

Building a Model Digital Curriculum

Thinking About the Future of Archiving

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Last year, the Master's Program in Archives and Public History (APH) in the Department of History (GSAS) received a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for the purpose of creating a "model digital curriculum." In February 2009, the *New York Times* confirmed the need for such a grant with an article titled, "Digital Archivists, Now in Demand." Part of a recession-inspired series on "fresh starts" in a troubled economy, the article began by describing what digital archivists do and why so many organizations need their professional services:

"When the world entered the digital age, a great majority of human historical records did not immediately make the trip.

"Literature, film, scientific journals, newspapers, court records, corporate documents and other material, accumulated over centuries, needed to be adapted for computer databases. Once there, it had to be arranged — along with newer, "born-digital" material — in a way that would let people find what they needed and keep finding it well into the future.

"The people entrusted to find a place for this wealth of information are known as digital asset managers, or sometimes as digital archivists and digital preservation officers. Whatever they are called, demand for them is expanding."¹

APH Director Peter Wosh, a past president of the Society of American Archivists, had been aware for some time of the urgent need for digitally literate individuals in his profession. Graduates from the program will go on to work in university libraries and museums, and at historic sites, nonprofit organizations, government archives,

¹ De Aenlle, C. Digital Archivists, Now in Demand, *New York Times*, February 8, 2009. www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/jobs/08starts.html?_r=3

and corporations. They will bring a historian's viewpoint to the task of preserving and presenting our culture's most treasured memories and its most significant records.

NYU has educated archivists and public historians for many years, but it would be difficult to overstate the extent to which the age of digital information has transformed what archivists and public historians need to know.

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For instance, a historian working at a museum that owns a set of interesting historical photographs will often be put in charge of a project to digitize those photographs and put them online, while an archivist working in a research library will need to make sure that boxes of unpublished letters by and to a famous person can be found using online search tools such as the library catalog, a database, or Google.

Both archivists and public historians must also learn how to cope with massive and ever-increasing amounts of born-digital electronic records. As the magazine *Computer World* reported, the outgoing administration of George W. Bush gave the National Archives and Records Administration "more than 50 times what it received from the Clinton years," in terms of electronic records: about 140

terabytes² of information, including some 20 terabytes of email alone.³ Such records are crucial to historians, but archivists have not yet figured out the best ways to collect and preserve this unprecedented amount of information, while historians have not yet figured out the best ways to find and interpret what's important. Increasingly, archivists and historians are realizing that they will need to use new technologies to do their work, and these technologies emerge and change at a dizzying pace.

Professor Wosh's first step in trying to prepare his program's students for this vastly transformed field was to ask Dr. Cathy Moran Hajo, Associate Editor of the Margaret Sanger Papers, to develop and teach a new course titled "History in the New Media." Dr. Hajo's work on NYU's Margaret Sanger Papers Project had given her extensive experience in working with programmers and librarians to create an online edition of Sanger's papers;⁴ the course she developed (first taught in the spring of 2008, currently being taught for the second time in spring 2009) teaches students to plan a major digitization project focusing on historical documents.

Students begin by identifying materials to be digitized and end with a fully realized grant pro-

posal. Along the way, they learn about such issues as website design, document digitization and markup in eXtensible Markup Language (XML), image formatting and file size, multimedia digitization, preservation standards for digital assets, and project management. Students also gain experience with using a wiki, which lets them easily put material on the web.

The NHPRC grant allows for the creation of a model digital curriculum, one that outlines the issues archivists will face and the skills they will need as technology advances.

Both Dr. Hajo and Professor Wosh soon realized that a single course wouldn't be enough; digital skills and issues would need to be incorporated throughout the curriculum. Professor Wosh therefore proposed and obtained a grant to create a model digital curriculum from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), a federal funding agency affiliated with the National Archives and Records Administration. The grant provided funds to hire Dr. Amanda French as a Digital Curriculum Specialist for one year.

Dr. French, whose background includes work on noted digital humanities projects such as the Rossetti Archive and the Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project,⁵ has been at NYU since November 2008. Dr. French has been working, and will continue to

work, on several tasks: drawing up a list of core digital competencies for APH students and assessing the skills of current students; arranging and in some cases teaching workshops on digital skills for APH students; advising APH students on digitally focused independent study projects; designing and building collaborative spaces for the APH faculty to discuss and agree on the curriculum; documenting the NHPRC project on a website; arranging digital internships for APH students at New York museums, libraries, and other cultural memory organizations; helping to develop a new course titled "Creating Digital History," where students can get greater hands-on experience with technology; and more.

Thus far, some of the biggest challenges to revising the curriculum have been related to infrastructure: a digital curriculum needs wired classrooms and WiFi classrooms, server space, and software licenses. NYU's emphasis on traditional humanities education is one of its strengths; our challenge now is to retain the best of that traditional humanities education while making room for a new kind of humanities education — a *digital* humanities education. §

2 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terabyte

3 Brandel, M. Bush's Exit to Put New E-Records System to the Test, *Computer World*, November 21, 2008. www.computerworld.com/action/article.do?command=viewArticleBasic&articleId=9120859

4 Hajo, C., and Katz, E., eds., *The Public Writings of Margaret Sanger, 1911-1960* (electronic edition), www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app. See also articles on this project from previous issues of *Connect*: www.nyu.edu/its/pubs/connect/archives/98spring/hajo-sanger.html and www.nyu.edu/its/pubs/connect/fall03/zimmerman_xml.html

5 McGann, J., ed., *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Archive*, www.rossettiarchive.org, and *The Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project*, ncslaap.lib.ncsu.edu