

# Ten Years later: has the blurring of the roles of cultural institutions helped or hurt libraries?

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**Abstract:** One of the most radical changes of the Digital Revolution has been the redefinition of libraries, museums and archives as cultural heritage institutions that serve a common function. This notion of a shared functionality is particularly apparent in the IMLS grant-funding guidelines, crucially important since the IMLS is a major funder of U.S. library and museums projects. The speakers ask whether these cultural institutions really have that much in common and whether the traditional mission of a library is being helped or hurt by this new approach.

KEY WORDS: Museums, Libraries, IMLS, Cultural Institutions, Digital Resources.

## 1. Introduction

A question we have been asked to consider in this conference is how the digital revolution has altered our perception of libraries and the role they play in our society. One of the most interesting dynamics of this decade-long period of change has been the recognition that libraries and museums, two of the most important types of cultural institutions, are not so different as was previously thought and that these organizations can profitably collaborate together. Most commonly this has been through joint digitization projects, although libraries and museums collaborate on educational programming, use similar electronic cataloging systems for the display and retrieval of their collections, and rely on similar marketing techniques for their exhibits.

In part, because of this collaboration, libraries and museums are frequently grouped together as “cultural heritage” or “memory” institutions in our professional literature. They even are jointly referred to as “social enterprises”, a term that has its roots in the financial sector. Each one of these concepts represents a significant departure from previous definitions of libraries as places for recreation or self-education, or as repositories of a collection of physical objects.

This paper will explore how these changes in perception came about in the United States, largely as a result of funding decisions that were made by the Institute of Museum and

Library Services (IMLS) in the last decade of the twentieth century. It will describe both the similarities and differences between libraries and museums in their approaches to user services, and access of collections, traditionally and in the digital environment. In conclusion, the authors will discuss whether the intersection of library and museum services has had a positive or negative effect.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services, as it notes in its literature, is the “primary source of Federal government funding to libraries and museums” in the United States (Institute of Museums and Library Services, Perspectives on Outcome Based Evaluation for Libraries and Museums, n.d. p.2). Formed from the merger of the Office of Library Programs and the Institute of Museum Services in 1996, the IMLS wields enormous power in shaping the direction these institutions will take. In fact, the statutes establishing the Institute mandate “its funds be used to foster collaboration between and among museums and libraries” (Martin, 2007, p. 82-83).

In 1998, the IMLS commissioned Aeffect, Inc. to examine the “nature, range, and scope of library/museum partnerships in the United States.” In its external review, Aeffect reported that such partnerships had the potential to “increase access to information in their communities, enhance education, attract new audiences and expand the reach of their programs” (Institute of Museum and Library Services: Identification and Analysis of Library and Museum Partnerships Executive Summary, n.d., p.1).

In part, because of this report, and because of the merging of similar governmental agencies in Great Britain and Canada that supervised museums and libraries, there began to be a growing consensus in the United States in the 1990s that there were many similarities among these institutions and that the mission of libraries and museums actually “intersected” (Martin, 2007, 82-83).

## **2. IMLS**

Libraries and museums are both centers of lifelong learning and keepers of cultural heritage. Both institutions face similar challenges in serving their digital audiences while still providing services for patrons who visit their brick and mortar institutions. IMLS addresses this dual responsibility and states that “through building technological infrastructure and strengthening community relationships, libraries and museums can offer the public unprecedented access and expertise in transforming information overload into knowledge” (About us, n.d.).

Digitization of resources is a key area of focus of IMLS because “having high-quality library and museum resources easily accessible online will enhance formal education at all levels, support independent inquiry, and encourage lifelong learning” (Roy, 2004, p.249). As such, IMLS has been heavily involved with digitalization efforts in museums and libraries in the United States.

With the rise of the digital age, digitization and the creation of online accessible collections has become progressively more important to libraries and museums. Increasingly, patrons are looking online for information and expect an institution to have a robust electronic presence. “Changing demographics and social conditions are creating increased demands for flexibility in formal educational structures through Web-based and other non-traditional delivery modes” (Bell, 2002, p.16).

In an effort to meet these new patron needs, IMLS has funded multiple digital initiatives projects. Voices of the Colorado Plateau Project is one example of a multi-institution digital project supported by an IMLS grant. In this project, Southern Utah University collaborated with “three university libraries and five regional museums” to create a digital oral history of the people of the Colorado Plateau that would be presented as a “series of online multimedia

museum exhibits” (Nickerson, 2004, p.271). Participants in this project were spread throughout three states and included librarians, archivists, historians and curators. Given the broad geographic scope of this project and diversity of institutions involved, project leaders “relied heavily on the local knowledge at each institution and their familiarity with their own collection” in choosing the oral history segments for the project (Nickerson, 2004, p.272). Collaboratively, the project participants agreed to a cataloging system which would allow visitors to the web site to search by name, location or subject. Later, essays providing context for the multimedia museum exhibits were added.

The Digital Cultural Heritage Community project was another IMLS digital collaborative effort between libraries and museums. The project was undertaken by a broad array of partners ranging from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Rare Book and Special Collections Library, the University of Illinois Digital Imaging and Media Technology Initiative, the Lincoln Trail Libraries System, several Illinois museums as well as several elementary school teachers. The project sought to provide greater digital access to primary source documents for elementary school children (Allen & Bishoff, 2001, p. 62). “The purpose of this project was to test a collaborative approach to selecting, digitizing, delivering and using primary source material in the classroom” (Allen & Bishoff, 2001, p. 62-63). The goal of increasing outreach to elementary school classrooms was an important unifying element that enabled these diverse organizations to collaborate on this project (Allen & Bishoff, 2001, p. 62-63).

Supporting its “strengthening community relationships” mission, IMLS has also supported numerous public outreach and collaboration efforts between libraries and museums. In Texas, the Fort Worth Public Library has partnered with the Fort Worth Public School system, as well as several area arts organizations, to create a more interdisciplinary approach to education (Grant recipients, n.d). As a part of this collaboration, “student participants will learn about history from library research and observation of museum artifacts” (Grant recipients, n.d.). In Fresno, California, the public library and the Fresno Art Museum partnered to “deliver arts programming to three majority Hispanic communities in Fresno” (Grant recipients, n.d). In Eastern Oregon, the libraries consortium partnered with the Oregon Museum of Science to provide programming in the arts and sciences to rural communities (Grant recipients, n.d). In this project “the public libraries will host onsite programs, interactive distance learning, and hands-on activities for lifelong learning and community enrichment” (Grant recipients, n.d). These collaborative efforts in outreach to underserved populations illustrate a movement in library and museum partnership that was first highlighted in the 1998 study conducted by Aeffect which stated “while quantitative findings indicate that many partnership projects are intended to serve the general public in several ways, in-depth discussions reveals that partnerships are most frequently instituted to attract and sustain underserved audience segments” (Aeffect, 1998, p.1).

### **3. Similarities**

Historically, there have been strong bonds between public libraries and museums in the United States. Both institutions were born at approximately the same time in the United States with “the common goals of public education and community development” (Bell, 2002, p.5).

Community outreach is a common theme that ties public libraries and museums together, and is the basis of many of their successful partnerships. However, this emphasis on service to patrons is a relatively new development within the museum field. Traditionally, museums have viewed their primary responsibility to their collection rather than to their users. “Museums are identified by their commitment to the collection, storage and educative display of physical, three-dimensional, objects, which are in some way representative of the classes of objects, the genera and species to which they belong” (Rayward, 1998, 210). Yet, museums are undergoing a dramatic shift from an internal collection based approach to an external focus on their users. Aided by IMLS funds, the partnerships museums forged with libraries have enabled museums to become involved with programs that take the museums’

collections outside the confines of its physical space and reach out into communities, both digitally and through outreach events.

Academic libraries also experienced a recent shift in their approach to user services. "In the late 1990s some college and university administrators openly questioned the future of the campus library" (Albanese, 2004, p.30). With increased access to digital resources, many wondered whether the academic library had fallen out-of-date (Albanese 30). Much like the museum, the idea of the academic library primarily as a repository of books was no longer a model that served the needs of its patrons. However, the creation of the information commons recreated the academic library from a place of quiet study to a vibrant interactive space that provides students with collaborative work space, technological services, areas for socialization and coffee bars (Albanese, 2004, p.31). This new approach to library services can also be found in public libraries, as they too are changing to create a more interactive social area within the library by increasing soft seating areas and including coffee cafés. Beyond these physical social spaces, both libraries and museums are engaging users and encouraging dialogue through Web 2.0 technologies. One example is Steve, a recipient of IMLS grants that explores this digital social engagement through social tagging as a way "to describe and access museum collections and encourage visitor engagement with museum objects" (Steve website: <http://www.steve.museum/>). There does not seem to be a distinction between museums and libraries in a social digital environment. Both have used blogs, tagging, social networking, and chat reference, to name a few technologies, to reach a larger user base.

The IMLS collaborative projects in Fresno, California, Fort Worth, Texas, and Eastern Oregon demonstrate the increased outreach, community building and user-centered efforts of libraries and museums. In these projects, the library worked with the museum to integrate information from both institutions to create educational community outreach programs, directed at historically underserved populations.

Libraries and museums are also reaching out to new audiences through the digitization of their collections. By creating online collections, libraries and museums make their material available to an audience far beyond the reach of their physical institutions. For institutions which hold specialized collections, such as Rare Book Libraries, digitization enables patrons to access information, which had previously been available only by physically going to the library and browsing the books (Martin, 2003, p.4). Similarly "museums are now creating not only online exhibitions, but in fact digital representations of their collections, including even three dimensional objects" (Martin, 2003, p. 4). Through digitization projects libraries and museums not only transcend geographical obstacles, they also expand their educational purpose.

The digitization projects lead by Southern Utah University and by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign illustrate how the shared goal of creating digital collections furthers the educational aims of both libraries and museums. As Matthew Nickerson, project director of the Voices of the Colorado Plateau project said, "As cultural heritage institutions, we are dedicated to education, outreach and quality patron services" (2004, p.274). Through the Voices of the Colorado Plateau project, the project partners were able to create a unique educational tool which highlights oral histories that would otherwise not be easily accessible. By partnering with museums and school teachers, the Rare Book and Special Collections Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, had the opportunity to create a stronger outreach program to elementary school children (Allen & Bishoff, 2001, p.63).

By digitalizing resources, libraries and museums, funded in large part by IMLS grants, have successfully opened their collections to a broad electronic audience. No matter the type of materials that the cultural heritage institution collects, technology works to create an online representation. Though traditional views state that "works of art belonged in art galleries, three dimensional objects belonged in museums, books belonged in libraries, and unpublished original documents belong in archives", today these items can "belong" online, which knows no difference between libraries and museums (Hedstrong & King, 2003, p.

22). This trend toward digitization of resources has led many in the field to question whether the similarities between libraries and museums are so great that there should no longer be a distinction between the two institutions. Robert Martin argues that to the patron, digitalization erases the boundaries between libraries and museums. He states that “users don’t care, and may not even be aware, whether the original materials are in a library or a museum” (Storey, 2003, how are libraries and museums collaborating section). Boyd Rayward further argues that “digitalization eliminates the distinction between types of records and thus, presumably, the need for institutional distinctions in the management of the systems within which these records are handled” (1998, p.214). With the success of projects like Digital Cultural Heritage Community and Voices of the Colorado Plateau, as well as numerous others, it would seem that the digitalization of resources has successfully united the educational and community outreach missions of libraries and museums. As Robert Martin states “as we move from the physical world to the digital world, the distinctions between libraries and museums not only blur, they disappear” (Storey, 2003, what challenges do libraries and museums face when they collaborate section, ¶ 3).

#### 4. Differences

Yet despite the similarities between libraries and museums, distinct philosophical differences exist between these two institutions. As collaborative projects between libraries and museums have demonstrated, these institutions have different approaches regarding how information should be presented and who is allowed access to information.

Libraries are steeped in the tradition of providing their users with a breadth of information that is both free of interpretation and free of charge. Nickerson explains that “librarians are anxious to use all the information resources at their disposal in order to satisfy a patron’s educational/informational needs, while at the same time offering very limited, if any, interpretation” (2004, p.274). Historically, as tax supported institutions, libraries are free and open to the public. Additionally, libraries have a tradition of sharing both information and resources with one another. “Indeed, the concept of sharing underlies the very foundation of the modern library as a social agency. Libraries were established in order to pool scarce resources for the common good” (Martin, 2003, p. 5).

Museums, however, do not share in the library tradition of free and open access to a broad span of information. Traditionally, museums are not tax-supported institutions and so the vast majority of them charge for admission, which is completely at odds with the library’s belief in free and equal access for all (St. Lifer, 1998, p.41-42). Additionally, “there is an emphasis on the protection of the intellectual property rights of objects and the protection of confidentiality” both of which discourage museums from freely exchanging information with one another, as is common in libraries (Gibson, Morris & Cleeve, 2007, p.56). Unlike many libraries which pride themselves on the browsing function of open stacks, museums normally display only a small portion of their collection and keep the rest in storage. In addition, museums commonly provide an interpretation of an object for the viewer (Nickerson, 2004, p.274). Identification of an object versus interpretation of an object is a common source of disagreement between libraries and museums in collaborative projects. This issue arose as a source of disagreement between library and museum professionals in both the Voices of the Colorado Plateau project as well as the Digital Cultural Heritage Community project.

Another area of dissimilarity between libraries and museums is metadata. Since libraries and museums do not share the same metadata standards, incompatibility between library and museum data is a common problem. “There are some practical, historical barriers to implementing any shared system for distributing metadata across institutions that are, more than in degree, different in kind. One of these significant differences is of metadata cultures and practices” (Roel, 2005, p.22). In practice, museums and libraries have their own formats and controlled vocabulary to identify objects in their catalogue system. In addition, the level to which items are described varies significantly from one institution to the other (Cole, T.W.,

Mischo, W. H., Palmer, C. L., Twidale, M.B., & Bennett, N. A., 2002, p.2).

With a limited representation of the museum's collection on view, it becomes even more important for users to have access to some sort of metadata about the remainder of the collection. Often this is achieved through searchable online catalogs, whose usability and metadata about the items can vary between institutions as widely as the collections themselves. Differences in the culture of sharing metadata arise between libraries and museums because "museums are not funded to make metadata on their collections freely available. It is common, in fact, for curatorial staff to view metadata as intellectual property to which they serve as gate keepers" (Roel, 2005, p.22).

Since funding at museums may not typically be focused on developing interoperable metadata, the IMLS can be a way to fund such innovation. One recent IMLS project "proposes to design, implement, and research a collection-level registry and item-level metadata repository service that will aggregate information about digital collections and items of digital content created using funds from Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Grants" (Cole, T.W., Mischo, W. H., Palmer, C. L., Twidale, M.B., & Bennett, N. A., 2002, p.1). Spearheaded through collaboration of the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science, the University Library, and IMLS, this project began in 2002 and has funding through 2010. By beginning with IMLS grant recipients, this endeavor connects the funded digitization projects by smoothing the metadata sharing issues.

## **5. Impact**

When libraries first came under the auspice of IMLS, many librarians worried about the impact it would have on libraries, because some of the money initially intended to fund library projects would be diverted to fund library and museum partnerships (St. Lifer, 1998, p.42). "Until the creation of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, collaboration among and between cultural heritage institution categories was relatively rare" (Allen & Bishoff, 2001, p.61). Looking back on the partnership projects IMLS has funded shows that libraries have played a varied role in these collaborations. As shown in the collaborative efforts of public libraries and art museums in Fresno, Fort Worth and Eastern Oregon, traditional library services of research and lifelong learning activities were enhanced by these partnerships. Alternatively, in digitalization projects at Southern Utah University and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, library involvement tended to be more closely in line with cataloguing rather than reference or outreach. In their study of library and museum partnerships in England and the United States, Gibson, Morris and Cleeve note that "libraries were also much more likely to have the responsibility of the hardware and software maintenance and the digitalization of catalogues" (Gibson et al., 2007, p.62). Thus, IMLS grants have a wide ranging impact on libraries from technical services to reference and outreach.

## **6. Conclusion**

Ten years ago, IMLS brought together libraries and museums in an innovative collaborative effort, which joined the critical education component and digitalization work of these two cultural heritage institutions. Through these partnerships, libraries and museums have expanded access to materials and increased outreach to underserved communities. The last decade has shown that libraries and museums are indeed natural partners. While some differences exist between these two institutions, they are not insurmountable. Projects such as the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting illustrate that libraries and museums can successfully work together to bridge their different approaches to metadata.

IMLS grants in the United States as well as joint library-museum funding projects in Canada, England and Europe have helped to increase the participation of museums in collaborative efforts with other cultural heritage institutions. Through these joint projects, libraries and museums have found ways to make the most of their similarities, while bridging the areas in which they differ.

In the current economic crisis, partnerships between libraries and museums are becoming increasingly important. The crisis has deeply affected the country and many libraries are experiencing significant budget cuts. Three public library systems in New York City face a 17% budget cut in the city's 2010 budget, while branch libraries in Baltimore face the elimination of weekend operating hours (New York City Budget Proposes Major Cuts to Libraries, 2009; Baltimore Mayor Proposes Cuts to Libraries Hours, 2009). Public libraries aren't the only ones suffering, a consortium of academic libraries in South Carolina experienced a 90% decrease in state funding, leading to significant cuts in database subscriptions (S.C. Schools May Lose Shared Databases, 2009). These cuts come at a time when libraries are experiencing significant increase in patron usage. While many of these patrons are seeking job advice, many others come to the library for free cultural programs (Saulny & Cullotta, 2009). In this time of budget cuts, resource sharing and programming partnerships between libraries and museums are critical in order to continue to provide services and resources to patrons, while operating under severe financial restrictions.

IMLS grants offer hope in this bleak economic period. Since its creation in 1998, IMLS funding to libraries, through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), has increased each year from \$142,250,000 in 1998 to \$214,432,000 in 2009. Similarly museum funding has increased from \$21,390,000 in 1998 to \$38,547,000 in 2009 (IMLS Appropriations History 1998-2009, n.d.). As libraries and museums look to the future, it is clear that IMLS grants will play a critical role in ensuring that these institutions continue to collaborate and provide educational resources and programs to their communities.

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