

'A Good Enough Fix': Repair and Maintenance in Librarians' Digitization Practice

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The chapter examines how librarians deal with the unavoidable decay of archived and to-be-archived books in the context of a large-scale digitization project. The librarians' professional repair and maintenance work is specified by the complex nature of the books and the 'double bind' of their routine treatment. At the same time, they are to be preserved as jewels of cultural heritage and national identity and to be made available to interested visitors. The text focuses on the digitization process disclosing a tension between preservation and availability in the multiple enactments of documentary heritage artifacts. Through 'shadowing' librarians at work, I explore librarians' distinctive care and professional vision, as well as their local inquiries into book properties, material and digital.

Keywords: Repair and Maintenance Work, Ethnography, Workplace Studies, Digitization, Digital Cultural Heritage, Library Studies, Science and Technology Studies

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1 SUMMARY

1.1 Background

Investigating librarians' activities through the lens of repair and maintenance work provides an opportunity for critical engagement with digitization projects and related issues of knowledge politics beyond what is mainly discussed in public, as well as academic contexts, namely the implications of private corporations (such as Google) 'co-opting' the domain of public knowledge infrastructures. Furthermore, it challenges the divide between production and use of (digital) information found in the predominant discourse of innovation, design and transforming social potential in media and information research. Focusing on repair and maintenance work as distinct properties of librarians' work enables reconsiderations of socio-material relations beyond a dualistic 'physical-digital' conception of objects and their status in the making of the social.

1.2 Method

I draw on ethnographic investigations of librarians' work conducted at a sizeable (national) library, currently in the process of mass-digitizing its complete historical holdings from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Exemplifying a few of the manifold ways in which librarians relate to their objects, I offer an empirical account of the various associations through which activities, procedures, tools, buildings, and bodies are mobilized in a digitization endeavor. Drawing on conceptions developed in actor-network theory and post-ANT studies to probe 'ontological' matters in empirical terms, the multiple enactments of objects in the different sites of this library are analyzed.

However, the conducted study emphasizes that 'multiplicity' is not solely a diagnostic approach of empirical analysis, but of intrinsic relevance within librarianship as a profession itself. Matters of 'ontology' are relevant within this particular setting as *topics*: Following librarians through digitization work shows them to be highly conscious of the 'multiple' of their objects within and beyond the library. This raises questions towards analytic approaches adopting a general ontology of multiplicity in their explanation of objects and the social— in methodological, as well as theoretical terms.

1.3 Conclusion

Mass digitization projects have profound internal effects on the maintenance and Gestalt of public knowledge infrastructures. Describing the librarians' object and corpus in terms of multiple enactments, I show the performance of socio-material order distinctive to this arrangement engaging different kinds of objects. The 'book' as historical object is of an emergent solidity, as its descriptions are becoming increasingly dense. Conversely, the book as 'material object' is characterized by a steady movement toward decay, enacted as fragile and vulnerable in practices of caretaking through constant routines of repair and restoration work. The coexistence of these objects eventuates in a corresponding digitization multiple.

Digitization is shown to be transformative not only in turning an 'physical' book into a 'digital' reproduction, but also in shaping physical objects, their representations within the library, and the divergent practices in which they are enacted. The mass digitization project is shown to be a mode of 'research and development' toward the library of an imagined future conducted through the practices of librarianship itself. This study can thus, on empirical grounds, add to contributions emphasizing 'research' not only being a domain of library and information studies as an academic discipline, but also as an inherent feature of librarianship as a profession.