Librarians in the Wild:

Attitudes and Experiences Concerning Online Exhibit Building

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

The California Digital Library has been awarded a three-year William and Flora Hewlett Foundation grant to assemble an American West virtual collection drawing from the resources of major research institutions. This multi-phase project will help scholars, teachers, and librarians implement solutions enabling users to better leverage digital content in an online learning environment. A large virtual collection will be assembled and presented with a range of tools supporting extensive re-configuration, integration with online learning environments, and continued growth through the addition of relevant research and teaching materials produced in the course of its use.

According to the Period 1 Report of the American West project[1], curation is "the development of high quality, coherently organized collections that satisfy particular users needs or modes of inquiry…." (§ 2) American West discusses curation at two different levels. First, there is "big" curation, which deals with creating large scale collections that will rely on the development of "tools that support this kind of selectivity without relying on painstaking, labor intensive and, with large collections, entirely impractical effort of 'hand-picking' from amongst the millions of digital images, texts, sound recording, and websites…." (§ 2.3) "Little" curation is much smaller in scale and will include customization tools likely to encompass "curatorial tools that enable users to build their own browsable views or subsets of the American West collection". (§ 5.5) For the purposes of this round of assessment, we focused on little curation and further refined our inquiry to examine online exhibit building, a subset of little curation.

The fundamental questions we must ask ourselves include the following:

- Is there a need for tools?
- What functionality must they have?
- And, would librarians be open to using them?

In order to find answers to these questions, the assessment team held a series of interviews with UC librarians and curators. We hoped to gain insights into the following four key issues:

1. Mission/Purpose/Value – the extent to which libraries value online exhibit building and how they view this activity within the context of their organization as a whole.
2. Organizational/Institutional Barriers – the organizational and institutional barriers to building online exhibits.
3. Support/Infrastructure – the status of online exhibit building support and infrastructure in academic libraries.
4. Tools and Systems – the tools and systems that libraries have employed for exhibit building.

Our hypothesis: Libraries would build more online exhibits if it were easier to do.

This document presents the assessment team's findings from this round of needs assessment interviews concerning librarians' attitudes and experiences regarding the development of online exhibits. A detailed list of participants appears in the appendix.

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[1] *New Frontiers in the Digital Library: Social and Ecological Diversity of the American West*, <http://www.cdlib.org/inside/projects/amwest/amwest_year1_report.pdf>.

II. Findings

A Changing Landscape

Historically, the roles of libraries and museums were well-defined and relatively easy to differentiate.

> Both libraries and museums are repositories, but libraries are user-driven. The role of the library is to provide access to a vast amount of material through which the user freely roams, making his/her own connections between works. The user chooses which items to look at. Museums, on the other hand, are curator-driven. Historically, they have only provided access to limited holdings, usually exhibited through a particular interpretation or context, as provided by curatorial and educational staff. The museum provides a framework of context and interpretation, and the user can navigate within that smaller body.[2]

Now, however, with all of the advancements in technology and networking, we are witnessing a convergence of these two worlds. Libraries are turning to museums to learn about how to create engaging and educational exhibits, and museums are turning to libraries to learn how open up their collections to the public and give them access to the museum's entire holdings, not just what the curator puts in front of them.

> These [technological] changes offer great opportunities for linking resources between these different types of collections, and may lead to exciting collaborations. One needs to be careful, however, to not let the technology drive changes in missions for these various types of organizations; professionals need to consciously evaluate and adopt mission changes, rather than merely accept them because of mission-drift caused by technology.[3]

Looking Within: Libraries Respond

Reflecting the relative newness of technological advances that make online exhibits possible, our interviewees expressed differing opinions about where online exhibit building fits into their vision of their library's mission. Responses ranged from "Yes, it's part of the library's central mission." to "No, it's not part of the library's central mission." Interviewees who believed the latter made a point of differentiating libraries from museums. "A library would still function as a library if you took out exhibits." The one interviewee from a museum "absolutely" felt that *online* [emphasis added] exhibit building was part of the museum's mission. He added that, in fact, this activity caused the museum to go back and rewrite its mission statement.

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[2] Besser, Howard (1987). Digital Images for Museums, Museum Studies Journal 3 (1), Fall/Winter, pages 74-81; and Besser, Howard (1987). The Changing Museum, in Ching-chih Chen (ed), Information: The Transformation of Society (Proceedings of the 50th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science), Medford, NJ: Learned Information, Inc, pages 14-19.

[3] Ibid.

All interviewees recognized the potential of online exhibits, but not everyone agreed that online exhibit building should be a central activity. Those who did feel that online exhibit building was important viewed it as an opportunity to further the mission of library. Others viewed it as a luxury that they could not usually afford. A key finding of this assessment is that how an organization views this activity with respect to its mission is an important factor in determining how open it may be to adopting new technology and tools.

The Purpose of Exhibits

Librarians discussed several reasons for building online exhibits. The most practical and well-understood purpose for creating an online exhibit is to preserve a physical exhibit. After a physical exhibit gets taken down, its online counterpart can serve as a digital archive of the exhibit. Sometimes, especially in the case of special collections, exhibit websites are linked to events, such as conferences or exhibit openings. As such, these online exhibits become a valuable development tool…"a way to draw in potential patrons". Before and during the event, the website helps advertise and organize resources for the event. After the event, the exhibit website becomes part of the body of knowledge for that topic and keeps the library that created it relevant by generating reference requests. Another important purpose for creating online exhibits is to showcase what the library has. By surfacing material for users, libraries can use online exhibits as outreach and teaching tools.

An interesting corollary of viewing online exhibits as a development tool is that this made some librarians less open to the idea of collaborating with and using resources from other organizations. These librarians felt that the purpose of an exhibit is to show off what they have, not send people to other libraries. As one librarian stated, "Having companion pieces was never the point of having a library exhibit." However, there are librarians who already collaborate with other people within and beyond their organizations to create online exhibits. These librarians felt that resources from other organizations made their own exhibits and collections "richer".

The Anatomy of Online Exhibits

Not surprisingly, the organizations that had more experience with developing online exhibits recognized that there are different types of online exhibits. The following table describes each category:

Level 1	• Online exhibit is a virtual (online) re-creation of a physical exhibit. • May include images of items in the physical exhibit and any copy written for the exhibit • May go as far as to try to re-create the physical layout of the gallery
Level 2	• All elements of level one *plus* additional context and content
Level 3	• Composed of digital surrogates • Physical counterpart may never be realized • Primary experience meant to occur online*

* The main criterion for the third level of online exhibits is that the primary aesthetic experience is designed to be online. With online exhibits that have some sort of physical counterpart, the primary aesthetic experience is intended to take place onsite. The website may provide more context or a convenient gathering of information, but the impact of the subject matter is best experienced in person.

Regardless of the type of online exhibit or the experience level of the interviewees, certain factors to consider when creating exhibits emerged. Interviewees identified three components of an exhibit:

1. Strong intellectual content that tells a story. (Scholarship is key.)
2. Strong aesthetic appeal.
3. Availability of means of display. (For a physical exhibit, this means the physical real estate of display cases. For an online exhibit, this means web production capabilities.)

Some libraries find that fulfilling the first component is their greatest challenge. Others feel that the third component is their greatest obstacle. In some cases, libraries have developed partnerships with faculty and donors to generate the scholarship needed to create an exhibit. For them, the stumbling block becomes putting that content online.

Overcoming Obstacles

Across the board, the greatest challenge that organizations face in creating online exhibits is the lack of human and financial resources. From research to scanning/text conversion to web production, libraries have neither the funds nor the expertise to support online exhibit building to the extent that they wish to. Furthermore, given that there aren't usually funds to hire staff dedicated to development of online exhibits, there is no norm for who in the organization is responsible for doing this work.

For many libraries, building online exhibits is, at best, done by people who have many other responsibilities. At worst, it is a wishlist item or an afterthought that rarely comes to fruition. One librarian who is in charge of building physical exhibits said that she "would love to have it [online exhibit building] be an ordinary, normal part of our routine." Even with a strong desire to build an online complement to every physical exhibit, several librarians reported not having the tools or resources to accomplish this goal.

Libraries that were most successful at developing online exhibits had web developers on staff or had funds to outsource web development work. With the latter, the funds were project based, so the library's ability to continue creating online exhibits depended on its ability to raise funds. Interestingly, everyone who was involved in web production reported using only HTML editing tools, such as Dreamweaver and BBEdit, and basic databases (if any) to develop online exhibits.

Another interesting finding of this assessment is that individual personalities can greatly influence the direction and success of online exhibit building programs. The lack of resources can be compensated for – to a degree – by the sheer will of a leader. In fact, we found that the impetus for pursuing online exhibit building in the first place was often driven by a determined and enthusiastic individual, excited by the possibilities of new technological advances. By the same token, an organization's openness to using new tools can depend on the artistic ability and the artistic sense of staff members.

One way of overcoming some of the obstacles associated with building online exhibits, such as lack of web production expertise, is to use templates. Templates keep designers from having to start from scratch every time they need to build a website. Libraries wanting to unify the look and feel of their websites are already exploring the use of templates. The most enthusiastic was a highly decentralized library. When asked whether there might be organizational resistance to using templates, the response there was "Organizational resistance? Not anymore. We need simplicity."

Despite this desire for simplicity, however, many librarians are wary of templates making exhibits look generic. The standard argument that templates would allow the designers to create more exhibits by allowing them to focus their efforts on content instead of layout is controversial, as well. Some who disagree with this feel that decreasing the time required for layout still would not

result in more exhibits because the time needed to develop scholarly content would remain the same. Another responded, "Why would you standardize a design if you have a designer?". Librarians with studio art expertise expressed a desire to have more control over the presentation of their online exhibits.

A template-based exhibit building tool is certainly not the silver bullet that will solve librarians' exhibit building woes. However, using templates has the potential to improve users' experience by standardizing navigation. In addition, as one developer noted, complex features, such as timeline creation and zoom, available in some template-based tools "aren't things you want to code from scratch yourself."

Wanted: Stability, Standards, and Support

Although there was disagreement about the value of templates, there was no such difference of opinion about the importance of having the ability to reuse and repackage digital objects that had been created by the librarians' organizations. One person mentioned that his campus had developed its own database for managing digital objects created on campus. Several interviewees expressed enthusiasm for the "skin and slice" tools that are under development at the CDL.

Whatever the technology, interviewees expressed a desire for stability and commitment to supporting legacy technology and standards. Any tools that are developed must also be easy to learn and use. Otherwise, interviewees said that they would go back to what they had been doing. Also of great concern is the issue of copyright. In the case of archives and special collections, the organization may possess the physical artifact but not the copyright. Libraries are looking for leadership and guidance on this issue, which is a "huge inhibitor to online exhibits". As one interviewee observed, "Rights? You can skirt these issues in the physical space, but not online."

III. Summary and Conclusion

Some of the main points to take away from this assessment include the following:

- How an organization views its mission is an important factor in determining how open it may be to adopting new technology or collaborating with others.
- The roles of libraries and museums are converging. Each could benefit greatly from the expertise and experiences of the other.
- Online exhibits bring many benefits to the organizations that create them.
- The greatest obstacle to building online exhibits is the lack of financial and human resources.
- Copyright concerns must be addressed.
- Librarians want tools that are stable, standard, and supported.

We began this investigation with our hypothesis that libraries would build more online exhibits if it were easier to do. After speaking with librarians and curators out on the campuses, we found that the question of whether or not tools would help librarians build more online exhibits is extremely complex. Successful adoption of new technology depends not only on how easily it fits into people's current workflow, but also on how it is perceived by individuals and the organization as a whole.

An important step in laying the foundation for CDL's future work is to release an outstanding "skin and slice" tool for the campuses. The anticipation for this tool is building, fueled by CDL's announcement of it last year. The CDL has a great opportunity to establish credibility and trust with the "skin and slice" tools, if they are easy to learn and use, stable, standard, and supported. A successful effort here would demonstrate to our users CDL's commitment to developing high quality technology and services for the UC libraries.

The assessment team learned a great deal from this round of interviews, but this represents only the tip of the iceberg. There is still much to learn about our users and the potential impact of CDL's various initiatives. We hope that this report has shed some light on the issue of online exhibit building, and we look forward to continuing our work on behalf of the American West project in the future.

IV. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedule

UCLA
03/22/05 Tuesday @ 9am

UCB Doe/Moffitt
Environmental Design Archives, 280 Wurster Hall
03/24/05 Thursday @ 2-3:30 pm

UCB
Bancroft Library - The Stone Room
03/28/05 Monday @ 3pm

Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive Exhibitions (BAMPFA)
04/04/05 Monday @ 3:15-4:15

UCI Southeast Asian Archive Portal
04/01/05 Friday @ 2:30pm
Via phone

Appendix B: Assessment Methodology

Target Audience
The user audience for the American West project includes UC and community college faculty, academic librarians, K-12 teachers, and public librarians. This assessment focused on academic librarians and curators.

Needs Assessment Design
This round of needs assessment consisted of five group interviews. Each interview consisted of an interviewer, one to five interviewees, and an observer. This format hopefully increased the comfort level of the interview subjects by distributing the focus of attention among the group instead of putting the spotlight on one individual. The interviewer used a list of prepared questions as a guide for the discussion.

Data Collection Methodology
Using a laptop computer, the observer took notes on interviewees' responses to the interviewer's questions, as well as any ensuing discussion.

Appendix C: List of online exhibits and websites mentioned during interviews

- Transportation Futuristics: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/news_events/exhibits/futuristics/
- Bridging the Bay: Bridging the Campus: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/Bridge/
- JARDA: http://jarda.cdlib.org/
- Berkeley Art Museum: http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/rubens/index.html
- Gene(sis): www.gene-sis.net
- Museums and the Web: http://www.archimuse.com/mw2005/index.html
- Museum Computer Network: http://www.mcn.edu
- Greene and Greene Virtual Archives: http://www.usc.edu/dept/architecture/greeneandgreene/index.html
- Bear in Mind: http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/bearinmind/
- Images of Native Americans: http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/nativeamericans/
- Relief of Pain and Suffering: http://www.library.ucla.edu/biomed/his/painexhibit/
- Medieval Manuscripts: http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/scweb/rouse/rouseindex.htm
- Ralph Bunche: http://www.library.ucla.edu/bunche/intro.html
- Realms of the Sacred in Daily Life: http://www.lib.uci.edu/libraries/exhibits/meso/sacred.html
- Pachyderm 2.0: http://www.nmc.org/pachyderm/

Appendix D: Questions and Objectives

1. Please tell me about your role in the library and a little bit about how you got there. How have you seen the library change over the last few years?

   Objective: Establish rapport with interviewee.

2. What is the mission of the library? What are some major goals that the library is pursuing?

   Objective: Get a general sense of library's priorities.

3. What are some of your professional goals and how do they fit into the context of the library's mission?

   Objective: Get to know interviewee. Job security, status, career development, and new interests are part of professional goals.

4. Can you describe the type of exhibits that you have been involved in building? Have there been instances where there was a physical exhibit and you wanted to build a virtual one but you couldn't?

   Objective: Find out what library's and interviewee's exhibit building history are.

5. Have you ever done a virtual exhibit that you would have liked to develop further? If time and resources were abundant, where would you have liked to have taken it?

   Objective: Find out what possibilities for exhibits interviewee envisions.

6. What is process for creating an online exhibit? What kind of tools do you use?

   Objective: Determine current workflow and tools used.

7. Will you walk us through the process you went through in creating a recent online exhibit? How do you actually get stuff online?

   Objective: Ground interviewee in a real life example. Get specifics of workflow.

8. What do you do when someone else has materials that you think would be great in your online exhibit? Do you just stick with what you have?

   Objective: Determine whether or not collaboration with others is taking place. What process is involved in collaborating with others? Do they go beyond their own institution's walls? If not, why?

9. What kinds of problems did you run into?

   Objective: Determine the "points of pain".

10. Who is the target audience for your online exhibits? How do you figure out who your target audience is?

    Objective: Find out what audience the library is trying to reach and how they determine this information. See if CDL can learn from their process.

11. Do you perceive online exhibits as being an integral part of your library? Once you create an online exhibit, where does it go? How would someone find it?

    Objective: Does the library/interviewee view websites as an integral part of the library or as an add-on to their organization? What is the purpose of building an online exhibit? Is its purpose to market a physical exhibit or does it stand on its own?

12. When you compare yourselves to other similar institutions, do you think your web presence is of higher, lesser, or equal quality? Who is leader in this?

    Objective: Determine how the library views itself? Who inspires them?

13. Do you expect online exhibit building to increase, decrease, or stay the same in the future?

    Objective: Find out how equipped library is, organizationally, to deal with virtual exhibits in terms of the following:
    - Personnel
    - Budget
    - Any barriers to doing it
    - General acceptance/attitudes (e.g. this is something that needs to be done)
    - Values and perceived value

14. Is there anything that we haven't covered, anything that you'd like to add or emphasize?

    Objective: Help bring interview to a close. Give interviewee an opportunity to voice his/her comments or concerns.

15. How do you explain what a finding aid is and what its value is to the general public? Do you think the general public understands what a finding aid is?

    Objective: See if CDL can learn from their experience with finding aids.