

From microfilm to megabytes: Digitizing community newspaper collections

By Jess Posgate.

With the increased interest in family research and the ongoing hunger for primary materials online, community newspapers are attracting more attention than ever before and local libraries everywhere are feeling the heat. Without a national digital strategy, our communities' cultural organizations are challenged to make their own strategic decisions and provide access to community content in consistent, sustainable ways.

A wealth of this content—Canada's community newspapers—is preserved on microfilm or paper copies and are stored in local museums, libraries and archives. In its time, microfilm technology lifted research activities to new heights of efficiency, but in the age of the Internet this format can be obstructive and expensive.

"The local newspaper has always been a vital source of information for genealogy and local history research. The online newspaper archives has given the public access to information that had previously only been available by spending countless hours in front of a microfilm reader with no way to search by subject or words. You've made a researchers' dream come true. Thank you to all those involved."

- Sharon Mulcaster, PLCGS

Reel stories

Vital statistics and articles aren't always republished in a national or provincial newspaper, so researchers from all around the world are now emailing community libraries with very specific requests for information. It's a natural call-and-response that library staff has engaged in for decades, even centuries, but even the most valiant library staff person will shudder when it goes like this:

Genealogist: "I'm looking for a John Brown who died in 1945"
Librarian: "Can you tell me more about John Brown: cause of death, date of birth, where he died?"
Genealogist: "Not sure, but he was married to a Mary Brown, née Smith."



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If you're lucky, some benevolent soul from your community indexed

the birth, marriage and death records from the local papers, including 1945, and they're catalogued in some organized fashion. If not, the librarian trudges off to the microfilm reader and skims through 500 or more pages of newspaper content. She comes away, hopefully, gripping a printed clipping from the paper of the requested death record and feeling only slightly seasick.

Unless there has been an indexing project, these searches require using or coaching patrons on how to use fussy, out of date equipment and patience, lots of patience. With today's thinning budgets and exploding demand for online services, answering requests can be burdensome.

Going digital

More and more, forward-thinking libraries are strategically replacing microfilm as an in-house service and switching to digital. With the right platform they are also making those collections freely available, full text searchable, and linked so discovery happens easily and from anywhere on the Web. Digitizing the collection instead of maintaining microfilm services is cost effective, in the long run, but who needs fortune? It's fame we're after! And like so

many acts of kindness, making the move from microfilm to megabytes makes local libraries into global heroes.

Grassroots projects like digitizing the community newspaper collections is a win-win decision and can garner strong partnerships and cost-saving support. Working with your local groups, societies and businesses means leveraging everyone's resources for a common goal. In every case, talk to the publisher and get permission to republish the material, but emphasize that the project will bring their back-copies online—chances are they get the same number of research requests you do! As well, local history societies or genealogical groups have a vested interest in making the local heritage newspapers more broadly available and might have funds or volunteers to lend to the project.

Project planning

Rolling out a project needs some planning, but nothing too onerous. A few things to ask right off the bat are: What's in your collection, what format, and where are the best copies? Can the digitization be done in-house or is it more reasonable to outsource? Which choice ensures you get consistent, high quality results? But most importantly, how will you mount the material online so people can find it?

Online solutions

There are many digital collection tools available on the market. In-house solutions hosted on your local server means discovery is often obscure: Researchers need to know exactly how to navigate to your system. Also, in-house solutions are not always sustainable since resident experts can migrate away from the organization, and software degrades over time and might require expensive modules and upgrades.

Other, cloud-based solutions are more easily upgraded and supported by the supplier. The price points vary widely: some complex, often academic, solutions are out of reach for small budgets whereas other free software won't effectively handle the managing and displaying of dense objects like newspapers. Others are built specifically for newspaper projects and optimizes the collections so patrons will find your content from wherever they are, be it Texas or England or India. Be sure to research solutions carefully, keeping in mind your budget, collection, and users.



Image by OurDigitalWorld

Strategic gains

Once your newspapers are online the benefits are innumerable: you can reclaim that 3'x 3' space in the corner and replace it with a new computer workstation or book display; your library has effectively extended its services to 24/7/365 access; statistics about the visitor traffic generated by the online newspapers not only raises your community profile but also the library's profile for Council or Municipal decision-making; and your library staff can spend their time attending to immediate tasks and patrons. And don't forget that wonderful index catalogue hidden on the back shelf: those records should be linked to the digital images for a highly interactive and informative experience.

Sharing the local newspapers online informs Canadians and the world of the strength in community history and presence in democratic and engaging ways. Like the newspaper itself, your digital collections reflect the progressive nature and sustainability of your community in the global arena.

More information

Newspaper digitization project planning

- OurDigitalWorld: <http://ourdigitalworld.org/services/newspaper-digitization/>

Some cloud-based solutions

- Omeka <http://omeka.org/>
- Veridian Digital Library Software
<http://www.dlconsulting.com/veridian/>
- VITA Digital Toolkit <http://vitatoolkit.ca>

Jess Posgate is the Community Outreach Coordinator for [OurDigitalWorld](http://ourdigitalworld.org), a not-for-profit organization committed to expanding the community of digital content contributors and to ensuring that our shared digital history is discoverable and searchable by users everywhere. Jess can be reached at jposgate@ourdigitalworld.org.