

WEIRD DIGITIZATION: NEW STRATEGIES FOR ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, cultural heritage organizations such as Libraries, Archives, and Museums (LAM) have overwhelmingly embraced digitization as a way of increasing access to their collections and possibly helping to preserve them. Due to large-scale digitization projects, the perception of many may be that the bulk of such collections have already been digitized. This is, however, far from the case. Most LAM practitioners recognize that even well-funded large-scale or mass digitization projects cannot possibly digitize all analogue objects within their ever-growing collections. LAM institutions must be selective about what does or does not get digitized due to limited resources such as staff, funding, technological infrastructures, etc. Physical cultural heritage collections themselves may be under-explored and under-described due to the persistence of these limited resources, compounding challenges for digitization projects. For a variety of reasons, such as concerns about sustainability, both financial as well as, increasingly, environmental, some LAM institutions may refrain from large-scale digitization projects, opting instead for smaller projects that can still leverage the many benefits of digitization for their cultural heritage resources and their users.

In doing so, LAM institutions must develop selection criteria to determine which objects are digitized and which remain “the great undigitized” (Milligan, 2022). Such selection criteria often favor “the best” or most popular items within collections, as LAM institutions understandably want to create access to their “treasures” for a variety of reasons, including increased visibility for the institution and the ability to secure funding for such projects. Yet denoting certain items as “the best” is, of course, never a neutral endeavor. Many scholars have noted a range of problems pertaining to selection criteria for cultural heritage collection development and digitization projects (see, for example, D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Manžuch, 2017; Posner, 2016;). This project explores the possible benefits of digitizing “the worst” items within an archival collection, in this case, severely damaged photographs. Focusing on such damaged items can highlight some of the challenges archives and cultural heritage institutions face by drawing attention to objects that have typically been less likely to be selected for public display.

One advantageous method for addressing the many challenges of digitization of cultural heritage outlined above is “slow digitization” (Prescott & Hughes, 2018) or “critical digitization” (Dahlström, 2010; Dahlström, Hansson & Kjellman, 2012). This project adapts the method of critical or slow digitization to critically reflect upon the

challenges and opportunities that damaged archival photographs pose for classification, description, and digitization of cultural heritage resources. Through close engagement with a set of damaged archival photographs in the IKFF (Internationella Kvinnoförbundet för Fred och Frihet) collection in KvinnSam (the Swedish National Resource Library for Gender Studies located at Gothenburg University), this project challenges conventional selection criteria for digitization and suggests an alternative method. This alternative method is grounded in the theoretical framework of new materialism (Bennett, 2010) and encourages practices of deeper reflection upon analog and digital objects as well as the networks of people who sustain and use those objects.

While new materialism has been applied in recent years in the contexts of museum studies and cultural heritage studies, especially those focusing on archaeology and historic sites (see, for example DeSilvey, 2017), it has been applied less in library and archival studies. Yet this approach can enrich a consideration of the materiality of archives and archival objects and can help inform new approaches to digitization. New materialism can assist in more meaningful selection and description of archival objects as well as encouraging institutions to (re)consider the nature, purpose, and scope of (digitized) archival collections themselves. In addition, new materialism can encourage users to meaningfully reflect upon the “lives” of the archival materials they access digitally. Synthesizing the method of slow or critical digitization with the theoretical approach of new materialism, then, this project suggests “weird digitization” as an alternative method for the digitization of cultural heritage.

Weird digitization takes as its starting point the potentially less “attractive” or even the “worst” items within cultural heritage collections as a way of representing the important edges of institutional collections. This project posits that the nature of damaged items has the potential to draw users into more meaningful relation with these items, their histories, their provenance, and their maintenance. Damaged objects compel users to reflect on temporality, history, fragility, and persistence. This approach can also highlight the humans (archivists, conservators, librarians, collectors, and creators) who have enabled these objects to exist and persist prior to, during, and after the digitization process.

After examining severely damaged photographs in the IKFF collection in KvinnSam preliminary findings demonstrate the need to consider digitization from a holistic perspective. The “weirdness” of considering damaged photographs for digitization can be expensive, drawing on a wide range of experts, but also valuable, as it helps to test the limits of current descriptive and digitization practices and to encourage care-taking and community-building. Reflecting upon processes of decay in a physical photographic archive, one scholar has noted that “the very inevitability of decay engenders a phenomenological consciousness not only of the self but also the ways in which that self is related to wider social structures and environments” (Buckley, 2005, 265). Digitizing decaying and damaged cultural heritage objects may allow this consciousness to extend into the digital realm. First, by drawing attention to the fragility of archival materials and the human labor that continues to sustain them, weird digitization can positively encourage an ethics of care (Nowvickie, 2019).

Second, weird digitization should encourage serious reflection upon the ultimate environmental sustainability (or unsustainability) of digitization projects (Noble, 2019). Weird digitization may thus encourage more ethical and sustainable practices of digitization of cultural heritage.

Keywords: digitization, archives, photographs, new materialism, ethics of care, sustainability

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