

Developing criteria and collaborative work on inclusion in cultural heritage digitization projects

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Background

Colecciones digitales inclusivas is a two year funded project that examines issues related to inclusivity in cultural heritage digitization projects. Inclusion is understood in two ways. One is related to the materials: their history and selection with a focus on the notion of “conceptualizing absence in the digital age” (Ortolja-Baird & Nyhan 2021). The other is how the digital object is presented, and whether the physical artifact is simply being reproduced in a digital format, as a “surrogate” to the physical (Cordell 2017), or remediated, in the sense that it can be accessed and studied using computational methods (Padilla 2018). Our overall goal is to create guidelines for contemplating inclusion in digitization projects, that helps practitioners consciously think about the new digital paradigms of the cultural memory (Thystrup 2018). Initial findings show that although there is work regarding libraries and race theory, feminist studies and postcolonial approximations, there is less research regarding this type of approach and digitization projects specifically. We also found little documentation of digitizing projects and no comprehensive list of cultural heritage projects in Mexico (Galina and Priani 2022).

Our paper will show our current work on a catalogue of digitizing projects, four case studies and a workshop, that are the basis for our proposed guidelines for contemplating inclusion in digitization projects.

A catalogue of digitizing projects

In order to create a catalogue of projects we faced the question of defining cultural heritage digital collections. According to UNESCO (2009) cultural heritage objects are defined, among others, on their symbolic, historic, artistic and aesthetic values, as well as their tangibility or intangibility. However, the definition does not include the digitalization of these objects, and how these digital collections of cultural materials are considered cultural heritage digital collections. As Katja Müller argues (2021), digital collections imply “encoding culture”, in the sense that they encode political decisions, archive conventions, resources, access policies, among others. A better definition on cultural heritage digital collections needs to include aspects of that “culture encoding”

such as the nature of the digitalization (as a surrogate or remediated), the institutional support, how they consider their collection, and the access to it. From this we define as cultural digital heritage those digital collections that: 1) remediate objects due to their historical, cultural or national relevance, 2) are developed and hosted by a public or private institution, 3) identify themselves as digital heritage collections and 4) give online access to digital objects.

Using lists of digital collections provided by academic and GLAM institutions, we identified and reviewed 308 collections, of which 104 met our criteria for the Catalogue. This shall be published shortly with the name of each collection, the organization, webpage, number of digital objects, format and description.

Working with case studies and workshop

From the Catalogue the research team then proceeded to select four collections that were diverse both in scope, size and institutional background with objectives that could foster our discussions on inclusion. In our presentation we will go deeper into the criteria of selecting these projects. Below is a summary of the case studies:

Table 1:

Name	Description	Selection criterion for research purposes
BDNM/HNDM	Digital collections from the special collection of the national library of Mexico.	Very institutional, large in scope, widely accepted as cultural heritage material
Repositorio Nacional de Materiales Orales	Collection of audio, videos and textual materials related to research of spoken languages in Mexico	Large national project, initially funded by government science agency, acute awareness of diversity, seeks to broaden concepts of heritage material
Archivo para la Memoria	Collect family archives in the Southeastern part of the state of Coahuila, México	Medium scale initiative, private university, historical importance of family history for identity and memory
Archivo de mujeres	Space to collect, protect and disseminate women's writing	A long term research project with institutional backing, but with grant to grant funding. Created to include women's voices and experiences as part of history

Additionally we required that members of the group that worked on the project were willing to collaborate with us on the research project, both during the workshop and later interviews. Participants from the four case studies will be attending a two-day workshop in late november 2022. The aim is to reflect on the formation of the digital collections, both of what is digitized and how it is digitized, through group presentations and conversations. We aim to gather the participants' experiences and thoughts, as practitioners, in order to take into account inclusion, not as an abstract academic concept, but thinking about how it can be incorporated into workflows. We will incorporate the results of the workshop into our paper.

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