

4-1-2018

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### Recommended Citation

(2018) "Copies, Surrogates, and the Simulacra: The Digitization of Rare Books and Manuscripts for Research Purposes," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 66 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol66/iss1/2>

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# Copies, Surrogates, and the Simulacra: The Digitization of Rare Books and Manuscripts for Research Purposes

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In the last fifteen years, digitization of rare books and manuscripts in special collections libraries has begun to play an increasingly significant role in providing access for students, faculty, independent scholars and members of local and academic communities. The digitization of print materials is now frequently undertaken for a variety of purposes and with varying degrees of success. Libraries digitize manuscripts and rare books to promote known and hidden collections, preserve fragile materials, and provide on and off-campus access to users, while new uses and possibilities are continually being explored and implemented. Some early scholarship on the subject, however, has expressed both excitement and concern about what the digitization of rare books and manuscripts means for the future of special collections libraries. Given the mix of both anxious and optimistic projections, what does digitization mean for user's perception of physical collections in terms of their purpose, usefulness, and essentially value in a world where digital surrogates are widely available? While much scholarship can be found on the subjects of copyright, fair use, and standard digitization practices as the field continues to grow and evolve, the following is a discussion on how these developments affect the ways in which users perceive and experience books as a physical object; how digital surrogates are encountered; and their potential in serving as a substitute or stand in for primary sources.

Early scholarship on the subject tends to reflect a dual sense of anxiety and hopeful anticipation about the possibilities of digitization in special collections libraries. One clear example can be found in Peter Hirtle's 2002 article, "The Impact of Digitization on Special Collections in Libraries," where he sardonically draws connections between the Manhattan Project's creation of the first atom bomb and the advent of digitization in special collections libraries. Hirtle suggests that the advancement of digital technologies has created tremendous potential for special collections libraries; though he nevertheless questions whether we as librarians might now be complicit in our own eventual undoing. Hirtle suggests that, with the implementation of digitization in special collections, we have reached a point of no return. He states, "... the accomplishments of the past decade in digitization represent a true technological advancement, one with the potential to alter forever the world of special collections as it now exists" (Hirtle, 2002, p. 43). While Hirtle's outlook for the future of rare books and special collections libraries appears quite grim, later scholarship tends to reflect similar sentiments. In her presentation, "Books in the Age of Anxiety," given at the 2009 *Books in Hard Times*, Grolier Club Symposium, Katherine Reagan suggests two possible

outcomes digitization could have on special collections libraries. The first scenario, she refers to as "The Special Collections Graveyard," foresees special collections libraries "becom[ing] vast warehouses containing physical artifacts few will desire to see, once their digitized surrogates are made freely and globally available" (Reagan, 2009, para 5 ). The second, more optimistic "Special Collections Renaissance" scenario, is one in which special collections "remain the one true locus for authenticity and scholarly activity" (Reagan, 2009, para 6). In this model, Reagan suggests, "our online arsenals of searchable full-text and digital facsimiles will, on the contrary, spur ever greater desires to study, view, touch, smell, and experience increasingly precious originals" (Reagan, 2009, para 6). The common theme in both Hirtle and Reagan's assessments is that special collections libraries have undeniably been undergoing a sea change due to the advancement of digital technologies.

While there continues to be an ongoing concern about how the ubiquity of digital surrogates affects the ways in which users and scholars regard their physical counterparts, overall opinions tend to resemble the "special collections renaissance" scenario and focus on the potential for new audiences and research opportunities. In her article, "Digital Special Collections: The Big Picture," Alice Prochaska notes that "Making high-quality images of special collections available on the Internet has opened up for archivists, curators, and librarians some dizzying possibilities" (2009, p. 13). She continues, "we are able to pursue high ideals for sharing a common cultural and historical inheritance by digitizing rare and unique materials for a worldwide audience" (2009, p. 13). Prochaska, like most librarians, sees the potential of digitization to dramatically expand usership far beyond the constraints of the physical library. Similarly, Hirtle notes several potential positives for the use of digitization in special collections libraries. He argues that digitized materials create "new users" and "new uses" and predicts that with digital technologies we will see "the appearance of new types of researchers using rare books and manuscripts" (Hirtle, 2002, p. 43). Hirtle notes that digital surrogates have the potential to create new opportunities for researchers that might not otherwise be feasible (or would at least be significantly more difficult) without digital technology. For example, high quality scans now allow us to examine manuscripts on a microscopic level, and discover characteristics, traits, and information that are less apparent or often invisible to the naked eye. More recently, possibilities are being developed every day in the area of the digital humanities and through collaborative efforts with other academic and non-academic departments and

institutions. For instance, businesses, municipalities, and libraries have been exploring the potential of augmented reality to engage with the public in educational and interactive ways that rely on special collections and archive materials. The City of Philadelphia has developed web and mobile device applications for the general public that enhance sightseeing experiences by merging existing maps applications with historical photographs taken from their archives (Boyer 2011). As digital technologies continue to develop, it is safe to say that we will continue to discover and explore ways to reach new users and create new uses for special collections materials through digital surrogates and web technologies.

While librarians are increasingly optimistic about what lies ahead for special collections libraries, one issue that continues to be a common concern is, how the ubiquity of digital surrogates will affect the way scholars, students, and general users regard the physical materials once their surrogates are made widely available and easily accessible. Both Hirtle and Reagan suggest that, with the increase of digital surrogates, there could possibly be a decrease in the need to access physical print materials. Hirtle states, “there are going to be digital surrogates for more and more material, and more and more people will prefer to work with those surrogates;” while Reagan takes this statement a step further and suggests that, as use of physical holdings declines, it could become more difficult to justify current holdings and the acquisition of new (and often expensive) materials (Hirtle, 2002, p. 49; Reagan, 2009, n.p.). In more recent scholarship, Dale Correa addresses instances and examples of special collections libraries that, in an effort to preserve physical materials, are increasingly restricting access to physical books and manuscripts serious researchers, and instead referring researchers to surrogates on their online websites (Correa, 2016, p. 2). Central to these discussions is the concern that users will become accustomed to relying on surrogates to the extent that the digital will begin to take the place of physical objects. In her discussion of *Early English Books Online*, Diane Kichuk deals with this question of users conflation of digital surrogates with physical materials at length. Kichuk takes issue with the marketing strategies of the digital facsimile provider, noting

In a current online marketing brochure, ProQuest states that *EEBO* includes ‘cover-to-cover full-page images that show the works *exactly as they appeared in their original printed editions*’ (italics added) and that subscribing libraries can show users ‘what the original readers saw, back when the Wars of the Roses still raged’. Its promotional literature implies that *EEBO* contains clone-like copies of the original printed work. The student and scholar can therefore happily reside at home or their institution and conduct primary research, instead of traveling the world to libraries that still permit

access to the original. (Kichuk, 2007, p. 296)

The problem for Kichuk, is not the existence of digital surrogates, but the suggestion that digital surrogates are capable of completely circumventing the need to access rare materials in their physical form. Kichuk argues that, as students and scholars begin to rely more and more on digital surrogates, the surrogates no longer signify, or refer to, physical materials—but they come to be regarded as the genuine artifact in and of themselves. “The longer they look, the more the facsimile becomes the ‘real thing’. The scholar rationalizes the only version of the work she will ever examine—the ‘only thing’—as the ‘real thing’” (Kichuk, 2007, p. 296). An interesting parallel to Kichuk’s analysis might be found in Jean Baudrillard’s discussion of simulation and the simulacra. Baudrillard suggests that Western society exists in a world of simulations; that simulations have become so commonplace that they circumvent and supersede reality itself. Baudrillard states

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and shortcircuits all its vicissitudes. (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 2)

Following Baudrillard, there is a distinct loss that occurs when the simulation comes to take the place of the “real,” because this process is not simply an act of replication or duplication, but through repeated deference to the simulation, the simulation itself takes the place of the real (in spite of the fact that it is an incomplete representation).

For special collections, the danger is that (if there is no distinction between digital and the “real”) a loss occurs in users’ understanding of the totality of that physical object. This loss has the potential to occur on two levels: (1) the loss of information that is not easily translated into digital images; and (2) the loss of context. As many scholars have noted there are many challenges to representing physical objects in digital form, as well as many aspects that cannot be, or frequently have not been, translated to digital surrogates. Abby Smith notes, in her article “Authenticity and Affect: When Is a Watch Not a Watch?,” “a book carries not only the text printed on the pages but also the explicit evidence of its use, such as marginalia and stains, and the cultural information implicit in its size, font, layout, and innumerable other physical traces that may or may not lend themselves to interpretation” (Smith, 2003, p. 173). She continues, “surrogates are notable for their inability to convey those crucial artifactual aspects and can deliver to the user only that which is fungible, that is, portable in any format. Anything that is intrinsic to the physical presence is lost” (Smith, 2003, p. 174). With digitization of rare books and special collections materials there is much knowledge that stands to be gained (through word-searchability, zoom

functions that allow for close analysis, increased accessibility, and the potential to compare materials at two different institutions simultaneously) but there is also a loss in that a digital copy can never completely reproduce the experience of handling the physical object. Diane Kichuk notes, “while digitization gives unprecedented access to content, that content is distorted by virtue of its production, and the print work it purports to represent with exactness, while seeming so tantalizingly accessible, is illusive” (Kichuk, 2007, p. 296).

More recently, Dale J. Correa, in her article “Digitization: Does It Always Improve Access to Rare Books and Special Collections?,” notes that “from the perspective of preservation, digitization is a blessing and a curse” (Correa, 2016, p.1). She argues, “A digital surrogate can provide the information conveyed in words or images, but it cannot capture the information contained in the physicality of special collections materials” (Correa, 2016, p.2). As Correa describes, there is a clear opportunity to reach wider audiences of users with digital surrogates, but there is also a loss in that the surrogate is by its very nature is incomplete and lacking in ability to communicate details about the physicality of an object. Diane Kichuk similarly argues that surrogates “preserve the text, but little of the book as a physical object” (Kichuk, 2007, p. 301). She suggests that surrogates “present ambivalent information about key physical characteristics, such as size, presence, typography, and context” (Kichuk, 2007, p. 301). While some of these issues can and will be worked out in time, the point still stands that digital surrogates are altogether different than physical materials and, while highly useful in some cases, they will never be able to replace a book or manuscript in its physical form. Further, when researchers, scholars, and students perceive or encounter a digital surrogate as though it were the original, without regard for the limitations of digital reproduction, there is a significant loss that occurs in their understanding of the material. Other potential problems with digitization include: the omission of important characteristics because items are not always reproduced in their entirety; blank pages that are frequently omitted; marginalia that is often cropped and omitted; binding evidence that can be omitted or ignored; distorted pages; and information about gatherings and sheet format that is often not included.

The second form of loss that occurs with the conflation of digital surrogates and physical materials is an issue of context. Abby Smith notes, “The context in which one views or uses an artifact can have significant bearing on how the item is experienced or perceived” (Smith, 2003, p. 177). When users utilize a digital surrogate, their encounter with that item is far different from how it might be experienced in physical form. For instance, passages from a rare book might be read within the context of an online search conducted, as opposed to being read within the context of adjacent passages in a particular work. While this type of research is highly beneficial under many circumstances, it is important that researchers are aware of this effect and that care is taken to consider the contexts in which the information originally appeared. Similarly, Prochaska explains that the extraction of content from its

original context and insertion into entirely new and different contexts has the potential to distort ones’ perception and understanding of that content. “It seems to me that facilitating the use of small snippets of a book out of its overall context does violence to the principle of scholarly argument” (Prochaska, 2009, p.22). Further, Stephen Davidson notes, “by digitizing the more ‘important’ or ‘significant’ items in a collection, we are giving those priority, which may have the unfortunate effect of drawing attention further away from documents of unrecognized importance in the collection” (Prochaska, 2009, p. 39). While the digitization of rare books and manuscripts is undoubtedly highly beneficial to special collections libraries, the concerns expressed in this brief survey of scholarship seem to suggest that there is a distinct danger in allowing researchers and users to conflate surrogates with the physical objects they represent.

For collectors and special collections librarians there is no question about the intrinsic value of rare materials in their physical form. The challenge lies in our ability to communicate those values to users, researchers, and administration and to promote the study of the physical characteristics of print materials. It is important for researchers to acknowledge that digital surrogates are in themselves an altogether separate utterance of a text; just as manuscripts are different from the printed text. Surrogates should be used to enhance research of the physical object, but scholars and researchers must be aware of the limitations in the ability of the digital to communicate attributes or characteristics of physical objects. For these reasons, it is essential that we continue to remain vigilant in our efforts to promote the study of our physical collections and the physical attributes of those materials that are not as easily translated into the digital realm. As Hirtle suggests, special collections should emphasize the unique (for example manuscripts) and “reinvigorate the idea of special collections as museums” (Hirtle, 2002, p. 49). Many librarians also suggest an increased emphasis on the artifactual value of our holdings; as digital surrogates deliver content and facilitate certain types of research, the study of books as physical objects is one that still necessitates handling works in their physical form. As digital surrogates are remediations of physical objects and thus an altogether different medium (with their own set of benefits and limitations) we should continue to explore new and innovative ways they might aid in new types of research. Digitization for research purposes is thus not limited to facsimiles; however, when digital facsimiles are created they should strive to capture as many physical characteristics as possible and not simply reproduce content. Finally, assessment of special collections libraries must continue to be adapted to account for the changing ways in which service is provided. Providing access to materials in a digital environment is still an act of service undertaken by the library. Our modes of assessment must be designed to take this into consideration; since we are nevertheless providing access to materials that have a concrete connection to physical materials. But we must also strive to maintain the physical connection between our library users and the physical materials as well.

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## SELA/GENERAL NEWS:

SELA Member, Wanda Brown, has been elected President of the American Library Association. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/brown-wins-2019-2020-ala-presidency/> Wanda is Director of the C.G. O'Kelly Library at Winston-Salem State University and serves as the SELA North Carolina state representative.

## LIBRARY NEWS

### Georgia

#### *Kennesaw State University*

On March 22 and 23, Kennesaw State University Graduate Library Team hosted over one hundred participants from universities all over the country for the Transforming Libraries Graduate Students Conference. This two-day national conference included formal presentations from visiting and KSU speakers, informal pop-up sessions, and plenty of time between sessions for networking and casual conversations. The original brainchild of librarian, Elisabeth Shields, the conference materialized with great success after over a year of planning and teamwork from the entire Graduate Library team.



*Chapter contributors*

Sharing the title of our conference, the book, *Transforming Libraries for Graduate Students* brought together the ideas of fifty contributors and organized into thirty-four chapter submissions. The Graduate Library's Crystal Renfro and Cheryl Stiles worked closely with ACRL for the publication.