

EDITORIAL

From Digital Access to Digital Stewardship: A Public-Humanities Agenda

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The vocabulary of digital cultural work is filled with the language of opening: open collections, open data, mass digitization, and universal access. These ambitions have enabled valuable forms of research and participation. Yet the public availability of an image or transcript does not by itself make a collection intelligible, equitable, or sustainable. Search interfaces privilege some descriptions over others; metadata can preserve colonial classifications; copyright uncertainty can discourage legitimate reuse; and short-term project funding can leave collections technically available but practically abandoned. Digital humanities scholarship has already shown that technical systems are never neutral containers for culture. Public humanities must now turn that insight into institutional practice.

The central shift should be from digital access to digital stewardship. Access describes a condition at a particular moment. Stewardship describes a relationship sustained over time. It includes preservation, documentation, governance, repair, and a willingness to revise earlier decisions when communities identify harm or omission. Stewardship also recognizes that cultural records are not merely content to be extracted. They may be connected to living identities, family histories, sacred practices, contested ownership, or memories of displacement. Making such records visible without considering the terms of visibility can intensify rather than reduce inequity.

Community archives have demonstrated that people want more than inclusion in institutional collections; they seek authority over how their histories are described and circulated. Shared authority should not be reduced to a final consul-

tation after curatorial and technical decisions have already been made. It should begin when a project defines its purpose. Communities connected to the material should be able to influence selection, description, access conditions, contextual notes, and procedures for correction or removal.

This approach need not imply that every collection must be governed identically. It does require institutions to identify who may be affected by digitization and to document how decisions were reached. A meaningful record of governance should accompany the technical record of the object. Future users ought to know who supplied the description, which terms were contested, what restrictions apply, and when the record was last reviewed. Provenance is therefore intellectual and social as well as material.

The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance usefully complement the technical emphasis of the FAIR principles by emphasizing collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, and ethics. Although CARE emerged in relation to Indigenous data, its broader lesson is relevant throughout public humanities: the capacity to circulate information must be balanced by responsibility toward the people represented in it.

Digital projects are still frequently funded for innovation but not for upkeep. A new platform attracts support; routine migration, accessibility testing, link repair, and metadata revision do not. This funding pattern creates a cycle in which institutions launch visually impressive resources that gradually become difficult to use or impossible to verify. Maintenance should instead be recognized as a scholarly contribution. Revising a harmful subject heading, documenting a disputed

attribution, improving a transcript, or creating an accessible alternative to a visual interface can change the questions researchers are able to ask.

Institutions should publish maintenance plans that identify responsibility, review intervals, preservation formats, and procedures for reporting errors. They should also preserve version histories. Silent correction may improve a record, but it removes evidence of how knowledge changed. Versioned description allows a collection to acknowledge earlier language without continuing to present that language as authoritative.

Public-humanities projects can make stewardship operational through five commitments: establish community participation before digitization priorities are fixed; publish plain-language statements explaining selection, description, access, and removal policies; budget for preservation, accessibility, and metadata revision beyond the launch period; provide visible routes through which users can challenge descriptions or contribute knowledge; and evaluate use qualitatively, asking whose research, teaching, memory work, or public participation the collection makes possible.

The public humanities should resist the idea that digitization automatically democratizes culture. Digital availability can broaden participation, but only institutions and communities can create the conditions under which that participation is informed and just. Stewardship places care, accountability, and continuity at the center of digital cultural work. The question is no longer simply whether cultural materials can be placed online. It is whether they can remain interpretable, contestable, and responsibly connected to the people whose histories they carry.