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Session 4: Improving Access to Images and Metadata
Saturday, May 6, 2006 11:00 am -12:30 pm

Moderator: Trish Rose, Metadata Librarian, University of California, San Diego

Speakers:
Henry Pisciotta, Arts and Architecture Librarian, Pennsylvania State University
Günter Waibel, Program Officer, RLG
Eileen Fry, Slide Librarian, Indiana University
Ann Whiteside, Head, Rotch Library of Architecture and Planning, Massachusetts
Institute of Technology

Recorder: Claire Dannenbaum

Summary:

This session explored access to images and their accompanying metadata through the use of technology, new approaches to generating and distributing metadata, social tagging software, and a new understanding of user needs in the discovery and retrieval of images. The panel included discussion of peer-to-peer technology, web-based sharing tools, and cross-platform image resources. While the projects were diverse, each of the presenters described a future in which collaboration will be critical for successful access to images in the academic environment.

Henry Pisciotta's talk, "LionShare's Peer-to-Peer Approach and the Race to the Un-database," began with the concept of the "undatabase." Citing common shortcomings of traditional database administration --slow development to meet new needs and proprietary commercial development among them -- Pisciotta described the peer-to-peer image sharing network, LionShare, developed at Pennsylvania State University (2003-2006). LionShare uses server technology to share or copy files from a personal hard drive to a central server. Metadata is generated automatically (file names, file types), and by contributors (indexing terms, descriptions). Difficulties with the LionShare project, and peer-to-peer solutions generally, include complex requirements for authentication, filtering duplicates, designated server technology, and firewalls. Promising features of the LionShare project include instant messaging (IM) functionality between contributors, simplified metadata input, Creative Commons licensing features, and many choices for sharing images and metadata that are controlled by the contributors themselves.

Günter Waibel's talk, "No Data is an Island, Entire of Itself," began with an image of California floating like an island in the Pacific Ocean. Waibel went on to describe why and how image collections must move toward integration with each other. No single licensed resource can be as comprehensive as multiple resources that can be searched simultaneously. Waibel sees designated instructional tools (MDID, Luna Insight, etc.) enabling a more streamlined retrieval and presentation process as paramount to future

developments. He described RLG's Cultural Materials XML Gateway as an example of a resource that can be delivered cross-platform. Waibel also described two models for increasing image content from museums which he coined "the Getty way" and "the Met way." "The Getty way" includes open access to images of artworks in the public domain through Categories for the Descriptions of Works of Art (CDWA) Lite XML and Open Archives Inititative (OAI) harvesting.. "The Met way" includes licensing digital images for scholarly use free of charge. Waibel concluded that the future of visual resources demands more openness on the part of providers, more interoperability between products, and better instructional technology to deliver content to users.

Eileen Fry's talk entitled "Of Torquetums, Flute Cases and Puff Sleeves: the Role of the Image Cataloger in Non-Art Historical Subject Cataloging," focused specifically on the activity of cataloging images and assigning subject indexing for difficult subject areas. Using Hans Holbein's painting "The Ambassadors" as an informal case-study, Fry described the difficulties of subject indexing for disciplines such as costume history and music history. Typically, a wide variety of sources are required to catalog non-art historical materials. Some of these require expert level knowledge, while others can be used by a generalist. Fry used two social tagging web tools (Flickr and del.icio.us), Google Group discussion forum, and PowerPoint to solicit terminology relevant to "The Ambassadors." Each tool yielded various levels of success. For example, Fry used Flickr to mount images and tag them with a minimal set of subject terms. Then she invited faculty/specialists with specialized subject knowledge to add other relevant terms to the tag list. Fry noted that the PowerPoint notes field was also a useful format for communicating with subject experts. When indexing is shared among a group of people, indexing terms develop by aggregation which the cataloger can then decide to add to the catalog record. Fry is excited by the implications of social tagging as a means by which catalogers, subject experts, and the general public can generate multiple levels of language for access to images.

Finally, Ann Whiteside's talk, "New Users, New Cataloging Perspectives," described the current state of affairs as finally having the tools to take "control of chaos." Image catalogers now have metadata element sets that are tailored to their needs, controlled vocabularies that are borne out of art, architecture, and material culture communities, and the Cataloguing Cultural Objects (CCO) guidelines to enable the creation of consistent and authoritative catalog records. Whiteside notes that these tools are coming together at a time when the landscape of information access is rapidly changing. She suggested that, despite these specialized tools, image discovery and retrieval is increasingly transient, as web-based tools for images (such as GoogleImage) create a sense of immediacy and spontaneity that is especially attractive to NextGen users. Whiteside described being "entranced" with Flickr, a web application that supports social tagging of images. She noted the feature called "interestingness" that allows users to see how images are tagged, by whom, and how often; a graphical depiction of how online communities develop a kind of "density" around images. Whiteside concluded with a reminder that image catalogers need to be careful not to recreate metadata that is already provided by museums, image vendors, and other resources. She hopes that newer model developing alongside social tagging software can in some way inform, and open up, new ways of thinking about cataloging images.