

Federal Digitization — Moving to Common Guidelines

J. Michael Stelmach and Carl Fleischhauer, Library of Congress (USA)

Abstract

The field of digital conversion, and particularly the conversion of historic materials, is relatively new and has primarily relied on analog capture practices. And yet as young and complex as the field is, there is a common perception that the task of digitizing collections is the aspect of developing digital collections that is a given, absent of unknowns or controversial views. Contradicting this perception, a survey of current practices and guidelines demonstrated wide variation in specific metrics and general practices in use at libraries, archives and museums worldwide. Furthermore, there are aspects of imaging, encoding or quality management that are simply not addressed.

US federal agencies are no exception in lacking common and comprehensive guidelines. Informal discussions took place among a number of agencies to discuss a collaborative initiative to address these discrepancies and gaps. A group of federal agencies began meeting in 2007 to articulate a common set of guidelines, methods, and practices for the digitization of historical content in a sustainable manner. The participating agencies share the belief that common digitization guidelines will enhance the exchange of research results and developments, encourage collaborative digitization practices and projects among federal agencies and institutions and provide the public with a product of uniform quality. They will also serve to set common benchmarks for digitization service providers and manufacturers.

The agencies involved in this initiative also share a common philosophical approach to developing technical guidelines; namely that:

- *guidelines should be based on clearly articulated objectives describing the expected uses of the digitized content;*
- *methodologies and requirements should be based on recognized approved standards or empirical data to the extent possible;*
- *work must be prioritized by project forecasts, impact of guidelines that are incomplete, dated or non-existent, and estimated effort to develop a robust guideline;*

- *the efforts undertaken through this federal initiative be conducted in a transparent manner, sharing not only conclusions but the approach and reasoning; and*
- *the participating members actively seek input from the public, governmental and academic institutions, as well as corporate entities and trade organizations.*

The participating agencies began their work by identifying and prioritizing the most critical areas to be addressed. Two working groups have been formed – the Still Image Digitization Working Group with a focus on textual content, maps, photographic prints and negatives, and the Audio-Visual Digitization Working Group whose focus is on sound, video, and motion picture film.

A public website (digitizationguidelines.gov) has been published to provide transparency with regard to the activities under this initiative, to share findings and to solicit input from external sources. All draft guidelines developed by the working groups are made available on the website for review and public comment.

The group initially formed under the auspices of the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP), a program initiated by Congress in 2000 to develop a national strategy to collect, archive and preserve digital content. Federal agencies represented on NDIIPP's National Digital Strategy Advisory Board formed the initial core of the group's membership.

Biography

Michael Stelmach has over twenty-five years of information management experience, with a concentration on providing digital access to content originating from analog print. Formerly the vice president of eBook production at netLibrary, he is currently the manager of Digital Conversion Services in the Office of Strategic Initiatives at the Library of Congress.