include human information interaction and human-computer interaction, human-centered computing, information retrieval, digital libraries, information architecture, digital government, cyberspace identity, and information policy. He is the head of SILS’ Interaction Design Lab. A particular current project of note is the SILS Lifetime Library, providing trusted storage and associated services for SILS students and alumni. Currently in the pilot stage, the LifeTime Library provides students with free web-based data storage space to manage and maintain their digital content, hosted by the school, into perpetuity.

REFERENCES

