

How Do We Keep the Archives Viable and Digital Formats Sustainable?

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Abstract:

The digital revolution has brought many advances to the archives and the professional field. But at what price? Digital surrogates may threaten the physical use of the archives, and endanger the intrinsic value of the original. Many users cannot rationalize visiting the physical archives when a digital copy is available at their convenience. Archivists need to actively participate in marketing their collections.

Their goal should be to convince users that, while the digital surrogate of an item is a wonderful resource, it can never be considered a replacement of the original.

The importance placed on the digital surrogate also brings into focus preservation issues of digital materials. The constant changes in digital technology, hardware, and software make it very difficult to create a surrogate with a longer shelf-life than a few years. How can we stop the degradation of information before it's too late, and the digital generation becomes an unsustainable memory?



Viability

Every archive is different, and therefore has different needs. But no matter what its setting, be it corporate, research, or academic, in order to remain viable, archives must be able to actively

- Promote
- Partner
- Proliferate

their collections. This will aid them in becoming more visible in their own settings as well as the larger community.



Sustainability

It is imperative that archives not only preserve original material, but the digital surrogates created. In order to do that, archives must have:

- Adequate funding for both the initial project and subsequent maintenance of the surrogates
- Knowledge of technological advances
- Good working relationships with IT professionals
- Surrogates created with the highest quality possible:



These images show the difference in scanning from a 35mm slide versus the original (DIAMM, 2008)



Conclusion:

In order to remain viable repositories, archives must not only strengthen their digital presence, but their physical presence among novices and veteran researchers alike. By partnering with institutions of different specialities, archives are more likely to gain attention, and therefore potential funding opportunities. This funding will enable future projects and thus put a larger percentage of their collections into the public eye.

The quality and sustainability of digital surrogates created is also extremely important. By adequately funding projects to include necessary maintenance or migration, as well as scanning images at the highest quality allowable, archives can extend their surrogates' shelf-life and usability. Surrogate sustainability is vital for granting access to existing users and for maintaining access for future generations.

Questions? Feel free to contact me at hball100@qc.cuny.edu