Going Digital: The Case of the Wellcome Library

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The Wellcome Library

- Part of Wellcome Collection, a major new £30 million public venue in London developed by the Wellcome Trust
- The Wellcome Library is one of the world's major resources for the study of medical history, 750,000 books, 250,000 pictures
- More than 30,000 readers visited us last year, including historians, academics, students, health professionals & consumers, journalists, artists & members of the public
Archives & Manuscripts

• Collections dating from antiquity to the present day

• Western Manuscripts Collection dates from the time of Henry Wellcome

• Contemporary Medical Archives Centre (CMAC) founded in 1979

• Western Manuscripts & CMAC amalgamated in 2000 to become the Archives & Manuscripts department

• Collecting repository

• First (known) digital accession received in November 2004
The Wellcome Library Goes Digital

• Increasingly archival materials, especially ‘personal papers’, produced in digital form only, today's email & word processed documents are tomorrow's research material

• If we don’t engage with born digital material then Library collection growth is going to be limited, & the Library will cease to be outstanding as an historical, evidential & cultural resource of national & international importance in the field of the history of medicine (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council, 2005)

• Library Strategy 2006-2009 acknowledges the importance of digital material in the future of the Library
Archivists Rule the World!

• Using archival practice allows Library to use existing skills/staff to build a sustainable foundation for dealing with digital material

• Different requirements of digital material are challenging the ways we think about roles & responsibilities within the Library, strengthening the role of the archivists

• Support of archival staff is essential, going digital is changing work patterns, but archival practice is proving relevant to the management of digital material

• Archivists supported by one new FTE, a Digital Curator, whose role is to adapt archival practice & support archivists with technical issues
How are we going digital?

Digital Curation in Action Project:

- Adapting current archival & Library procedures, sound archival basis
- We’re not working in isolation; project & ad hoc collaboration with other institutions a valuable way to build capability & gain experience
- Real material, real experience, real lessons
- Educating & supporting donors & depositors, e.g. FAQs
- Digital Curation pages on the Wellcome Library website
Digital Preservation System

What do we need?

• Standards based system, e.g. OAIS
• Safe & secure system that can be trusted by staff, donors & users
• Metadata creation & management
• Preservation functionality built into system, e.g. technology watch
• Integration with existing Library systems
• High levels of automation
• System able to meet the diverse needs of Archivists, IT staff & Library system administrators
Digital Preservation System 2

What were we offered?

• 5 responses, variety of proposed approaches
• No system offering everything we wanted
• Most were not preservation systems
• Poor understanding of archival practice
• Designed for the academic or library community
• Some misunderstanding of our needs
Digital Preservation System 3

Is it better to buy an imperfect system today or wait & see whether something better comes onto the market tomorrow???

• 4 proposed solutions rejected for not offering what we are seeking

• We have a preferred system, but still some negotiating to be done…

• Speed of obsolescence of digital material means we can’t wait around for a tomorrow that may never come

• However, there will be a lot of work to be done before we can make digital material available to our users
The Future

- Provide information, support & encouragement to our existing donor community in moving from physical to digital transfers
- Target key individuals working in medicine & the allied sciences
- Work with sister organisations to target those currently working in the field, & raise awareness of the possibility of depositing material in an archive (hopefully ours!)
- Begin to make digital material available to our users

Aim to eventually create a hybrid collection: paper, born digital & digitised material together in one collection
Known Issues

• Data Protection issues

• “Widow’s Deposit”

• Donor reluctance to hand over digital material

• Restricted access

• Need to communicate with donors earlier in the records life-cycle

• Cataloguing backlog
For More Information

• Wellcome Trust – www.wellcome.ac.uk
• Wellcome Library – http://library.wellcome.ac.uk
• Digital Curation at Wellcome – http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/node288.html
Questions?

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