

Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group Report

May 28, 2021

Introduction

The Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group convened in April of 2020 and commenced work together the following month. Its members operated within a larger constellation of decision-making bodies addressing issues of digital collecting, access, and preservation at NYU Libraries. Two additional working groups complement their efforts: the Digital Preservation and Access Working Group and the Digital Library Steering Committee. While the work of the Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group is time-bound, and concludes with the writing of this report, the others are on-going. Together they will carry forward the proposed criteria in order to assess and prioritize proposed digital preservation and publication projects.

The Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group charge was twofold: First, to create a statement of the Libraries' selection criteria¹ for digital materials and digital library publication projects, both those that should be digitized and those already in digital form, to be included for access and/or long-term preservation in Libraries-managed digital collections and publication services. Second, to create a strategy statement that articulates the landscape, criteria, and prioritization of scalable access services to digital resources in specific scholarly contexts.

It is imperative to highlight that this charge also explicitly centered issues of inclusion, diversity, belonging, equity, and accessibility (IDBEA) as the focal point through which all of our discussions and recommended criteria were framed. Further, the membership of the Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group was intentionally composed to invite direct coordination with the Diversity and Inclusion in Collections Working Group of the IDBEA Steering Committee.

Notably, the working group configuration aimed to represent a wide range of departments and actors who regularly engage with collection development, access, preservation, production, management and administration of digital materials within NYU Libraries. This range of participation was reflective of the scope of collection materials for which the criteria outlined here will apply: general collections, special collections, web archives, publishing, researcher initiated projects, consortial projects, and open access resources. Not included in our scope were vended mainstream digital resources such as commercial databases.

¹ The given charge was slightly modified by the group. The original phrasing "*to create a statement of the Libraries' accessioning criteria for digital materials*" was deemed too hyper-local to archival practices, not inclusive of the full range of digital collections activities encompassed within the criteria we set out to collectively write.

Participants of the Working Group, in alphabetical order by last name:

- Charlene Chou: Head, Knowledge Access; KARMS
- Jonathan Greenberg: Digital Scholarly Publishing Specialist; DLTS
- Nora Lambert: TV & New Media Content Specialist; NYU-TV
- Aruna Magier: Librarian for South Asian Studies, International Relations, and Food Studies; Research & Research Services
- Bill Maltarich: Head, Collection Development; Collections & Content Strategy
- Shannon O'Neill: Curator for Tamiment-Wagner Collections; Special Collections
- Eric Stedfeld: Project Manager/Systems Analyst; DLTS
- Weatherly Stephan: Head, Archival Collections Management; KARMS
- Kim Tarr: Head, Media Preservation Unit; Barbara Goldsmith Preservation and Conservation Department
- Kent Underwood: Head, Avery Fisher Center for Music & Media and Music Reference Librarian; Research & Research Services
- Deb Verhoff: Digital Collections Manager; DLTS

Overview of our process

The Digital Library Selection Priorities Working Group convened monthly over the course of one year. Following an initial review of our charge, we generated a set of activities, proposed and led by members of the group and which constituted an environmental scan. For six months, we worked in a divergent manner, expanding inputs through the use of surveys, case studies, narratives, and knowledge sharing. We committed to a practice of focused conversations in order to collect data along the way. Sample prompts for these conversations included: *What is one thing that stood out to you from this report / presentation? What new insights are emerging? What is one action that we should bring forward into our work on creating selection criteria?*

At the midpoint in our year, we concluded the research and knowledge sharing phase by reflecting on data collected during our environmental scan. Smaller teams revisited each topic and identified key messages or themes. We noted which of the suggested actions would be easiest for us to include in our recommendations and which would be the most challenging. We participated in a creative visioning exercise in order to prepare for generating the selection criteria. Using imagery and sound, we described what we want the outcome of our work together to be. We imagined the positive impact that our resulting criteria could have on teams in the library. The group then checked this vision against our current reality of what is possible, identifying the strengths and weaknesses, dangers and benefits for our work. At a subsequent meeting, working group members revisited data recorded during these activities and worked together to create a commitment statement which is included in this report.

Recommended criteria were proposed, grouped by theme, and discussed as a shared activity in real time with additional inputs between meetings. The final presentation of the criteria in this report is the result of a shared writing process that was owned by all members of the group.

Commitment Statement

We are committed to a set of recommendations that:

- Supports the acquisition, preservation, description, appropriate discovery and access, and publication of cultural heritage materials created by or reflective of marginalized communities.
- Promotes collaboration, communication and resource sharing.
- Reflects NYU Libraries' commitment to the core values of inclusion, diversity, belonging, equity and access.
- Recognizes there are opportunity costs which result from balancing and prioritizing requests.
- Clearly communicates to the NYU community our priorities for acquisition, digital access, preservation, and publishing.

Recommended Criteria

ETHICAL COLLECTING

Ethical collecting comprises acquisitions, access, and publishing processes that respect the inherent rights, perspectives, consent, intellectual property, cultural permissions, and stories of all creators and subjects. Ethical collecting requires that we approach our work with humility and empathy. It seeks to support and collaborate with the communities whose materials we are collecting, making accessible, or publishing. Further, ethical collecting acknowledges the impact of our collecting and digital endeavors on our collective labor and workload capacities. An ethical collecting approach should also take into consideration the environmental impact of digital projects and the ways in which digitization, long-term preservation, data-exchanges, and large-scale server space contribute to climate change which disproportionately affects communities of color. It matters what we choose and don't choose. Organizations and individuals whose materials we preserve will have a more secure and documented legacy than those not chosen for digitization. We must consider the impact of our choices on the communities and histories that surround us:

- Building trust with creators and communities is crucial. It is the first action one should take when developing a digital project for digitization or publication. NYU Libraries should engage in direct outreach to communities rather than waiting for communities to connect with us. Wherever possible, NYU Libraries should work with creators/owners of the content and receive their consent for the materials to be digitized or made digitally accessible. There should be established community support for the proposed project.
- When proposing a digital project, project selectors or initiators should take into account the safety and privacy concerns of the subjects and creators represented in the collection or project material. Project selectors and initiators should ask themselves: *Does digitizing or publishing their content place the community or creators at risk for harm inclusive of state violence, surveillance, doxxing, or harassment?*

- Appropriate intellectual property rights and permissions must be secured prior to digitizing the content. In lieu of rights and permissions being secured, or in the case of fair use or that the materials are in the public domain, documentation supporting the access of the digital materials should be made available.
- Connected to the issue of rights and permissions, projects should emphasize a decolonial approach. Communities should retain ownership of their content. Project proposers should also examine post-custodial models for community partnerships where the original materials continue to live with the organization or community and are not formally placed within the institution.
- Project proposers should also examine how they might support and collaborate with communities by providing infrastructure, expertise, or funding for digitization and digital publishing projects.

IDBEA FRAMEWORKS

IDBEA frameworks aim to expand users' perception and experience of the Libraries as an inclusive environment. Guided by this framework, the Libraries must shape its collections in all formats in ways that more explicitly support, affirm, and speak to the life experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, identities and perspectives, including but not limited to: culture, race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, physical and neurocognitive ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographic origin. In other words, we seek affirmative answers to the questions: *Do our users see themselves in the stacks and in our online resources? Do our collections provide opportunities for our users to grow through discovery and cultural awareness of others?*

IDBEA-informed digital collecting and access projects should, therefore:

- Prioritize materials and projects by and about marginalized communities, with particular priority given to those communities' stories of themselves.
- Prioritize resources generated by grass-roots organizations and communities engaged in social and reparative justice movements.
- Prioritize content contributing to democratization of knowledge with emphasis on open access (with benefits beyond NYU and beyond academia itself).

MATERIALS VULNERABILITY AND PRESERVATION NEEDS

Materials that might soon become unusable or inaccessible should be prioritized for digitization and digital preservation activities, as this work supports both the long-term preservation and use of these materials. Access is directly linked to, and contingent upon, preservation in the following cases:

- Materials that are fragile, damaged, or will be damaged with use.
- Material with inherent vice or contamination that can harm the material itself, other collection materials, staff, and/or users.
- Machine-dependent magnetic and optical media at risk for degradation and obsolescence (e.g. analog and digital audio and video; computer disks; CDs/DVDs).
- Motion picture film elements and photographic negatives.
- File-based digital formats that may require refreshment, migration, and/or emulation for long-term preservation.

CONTENT SELECTION AND RESEARCH VALUE

The selection criteria below apply equally to “general,” “distinctive,” and “special” collections, and to both born-digital and digitized analog resources being considered for acquisition, processing, providing discovery and access, and preservation. Digital publication projects that increase the value of content to researchers, instructors, students, and other relevant communities should be evaluated in a similar way. These criteria serve as a checklist for prioritization with the understanding that no particular collection development opportunity is going to meet every single criterion. Rather, these criteria will have to be weighted, balanced and prioritized in relation to each other.

During the course of our engagement, working group members surveyed NYU Libraries subject selectors in order to better understand how changes in digital publishing and acquisition impact their ability to collect materials in their discipline. This feedback surfaced current use cases for which the Libraries’ organizational structure and established workflows for acquiring or processing born digital material are not sufficient to meet the needs of selectors. Addressing these limitations is beyond the scope of the group’s charge. However, it should be noted that a closer examination will be necessary in order to ensure that the criteria for prioritization can be applied as intended.

- Research value for both present and long-term future teaching, research, and learning interests and trajectories of user communities at NYU.
- Recommendation by selectors and curators responsible for collection building and liaison roles in their respective subject areas/disciplines.
- Uniqueness or rarity.
- Artistic quality, for creative arts material.
- Content contributes to IDBEA of NYU’s collections, either within an already established collecting area or by opening up a new area that is currently underrepresented.
- Timeliness in meeting urgent needs to support current research and teaching.

- Endangered content; material that will become inaccessible or disappear if not digitally preserved now (e.g. endangered due to format, lack of sustainable funding, conditions of political turmoil, or other social, economic or political constraints, short in-print life).
- Open Access; can be presented openly to contribute to democratization of access to knowledge, with an understanding that open access is not possible in certain fields.
- Content contributes to inter-institutional collaborative and coordinated projects.
- Long-term historical value as a document of cultural memory, especially with regard to unheard voices of marginalized communities.
- Contribution to the national or international community of research collections.
- Demonstrable or predictable high use (but not at the expense of low-use material that qualifies under the other criteria such as high research value or IDBEA focused).
- Potential to enhance an area of established collection strength at the NYU Libraries.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

While not every project warrants a cooperative effort, partnerships and collaborations can offer opportunities for resource sharing, joint grants, intra- and extra-institutional engagement, and the chance to participate in consortia and global communities that have wide reaching impacts. In particular, partnerships that leverage open-access frameworks make space to democratize access to content, and it is encouraged that proposers aim for their digital projects to support the broadest possible access.

When considering selection for digital materials and digital library publication projects, proposers should take into account the landscape of digital collections and projects occurring within and external to NYU Libraries. The following criteria are recommended for those partnerships and collaborations:

- The partnership or collaboration's ethics, values, and actions center upon inclusion, diversity, equity, belonging, and accessibility, and engages in decolonial and anti-oppressive frameworks.
- The resulting digital materials and digital library publications fill a gap in existing digital collections or projects, compliment an existing digital collection/publication, or generously expand said digital holdings intra- or extra-institutionally.
- The resulting materials or publications contribute to national or international scholarship and documenting and preserving diverse cultural heritage of the communities involved
- The project is designed to build upon, or develop, a cooperative interlibrary effort.
- Inter-institutional collaborative open access projects should be prioritized. See for example: [Arabic Collections Online](#) and [South Asia Open Archives](#).

LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Once we determine that we have or can gain the capacity to undertake a project, we should evaluate its long-term sustainability. For each specific project, we need to confirm that the resources required will continue to be available and are sufficient to complete and maintain it. In addition, this value demands that we consider how the single project might contribute to the sustainability of our work in general.

The following are specific criteria that can be used to ensure sustainability:

- The project's digital formats/platforms are not only ones that we can currently support, but that we can support into the future.
- The project creates or sustains valuable partnerships (with donors, with other memory institutions, with our community or new communities, etc.)
- The project contributes to our own growth in terms of technological infrastructure, experience, capabilities, or ability to take on more projects, in particular if the new infrastructure or experience furthers the Libraries' overall values.
- The project has a champion who can articulate and promote its value. This is especially important when a project is focused on skill or asset building.

BUDGET, STAFFING RESOURCES AND SCALABILITY

We must be able to demonstrate either current capability to support a project or lay out the concrete steps needed to build this capability. Building new capacity needs to be considered as part of the project along with supporting activities such as grant writing, donor relationships, and technological investments. We suggest mapping the budgetary, staffing, and technological demands to current capacities, including explicit indications of anything that may need to be shifted to accommodate the new project. When supporting the project demands additional resources, evaluate the effort needed to garnish that support and the likelihood of gaining that support. This assessment should include proposed timelines with explicit deliverables.

Digital technology has fundamentally transformed today's cultural marketplace, by providing independent content creators, whose voices might otherwise be kept outside the margins by the regimes of academic and commercial publishing, with the practical means to document and disseminate their own work in their own ways. A library that aspires to inclusiveness and diversity in its collections will therefore be open to self-published, independently distributed collection material. A substantial portion of such material is born-digital, and to procure it compels the library to go where the opportunities are to be found. The NYU Libraries' limited experience so far with collecting diverse and inclusive, born-digital material has amply demonstrated how labor-intensive it is for Knowledge Access and Resource Management Services to acquire and process it. Factoring technical-processing staff hours into project plans and budget calculations and in general providing KARMS with the resources it needs to support

digital collecting as an integral part of the larger IDBEA enterprise, will be essential in turning strategic ideals into concrete achievements.

This criterion demands we consider the financial, human, and technological inputs necessary to take on digital projects:

- The project is feasible. Determine whether we have the current staffing, funding to support this (or we are working towards that; i.e. we are writing a grant, building a relationship with a donor).
- The project matches existing processing/preservation capacity, or identifies what current work this will replace.
- The proposed timeline and deliverables in line with available resources, technology, and staffing.
- The proposed project or collection offers potential to attract funding.

METADATA SCOPING FOR ACCESS AND DISCOVERY

It is critical to acknowledge and commit to the stewardship responsibilities that we take on for the life of the material we acquire. To meet these stewardship responsibilities, projects must have a plan for metadata creation, discovery, and access that aligns with the following principles:

- A scope of work for metadata creation, access, and discovery platforms is clearly defined, at least for initial phases.
- Supports the creation of interoperable, standards-compliant metadata that promotes open access.
- Centers on inclusive metadata principles and the adoption of infrastructure that supports content and use by marginalized communities and organizations.
- Contributes to consortial discovery and access systems like HathiTrust.
- Resource commitments accompany new workflows and systems, or existing workflows and systems are in place.

Strategy Statement on Scalable Access

NYU Libraries has played a leading and wide-ranging role in building and supporting services to support access to digital resources. As a member of organizations that provide access services, such as HathiTrust, the Libraries support community-driven services. DLTS builds, maintains, and contributes to software for access and preservation. In some cases, NYU researchers collaborate with DLTS and other Libraries departments in these efforts. KARMS provides infrastructure and produces metadata that support these access services. The range of such services includes: digitization, OCR, and captioning of printed and audiovisual material; dedicated publication platforms for scanned books, video content, archival material, and finding aids; repository services that accommodate a range of formats, arrangements, and use cases; platforms and websites for specific collections or projects. Together, these services support access to research content from library collections, scholar-curated projects, and NYU Press publications. The content is text-based material, both digitized and born-digital, image-based material, audiovisual material, datasets, and software.

Over the past decade, DLTS has moved away from bespoke digital projects toward more scalable services that are useful for multiple projects over time. The Libraries should continue to employ this strategy, which is necessary to keep up with the activity of selectors and faculty. This principle should be kept in balance with the values and priorities elucidated in this report, with special attention paid to the following objectives:

- Digital library projects and collections should be better integrated into existing discovery systems.
- Digital library projects and collections will benefit from better promotion and visibility campaigns, targeting the current and potential audiences and stakeholder communities of these resources.
- The Libraries should assess existing infrastructure and resources in light of projects and collections that selectors identify as priorities, but which cannot currently be supported by Digital Library infrastructure and workflows.
- The Libraries should explore partnerships with partner institutions for collaborative work in software development, digitization, and metadata creation.