

CHAPTER 2 SELECTION

How do we choose to take from our past certain things to remember? How do we decide which of life's many stories we wish to tell? It is a mysterious process, and one that occurs daily in museums, archives, and libraries.

The documents, photographs, and objects that are the evidence for our stories, often come to their acid-free, carefully-controlled environments willy-nilly, by happenstance as much as by planning. They have been absent-mindedly or quite determinedly winnowed by their creators, his or her family, and by the erstwhile field mouse. They have been evaluated by graduate students, yard-sale goers, file clerks, and scholars, as well as by the keepers of family heirlooms.

For most institutions, the creation of online collections will mean one more series of choices, one more set of evaluations, one more group of interpreters. Can these individuals move beyond subjective processes when making decisions about what to select for digitization? Probably not. However, they can ask certain questions that will more objectively guide their selection process. This chapter will discuss the issues of selection and help you define your selection criteria.

Once the initial planning phase has been completed, it is time to select materials for digitization. The analysis of collection materials done during the project planning phase should provide a strong foundation for determining your selection criteria. These selection criteria apply to both the preliminary selection of collections and then the more detailed selection of material within collections, including both the physical and intellectual aspects of selection that need to be considered. Each category covers both the macro and micro selection processes.

Determining your Selection Criteria

How does one choose the best materials to digitize? Acknowledging that content selection is most often driven by subjective responses, the following provides some framework to help you make those selection decisions more objectively. Below are the central elements to be considered in selection with some questions to help you assess material. These central elements focus on seven areas that form the framework for your selection criteria: audience, impact on your institution, intellectual control, intellectual property rights, preservation, and technical considerations. Each section provides guidance and questions that should help you to think through defining your selection criteria.

Audience

- Who are the expected users? Who is the intended audience?
- Will the material be of interest to a large public?
- Will the original materials be appropriate for multiple levels of users or a specific audience?
- Will the project make materials available to a population that otherwise would be unable to use the collection, (e.g, disabled population, home-bound, or international users)?

Impact on your institution

- Is the scope of the project within the range of your staffing and budget or will you need additional funding to successfully complete the project?
- Will the product have immediate utility?
- Will digitization increase the demand for the materials or for other, related materials (and if so, do you have staff to handle the demand)?

Intellectual control

- Will the digitization provide better indexing and better bibliographic control of the material?
- Will digital capture enhance use through a contextual presentation?
- Will the project raise the knowledge base of staff about the materials within the institution?

Intellectual property rights

- Do you hold copyright on the materials you plan to digitize? If not, do you know who holds copyright, and can you get the copyright holder to grant permission for its digitization? (For more information on this, see Legal Considerations)

Preservation

- Will the digitization aid in the preservation of deteriorating materials by diverting resources to their conservation or decreasing the wear and tear on originals by providing a digital surrogate?
- Will the materials hold up under the handling and processing required by digitization? Will special handling of the material to prevent damaging it be necessary? Will that special handling be costly? Do the materials require special technology considerations in order to digitize them without damaging them?

Technical considerations

- Will your knowledge of technology be sufficient to meet the needs of the material?
- Will your technology allow for quality reproduction of materials?
- Will the Web site have visual appeal online?"

Value

- Does the project duplicate materials available at another repository or are they unique to your collection?
- Will the resulting digital collection have enduring value?
- Will the project make the content more broadly available?

- Will digitization give the collection "added value"?
- Will digitization improve legibility of originals?
- Will the project provide educational material that can be used in resource-based learning?
- Will the digitized collection have the potential to attract funding, either through external grants (i.e., it meets the criteria of funding agencies) or in terms of raising revenue (i.e., is it marketable)?
- Will the project generate institutional prestige?
- Will the project be in keeping with policies at the institutional level?

Harvard University has created a decision-making that provides step-by-step guidance through the selection process. This can be a good place to start when defining your selection criteria and incorporates many of the ideas outlined above.

Selection for Digitizing: A Decision-Making Matrix, Harvard University Libraries, available at: <http://preserve.harvard.edu/bibliographies/matrix.pdf>

An Example of the Selection Process:

The small and modestly funded Historical Society of Lower Turkey Fork in rural northwest North Carolina has a collection of some 2,500 photographs donated by a local auto mechanic who shot photographs of his family for some 25 years. The Society repository also has a collection of about two linear feet of manuscript papers and photographs of a turn-of-the-century land developer who negotiated the purchase of many tracts of land from the local Indian tribes. The third largest collection is an oral history collection of audiotapes (150 of them) and photographs of soldiers who fought in WWI all gathered in the 1940's and no longer associated with any documentation. A fourth collection is a group of approximately 150 glass-plate negatives of life on Lower Turkey Fork in the late 1890's shot by a Belgian anthropologist and photographer who studied rural farm methods. Also in the collection is a journal of his activity, photographic practices, and encounters while in Turkey Fork. Remaining collections include an assortment of letters, documents and photographs, and 500 objects including art, historical objects, and four turn-of-the-century horse carriages kept in a barn behind the historical society.

The staff wants to digitize their holdings but wonder what to select for digitization. While opinions may differ, the most likely candidate for first selection might be the Belgian photographer's work and his journal. The collection size is modest, and it is likely to be of wide-ranging interest. The collection is currently inaccessible because of the fragile nature of the glass plates. Audience, preservation, and value have all informed this choice. The mechanic's collection is too large and not likely to appeal to a general audience beyond Turkey Fork. Transcription of the WWI soldiers' tapes would be very labor intensive, and their age and composition would require special handling. Also, they have problematic documentation. The scattered letters, documents, photos and objects appear to be too unfocused to be of sufficient interest at this time. They chose the Belgian photographer's work for digitization.

Certainly, you could expand on this analysis and you may choose differently based on your perception of the selection criteria. Remember in applying your selection criteria, though, it requires some objective guides that go beyond initial response.

Documenting your Selection Criteria

As part of the selection process, you should record the criteria that you are using to choose materials for digitization. This documentation process serves several purposes. First, it allows you to revisit the original materials to ensure you have consistently applied the selection criteria. Once the digitization project is underway, you may decide to change individual items selected. A well-documented selection criteria will guide any changes you make in your selection and remind you of the decisions made during this process. In addition, your documentation allows for more productive teamwork because all members of the team will follow the same protocol. Finally, documentation will provide a framework for the next digitization project, allowing for consistency across digitization projects.

Conclusion

One of the most important services performed by archives, libraries, and museums is selection, choosing from the many products of the living those few items which will best tell their stories. Digitization means that cultural caretakers will find themselves conducting another series of selections among their collections. Every institution knows its own audience best and thus will have its own set of selection criteria based upon its audience's needs.

Further Reading

Columbia University. "Selection Criteria for Digital Imaging Projects" available at:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/projects/digital/criteria.html>

"Guidelines for Selection" compiled by P. Ayris (UCL) as part of the joint RLG and NPO Preservation Conference, Warwick, 1998
<http://www.rlg.org/preserv/joint/ayris.html>

Harvard University. "Selection for Digitizing: A Decision-Making Matrix"
<http://preserve.harvard.edu/bibliographies/selection.html>

Hazen, Dan, Jeffrey Horrell, and Jan Merrill-Oldham. *Selecting Research Collections for Digitization*, Council on Library and Information Resources, 1998. Available at:
<http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/hazen/pub74.html>

Oxford University. "Assessment Criteria for Digitization"
<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/scoping/assessment.html>