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Deep Dives into Digital Cultural Heritage Practices: An Interview with Diane Zorich

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Abstract

In this interview, Diane Zorich (Director of the Digitization Program Office (DPO) at the Smithsonian Institution) brings her extensive knowledge and experience to consider approaches to working within cultural heritage institutions and what she would like to see moving forward. Notable topics discussed include sustainability in digital collections, inclusion, diversity, equity, and access initiatives, linked open data, NFTs, and sharing content on digital platforms outside of institutional control. Woven through the technological components, Zorich reflects on "materiality" and role of an object as a "touchstone for history, memory, and personal stories."

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Sara Schumacher is the Architecture Image Librarian in the Architecture Library at Texas Tech University Libraries.

Self-described in her Twitter profile as a "lapsed anthropologist" with "[i]nterests all over the board," Diane Zorich has cultivated those interests into a diverse array of expertise throughout her career and into her current position as Director of the Digitization Program Office (DPO) at the Smithsonian Institution. As the Director of the DPO, Zorich and her team innovate, operationalize, and assess digitization initiatives (including 3D digitization) with an eye to public engagement and learning. While these activities are certainly of high importance to many of our readers, I approached this interview looking at the totality of her career.

Her published research explores information policy, data curation, and collaboration in institutions concerned with digital cultural heritage, including libraries, archives, museums, and digital humanities centers. The research scope really highlights the commonalities we can find in mission, process, and desired outcomes across different institutional types.

Sara Schumacher (SS): Has your education in anthropology shaped how you approach your current position? In what ways?
Diane Zorich (DZ): Yes, in many ways. Culture at a large organization such as the Smithsonian can be interpreted through many lenses. For example, you have professional cultures (educators, curators, conservators, etc.), organizational culture, colleagues from different cultures, and collections items from various cultures. I often consider circumstances in these specific contexts and spin up mental scenarios that – sometimes – help me go deeper than surface level to better understand and interpret situations.

SS: If time and money were not factors, what would you want to learn how to do?
DZ: I would go back to school and study library and information science to dive deeper into the theory and practice of things I do, or take for granted, every day. Since the very beginning of my career in museums I have admired the library profession – first as a community of information organizers, and later as advocates for free speech, access, and serving communities. I'd also go to Rare Book School, but that is because I love all things related to the materiality of books, and have taken courses here and there around book binding, artists books, etc. and found them fascinating.

SS: Are there certain things that you have identified as leading to successful Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access [IDEA] initiatives at cultural heritage institutions?
DZ: I won't pretend to know a successful way for these efforts to have a real impact. I imagine there are many paths to success here. But the one I have *observed* that seems to fast track IDEA in cultural organizations is the placement of people from diverse backgrounds into the very *top* leadership positions, where they have the power and opportunity to suffuse IDEA initiatives across the organization.

SS: In a post-COVID-19 world, do you see people having a different relationship or expectation for digital cultural heritage content?
DZ: During the lockdown phase of the pandemic, and perhaps for a year or so afterward, people definitely had a different relationship and expectations. We all were searching for and sharing online content to keep ourselves sane! Parents and teachers were clamoring for educational materials as they tried to help kids not lose ground with the closure of schools. Families and friends tried to connect around cultural content that could be shared on Zoom or social media. Somewhat

fortuitously, the Smithsonian released its Open Access collection one month before the pandemic lockdown, and we saw a spike in use of these collections.

Now, 2+ years into the pandemic, I think much of the expectation comes from the cultural heritage community itself. We learned that we had collections of interest to different groups, but often didn't make them available in ways that were engaging or useful. For example, teachers and schools want cultural heritage content, but it has to fit into state curricula standards, be easy to upload into the online platforms used in teaching, have useful contextual information, and (often) be available bilingually. We weren't making our collections available to them in these ways. Similarly, a scientist might need thousands or tens of thousands of images of various specimens for their research project, but we hadn't created tools that would make it easy for batch downloads, delivery, or viewing.

Audiences also want easy access to our content in spaces where they work, play, or otherwise engage online. We have lots of websites at the Smithsonian, but collectively we do not have the reach of sites like Wikipedia, or gaming platforms, or aggregator sites, so we need to rethink our traditions of putting our content out only on our web or social media properties and calling it a day. If we want people to know what we have, use it in ways that have meaning for them, and help them find it without going too far afield, we need to scatter our collections far and wide onto many digital platforms. This isn't a new idea: many others have talked about this before the pandemic, but it may gain real traction now. If it doesn't, and we slip back to our usual ways of doing things, shame on us.

SS: Is there a project or research topic from your career that didn't work out the way you anticipated, but you still firmly believe was a good idea?
DZ: Before I worked in my current position, I was a consultant working with museums, archives, and other cultural organizations on a variety of topics. Consultants see many good projects flame out for a host of different reasons. The ones that make me most wistful are those that that fail because they are a bit ahead of their time. In these cases, they seem to fail because of mismatched expectations: funders or hosting institutions don't see the long-term value of a project and decide to "cut their losses"; project partners cannot (do not?) make a compelling case for why the long-term investment will eventually reap great rewards.

Linked open data is, for me, an example of a great idea that is really hard to implement on a local level (e.g., within an institution). It takes a lot of work, has a large learning curve, requires skill sets often not found in our institutions, and needs a long-term sustainability commitment (e.g., funding, host institution(s), internal project champions, etc.) to be successful. But the results are potentially endless and expansive discoveries and linkages of our collections with the world.

Question provided by the Equitable Action Committee: How can cultural heritage institutions balance responsible digital stewardship with meeting sustainability goals? What role can digital preservation play?
DZ: I love this question because it is so important but rarely considered! Let's first reconsider some of the sacred cows of our work, starting with the myth that we need to image ALL our collections at the highest resolutions possible. It's just not sustainable and frequently unnecessary to meet our own and our audiences' needs. Teachers, students, researchers, and others need good images – but rarely high-res images – to successfully use our digital collections for their needs. Why is this a sustainability issue? Because "high resolution" + "large collections numbers" = "huge storage and

bandwidth needs," which have a financial and environmental cost (someone is paying for and expending resources – electricity, HVAC, building costs – to run those servers farms we call "the Cloud").

It would also help if we considered centralizing some activities across our institutions to reduce the amount of redundant hardware we purchase. Does every curatorial department have to purchase its own hardware and image its own collections? Maybe it would make more sense to centralize that. Similarly, we might consider more open-source solutions, which are more inclusive and community-driven than proprietary solutions.

Finally, let's pause and take a breath before we jump on technology bandwagons. About a year ago, NFTs (non-fungible tokens) started appearing on the radar of cultural heritage institutions. Whether you think these are a good idea or not, you cannot deny the huge negative environmental impact of these and other cryptographic assets. Cultural heritage institutions who jump on these technologies or the hype that often underlies them usually find themselves with a failed project, and subject themselves to questions about their standing as responsible public institutions.

SS: Is there a work from the digitized collection that you consider your favorite or immediately comes to mind? How do you feel connected to it?
DZ: This is like asking me to choose my favorite child. It's just not possible. But some things we have digitized resonate with me more than others. I love orchids, for example, and have some that I have managed to keep alive and blooming seasonally for many years. So, digitizing the Smithsonian Garden's collection of 6000 orchid specimens was a real treat for me.

We also have 3D digitized items in consultation with the indigenous Northwest Coast communities whose ancestors created these objects. Most recently, we created a 3D model that was used to recreate a sculpin hat [https://dpo.si.edu/blog/smithsonian-uses-3d-tech-restore-broken-sacred-object-tlingit-indians] of importance to the Tlingit *Kiks.ádi* clan of Sitka, Alaska. The clan is now using this hat in its ceremonies. For me, there is a no more poignant example of the impact digitization can have in the revitalization of communities.

Finally, there is Alice Paul's "Jailed for Freedom" pin [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1067243], digitized by the National Museum of American History. This broach in the shape of a prison door with a heart-shaped lock was given to suffragists who had been jailed (many of them forcibly fed and abused) as an acknowledgement by their sister suffragists of their courage. I find so much meaning and incongruity in this item. For me it personifies how an object can be a touchstone for history, memory, and personal stories.