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Jill
Hurst-Wahl

[OPINION]

JILL HURST-WAHL

Digitization: How Many Best Practices, Guidelines, and Standards Do We Need?

Many organizations that are digitizing are using best practices, guidelines, and standards to inform the work that they are doing. By doing so, they hope to build a digitization program on the shoulders of giants that have traveled this path before them. However, is the path truly obvious?

Best Practices

When my corporate library began scanning materials in 1990, all we knew was what our hardware/software vendor taught us and what we were able to learn on our own. Our goal was to create a worthwhile repository for use internal to the organization. The need for the information was immediate and our goal was to get it done. We gave no thought to industry best practices, guidelines, or standards. Best practices to us were what worked in our situation with an expensive but temperamental scanner and OCR software that taught us how unreadable the typed word can be.

I often characterize this as the “Wild West” days of digitization, when we talked about scanning (conversion activities) and not about all of the other aspects that form a well thought out digitization program. This was also before the dominance of the Internet, so it was not easy to share best practices with colleagues and to discern if there was synergy among the rules we were creating. Over the next decade, larger organizations (often academic libraries) were able to research, experiment, and do iterative work that allowed them to create best practices that they felt meet their needs as well as the needs of other institutions. In addition, people like Anne Kenney and Oya Rieger created books and tutorials from the lessons being learned, such as *Moving Theory into Practice*.

While attention may have initially been given to the conversion process, best practices were soon developed around the selection process, metadata, outsourcing, and more. Wherever a process existed that could be documented, a best practice was able to be developed. New digitization programs looked for best practices that had been developed by organizations that were respected for their work in advancing the use of technology and doing so in a responsible manner. With the growing pervasiveness of the Internet, these best practices were more easily disseminated to a broader audience that was able to use these documented best practices as they developed their own.

At its core, a best practice is what has been determined to work well. In some circles, they are called traditions. For example, our tradition (best practice) is to digitize images into TIFF files in order to capture as much data as possible and then to archive those files. It can, however, be difficult to replace a tradition. Hence the relative slow adoption of JPEG2000, even though it is a lossless standard. Once a tradition is established, many see it as unchangeable, yet as our world changes, our traditions—best practices—should also change.

The problem with best practices may be obvious: there isn't just one. Multiple best practices existed because of the diversity of materials being digitized and the diversity of ideas around how the overall program was to occur. One digitization program may decide that 200 dpi is appropriate while another decides to use 300 dpi and still another uses 600 dpi. While we would look at 200 dpi as being generally inappropriate for archival images, a program with limited resources that used a dial-up network may have decided that 200 dpi met its needs and adopted it as its best practice. Most programs historically used 300–600 dpi because of the increased amount of data captured from the image. Recently, due to lower storage costs, 600 dpi has become more of a norm. It could be that as our equipment and storage improves that even a higher dpi will become the norm.

Guidelines

Respected organizations engaged in digitization (often academic research libraries) were able to spend time understanding the process, developing procedures, creating best practices, and writing overarching guidelines. This work resulted in a variety of guidelines, each with a different organization's stamp of approval. Often these guidelines were very similar, since organizations were referring to the same underlying best practices developed at other organizations and to industry research. Some guidelines were developed and adopted by specific consortia or by institutions that had the clout to ensure widespread acceptance.

In 2000, the Institute of Museum and Library Services created the first *Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections*. Now in its third version—updated and maintained by NISO—the Framework is intended to:

- » Identify existing resources that support the development of sound local practices for creating and managing good digital collections
- » Encourage community participation in the ongoing development of best practices for digital collection building

In the introduction, the authors of the Framework state:

There are no absolute rules for creating good digital collections. Every digital collection-building initiative is unique, with its own users, goals, and needs.

Thus the Framework is another document from which organizations can build their own best practices and guidelines.

The development of guidelines, even though developed for a specific consortial program, can be an activity that allows a group of people to understand more about the theory and practice of a digitization program. That development can spark learning, the exchange of information, and the better understanding of best practices that have been in use. What is born out of that activity is an agreement (guidelines) that the group is willing to use. The publication of their guidelines provides one more document for other digitization programs to consult as they begin their efforts.

The Right to Reject the Practices of Others

There has been a proliferation of best practices and guidelines. In addition, there have been standards set by recognized standards organizations that affect digitization. ISO defines a standard as “a document established by consensus and approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines, or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context.”

With that definition, it becomes clear that we don't have best practices, guidelines, and standards, but standards, standards, and standards—with each agreed upon and endorsed by a recognized body and available for broader use. Each organization has the right to review what “standards” others have used and then decide for themselves what they will use. Inherent in that is the right to make an informed decision to reject the path that others have taken and to determine one's own fate.

We assume that standards will provide for interoperability, data sharing, etc., but in reality standards provide a starting point that organizations can use (or not). When we talk to people about their programs, we quiz them about the best practices, guidelines, and standards that they are using and make judgments about their work based on their answers. What we really should be asking is: What standards did they consult and what decisions did they make based on those standards.

A program team could read various standards and decide to not follow any current recommended practices because they felt those did not support the program's goals. That decision would be legitimate, although it may not be popular with others in the community.

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Moving to One?

Now that we have many standards (including best practices and guidelines), two questions need to be asked:

- » What would it take for the digitization industry to develop detailed best practices and guidelines that truly would be seen as “the” standards to be used, and thus eliminate the need for many of the best practices and guidelines already in use?
- » What would it mean to specific programs to drop the best practices and guidelines that they have been using in favor of the guidelines developed by the industry?

As Rick Jelliffe wrote in 2005, “To me, the two credible approaches to standardization are either for a standards organization to rubberstamp a mature and multiply-sourced non-proprietary technology (such as TCP/IP) or to collaborate on consolidating existing experience into a new standard.”

Many of the guidelines and best practices around digitization are similar, but not exactly the same. While NISO has developed a guideline document, it is only that. Could the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), for example, spearhead an effort to create one set of best practices and guidelines? Yes. In fact, doing so could be in its best interests. All future grants could be tied to the use of their “standard,” which would eliminate any reinvention of the wheel and ensure interoperability. Of course, you might be able to immediately imagine a problem with this. For example, would the guideline endorse one metadata standard or would it provide more rigorous guidelines for what the metadata should include and then allow flexibility in the implementation/schema? IMLS would have the clout to do this and could draw other highly regarded institutions into the conversation in order to ensure that the guideline could and would be widely adopted.

Existing digitization efforts should see the adherence to these more universal guidelines as being beneficial. Using these guidelines would ensure that their work could interoperate with other programs because they have been built using the same best practices. Even thinking about digital preservation (or, more appropriately, long-term access to the materials) could become easier. The problem could be those materials converted before the adoption of this universal standard. A migration path would be needed. For those materials that could not be migrated, there may be a sad recognition that they were done before the common guidelines era. In the long term, decisions would need to be made about the ferocity of their maintenance.

No, this would not be an easy path and many decisions would need to be made. In the short term, it could cause angst and division. However, in the long term, it could lower the cost of digitization and make it more of a widely supported commodity process. A move to one guideline (or a limited set of guidelines) would put us further on the path of making digitization a commodity activity. It would remove angst and eliminate discussions about how. It would allow programs to know that they were on the correct path and that it was a path being trodden by many others.

Will a move to one guideline or universal set of best practices ever occur?



In reality, how could moving to one guideline possibly occur? While we could look to thought leaders, funding organizations, and even digitization vendors for leadership, the most likely way of achieving one guideline—if indeed it is even possible—would be for those who have written the various widely accepted guidelines and best practices to meet and develop the overarching guideline. They would best know what the differences are between their guidelines and why, and be able to resolve those differences. If there were still places where programs could make their own decisions, they would be responsible for pointing those areas out and providing parameters to inform the decision-making process.

I am left wondering if a move to one guideline or one universal set of best practices will ever occur. Maybe because we’re still digitizing such a wide variety of materials from institutions with different points of view that I think the answer is “no,” at least for the near-term. There will, however, come a point in time when we will wonder why we had all of those best practices and guidelines in the past and find it quite normal to be using the universal guideline that we take for granted.

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JILL HURST-WAHL <hurst@hurstassociates.com> is president of Hurst Associates, Ltd. and a professor of practice in Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies.

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Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

www.ims.gov

Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections

framework.niso.org



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