

National Digital Forum

**Digitisation Selection Work:
Position Paper**

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“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 yet another series of selections among collections that have been winnowed time and again” (North Carolina ECHO, 2005)

“Considering the burgeoning volume and heterogeneity of information on the web, selection and appraisal of resources for digitization is one of the most difficult tasks in the digital resources management life cycle” (Hartman et al., 2005).

Introduction

There are many aspects to the creation of a content-rich New Zealand. This paper focuses on the digitisation of heritage material¹. New Zealand has significant stores of formal content held in local, regional and national institutions, ranging from manuscripts and printed material to film, video and sound recording. Much of this material is not in digital form. Unlocking this content through digitisation is important because it enables New Zealanders to access information about our histories, cultures, languages and identities – and tells our stories to the world.

New Zealand's efforts to date in putting such content online have been sporadic and lacking in national oversight or coordination. The New Zealand government has now proposed a series of actions through the New Zealand Digital Content Strategy aimed at making New Zealand digital content more accessible, providing seamless online access to New Zealand collections, **agreeing priorities for digitisation of significant and important publicly held content**, and promoting open standards, formats and interoperability².

It is expensive to select, create, and maintain digital resources. There are limits to financial resources and to technical capabilities. It is not currently feasible to digitise everything and copyright restrictions, intellectual property rights and cultural preferences mean that not everything should be digitised and made available online. A process of selection and prioritisation is required which takes account these factors along with the value of the materials and the interest in their content. This process takes place to some degree in every institution or community embarking on digitisation work but it should

¹ The creation and wide availability of accurate catalogues, indexes and finding aids to enable the discovery of content which is not digitised is another important piece of work required to improve access to heritage content. However this document is focused on digitisation of the content itself.

² Creating a Digital New Zealand: New Zealand's Digital Content Strategy, www.digitalcontent.govt.nz

also take place at a national level. A 2004 report on the piecemeal and uncoordinated approach to digitisation in the UK highlighted resulting issues including risk of duplication, use of diverse standards, lost opportunities for collaboration, lack of user awareness of existing resources and poor gap analysis³.

The National Digital Forum has produced this paper as a way of articulating ideas about how New Zealand could prioritise material for digitisation and what criteria should be taken into account when doing so. It is envisaged that it will be an input to actions of the Digital Content Strategy while providing the basis for a future New Zealand online resource. This paper is licensed under [Create Commons Share Alike](#); you are free to copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work under the conditions that you attribute the work to the NDF and if you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar or a compatible license.

Selection Criteria⁴

Statement of Principle:

The primary purpose of digitisation is to facilitate access. The aim is to enable people, regardless of location, to directly access to content relating to New Zealand's documentary and cultural heritage.

Value

The value of the materials' content and the benefits derived from access to digital versions justify the expenditure of time and effort of carrying out a digitisation project. The content should have sufficient intrinsic value to ensure ongoing use by a defined constituency for a significant period of time.

Many factors contribute, but they include

- intellectual content, historical significance⁵
- rareness or uniqueness
- importance for the understanding of the relevant subject area
- broad or deep coverage of the relevant subject area
- useful and accurate content
- information on subjects or groups that are otherwise poorly documented
- access to the material currently restricted due to its condition, value, vulnerability or location

³ B Bültmann, R Hardy, A Muir, C Wictor "Digitisation in UK Research Libraries and Archives: is a national strategy needed?" <http://hdl.handle.net/2134/471>

⁴ Based largely on the criteria developed and published by Columbia University Libraries

⁵ For an expanded discussion on the idea of significance see "A Regional Approach to Identifying Items of National Significance Held by Small Culture Institutions: A Research Report" D Dorner and S Young (2004)

Demand

To justify the effort and expense, there should be a reasonable expectation that the product will have immediate utility for New Zealanders community and/or other appropriate audiences. Thus factors to be considered might include:

- an active, current audience for the materials
- advocacy for the project from part of the community
- realistic expectation of attracting new users even if current use is low
- requests from potential partners in collaborative or consortial efforts

Note however that that a 2005 paper looking at 21 digitisation projects for historical photograph collections cautions against using existing demand as the sole justification for digitisation

“Criteria for selection are often made on the perceived needs of the targeted viewer. Hence there is a danger of producing a ‘turn-of-the-century view’ shaped, as one archivist interviewee put it, by ‘today’s trends for nostalgia’ rather than by online resources that will have sustainability over time. ...The question here .. is one of authenticity and representation of historical material being accessed by the public”⁶

Non-Duplication

There is no identical or similar digital resource that can reasonably meet the expressed needs.

Collaborative Potential

The following factors could be considered

- part of a collection split among a number of institutions that could be united online as a virtual collection
- contribution to development of a "critical mass" of digital materials in a subject area
- flexible integration and synthesis of a variety of formats, or of related materials scattered among many locations

Enhancement of intellectual access

The following factors could be considered

- Enhancement of intellectual control through creation of new finding aids, links to bibliographic records, and development of indices and other tools.

⁶ “A study into the effect of digitisation projects on the management and stability of historic photograph collections” <http://www.dcs.qmul.ac.uk/~pc/publications/2005/ECDLpreprint.pdf>

- ability to search widely, manipulate images and text, and study disparate images in new contexts
- widespread dissemination of local or unique collections

Enhancement of resource quality

Improved quality of access to resource content, e.g., through improved legibility of faded or stained documents, enhanced images or restored sound quality through digitisation processes.

Preservation

While digitization does not in itself constitute preservation, there are preservation aspects to be considered through the creation of digital surrogates which allow

- significant reduction in handling of fragile materials
- access to materials that cannot otherwise be easily used
- protection of materials at high risk of theft or mutilation

For audiovisual items long term access can only be achieved by successive migration of content in the digital domain. As machine readable formats, audiovisual documents require a high degree of physical integrity. Obsolescence of formats and systems represent a barrier to access, as does the chemical composition or inherent vice of the analogue carriers themselves. Therefore digitisation to international best practise standards is a preservation strategy for audiovisual documents. In such cases criteria including the fragility of existing analogue carriers and technical obsolescence of existing analogue platforms should be considered.

Technical Feasibility

Potential projects should be evaluated as to whether it is technically possible with current equipment and software to capture, present, and store digital resources in ways that meet user needs.

Considerations include:

- degree to which a digital version can represent the full content of the original
- understanding of how people will use the digital versions and the level of quality that that implies
- whether the materials will display well digitally
- anticipation of future users with better equipment, to avoid a need to rescan in a few years
- staff and resources to support programming, user interface design, and search engine development to assure that the project can fulfil the functions for which digitisation is planned

Materials that require special consideration include:

- materials that require unusually high resolution
- materials for which fidelity to original colour is essential
- oversize items
- three-dimensional objects
- items with poor legibility

Intellectual Control Criteria

Potential projects should be evaluated as to whether appropriate intellectual control can be provided for the original materials and the digital versions:

- cataloguing, processing and related organisational work already accomplished or to be accomplished as part of the project
- staff and resources to support creation of appropriate metadata relating to document identification, technical capture information, provenance, and easy navigation within the information resource
- Digitisation has to take account of the provisions of the 1994 Copyright Act

Consideration of special requirements around traditional knowledge

Special consideration needs to be given to the digitisation and online delivery of resources which are considered to be mātauranga Māori.

Maori share with other indigenous peoples a legitimate concern and apprehension when uninitiated enter their cultural world. Not only is there a need for respect, but also for caution about the dangers inherent in 'getting on the bandwagon but starting at the top' without having first served an appropriate apprenticeship in learning about the culture, its history, cosmogony, customs and language. Too often, the lack of these attributes has led to subsequent misuse and even abuse of superficially acquired knowledge, thus reinforcing the reluctance of many Maori to share their knowledge with the uninitiated.⁷

These concerns must be addressed. There is a clear risk that if they are not, and if the majority of resources detailing aspects of Māori history, culture and language are therefore excluded from a nationwide digitisation programme, then part of essence of New Zealand will be invisible to us and to the world.

“Although digitization is ideal for sharing, exchanging, educating and preserving indigenous cultures, it also creates ample opportunities for illicit access to and misuse of traditional knowledge. It is essential that traditional owners be able to define and control the rights and access to their resources, in order to uphold traditional laws; prevent the misuse of indigenous heritage in culturally inappropriate or insensitive ways; and receive proper compensation for their cultural and intellectual

7 M Roberts, W Norman, N Minhinnick, D Wihongi, C Kirkwood, Kaitiakitanga: Maori Perspectives on Conservation, University of Auckland, 1995, pp 1–2

property. Finally, it is essential that indigenous communities be able to describe and contextualize their culturally and historically significant collections in their own words and from their own perspectives.”

J Hunter, B Koopman, J Sledge “Software Tools for Indigenous Knowledge Management”, Museums and the Web 2003

“A cornerstone of an Indigenous Digital Library is that the indigenous communities themselves control the rights management of their cultural intellectual property. Local cultural protocols need to be documented and followed prior to the creation of digital content, and communities must be consulted with regard to the digitization of content already gathered by institutions of social memory. “

Robert Sullivan, “Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights”, D-Lib May 2002

Selected Bibliography of Digitisation Selection Policies

(Given in chronological order)

Selecting Research Collections for Digitization by Dan Hazen, Jeffrey Horrell, Jan Merrill-Oldham
<http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/hazen/pub74.html> 1998

University of Oxford Assessment Criteria for Digitisation 1999
<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/scoping/assessment.html>

A Handbook for Digital Projects: A Management Tool for Preservation and Access 2000 <http://www.ncsi.iisc.ernet.in/raja/is214/is214-2006-01-04/dman.pdf>

Columbia University Selection Criteria for Digital Imaging 2001
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/projects/digital/criteria.html>

DEF(Denmark's Electronic Research Library) Final Report. National Digitisation Programme and Policy by Brian Robinson and Simon Tanner 2001

North Carolina Echo (Exploring Cultural Heritage Online) 2005
<http://www.ncecho.org/Guide/selection.htm>

National Library of Australia Collection Digitisation Programme 2006
<http://www.nla.gov.au/policy/digitisation.html>