Evaluating Digitized Archival Material – Some Considerations

Introduction

These questions are designed for an assignment in which students are provided with a curated assortment of digitized primary source material content ("digital surrogates") from a variety of sources. The students are asked to explore one item from a collection and report back on their findings, the experience overall, and the accessibility and reliability of the digital content. This is a useful activity for instructors who would like their students to engage with primary sources when unable to visit the reading room. Also a useful activity in preparation for onsite research.

Document Analysis

- What *is* this item, in a sentence or two. What is the format? (Letter, report, photograph, etc.) Who created it? When was it created? Who was it created for?

- Is there anything interesting or neat or remarkable about it?

- What does it reveal that you might not find out from anywhere else?

- What secondary sources might help you better understand this item?

- What is your favorite line or phrase in the item?

- If it is an image, what is your favorite visual component?

Evaluating Digital Surrogates

- Is there descriptive information available for this collection or item?

- Do you know where the collection or item came from?

- Are there other digitized items to help contextualize it?

- How easy to view the digitized content. How is the quality of the scans? What's challenging about viewing it on a screen? Can you zoom in and out? Can you move from page to page without getting lost? Is the content available without a fancy subscription or hardware?

- How would it be different if you looked at the original item in the Archives reading room?

- Does the document have artifactual value? (Is it inherently cool because of its format/medium?)

- Why do you think this was digitized?

- Is it clear who owns the item?

- Could someone easily refer back to this digitized resource in the next 5-10 years?

- If you wanted to use the image in a book or article, is it possible to obtain a high resolution copy?

- Who would you contact about requesting permission to publish it?

- Is it easy to cite? Is the link stable?

Citing Digitized Materials

Readers should be able to find the exact version based on the citation you provide. This establishes your credibility. And it's helpful to the Archives staff, who must often track this item down for other researchers.

Necessary information

- Name of document; unique ID number if available
- Collection name; Box number, File/folder name if available
- Repository information
- Electronic address or URL (permalinks preferred)
- Date accessed

Examples

- Photograph:
  "Quonset hut," PPBUC0235, Purdue Buildings and Campus Scenes, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries. Retrieved October 14, 2020. https://earchives.lib.purdue.edu/digital/collection/pbuildings/id/2554/rec/2813

- Page from a scrapbook:
  "'Cap' in a few Characteristic Poses," Loretta Mae Wallace photo album, page 124.MSA327i001. MSA 327, Loretta Mae Wallace photo album, Purdue University

Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries. Retrieved October 14, 2020. https://earchives.lib.purdue.edu/digital/collection/msa327/id/125

- Publication:
1972 Debris yearbook, PUD00086. Purdue University Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries. Retrieved October 14, 2020. https://earchives.lib.purdue.edu/digital/collection/debris/id/53543/rec/86