

West Beyond the West: BC Digitization Symposium

User Panel

John Lutz, Associate Professor, Dept. of History, University of Victoria

John is a researcher and so user of digital resources and creator of digital material. As a researcher, his life has been totally transformed by digitized materials: he can work from anywhere, anytime, and can ask new kinds of questions and find answers. As a teacher, he can turn his students into researchers, producing a cadre of people eager to learn and treasure history and culture, and to support our institutions and what they do. All his work would be impossible without the work that librarians and archivists do and we need to acknowledge the fantastic work to date.

His key point is that history is too important to be boring and that the digital technology makes it possible to engage students and the public in the past in new and exciting ways.

John questioned what kind of relationship we want to have between the user and creator of digital content, and made the following points:

1. Promotion of projects is generally not done well, as a result of the typical grant-funding formulas, which don't allow for promotion. Promotion needs to be built into funding formulas.
2. Break down the user/creator dichotomy and involve the user in the process of building resources.
3. Build many specialised portals instead of The One Great Portal. There are many different audiences who search in many different ways, and portals should be built for the users, e.g. BC history, BC genealogy, BC medical history. Use of search widgets on web pages will extend the reach of these specialty portals.
4. Teachers need curriculum support materials with resources.
5. Think about the projects you put online as stories e.g. posing a mystery or writing the first paragraph of the story and then asking users to finish the sentence and solve the mystery. Along the way they use archival materials and learn about context. An example of this in use is the Big Unsolved Mysteries of Canadian History website <<http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/indexen.html>>.

On the question of what to digitize, John made the following points:

- On the one hand, everything should be digitized but as a starting point we need a balance between mass digitization and detailed micro-digitization projects.
- It is also important to do the micro-projects to go deep and provide context by digitizing ephemera to preserve the activities of everyday life that don't get noticed in ordinary records.
- Technology is allowing us to make our archives available in new ways with new tools, "mashing up" or linking different types of materials together. John gave examples of the Virtual Victoria Project, where a panorama of Victoria is marked up with information about who lived in the buildings, what they are for, etc. Knowledge ON and the Britannia Mines exhibit are other examples of this at work.

John concluded by noting that it is important to break down the barriers between sectors, institutions, and different types of data. We need to make resources engaging for the Wii generation in order to create a new historically literate generation who will become our greatest advocates in the future.