

## **A Content Analysis of Visual Resources Collection Web Sites**

Visual resources collections are undergoing a transitional period as they attempt to provide patrons with analog and digital images in an era of information overload. With the advent of Google Images, Flickr, and other photo sharing services, visual resources collections are struggling to communicate their relevance within academic communities. For academic libraries of all specializations including VRCs, retaining and growing a customer base and focusing additional energy on meeting customer expectations is the only way to survive in the current digital climate.

This research project surveyed 45 web sites pertaining to VRCs to examine the information they present on a variety of topics, including what types of content and services they offer to patrons, how they support patrons with image presentation tools, and whether they offer copyright guidelines and information about fair use.<sup>1</sup> At the time I undertook this study, I was a VR cataloguer at Yale University. Yale was in the beginning stages of initiating a project called Integrated Digital Image Resources to transform the Visual Resources Collection by digitizing approximately 50%, or 160,000 images, from the VRC slide and photograph collection. As an important part of this transformation, the staff was working collaboratively with faculty, Library, and ITS colleagues to re-organize collection building and associated service support for digital

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in the spring of 2007 to complete the requirements toward an M.L.S. degree at Southern Connecticut State University. The advisor of the study was Dr. Chang Suk Kim.

teaching. In these areas in particular, we wanted to see what kinds of services other universities were offering.

While a number of studies emphasize the unique role that VRCs perform within an academic community, my survey found that most VRC web sites are not communicating how they fulfill this responsibility. For visual resources departments, the web can provide patrons not only access to electronic collections, but also information about a collection's patron services. What I found in looking at a variety of sites was that although most VRC sites *do* offer information about their collections' physical or digital resources, in particular many shortchange themselves in neglecting to provide information about the knowledge and resources that can be provided by their staff, such as assistance with using image collections or image reference services.

This is problematic because VRCs contain highly specialized collections materials and support their patrons with methods outside of the capacities of most academic library units, and are therefore often isolated within their academic communities. A report commissioned in 2006 at UC Berkeley suggests that image content is primarily discovered by faculty via search engines rather than provided by VRCs, despite the fact that collections offered via the library contained higher-quality images and data. In this survey, only 57% of faculty had used image collections provided by their respective academic libraries, principally due to the fact that many of the faculty surveyed were unaware that they existed.<sup>2</sup> Statistics such as this suggest that

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<sup>2</sup> Harley, D. et al. (2006). *Use and Users of Digital Resources: A Focus on Undergraduate Education in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Online report commissioned by the Center for Study in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved on February 10, 2007 at <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/research/digitalresourcestudy/report/>.

much more aggressive communications must be undertaken by VRCs to advertise the content of their collections and the services they provide if they are to remain a viable academic presence.

### *About this Study*

The foundation of this study is the methodology of content analysis, which has been used widely in previous library and information science studies. At its core, content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.”<sup>3</sup> This study was limited to web sites of VRCs affiliated with academic institutions within the United States, excluding visual resources collections located within art museums. The sites evaluated in the study were the member web sites of the Visual Resources Association, found online under vraweb.org’s membership tab. In addition to these member sites, the sites of 5 peer institutions of Yale, identified as peer academic institutions by the Yale Library, were also evaluated. 45 in total, these web sites represented a variety of types of academic institutions including state and private schools, those with student populations over 10,000 students and those with student populations under 2,500 students, those pertaining to general academic institutions, and those that specialize in art-related disciplines. In evaluating these sites, attempts were made to explore all aspects of the visual resources collection’s web site and follow all embedded links. The methodology was not meant to be exhaustive and to consider all aspects of VRC sites, but rather to target issues

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<sup>3</sup> Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

identified as most pedagogically significant to VRCs and their patrons. The 45 sites were evaluated over the period of March 5 through March 31, 2007.

### *Content*

Topics of the study included:

#### Content

- What types of content are VRCs offering their patrons?
- Are there collections offering digital-only content?
- What vended databases, if any, do VRC collections subscribe to?
- How do VRCs inform patrons via their web sites when they acquire new content?

#### Services and Tools

- What services are VRCs offering to patrons with regard to both analog and electronic materials?
- How do VRCs integrate patrons' personal materials into the institutional collection, if at all?
- Do VRCs support patrons with classroom/ presentation use of their materials in individual sessions?
- Do VRCs support patrons with classroom/ presentation use of their materials with online guides?

#### Copyright

- Are VRC sites providing copyright guidelines on the fair use of images to their patrons?
- If so, is the language specific to the institution or written by another institution or provided by a professional organization?

I'll highlight some of the findings and how I interpret them.

The vast majority of the evaluated sites, 41 of 45, or 91%, offer access to locally developed digital collections. 31 of 45 web sites evaluated, or 69% of evaluated collections, offer subscriptions of some kind to outside digital collections or consortia databases other than their institutionally-developed collection. These two statistics echo comments published by Christine Sundt in 2004 that "the commercial databases have not really affected my work (or that of most VR curators) because the content is typically too

broad for most of our curricular needs.”<sup>4</sup> With this many of collections surveyed continuing to develop in-house databases of images, VRC staff are clearly making strong efforts to meet the pedagogical needs of their individual institutions. What many VRC websites don’t express, however, is how the content of subscription collections complements that developed by the institution. This often forces a patron to explore several different resources when looking for specific content, when often simple text explaining the strengths of each resource could provide direction. VRCs can also learn to be more proactive in informing patrons of new and expanded content in their collections. While informing patrons of new content has not been a traditional responsibility of VRCs, faculty at Yale often noted in discussion forums that, since nothing physical is produced by the act of adding new digital content into a repository, there is nothing that allows them to “see” how the collection is actively growing. As of 2007, only one institution offered its patrons the option to learn about updates made to the content of the collection.

Of particular significance is the small number of VRCs using their web sites to promote their patron services such as reference and collection development. Although there have been many studies published regarding the importance of image reference services, only 10 of 45 sites evaluated, or 22%, list reference services in some capacity on their web sites. While arts-oriented faculty may know that this is a service generally provided by visual resources staff, these faculty are not the only population that image

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<sup>4</sup> Mattison, D. (2004). “Looking for Good Art: Web Resources and Image Databases.” *Searcher*, 12 (9), 8-19.

reference services should be directed toward. Patron assistance with locating quality images is a prime strength of VRC staff and should be highlighted as such.

A slightly higher number of VRCs, 20 of 45, or 44% of evaluated collections, provide technical support with using electronic image collections. Moving from teaching with analog to digital images is a difficult technical and pedagogical process for many faculty members, and visual resources staff are often called upon to act as the first tier of support in this transition. Because of the proximity of visual resources staff to the digital collections they are building and supporting, it seems probable that nearly 100% of collections are doing some initial technical support in this area, yet this is not highlighted by many VRC web sites. Much like image reference, image database support is ingrained in a visual resources collection's core services to the point that perhaps many curators think that it does not need to be highlighted as a service on their web site. Again, however, the patrons most in need of assistance using the contents of electronic collections are those not closely familiar with the services of VRCs and precisely to whom the visual resources staff should be reaching out via the web.

Previous studies, most notably the 2006 study of use and users of digital resources conducted at UC Berkeley, have found that acquiring skills with regard to digital content is a major concern by those utilizing images in teaching. To this end, 42% of evaluated sites present patrons with informative web-based resources, most often through PowerPoint or written instructions presented as PDF files. The benefits of instructional materials to VRC patrons are possibly two-fold: they draw attention to the strengths of the collection and the services provided by visual resources staff, and also reduce the amount of staff time spent in one-on-one tutorials helping patrons acquire basic skills.

Only 4 of 45 evaluated collections, or 9%, are providing group instructional classes regarding their digital collections. At Yale, efforts to provide group instructional sessions to faculty admittedly were very poorly received, as faculty were more comfortable receiving instruction in one-on-one sessions. Group instructional sessions reach out to patrons beyond faculty, however, provide excellent introductions to a VRCs resources and tools, and make patrons more likely to utilize image databases rather than seeking images via the web.

Finally, on the topic of copyright, 24 of 45 collections, or 53% of evaluated VRC sites, included some kind of copyright statement on their web site. Of these institutions that provided some form of statement, 17 of the 24 utilized a copyright statement that was specific to the institution, 2 of the 24 linked to the copyright statement of another institution, and 5 of the 24 linked to the copyright, intellectual property rights and fair use statement of the Visual Resources Association. Recent discussion threads on the VRA listserv have demonstrated how the interpretation of copyright and fair use is varying widely from institution to institution, with some institutions willing to share their policies and others keeping them closer to their chests. Providing patrons with some form of copyright information via the web is an intelligent move for visual resources collections, however, as it takes the burden and liability off staff for enforcing these concepts. Copyright and fair use guidelines regarding the use of visual images are extraordinarily complex, and a study conducted across liberal arts colleges by David Green in 2006 showed patrons, especially teaching faculty, tend to assume that the burden of

compliance rests on the institution rather than the individual.<sup>5</sup> VRCs would do well to present some information regarding this topic and linking to the information from a professional organization such as the VRA, as some collections were found to have done, may be a potential compromise for institutions unwilling to script formal copyright language.

### *Conclusions*

The point of this presentation is not to encourage VRCs to do more, because I'm well aware that they are already doing quite a lot, but rather to encourage them to think about marketing themselves more aggressively. If VRCs are going to remain an important resource within academic communities, they must communicate more articulately with faculty and patrons about what collections content and services they provide. Patrons have too many options for acquiring images, and they cannot be expected to innately understand the benefits that visual resources staff and services can add to their scholarship. A recent panel at VRA's annual meeting in San Diego titled "Improving Your Image," the presentations for which are now online, contained great tips for marketing your VRC collection.<sup>6</sup> Advertising a visual resources unit's collections and services encourages patrons to use a collection to its full extent, brings awareness to VR staff for their efforts to expand an institution's resources, and increases the profile of a collection and its significance within the context of the university.

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<sup>5</sup> Green, D. (2006). *Using Digital Images in Teaching and Learning: Perspectives from Liberal Arts Institutions*. Online report commissioned by Wesleyan University in collaboration with the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE). Retrieved on February 20, 2007 at <http://www.academiccommons.org/imagereport>.

<sup>6</sup> Viewed on April 25, 2008 at <http://www.vraweb.org/conferences/sandiego2008/sessions/session6/index.htm>.