Writing the Docs Honestly

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ARCHIVES * RECORDS 2018
Washington, D.C., August 16, 2018

Opening the Black Box: Transparency and Complexity in Digital Preservation

Digital preservation = so much writing

Docs I write:

I write docs to:

FRED Guide
born-digital accessioning manual
web archives collection policy
web archiving manual
digital preservation policy
digital media collection assessment
digital media imaging log
Digital Curation Notes
workstation specs and justification
annual work plans
seasonal project lists
daily timesheet and work diary

Remind myself
Work well with colleagues
Justify my work
Futureproof my work
Maintain membership in a community
of practice

Principles

Documentation should be ...
- Precursory: begin documenting before you begin developing
- Participatory: include everyone in the documentation process

Content should be … ARID, skimmable, exemplary, consistent, current

Sources should be … nearby, unique

Publications should be … discoverable, addressable at granular level, cumulative, complete, beautiful

A **body of documentation** should be comprehensive

Write the Docs, *Documentation Principles*, http://www.writethedocs.org/guide/writing/docs-principles/

WRITE THE DOCS

Docs I read:

software documentation
hardware manuals
archival description
blog posts
job descriptions
research
meeting minutes
news alerts
social media
email lists
Google Groups
LibGuides

I read docs to:

Identify problems
Look for solutions to specific problems
Maintain membership in a community of practice

"honest"

Honest description addresses and accounts for the constructedness of archives by considering how archives are shaped by ...

- the process of archiving
- custodians & intermediaries
- archivists

Can we adapt these principles to writing documentation?

Jennifer Douglas, "Toward More Honest Description," *The American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016) 26-55. https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.26.

Honest documentation spells out the work

Rewriting, unpacking

Old

In general Wayback machine, no specific institution is listed with who archived the site. In Archive-It, the institution is listed.

New

We endeavor to make our web archiving appraisal, acquisition, and maintenance activities visible to users so that the authenticity and provenance of these web archives do not rest solely on institutional reputation or visual branding. Archived web pages display technical metadata related to their capture, which Archive-It generates, hosts, displays, and preserves. We supplement this technical metadata with user documentation and descriptive metadata detailing the processes through which we have appraised, selected, captured, and described URLs. Lastly, we cite the contributions of archivists, website creators, and other partners who participate in aspects of web archiving.

Honest documentation acknowledges the work it does

Documentation does work

Materializing through reference

- Speaking of conditions conflated with producing them
- Conflating policies or credentials with practices
- Invoking commitment as evidence of reality

Institutionalizing

- Making a practice "background"
- Documentation as an end in itself
- Institutional(ized) rewards for documentation

Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012).

Honest documentation values labor

Give credit

Centering workers
rather than
collections

Documentation that
celebrates
collaboration

Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries | DLF Labor WG

Acknowledgements

Key issues represented in this document emerge from collective interests voiced by members of the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Labor Working Group and the broader DLF community. Ruth Kitchin Tillman, Sandy Rodriguez, Melissa Chalmers, and Amy Wickner facilitate the working group. Roxanne Shirazi proposed the development of a collective research agenda.

Members of the Valuing Labor sub-group contributed research, writing, editing, and comments:

Amy Wickner (co-facilitator)
Karly Wildenhaus
Hillel Arnold
Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe

Members of the DLF community contributed comments:

Anastasia Chiu
Aaron Collie
Thomas Padilla
Dorothea Salo

We acknowledge the following projects as models for process and product:

- ACRL Women and Gender Studies Section *Research Agenda — Feminism & Librarianship* and *Bibliography of Scholarship on Women and Gender Studies Librarianship — By Author*
- *Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries* by Chela Scott Weber (OCLC Research, 2017)

Thank you especially to Bethany Nowviskie, Katherine Kim, and Becca Quon of DLF for leading and maintaining the community infrastructure through which this work takes place.

DLF Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, *Research Agenda: Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries* (2018),
https://wiki.diglib.org/Labor/Valuing-Labor/Research-Agenda.

Rubric for honest documentation:

- ↳ Spell out the work
- ↳ Acknowledge that docs do work
- ↳ State your positions
- ↳ Value labor (yours too)