

Building Good Digital Library Collections: A Dynamic Framework

A year ago, in November 2001, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) published "A Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections."¹ Since its publication, the IMLS Framework has been endorsed by the Digital Library Federation and by the Chiefs of State Library Agencies. Since that time also, the IMLS has solicited comments and feedback from the community it serves and has presented the Framework at venues including the 2002 Museum Computer Network annual conference and Web-Wise 2002.² While consistently favorable, comments received have highlighted a few areas where the Framework already could be expanded and enriched. To ensure that the Framework retains its utility, the IMLS is presently finalizing arrangements for maintaining the Framework, with the goal of putting it on a periodic schedule of review and revision.

The IMLS Framework is designed to be a gentle guide to project planning and evaluation rather than a prescription for these tasks. Whereas more prescriptive guidelines promote specific standards and practices, the utility of which are limited in scope and invariably must diminish with changes in technology, the Framework provides principles by which such standards and practices may be judged, and it gives links to exemplary resources and templates that can be used as models for a broad spectrum of new digitization projects. Carefully considering the principles articulated in the Framework when planning and reviewing digitization project proposals demonstrates an appreciation for the importance of digital



library interoperability and of the persistence and reusability of digital content and will lead to results of greater utility for a broader and more lasting constituency.

Central to the design and purpose of the IMLS Framework is the observation that what makes a successful library or museum digitization project has changed over the last decade. Digitization project objectives (and expectations) have evolved. Ten years ago, proof of concept was a sufficient objective. If a project could demonstrate an innovative way to digitize full content, it was a success, almost regardless of what was then done with that digital content. In the next stage, as technologies became more mature and better understood, measures of utility for a well-defined target community increased in importance. Digitization projects were not successful unless they were effective in delivering digitized content to targeted users.

We are now entering a third stage of evolution. Digital collections are no longer simply self-contained, single-purpose entities constructed only to meet an immediate need. Practitioners have come to recognize the potential of digital collections to function as reusable components and building blocks upon which many kinds of advanced, lasting digital library services may be built. Digital collections have become more fully analogous to traditional academic library collections. Print collections are shared resources, available to and used by many beyond those primarily considered when the collection was initiated. A good academic library collection manager considers not only near-term and proximate-core users but also the wider and more diverse audience of both current and future potential users. In selecting items for print collections, librarians follow selection guidelines that have been proven to create collections of broad, lasting worth and utility. Managers and implementers of digital collections are expected to take the same approach. This means that digitization project planners today must consider issues of long-term value, reusability, persistence, sustainability, interoperability, verification, and documentation. The resulting implications for project planning and evaluation are emphasized in the Framework.

The scope of the IMLS Framework also was informed by a judgment that an important distinction exists between digital collections and digital libraries. Digitization projects, for which the Framework is intended as a resource, deal with the digitization of content—that is, with digital collections. A digital collec-

tion consists of an organized assembly of digital information objects, metadata describing those objects, and metadata describing the overall collection. Digital libraries, on the other hand, are systems that incorporate not only digital content but also value-added services, ranging from search and discovery utilities, to browse and interpretative interfaces, to specialized preservation and dissemination protocols. Digital collections are the building blocks of digital libraries much as collections of printed books, journals, and archives are the building blocks of traditional libraries. The Framework addresses what is needed to make digital collections useful as building blocks of digital libraries. It addresses three primary components: digital collections, digital objects, and metadata. For each, it articulates relevant principles that should be considered in planning or evaluating a digitization project. It also provides top-level principles applicable to digitization projects as a whole.

For instance, the IMLS Framework articulates the basic principle that a good digital collection is created according to an explicit collection-development policy that has been agreed upon and documented before digitization begins. A good digital collection provides some measurement of use. A good digital content object is persistent, with a persistent identifier, and has appropriate metadata associated with it. Good metadata use standard controlled vocabularies to reflect the what, where, when, and who of the content, include a clear statement on the conditions and terms of content use, and support the long-term management of content collections. A good digitization project includes both evaluation and reporting components.

The IMLS Framework includes a total of twenty-two collections, objects, metadata, and projects principles, each accompanied with explanatory text and links to relevant resources, models, and standards showing the application of the principle across a range of settings and content domains. Not all principles will apply equally to all digitization projects, but the principles are stated in general terms and are defined independent of any particular standard or best practice, though many such standards and prac-

tices are cited as illustrations of how a specific principle may be applied.

The means to develop, maintain, and update the IMLS Framework over time remain to be settled. The response so far suggests that an effort to maintain and develop this resource for use by both project planners and project-funding organizations is warranted. Though the principles and links contained in the initial draft represent considerable breadth and depth, the current Framework cannot be considered a complete and finished document. To be truly useful, it must be maintained as a dynamic resource. New links and even new principles need to be added and old ones discarded as technologies, protocols, and best practices change and evolve.

Notes

1. "A Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections," November 2001 <<http://www.imls.gov/pubs/forumframework.htm>> (accessed September 11, 2002). The Framework was authored by the Digital Library Forum, which was funded by the IMLS to explore ways to facilitate and encourage interoperability among digital library projects funded by federal agencies. In writing the Framework, the IMLS Digital Library Forum collaborated with a parallel group brought together by the National Science Foundation and made up of researchers involved in the National Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education Digital Library Program. The following IMS Digital Library Forum members contributed to the drafting of the Framework: Liz Bishoff, Colorado Digitization Alliance; Priscilla Caplan, Florida Center for Library Automation and chair of the IMLS Digital Library Forum; Tim Cole, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Anne Craig, Illinois State Library; Dan Greenstein, California Digital Library; Doug Holland, Missouri Botanical Garden; Ellen Kabat-Lensch, Eastern Iowa Community College; Tom Moritz, American Museum of Natural History; and John Saylor, Cornell University.
2. "The IMLS Framework for Building Good Digital Collections: Feedback from the Museum Community," presentation at the Museum Computer Network annual conference, Toronto, Canada (September 4, 2002). In March 2002, the author delivered a paper about the Framework at WebWise: A Conference on Libraries and Museums in the Digital World, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland (March 22, 2002); in May 2002, the paper was published in *First Monday* 7, no. 5 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_5/cole/index.html> (accessed September 11, 2002).

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