Digitization of Special Collections:

Impact and Issues

A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Special collections librarianship is undergoing a dramatic transformation due to the impact of digitization. This review of the literature examines the numerous issues associated with digital projects, and the impact they are having on both the manner in which special collections duties are carried out and the fundamental nature of special collections itself. Five major areas of discussion are identified in the literature and discussed herein: 1) the proper role of digitization as a preservation strategy, 2) motivations driving the digitization of special collections, 3) selection and formatting issues, 4) the impact of digitization on the staffing, workflow, audience and future of special collections, and 5) areas for future research.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS:

Digitization; preservation; special collections; library materials.

INTRODUCTION

Problem Domain

Special collections librarianship is undergoing a dramatic transformation. While the fundamental role of special collections has always been to gather, preserve and provide access to unique primary records that reflect the legacy of human knowledge, the manner in which this mission is carried out is rapidly changing with the advent of the digital era. Digitization has introduced new options for preservation reformatting, new opportunities for conservation through the reduced handling of fragile objects, and new access methods that promise to simultaneously revolutionize the landscape of scholarly research and globally broaden the audience of special collections.
These new opportunities have been accompanied by a perplexing new set of challenges and concerns for special collections librarianship. Digital technology is still changing rapidly, making choice of storage medium difficult, and ensuring the need for repeated migration of data to new formats as they emerge. Further, the physical durability of digital media has been called into question; some formats deteriorate within a matter of decades, without any perceptible warning signs. These uncertainties have led many to question digitization as a viable option for preservation reformatting.

Even if not deemed a suitable preservation strategy, digital projects still offer significant prospects for promoting the awareness of special collections holdings, and for expanding a library’s constituency beyond local boundaries. Enthusiasm for these advantages are tempered, however, by other uncertainties. Digitization changes the nature of the audience for special collections – are these changes desirable, and do special collections librarians have a role to play in shaping that audience? What criteria should be considered when selecting materials for digitization? Is digitization properly handled within special collections units, or is it more appropriate work for technical services, preservation departments or systems divisions? How does digitization impact staffing, training and workflow in special collections? How does digitization alter the very nature of special collections work, and what does this signal for the future of special collections librarianship?

This review of the literature aims to explore these broader questions, in an effort to understand the impact to date of digitization on special collections, and to provide a direction for future research.
Scope

The academic literature relating to digitization of special collections is extensive and diverse, reflecting the central importance of this issue to both the future of preservation work and the future of special collections librarianship itself. Articles were selected for their emphasis on disciplinary issues over digital processes, with the exception of a limited number of case studies in digitization that are used for illustrative purposes. Recency of scholarship is also emphasized; of the eighteen peer-reviewed articles that were reviewed, fifteen were published in 2000 or later.

Five major areas of discussion are identified in the literature and discussed herein: 1) the proper role of digitization as a preservation strategy, 2) motivations driving the digitization of special collections, 3) selection and formatting issues, 4) the impact of digitization on the staffing, workflow, audience and future of special collections, and 5) areas for future research.

MOTIVATION

Digitization As A Preservation Strategy

When asked whether they considered digitization tasks to be preservation work, all responding departments answered positively in a 2005 survey of major Association of Research Libraries (ARL) preservation units (Kennedy, 2005, 548). Despite this consensus among practicing departments, the academic literature reveals a lively, ongoing debate about the proper role of digitization as a preservation strategy.

DeStefano (2001) believes this “persistent practice in the library community of linking preservation and digitization” only exists because microfilm reformatting has long served as a preservation strategy for brittle books (p. 61). Despite the common association
of microfilm and digital reformatting as two alternative options, she argues that they serve largely distinct purposes; whereas microfilm reformatting is motivated by the need to preserve deteriorating materials, the motivations for digital reformatting are primarily about looking forward technologically:

Digital technology is ideal when used to enhance access but assists in preservation only when creating surrogate copies of materials that are likely to benefit by reduced handling. It cannot be used to actually preserve an item (p. 62).

While true, the same can also be said of microfilm reformatting. Neither activity directly preserves the original document; rather, they both indirectly support preservation goals by reducing physical handling of fragile primary material. If the use of surrogates can satisfy the needs of most researchers, vulnerable objects can be stored long-term and even off-site in ideal storage environments (Graham, 1996, p. 319). This conservation-based view of digitization is supported by Kaiser’s study, which found that the most frequently cited preservation goal of digitization is the creation of surrogate copies that “reduce wear and tear on the original”; in contrast, permanent storage is never cited as a goal (p. 21).

Some question whether the promotion of digital surrogates decreases or increases demand for access to original materials. As awareness of the existence of special materials is raised, increasing numbers users may potentially begin to request access to the original (Sutton, 2004, p. 234). As a result, Cullen (2001) and others question whether digital surrogates should be mandated as a sole means of access for the majority of users, as a conservation strategy for particularly rare materials (p. 84). The Modern Language Association (MLA) was concerned enough about continued access to original artifacts to issue a formal “Statement on the Significance of Primary Records” in 1995 (Reed-Scott, p. 10).
The hesitation to acknowledge digitization as a preservation strategy may partially arise from the newness of the technology. Graham (1996) acknowledges that “digitization is in its infancy as a preservation medium, but its promise is unmistakable” (p. 321).

**Digitization As A Promotional Strategy**

In an era of tight budgets, the costs and technical challenges associated with digital projects can be daunting, yet the majority of the literature does not question the fundamental decision to digitize special collections. If digital technology is to be viewed as “just one tool in the tool kit, rather than a replacement for tried and true techniques of preservation” (Kaiser, 2000, p. 8), then, the universal drive to digitize special collections must be motivated by other perceived benefits. Indeed, Kaiser’s study found that whereas preservation was cited as a motivation for digitizing special collections only 65.4% of the time, improved access was a cited goal 100% of the time, and “Internet observability” was a goal 96.2% of the time. These goals were not deterred by the significant economic and technical challenges associated with digitization.

Michel (2005) identifies Internet observability as much more than a motivation, labeling it an “institutional imperative” (p. 386):

As library collections become increasingly homogenized through the aggregated commercialization of both print and electronic resources, special collections increasingly are what make library collections distinctive (p. 379).

The unique holdings of special collections have always provided libraries with a distinct, unique identity; they define what makes a particular library “special”. In today’s electronic information environment, it is now perhaps the only means for “preserving the identity and presence of the institution in knowledge space” (Lombardi, 2000, pp. 6-7). Advertising
unique holdings is increasingly seen as an essential strategy for enhancing a library’s reputation, and is a primary reason why special collections units have been at the vanguard of most early library digitization projects. The perceived benefits of promoting special collections via web initiatives include enhancement of institutional prestige, improved public relations and attractiveness to potential library donors. Merrill-Oldham (2003) also characterizes digitization projects as an important means for stimulating support by governments, donors and the community at large (p. 84).

Other authors concur. As early as 1998, Graham observes that “placing digitized materials on the network already has become a requirement for present special collections departments” (p. 4), while Kaiser (2001) notes that “in 2000 a special collection without a digital initiative accessible via the Internet runs the risk of being labeled backward” (p. 4).

Michel (2005) goes perhaps the furthest in stressing digitization of special collections as a strictly promotional strategy, referring to such projects as “digital billboards” (p. 379) or “teasers” (p. 389), rather than a viable means for in-depth research, and taking the position that “they are not surrogates of the collections nor are they intended to provide the basis of intense or deep research” (p. 382). Others disagree, however, citing increased awareness and improved access to special collections as the primary motivation for digital projects.

**Digitization As An Access Strategy**

Of the three primary motivations for digitization of special collections - preservation, promotion and access - increased access is the one most often cited. In Kaiser’s study (2000), fully 100% of responding special collections units stated their projects were motivated by the goal of improved access. This is also reflected in numerous case studies; for example, Phillips’ (2002) review of special collections digitization efforts at the Louisiana
State University Libraries in Baton Rouge, Louisiana identifies broader access as the primary project goal (p. 52), and later goes on to stress that they will not change their “primary focus from access to preservation” (p. 56).

Some authors go further, suggesting that digitization not only broadens access, but also enhances access in ways not possible with original material or traditional surrogate formats. Unlike microfilm, digital reformatting can sometimes augment a researcher's ability to analyze the content of primary material (Cullen, 2001, p. 79; Prochaska, 2003, p. 148). As specific examples, Cullen (2001) relates how Thomas Jefferson often marked through his words as he edited his writing, obscuring his original choice of words. Digital technology has been employed to assign different colors to various inks used in the original documents, and then electronically “erase” a certain color to reveal the words underneath it (p. 83). Graham (1998, p. 5) and Hirtle (2001, p. 44) both recount how early Beowulf manuscripts have been digitized using special lighting techniques, to make deteriorated parts of the text more readable.

Information technology can also fundamentally alter the way in which research materials are used and navigated. As Hirtle (2001) notes, “Digitization can be more than just a substitute for page viewing – it can also generate new and exciting research opportunities” (p. 44). Images of texts can be hyperlinked to transcriptions of texts, to related texts, and even to geographic information systems. This ability to place special collections materials within a larger research context can add “considerable intellectual value” to the objects (Graham, 1996, p. 321). Michel also identifies this as an important by-product of digitization, recommending that projects ought to “go beyond simply digitizing for the sake of digitizing by using the digital environment to link and interpret discreet and unique collections in ways not possible in their physical form” (p. 381). By integrating commentary, criticism,
scholarship, instruction and other intellectual content with digitized materials, we not only broaden access, we enhance it.

**DECISIONS**

Academics are in agreement that archival and special collections holdings cannot be digitized in their entirety; a non-selective “clean-sweep approach” is simply not feasible from the standpoint of time and cost. Like traditional collections development, selection models must be developed to guide decision-making in digitization. The consensus ends there, however. A multitude of approaches have been proposed, some based on traditional decision-making principles for preservation reformatting, others more reflective of the new realities of the digital era.

Burrows (2000) expresses surprise at how “little consideration has been given by the research community to the development of criteria for appraising and selecting objects for digital preservation (p. 149), and observes that several informal models that have emerged without any great consideration for their appropriateness (p. 148). Despite this lack of formality, a number of selection models for digitization are beginning to emerge.

**Materials-Based Approach**

In a materials-based approach, digitization priorities are assigned to those materials considered most at risk within an individual institution’s collections. These are typically objects that are in the poorest physical condition and/or in the greatest demand by users of the collection (Reed-Scott, 1999, p. 10). It is a strategy that emphasizes rare and unique materials, the individual object, the individual user, and the individual institution. De Stefano (2001) observes that hierarchical strategies have been proposed for traditional materials-
based selection models, which recommend conservation for special collections and archival materials, and replacement or reformatting for all other library materials. Despite this, digitization efforts have been overwhelmingly focused on special collections (p. 62). Further, De Stefano counters that condition and use-level are not the only criteria applicable to digitization; the broader goal of research support must also be considered. He concludes with a recommendation to develop a digitization selection model that incorporates aspects of the traditional materials-based approach, but also considers the unique research opportunities offered by digital collections (p. 64).

Cullen (2001) also emphasizes the need to consider academic need when developing digital selection principles, as high-use is not always an indication of value. “We can all cite examples of a book or cache of manuscripts lying unused for decades being taken up by a scholar who sees in them things that had never been seen before, leading to new interpretations and new insights” (p. 86). By more proactively selecting for research value, digitization offers new opportunities to make scholars aware of materials that have heretofore been ignored.

**Collections-Based Approach**

A collections-based approach to selection involves the identification of highly unique or important collections, which are then digitized in their entirety. Unlike the materials-based selection model, this strategy employs inter-library collaboration to avoid duplication of effort, and considers the importance of materials to users beyond the holding institution (Reed-Scott, 1999, p. 10). De Stefano (2001) criticizes this approach for its relative lack of selectivity, as any comprehensive reformatting strategy will inevitably involve the reformatting of rarely used materials – an expensive and inefficient proposition (p. 62).
Further, attempting to identify certain collections as being more important has come under increasing criticism as “cultural imperialism” (Burrows, 2000, p. 146). The modern tenets of cultural relativity hold that even ephemeral materials may contain important information, and that it is inappropriate to determine that some items are more worthy of preservation than others. Unfortunately, this philosophical approach leaves only the impractical “clean-sweep approach” as a model for digitization. More seriously, some academics argue that it can lead to information overload, and a subversion of the cultural memory process (Burrows, 2000, p. 147).

**Discipline-Based Approach**

This user-centered approach holds that disciplinary experts, in conjunction with librarians, are best able to guide priorities for digital preservation in particular disciplines. Scholars provide the “intellectual blueprint” for identifying those resources most valuable to the research community (Reed-Scott, p. 10). De Stefano (2001) refers to this as the “editorial model”, and notes that is not commonly employed (p. 62).

**Formatting Decisions**

In addition to deciding what should be digitized, special collections librarians face the challenge of choosing among multiple digital formats in an environment of rapidly changing technology. Librarians cannot hope to control technological developments, and therefore must remain actively and continually engaged in responding to change (Graham, 1996, p. 322). Kennedy (2005) concurs, noting that digital files will require repeated reformatting over time, and expressing the need for “deep curatorial commitment on the part of collection management and preservation departments” (p. 550). Digital preservation,
defined as the preservation of digital materials, is an extensive topic unto itself, one that is beyond the scope of this survey.

**IMPACT**

**Organizational Impact**

The rapid rise of digitization has had significant impact on the work performed by preservation staff, the way in which that work is organized, and the expertise required to perform it. Whereas early digital projects were considered to be temporary endeavors, they have now come to be recognized as a fundamental preservation responsibility, and a part of daily special collections tasks (Sutton, 2004, pp. 234-235). Examining a 1998-2002 longitudinal by the Association of Research Libraries, Kennedy (2005) observes that the volume of digital reformatting work has now surpassed that of photocopy reformatting, and has become the overwhelmingly preferred preservation reformatting method for non-paper items (p. 544). A 2001 survey of preservation administrators concurs that the addition of digitization activities has been the most significant change in preservation work in recent years.

The ARL survey also reveals that preservation staffing levels have not increased despite the dramatic growth of digitization tasks, and that microfilm reformatting volumes have not declined (Kennedy, 2005, pp. 545-546). Because the ARL survey fails to illuminate how preservation staff is accommodating this increased workload, Sutton (2004) conducted an additional survey of ARL libraries, which reveals that digital tasks are increasingly being shared among multiple library units. Specifically, Sutton identifies three distinct organizational models for implementing digitization of special collections, which fall along an experience-level continuum. When first experimenting with digital projects, special
collections tend to handle projects exclusively. Once digitization is recognized as an ongoing responsibility vs. a temporary project, special collections departments tend to designate a dedicated digital projects manager within their department. Finally, as digitization becomes a high profile, extended library initiative, digitization tasks become divided among several library units both within and outside of special collections, with multiple staff exclusively dedicated to digital efforts. In 2004, Sutton found that 47% of responding libraries fell under the first model, 33% had implemented the second model, and 20% fit the third model (pp. 237-238). He notes, “Although cooperation occurs in all these approaches, the organizational framework for long-term partnerships becomes stronger as libraries move along the progression” (p. 239).

The increasing importance of inter-unit cooperation and collaboration to digitization can be observed in numerous published case studies. In a study of digital projects at the Cleveland State University Library, for example, Boock, M., Jeppesen, B., and Barrow, W. (2003) discuss how workflow evolved from projects isolated within special collections in the early 1990’s to current efforts where responsibilities are divided among no less than four library units: collections development; special collections; systems; and technical services divisions. Phillips (2002) describes a similar progression towards increasingly cooperative work, from “incubator” projects within special collections in the early 1990’s to an emphasis on inter-departmental cooperation. This trend towards collaboration may explain why the 1998-2002 ARL study fails to show an increase in preservation staffing; by partnering with other units, including dedicated digital library divisions, much of the added burden on preservation staff is relieved (p. 240).
Impact on Audience

“The biggest single benefit that has arisen from our pioneering digitization efforts has been a tremendous increase in the use of digitized material” (Hirtle, 2002, p. 43).

Not all academics agree with this confident assertion that obscure special collections materials can be transformed by digitization into mainstay resources. While digitization unquestionably increases the potential for increased use of materials, it may not necessarily translate into increased usage. Kaiser (2001) cites academic literature which stresses that “mere potential for increased access does not justify digitization of an underutilized collection”, and calls for research into whether and how digitization alters the audience for special collections materials (p. 9). These concerns are supported by the fact that less than one-third of all respondents in Kaiser’s survey indicate they had confirmed a demonstrated user need, an indication that “special collections libraries may be developing projects without a clear conception of who the users will be” (p. 22).

De Stefano (2001), in particular, expresses doubt as to the audience-expanding role of digitization: “It is hard to imagine that a broad-based local user community benefits by the improved access to special collections” (p. 64). He goes on to argue that “we should beware of falling into the trap of believing that we create through digitization a broad user community for a collection with an inherently narrow and specialized research interest or use. Our enthusiasm for our collections should not blind us to their limited use” (p. 391).

The question that must then follow is whether or not the significant costs of digitization can be justified if only a limited number of people are interested in the material.

In between these two extreme viewpoints, a number of authors agree that digitization can broaden usage of a special collection, but that this audience must be identified and targeted in advance; in other words, libraries should proactively “shape their
audiences to fit their collections, whereas general collections are more often shaped by their audiences to meet their needs” (Cullen, 2001, p. 86). The scope of a special collections digitization project must provide a sufficient “critical mass of information for the intended user base”, but this also cannot be accomplished unless the intended user base is first identified (Michel, 2005, p. 390). Further, special collections have an obligation to identify the relevance of their holdings to the needs of researchers, and to promote awareness of rare resources that scholars may not know exist.

The literature also notes an inherent tension between satisfying the in-depth needs of specialized researchers and the passing curiosity of the broader community. Cullen (2001) echoes this sentiment, asking “Do we digitize materials with the world in mind, or do we focus on special interest users and let others take care of themselves?” (p. 84). Michel (2005) asks, “Are we creating digital billboards of popular culture or serving the research needs of a community of scholars, or both?” (p. 379). Kaiser suggests it may be both, noting that special collections may be under pressure from funding sources to broaden their traditional constituency (pp. 24-25).

Despite differing levels of optimism for the ability of digitization to broaden a special collection’s user base, researchers appear to agree that the early mantra of “Build it and they will come” is no longer sufficient justification for undertaking a project. User and usability issues can no longer go unconsidered.

**Impact on Future of Special Collections**

Beyond the impact on workflow, staffing and audience, the literature also takes up the question of the impact of digitization on the future of special collections itself. Opinions run the gamut, from wildly optimistic views of a new “golden age” for special collections
(Albanese, 2005) to the potentiality of digitization as “a path to their own destruction” (Hirtle, 2002, p. 49). Regardless of which extreme view is the more prophetic, it is clear that digitization is fundamentally altering the role of special collections in academic and research libraries.

While digital projects have clearly brought enhanced awareness of special collections, some authors argue that it has been accompanied by unforeseen consequences that work to lessen their importance and relevance. Hirtle (2002) identifies five specific areas of “fallout” from the digital era: 1) use of electronic surrogates will increase, 2) use of paper originals will decrease, 3) number of books available digitally will increase, 4) special collections will become “less special, and 5) the role of special collections librarians will change (pp. 46-48).

In this vision of the future, special collections holdings will be valued more for their information content, and less so for their intrinsic value as artifacts. Very few special collections holdings are truly unique, bringing into question the necessity of multiple libraries holding expensive copies of antiquarian books when a single digitized copy can support global usage. Because the relative value of the original object has shifted, some go so far as to question why libraries should continue to invest in expensive special collections development, characterizing them as “museums of the book” where items are held only for their artifactual value (Graham, 1998, p. 5). Further, it is not clear whether digital surrogates are still considered to be “housed” within special collections – are questions related to special collections items now to be fielded by general reference staff? Are special collections librarians only “leading themselves back into the mainstream of the research library” as Graham (1998) suggests (p. 7)? The answers to these uncertainties hold implications for the future of special collections and the librarians that staff them.
For some, that future is bleak. Burrows (2000) concludes that “as far as electronic materials are concerned, the importance of a local collection is in rapid decline” (p. 144). Supporting anecdotes abound. Cullen (2001) cites a conversation with a dean that questioned the value of maintaining expensive special collections with only limited value to his local academic constituency (p. 88), while Phillips (2002) mentions a colleague voicing concern that the value of special collections is diminished by the rise of digital libraries (p. 56).

In contrast to this sobering outlook, most authors express continued confidence in the future of special collections. Phillips (2002) observes that in-house use of Louisiana State University’s special collections has not lessened with the expanded availability of digital surrogates (p. 57), and Sutton (2004) believes that special collections will become even more highly valued as the “defining characteristic of a university library’s identity” (p. 235). Graham (1998) concurs, stating, “Special collections will continue in importance because of the continuing importance of artifactual documents” (p. 1). Albanese goes perhaps the furthest, quoting a colleague who asserts that “In the future, I believe great research libraries will be evaluated more and more on their special collections” (p. 18).

All acknowledge, however, that the role of special collections is changing in the digital age, and that special collections librarians need to play an active part in shaping that role. Michel (2005), for example, asserts that the profession must “re-evaluate and re-access our purpose and role as special libraries and librarians” (p. 383). Hirtle (2001) identifies three particular areas where special collections librarians should focus: 1) they should emphasize those holdings that are truly unique, primarily manuscripts and archival documents, 2) they should embrace and promote the idea of special collections as museums, and place increased emphasis on the artifactual value of holdings, and 3) they should look for new collections
opportunities, specifically electronic materials, and apply their traditional skills to these new areas (pp. 49-51). Albanese echoes this outlook, arguing that the distinction between museum and library is rapidly blurring, and that acquisition of rarities is becoming more, not less important to libraries (pp. 41-42).

**ISSUES**

The discipline’s understanding of digitization and its impact on special collections is still lacking in many areas, a situation further complicated by the fact that digital technology remains a moving target. Just as digitization is altering the work of special collections, the nature of digitization itself is still evolving, with attending challenges. Quoting Rob Spindler of Arizona State University, Sutton (2004) identifies important areas for future research as the development of scaleable digital storage methods, the development of metadata standards for digital libraries, and the clarification of project maintenance procedures (p. 241). Optimization of collaborative workflows is identified by both Cullen (2001, p. 89) and Burrows (2000, p. 141) as another area for improved understanding. Additional areas requiring research and development include but are not limited to:

**Standards and Quality**

As noted by Reed-Scott (1999), “the movement towards greater reliance on digital technology is inexorable” (p. 14), yet the long-term durability of digital information introduces as many new preservation issues as it supports. Digital mediums and storage methods are continuing to evolve rapidly, requiring repeated migrations of data to newer formats, and access to outdated digital mediums is already proving problematic for libraries. The physical durability of digital media is also in doubt, but hard to predict and impossible
to visibly observe. To address these concerns, Reed-Scott calls for the “development of preservation-quality digital media, as well as methods for preserving digital information” (p. 14).

Acceptable standards for digitization have not yet been defined by the field, in contrast to well-defined quality standards for other surrogate formats. In addition to the hazard of sub-standard digital surrogates, this situation also renders comparative studies of digitization projects more difficult (Kennedy, 2005, p. 549). She argues that the field needs to agree on digital standards at which an item may be considered “preserved”, and suggests such a definition may include scanning at minimum 600 ppi, uncompressed storage, a minimum level of descriptive metadata and a thumbnail image (p. 549). As with other forms of conservation, Kennedy also suggests that differing quality levels of digitization may be defined, suitable for different purposes (p. 550).

**Cataloging Issues**

Several authors question the devotion of effort to digital projects when large quantities of special collections holdings have yet to be cataloged. In a 1998 survey of 100 ARL libraries, Albanese notes that:

…on average, one-third of special collections holdings remain unprocessed. Further, roughly 44 percent did not allow researchers access to those unprocessed collections. It presents some interesting questions for library leaders – how much time and money do you put toward getting processed collections online vs. processing them (p. 42)?

A case study by Jerrido, Cotilla and Whitehead (2001) suggests that digitization only adds to the cataloging backlog by creating large volumes of new preservation surrogates requiring
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descriptive metadata. Prochaska (2003) aptly describes this dilemma as a “fundamental tension…between the desire to give an electronic life to…special collections…and the need to produce primary catalog descriptions of material that nobody even knows they have” (pp. 146-147).

If the primary goal is to increase usage of special collections, data may point to digitization as a priority over the cataloging of unprocessed primary material. Michel (2005) argues that cataloging of special collections materials does not increase use (p. 392), an assertion supported by Jerrido, Cotilla and Whitehead’s (2001) case study of Temple University digital projects. Their efforts to catalog digital holdings did not increase usage of or inquiries about special collections, but digital projects have (pp. 9-10).

CONCLUSION

The literature on digitization of special collections reveals a broad range of issues and significant difference of opinion. This is perhaps to be expected of a technology that is still evolving rapidly, and which is currently transforming the landscape of special collections librarianship. Additional studies are needed to resolve many of the outstanding uncertainties and concerns related to digitization.

On one point the literature is in general agreement - that “the movement towards greater reliance on digital technology is inexorable” (Reed-Scott, 1999, p. 14). Digitization may have introduced as many perplexing new preservation issues as it supports, but these issues can only be resolved through active engagement and experimentation with the medium. If librarians fail to embrace digital technology with all its attendant imperfections and issues, others surely will, a development that would be tantamount to abandoning the future of special collections.
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