

Building and Sustaining Digital Collections: Models for Libraries and Museums

In February 2001, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage (NINCH) convened a meeting to discuss how museums and libraries are building digital collections and what business models are available to sustain them. A group of museum and library senior executives met with business and legal experts, technologists, and funders to discuss the challenges that cultural institutions face when putting collections online and to identify models for sustainability that support the core missions without contravening the internal cultures of nonprofit entities.

Using examples of six enterprises - JSTOR, HighWire Press, The International Center for Photography and George Eastman House, Questia Media, Inc., Art Museum Network, and Fathom - the report illustrates the differing approaches being used to extend the reach of collections and services online.

A discussion summary focuses on the following questions: How does a museum or library structure a business model for an online enterprise? Given the costs of a digital enterprise, can a single organization achieve success, or is collaboration necessary? How does a new digital enterprise affect the institution, and what are the new demands for staffing, technology, and marketing? And, finally, what elements are necessary to build and sustain a digital enterprise? On the basis of this discussion, participants identified a range of concerns and suggested next steps to address the short- and long-term needs of museums and libraries.

From the Report:

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

In addressing the short- and long-term needs of museums and libraries, participants identified four distinct areas that deserve the greatest attention: the elements of a sound business plan; the elements needed to sustain digital efforts at all types of institutions; inter-institutional issues; and funding.

BUSINESS MODELS

Concerns

- What things can or should be done in the commercial world, and what can or should be done only by mission-driven organizations?
- How do we develop cross-community business models; standardize training; measure institutional readiness?

Next Steps/Actions

- Study costs and benefits of collaboration through case studies.
- Develop criteria that institutions can use to assess their readiness to engage in collaborative digital library or digital museum developments.
- Develop a framework for business planning—a document identifying the components of a business plan, the options available for any component, and the interrelationships of the components.

ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Infrastructure/Institutional Issues

Concerns

- How do we prepare staff members for their new roles?
- How do we turn projects into sustainable programs?
- How do we transform legacy institutions?

Next Steps/Actions

- Host cross-domain discussions about common professional developments, awareness raising, and training needs within libraries and museums.
- Involve professional associations such as the American Library Association, the American Association of Museums, the Society of American Archivists, and the Museum Computer Network.
- Host a workshop to compare methods for organizational restructuring for large public institutions; then scale this session down to make it useful for other institutions.
- Describe the benchmarks in the transition from project to program in leading to the transformation of legacy institutions.
- Apply rigor to descriptions of what library and museum staff members do; share position descriptions and develop role descriptions rather than job descriptions.
- Examine the role of curators and specialists and develop a profile of e-curatorship.
- Determine the balance between the benefits of income from digital assets and the possibility of eroding the "specialness" of an institution when digital assets become widely available.

Infrastructure/Technical Issues

Concerns

- How do we share best practice between and among libraries and museums?
- How do we develop interoperable systems?

Next Steps/Actions

- Undertake more research on interoperability.
- Map metadata schemes, along the lines of the metadata mapping schemes registry that exists at the United Kingdom Office for Library and Information Networking (UKOLN).
- Share good or best practices through targeted workshops.
- Develop a mechanism for exploring common institutional information architectures internationally.

Users and Audiences

Concerns

- How do we determine the needs and preferences of our users?
- How do we conduct market research and target segments of our audience?
- How do online users interact with virtual collections, and how does this use compare with on-site use?

Next Steps/Actions

- Gather studies of users and nonusers to share with museum and library communities.
- Host a cross-domain meeting (i.e., libraries, museums, archives) to discuss common measures, trends, and related matters.
- Conduct research into the impact of the virtual and real library and museum experiences.
- Conduct applied research on how people expect to interact with digital materials.
- Conduct market research of library and museum users to determine what they want from virtual and real museum and library experiences.
- Adopt a segmented approach to the user population, based on market research.

General Cross-Domain and Inter-institutional Issues

Concerns

- How do we support the needs of small institutions?
- How do we share assets developed at considerable expense by various groups?
- How do we assess the impact of changes in copyright law on how libraries and museums manage intellectual property, and how can we shape the law in ways that reflect our interests in fair use?

Next Steps/Actions

- Reconvene museum and library leaders periodically to discuss changes.
- Consider more involvement by organizations in other countries.
- State the problems facing museums and libraries clearly in non-technical terms; museums asked libraries to formulate "the green, red, and caution lights."
- Specify requirements of some of the infrastructure services to be provided at the regional level, e.g., digitization, cataloging, distribution, and preservation.
- Identify governance issues for services and convene groups, including funders, to address them.
- Develop a statement about the larger ecology to which both large and small institutions can contribute.

Funding

Concerns

- How do we educate funders about the issues that are and will be of concern to them?
- How do we help funders incorporate best practices for sustainability in their grant requirements?

Next Steps/Actions

- Convene funders to educate them about the issues facing cultural institutions.
- Encourage funders to incorporate the best practices we have identified into their requirements.