Sharing the Bridge: From Analog to Digital without Falling In

Amy Lucker

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Two years ago I presented a paper at the Visual Resources Association annual conference entitled, "From Project to Program: Digital Imaging at the Fine Arts Library." I spoke about staffing, space and equipment, and the path of our progress in digitizing our slide collection. What I did not cover then, but wish to discuss here, is why we at Harvard are doing all this work, and how we are working to balance the library's need for a shared resource with our users' needs for the images they want, when they want them. The gap that we are attempting to bridge is the one between the library's vision of what is good for the whole of the institution, and the faculty's vision; or, to put it another way, we are trying to realign the library's goals with the faculty's teaching needs. Although we have begun to bridge this gap, much work remains to be done before we close the distance that separates our respective visions.

Our art history image collection is part of the library and not administered by an academic department. While our primary clientele is the Department of the History of Art and Architecture, we have regular users from other academic departments as well as from the Harvard University Art Museums. As part of the Harvard College Library organization, we participate in library-wide activities and contribute to library-supported, university-wide systems. One of these systems is VIA, or Visual Information Access: http://via.harvard.edu:9080/via/deliver/advancedsearch?collection=via.

Participants in VIA include the Fine Arts Library, the library of the Graduate School of Design, the Houghton Library, the Schlesinger Library, and many other Harvard University libraries. VIA is for our visual holdings what HOLLIS is for our print holdings, a union catalog. We are committed not only to submitting our cataloging to the Harvard union catalogs, but also to submitting cataloging that conforms to available standards. These include national standards, such as Library of Congress subject headings and call numbers, and local standards, such as those that control most of our image cataloging. The latter is done using a local system based on a relational database software product. This cataloging system is not an easy one to use; rather, it includes many screens and has built-in controls for vocabularies and forms of names. These controls, and this complexity, are important for a shared system where participants come from a variety of libraries that had a variety of manual cataloging processes. At the same time, we are faced with both an ever-growing number of images to catalog and a somewhat shrinking work force. Nevertheless, because we are part of a larger library organization, and have these system commitments, there is a limit to how many shortcuts we can take in our image cataloging. There are times when this conflicts with our desire to provide materials for our users in a timelier manner.

One such example occurred this past winter. The library was requested by a faculty member to make a large number of digital images available on VIA within a very short time frame. It is worth noting that in order for an image to be available in VIA it must be accompanied by descriptive metadata, i.e., a cataloging record. The majority of images in our collection come from published sources, primarily books. Many faculty members not only order images "by the book," but also mentally organize them that way. In meetings with my image catalogers, we considered an option of creating a record that represented a book, and linking all of the images to the title. That way we could load the images into VIA very quickly without having to do much cataloging. This would be a temporary measure, of course, until we had the time to do full cataloging. While this would have satisfied the user, the rest of the VIA participants felt that it would be detrimental to the database and would, in fact, confuse other users who happened upon these images. One could (and did) argue that this would not be the case, but resistance was strong enough that we abandoned this approach and instead supplied the images to the faculty member offline as quickly as possible.

This example brings up an important issue surrounding the creation and maintenance of library systems. Unarguably we build library systems to provide access to information for our users. We do not build them so that librarians have somewhere to put their beautifully crafted cataloging records. At the same time, it is crucial for the library to maintain enough controls on what goes into a database to preserve consistency and integrity of the data over time. But this is also where our library needs come into conflict with the users' needs. And while most library users truly appreciate the benefits that an orderly and controlled catalog gives them, they are not willing to sublimate their needs to these benefits, nor should they. Surely there are ways to compromise so that we provide users what they want, yet comply with the larger community's regulations.

Over time many senior faculty members build up their own image collections. This has certainly been the case at Harvard. The problem for the library with this approach is that we have no sense of what someone is using for teaching or research, and therefore cannot collect complementary materials for them. In addition, we very well may be duplicating what someone has
in his or her personal collection, either for our general collection or in response to another user's request. One of our goals at the Fine Arts Library has been to try to convince our users to depend on us, rather than to build these private collections. We appeal both to their sense of the collective good, as well as to the greater efficiency of having a group of professionals do the work for them. And this is where conflicts arise. The notion of the collective good, of the shared resource, resonates with our users. They have no arguments against this approach. The issue is when they are told that we cannot provide everything they want at the time they want it because we need to comply with cataloging and procedural standards. And it is very difficult to argue with this. When they receive a service, they do not really want or need to know all of the backroom activities that went into providing this service. Nor do they wish to wait an unreasonable amount of time for the service.

Our mission, then, is to figure out how to compromise between the two sets of needs. We in the library are not willing to desert the union catalog (nor would we be permitted to if we did want to), and we understand the drive for standards. The users also understand the value of the union catalog, and of having the library maintain (and store) the digital assets. But when faculty members are preparing for a class, they cannot wait until next semester to get access to their materials.

So what are we doing to find our way to some of these compromises? As mentioned above, to the extent possible, we are creating brief catalog records. This is something well accepted in the print catalog world, albeit less so in visual catalogs. As we develop delivery systems that stress the visual elements over the textual, it becomes clear that we can get away with much less text than we may have thought. This is also true given how users search in VIA. Systems statistics have shown that users consistently search using "keyword anywhere" searches. The main exception to this is when they look for a specific artist name. But almost all topic searches in VIA are done using keywords. This means that less time needs to be spent constructing headings or choosing between specific topics. Rather, the cataloger needs to be sure that the likely retrieval words are found somewhere in the record, regardless of where. While it is also true that in manual cataloging one limited the number of terms used so as not to have to file too many cards, in the electronic catalog this is not an issue. It may often be faster to pick several terms off a list than to spend time deciding among them.

One of the less efficient, but at times necessary, compromises we have made is to provide users with digital images on removable media (primarily DVD) prior to getting the information into VIA. This provides users with access to the digital images. It is, in fact, akin to circulating uncataloged slides, an accepted practice for our library. Obviously, this causes problems on both sides. It creates an extra step for us, and users have to handle many unlabeled images on many discs. And, as with uncataloged slides, we can lose track of these images, particularly since the user has what he or she needs and is not likely to prompt us to deal with the image.

We are at a critical juncture at Harvard at this time. The image delivery system, VIA, has recently been reconfigured and presents users with image-centric results, arrayed in a grid display. Because the system is far more user-friendly than it was in the past, more people are using it. That's the good news. In order to keep them using VIA, we need to populate the system with as many images as possible, as quickly as possible. We have received several grants to do this work, and are making great strides. But as more and more faculty are moving towards teaching with digital images, our largest task becomes that of making sure we populate the system with the images they want to use now. Here we are once again competing with the personal collections. The challenge before us right now is how to digitize those collections, catalog them, and load them into VIA in the shortest amount of time possible. The actual digitization of the images becomes the least of the problems. Rather, the difficult issue is how to get the images cataloged quickly so that they may reside in the system.

I would like to report that I know the solution to this problem. In fact, I do not, hence my reference to our big challenge. I do know that it will require compromise on all sides, and it will not be easy. But the end result, if we do this the right way, will be a vastly improved shared resource, and users who are satisfied with the service we provide.

Amy Lucker, Head of Technical Services and Slides and Digital Imaging, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, lucker@fas.harvard.edu

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