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Introduction to Focus Issue: Collections in a Digital Age

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FOCUS ISSUE

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Cover Image: Faith in the City: Chicago's Religious Diversity in the Era of the World's Fair home page, visually showcasing the scale of the Newberry's holdings in church and synagogue records. All figures come from the site itself, which can be visited at http://publications.newberry.org/faith. Beta version as of April 2016. Official launch estimated for early 2017

Introduction to Focus Issue
Collections in a Digital Age

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In Spring 2015, a working group engaged in questions at the intersection of digital and public history at the annual National Council on Public History (NCPH) meeting held in Nashville, Tennessee. The vibrant discussion focused on the exciting and important ways by which public historians make digital, public history. Because a significant amount of work has centered on digitizing and augmenting historical archives, this special issue explores digital approaches to physical collections. Inflected by the contributors' positioning in public history, the issue highlights how digital approaches are shaped by questions of access, audience, collaboration, interpretation, and materiality. From that discussion in Nashville arose another conversation to convey some of the practical challenges, decisions, applications, and opportunities as experienced by working group discussants. It seemed then, and with the collection of articles in this issue it is even more apparent that the lessons learned by working group discussants are widely applicable to practitioners of public history and digital history, and public, digital history.

The articles in this collection develop and interrogate a range of issues beginning with methodology and then turning to case studies. In "A Case for Digital Collections," Sheila Brennan highlights a challenge. How do we represent disagreement and difference in the interpretations of objects? She argues that digital environments offer a creative and flexible space for multiple meanings of objects and their histories to be exhibited and constructed. She focuses on three strategies for increasing access and multivalent interpretation to collections: building generous interfaces that allow users to browse rather than search, interrogating multiple historical interpretations of the collections programmatically, and providing open access to collections for transformative use. Digital collections are just the beginning of the multivalent meaning-making possible in digital projects.

Zooming in on the process of digitization, Lauren Tilton writes about the politics of film digitization, arguing that we should reconsider archival and preservation "best practices" that require film restoration. We should consider digitizing film "as is" in turn capturing the film's current materiality rather than focusing on restoring films to their "original," "authentic" condition. By doing so, viewers can begin to see the age and wear of a film, offering possible insight into usage. More broadly, she highlights how archiving practices determine which histories are remembered and how.

We then turn to William Walker, who explores combining digital collections with embodied public programs. He shows how using public history to engage in conversations about contemporary social issues enhances and shapes how one collects and exhibits oral history. Rather than a digital collection online serving as the final project, the oral histories are the foundation for facilitated, public dialogue.

In the case studies, we begin with Brent M. Rogers, who explores the relationship between print and digital documentary editions of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. He focuses on the new affordances made possible through the digital component. Bringing together documents across archives, the digital collection offers unprecedented access to the voice of Joseph Smith, while also providing a space to interactively contextualize and (re)interpret Mormonism's founder. In particular, he focuses on the digital documentary editorial process by looking closely at the role of XML and the importance of scanning in the original documents, which allows users to engage with the materiality and words of Smith's original texts. Contextualizing the project within issues of transparency, he finishes by discussing what such a public, digital project means for understanding Smith historiographically and for the project's institutional sponsor, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Next, we turn to issues of local history and pedagogy. Brian Failing looks closely at the role of postcards in teaching local, public history. *Using Postcards as Historical Evidence* is a digital project built around a collection of postcards from the DuPage County Historical Museum. The project argues for the importance of postcards as a historical source and shows how postcards can be used to understand local communities. Importantly, he highlights the importance of developing such digital projects through graduate coursework for professionalization in public history.

Chris Cantwell's project, which takes *Faith in the City* from the archives to the streets of Chicago, is also quite instructive. Cantwell's case study demonstrates the possibility digital public history has to complicate and improve historiography. His explanation of the processes and presentation of *Faith in the City: Chicago's Religious Diversity in the Era of the World's Fair* offers readers much to ponder. The process of digital collection creation from physical objects opens up its use for historians and interested publics, thereby making the potential to re-shape historical knowledge about a collection. But, perhaps more importantly, Cantwell offers an invaluable case study concerning the power of presentation of digital collections.

The presentation of digitized physical objects on a map-based interface, Cantwell embeds those historical objects as well as the repository responsible for them into the physical, albeit digital, space of the city. This is something that archivists and museum curators at any institution should consider: how to make your collections part of the fabric of understanding the space and place you occupy. Such activity can, and perhaps should, be done digitally.

In conversation with Failing and Cantwell, Kyle Roberts uses the Jesuit Libraries Provenance Project (JLPP) to show how developing digitized library collections offers an opportunity to learn and teach about digital projects, shared authority, and collaboration. The project places front and center the recovered books bindings, illustrations, inscriptions, and stamps, which brings attention to the relationship between physical and digital objects. The interchange between the digital project held at Loyola University and Flickr allows JLPP to highlight the materiality of the collection while crowdsourcing new metadata. Finally, Roberts importantly highlights how the project is creating new religious history scholarship. This article unveils the multiple outcomes of creating digital, public history. One example highlights how the digital creation of physical objects not only provides virtual access to those objects but also offers an opportunity to gain a more intimate knowledge of the original physical item and its place within the tangible archive, thereby allowing that knowledge and that authority to be transmitted through the digital presentation.

Building off questions about creating and accessing new forms of knowledge online, Susan Knowles examines a litany of challenges and successes for digitization, preservation, and collaboration within the context of her work at Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation. Knowles highlights what is at stake for digital archival collections: access and preservation and what takes precedence. This article offers all of us a way to look at a variety of approaches and challenges to developing digital collections writ large.

Finally, Mark Tebeau argues that digital tools can augment rather than obscure the materiality of collections. He begins with use of mobile tools to interpret history among the living and material archive of the built environment. He then turns to crowdsourcing as a mechanism for close engagement with material collections. Finally, he looks at how digital tools return listening to sound archives.

The articles are—like digital public history itself—multifaceted, showing a variety of possibilities, opportunities, challenges, and even best practices at a range of institutions or dealing with an assortment of historical materials. While each offers much to consider individually, readers will see some interesting and important themes develop across them collectively. Digitization offers an opportunity to look again at the objects and to describe them in new ways for digital presentation, as particularly noted by Tilton, Roberts, and Cantwell. The process of digitization also exposes the politics of institutional collecting, cataloging, access, and presentation that often privileges particular histories and publics.

The importance of metadata in digital, public history cannot be overstated and several articles speak to the ways in which rich metadata augments collections' discoverability, interpretation, and preservation. As articles by Roberts, Rogers, and Knowles demonstrate, doing so requires in some cases cataloging physical information that develops and shares an archivist's or curator's intimate knowledge of physical objects. The data created with digital initiatives can be captured and distributed to many rather than locked in an institution. Thoroughly cataloging metadata becomes paramount and offers an opportunity for knowledge production whether created by a project team or by a broader set of publics.

An exciting affordance of digital projects is the opportunity to collaborate with multiple publics in turn decentering knowledge production as unidirectional. Crowdsourcing is a particular area of interest as cultural institutions such as galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) turn to the crowd, or "public," to enrich collections through tasks such as transcription or geolocation. Public historians too are turning to crowdsourcing but questioning the idea of a singular public instead of favoring digital project that engage specific audiences yet leave space for collaboration and shifting, even unexpected, audiences. The new data provided by participants offers new ways to draw connections within and across collections. Such is a theme running through the articles by Tebeau, Roberts, Rogers, and Cantwell specifically, although all authors included in this volume hint at this notion.

Importantly, structured data opens up digital methods such as faceted browsing, mapping, and drawing out timelines which, in turn, allow multiple access points to the collections, as articulated by Brennan and Cantwell. The ability to remix and reorganize within and across collections allows for multiple entry points and arguments. Meaning and interpretation can shift as participants move through the project and over time as new data and new digital methods are introduced. The interpretive flexibility and reach afforded through digital techniques also allows for new scholarship and public history today while opening up new avenues of pedagogy for public historians, as shown in articles by Failing, Walker, and Roberts. Digital collections and digital history are not always the end goal and rather are part of a larger ecosystem of public history programming and pedagogy.

Taken together these articles demonstrate fluidity between the questions and practices of digital history, public history, and digital, public history. The methods and case studies present a range of practical applicability to the historical community. Whether you are interested in accessibility, preservation, collaboration, platforms, presentation, or scholarship, these articles offer a great deal to consider. Yet, they offer as many answers as questions. Looking forward, questions to ponder include: How do we collaborate and share authority from a project's start to finish? How do we account for and recognize the labor of participants? How do we decide when a project ends? We hope that these articles can raise new questions that will lead to new answers that can be shared, leading to growing knowledge and understanding about the intersections of digital and public history.