

Terras, M. (2007) Review of Lorna M. Hughes "Digitizing Collections. Strategic Issues for the Information Manager". *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 22:105-106.

## Digitizing Collections Strategic Issues for the Information Manager

Lorna M. Hughes, 2004. Digital Futures Series (Eds Marilyn Deegan and Simon Tanner).

Digitization, the conversion of an analogue artefact into a binary representation, is big business nowadays: most museums, archives, libraries, and the organizations Hughes terms as "Memory Institutions" are currently at some stage of making their collections available in digital form. Much has been written about digitization, and many standards have emerged from the experimental approach to creating digital representations of artefacts which accompanied the growth in Internet technologies and cheaper digital imaging equipment in the 1990s. However, "there is no one point of contact for up to the minute expertise and guidance on this topic" (p.233), and although many disparate organisations serve to provide advice on digitization (for example, the Technical Advisory Service for Images<sup>1</sup>, and the AHDS guides to good practice series<sup>2</sup>) the many issues to be addressed can baffle staff new to the digitization process, or those in Memory Institutions whose responsibility it is to develop, manage, and budget for such projects.

The aim of Hughes' text is to provide an honest and necessary overview of the strategies and practical issues staff may encounter when involved with a project which aims to put digital collections of cultural materials online. In doing so, Hughes presents a useful and readable introduction to the business of digitization, weaving anecdotes and case studies with technical information and standards to animate which can otherwise be a lifeless topic.

The book is split into two sections. Part One, Strategic Decision Making, provides an overview of the decisions that will precede a digitization initiative, such as the advantages (and disadvantages) of digitization, the impact such activity can have on collections, and the potential benefits which may arise from such a project. A full chapter addresses how selection policies can be developed within an institution, how collections can be assessed, and when it is more beneficial for the institution (or artefact) not to digitize. Legal issues, such as intellectual property, and copyright, are given the stress they deserve in another chapter, as are issues of project management, such as risk awareness and management, economic considerations, and issues of staffing and human resources. This section closes with an overview of institutional frameworks and management issues such as the benefits of collaboration.

Part Two of the book, Digitizing Collections, covers many of the complex issues involved in the day to day running of a digitization project, such as developing (and keeping to) a project plan, finding funding for digitization projects, and project management, including issues regarding staff, technology, workflow, quality assurance, standards, metadata and the preservation and maintenance of digital data, as well as the reasons digitization projects can fail. Three chapters are then devoted to the digitization process itself. The first covers the digitization of rare and fragile materials, explaining the multitude of issues the project team have to contend with,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tasi.ac.uk/](http://www.tasi.ac.uk/)

<sup>2</sup> <http://ahds.ac.uk/creating/guides/>

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such as equipment and methods, and elements of good practice. A further chapter provides an overview of the digitization of audio and moving image collections, whilst the final chapter outlines the main issues in digitizing text and images, dealing with textual markup and encoding, technical issues in image and textual digitization, and the usage of such archives. Further case studies are then presented which illustrate the points addressed; the case studies presented throughout the book range from the large scale, such as the American Memory Project at the Library of Congress<sup>3</sup>, to smaller and less well known initiatives, such as the Am Baile (Gaelic Village) project<sup>4</sup>, making the text applicable and useful to a project of any size and funding.

There is little that is remarkably new here, with most issues having been raised in some diverse publication, webpage, or article beforehand, but Hughes' consistent and readable writing style draws together many disparate issues into a cohesive whole which is an appropriate starting point for anyone about to engage in a digitization project. The thorough and useful bibliography provides further reading, whilst the text is anchored with references to online resources which should prevent it in ageing too rapidly: although the technology behind the creation of digital surrogates will change, the issues confronting the information manager regarding selection, management, and budget should not (or at least, not at the same pace as technological change).

Where this book is at its most useful, though, is its common sense approach to management, to cut through the various and sometime conflicting advice which can be acquired when setting up a digitisation project. Although Hughes advocates reading widely, and consulting guides to good practice, the responsibility regarding all aspects of the digitisation process must lie with the manager, who (or whose staff) should know the collection better than any external guide to good practice could. Hughes suggests that examining "existing guidelines will allow the extrapolation of the best and most recent standards currently available that can be modified to fit the intended purpose, institution and budget" (p. 200). Her model of management is one that is fluid, aware of rapid technological change and institutional requirements, whilst focussing concomitantly on what is best for the institution, staff, collection, and individual artefact.

This common sense approach can make fearsome reading: Hughes' honest, well read and factual text reveals digitization to be the complex, difficult, time-consuming, and costly process it is, rather than an easy and quick way to give a Memory Institution status in a technically modern world. Nevertheless, the management issues described and detailed in this book need to be understood and addressed before a digitization project can be successfully carried out: the act of digitization itself is just a small part of the whole process. The book works best when the (mostly online) external resources it refers to can be accessed alongside the text. This book is a necessary and useful overview of a deceptively complex undertaking, and will provide a useful starting point for those about to engage in the creation of digital surrogates of cultural and heritage material.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ambaile.org.uk/en/index.jsp>