Accessible Archives and Special Collections

Session 208

Thank you for coming to Accessible Archives and Special Collections, session 208. I am Dr. Lydia Tang, Archivist-Librarian at Michigan State University’s Special Collections. I am excited to share this panel with a diverse pool of presenters speaking about many important and practical considerations and solutions for enabling accessibility of archives and special collections. I am very happy to share this panel with Dr. Fernanda Perrone, Archivist and Head of the Exhibitions Program at Rutgers University Libraries, Erin Wolfe, Digital Archivist of the Dole Archives, Blake Relle, Archives Specialist A at the Louisiana State Archives in Baton Rouge, and Lisa Snider, Senior Accessibility Consultant and Owner of Everything Accessibility.]
Hello everyone, I hope you enjoyed this demonstration of a screen reader introducing our panel. I started out this presentation with this image of two football teams in red and green uniforms. When I first looked at this image in the LA Times, I thought it was just another football picture, but this game made the news in 2015 because it alerted the sports world to issue of colorblindness because viewers weren’t able to distinguish the teams. This is an example of how problems that exist around us might not be always obvious, but for someone with a disability, it can be a huge obstacle.
I first proposed this panel after attending a webinar by the American Alliance of Museums in November featuring a presentation about accessibility at the Museum of Modern Art. A link to their excellent staff training videos on disability awareness and resources is available through this link and QR code. With museums having tactile days, audio loops, and audio components for exhibits, it seemed like they were more familiar with accessibility efforts and less constrained by the materials they worked with, compared to traditionally more textual based collections that I’ve worked with. When I was in library school, I brought up accessibility in my archives class. When faced with a daunting backlog of materials and many other day-to-day strains on staff time and effort, my professor scoffed at the idea. However, these are real obstacles for real people and it has to be addressed as a fundamental right to equal access.

Who here has a QR code scanner on their smart phone? I will be using QR codes to allow people to link more quickly to websites and as Erin will describe in more detail later, QR codes are also used in exhibits to connect with accessible digital content, but it also comes with its own accessibility drawbacks which we will talk about later.
This panel was intended to continue the discussion on the accessibility of archives and special collections accomplished by the Archives Management Round Table and Records Management Round Table Joint Working Group on Accessibility in Archives and Records Management. I encourage you to view their resources and links on the SAA’s webportal which include guides for accommodating staff and researchers with disabilities.
In 2008, the Joint Working Group created a survey to study the archives and records management professionals who have disabilities, identify some of their challenges, and compile solutions and resources. In preparation for this presentation, I created a survey with Google forms and posted to social media sites through facebook and twitter to groups such as the Disability Visibility Project, and the Blind and Low-Vision groups. Unlike the previous survey, which focused on addressing the needs of archives and records management professionals, this survey was targeted to a general population of people with disabilities who may or may not be users of archives or Special Collections. The purpose was to enable respondent’s direct voice in identifying barriers to access and use. Some responses may have come in since I prepared this presentation, the full responses are available through this link and QR code
Since this project was a sole effort, I was limited in my distribution and was very concerned about creating a survey that was brief and respectful. Respondents represented a broad range of people identifying as with disabilities.
I also wanted to hear both from people who do visit archives or special collections, as well as who don’t, because it could provide more perspectives about what barriers potential users are encountering as well as general archives awareness.
I asked if they didn’t would they be willing to share reasons for why not. Wanted to include this question help identify barriers for access. Although this was a small study, it indicated common problems that anyone might encounter, from general awareness, to feeling intimidated in an elite or unwelcome environment, to directly addressing access issues for people who may have a sight disability as one respondent replied that “I don’t have anyone to help me read the documents.”

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<th>Reason</th>
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<td>Don’t know where one is close enough to home</td>
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<td>I just transfer from San Francisco CA to Los Angeles CA so I do not know about archives and collection library.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because I don’t have anyone to help me read the documents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It feels very separate and gatekeeper-ish. Usually they’re on college campuses and you need to show your ID or navigate around physical spaces that may not be accessible to reach the archive/library. For me, I prefer to access archives online.</td>
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My next question was ”If yes – How was your experience visiting a special collections or archives?” The first response is especially poignant: “I only visited them when I could see. I lost my sight when I was 26 in 1986, and since then I’ve assumed the archives would be impossible for me to navigate – both physically and technologically (I use a talking computer to read documents).” THIS is what we want to address and change!

Another respondent expressed the challenge of communicating with a staff member in an environment which is usually very quiet when the respondent appears to be hard of hearing.
“Were you able to find the information you needed on the websites or online resources?” The responses were mixed and with varying levels of detail. One respondent’s answer indicated that it would be helpful to include an accessibility statement for visitors to indicate if the building and parking is accessible and if there are any assistive technology or other resources available. The respondent continued by describing other common confusions common to researchers, from determining whether scholarly credentials were needed, to finding and requesting materials where “line after line of text that swam together” The person described the process of requesting documents as, “overall, a bit obtuse” and noted the jargon involved.
Did you have any positive or negative experiences with exhibits? Would you like to explain?
(7 responses)

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<th>Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Haven't tried accessing any.</td>
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<td>Stopped going to museums because I can't read the labels and information texts. Audio-guides help.</td>
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<td>It was good.</td>
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<td>I have had a positive exhibit when the Royal Ontario Museum hosted an exhibit called ‘Out from Under’ and it was a historical overview of disability through the years.</td>
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<td>As I said, it was thrilling to enter into that part of my father’s life. The negatives: (1) the antechamber where you leave your stuff and watch the introductory video is small and crowded with furniture. I was lucky that I use a fairly small scooter; and (2) the documents arrived in boxes on a large cart. The boxes are heavy and awkward. The ones nearest to and at about the same height as the table weren’t so bad, but the ones that were at an odd angle or had to be lifted or lowered were hard to wrangle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find exhibits easy to interact with</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive for book arts exhibits, I do not think information exhibits work well</td>
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“Did you have any positive or negative experiences with exhibits?” I believe the responses show that exhibits can have a self-selecting audience. Some respondents indicated that they didn’t attempt to go to exhibits because the barriers for their access was too great. As one respondent said, “[I] stopped going to Museums because I can’t read the labels and information texts. Audio guides help” Another respondent described a venue that was too cramped for scooters and the document boxes as being heavy and awkward.
My question about staff brought up generally positive responses, but with one respondent echoing their issue with communication if the staff member isn’t aware of the hearing impairment, and another person expressing disappointment with staff’s response to dyslexia. There needs to be more training in empathy with public service roles, especially a sensitivity for invisible disabilities. At MSU, we have a contact person for any patrons who are needing accessibility accommodations.
In my final open-ended question on ways to improve special collections or archives services, they suggested many points that we will be addressing today: visual aids, transcripts for audio, alt text and captions to describe digital images, and also stressing the importance of staff training for being the primary contact point for improving an experience.

Again, I encourage you to view the most recent results of the survey which will be available later through my posted presentation slides.
Next, I will briefly recap accessibility at Michigan State University. We are fortunate to have a culture of accessibility on campus, which is the result of the coordinated commitment of multiple units on campus, from one of the oldest Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities, IT, Central Purchasing, to inter-campus and Library-wide accessibility working groups. Referring back to the first slide about the football team, since arriving at MSU in September, I was able to view the campus with a fresh eyes to help illuminate obstacles which may not have been so apparent to other members of the library staff. I created reports here on the accessibility of the Library as a Physical Space and Accessible Exhibits, which you are welcome to view.
Here is a picture from our exhibit for the Alfredo Levy Conservatory collection. Having it behind glass, I was very concerned about making sure to bank the angle of documents and descriptions to enable better visibility from a wheel-chair level. I also used a QR code on a sign to link to more accessible digital content on a LibGuide. However, I found from the website statistics that the QR codes were not very utilized, and I struggled with how a QR code could be discoverable for someone who may be blind or low vision to find the code in the first place. Seeking to enable a low budget solution for alternative access, we went to social media to provide digital access in at least that form.

Efforts we are currently implementing include providing alt-text for images on social media and creating short videos which highlight various collections or introduce procedures for utilizing our resources. Twitter has recently since March enabled alt-text of their images. Facebook also recently enabled “automatic alt-text,” which has been praised by many to be a good first step towards accessibility, but often the images are recognized on only a basic level. This image is recognized as “2 items,” thus, it’s helpful to provide greater descriptions in the main text. However, as you will see, screen readers may have even greater issues with navigation and Zoom Text versus Apple’s Voice Over will behave differently as well.
The Zoom text screen reader actually as a default wouldn’t read the picture or the description, only reading the information on the main Facebook page. It’s an ongoing struggle, and also worth engaging in a dialog with the external hosts such as Facebook to continue to advocate for creating accessible content.
With the help of Outreach Librarian Ruth Ann Jones, we also have started to create brief-under three minute long videos which provide audio and visual content with captions. So far, we have used these to create tutorials for researching in Special Collections and to highlight various collections and exhibits. This is in an early phase, but I hope to continue and expand upon this in the future.
Future directions - Exhibits

- Electronic component via QR code or RFID
- Audio components for exhibits
- Tactile exhibits

In the future, we are hoping to continue with accessible content via QR code but in a more predictable location, with tactile strips. Additionally, as we implement a new wayfinding technology Four Winds, we hope to have interactive digital signs with audio components. We are also pursuing tactile exhibits, from printing 3-d artist books and replicas with our Makerspace studio, and to having examples of historic binding materials such as raised bands and samples of vellum. This is a picture of an artist book by Tom Burtonwood featuring braille, raised text, and 3-d images which we printed on MSU Libraries’ 3-d printer.
Future directions

• Considerations for new reading room
• Tablets in the reading room
  • Apps for magnification and text-to-speech
• Contributing to MSU Guide iPhone app or Google Indoor Maps

Thank you for listening to my presentation!

Dr. Lydia Tang
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Looking ahead, in anticipation of MSU Special Collections getting a new reading room on the first floor of the library in the coming years, we have been grateful for the work of the earlier working group in compiling and making available guidelines for physical considerations.

We also are fortunate to be exploring adding tablets to the reading room to be used not only for taking pictures for researcher's personal study, but also to have a variety of magnification software, speech readers, and optical recognition programs to allow printed text to be accessible in multiple formats. Additionally, the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities spearheaded a project called the MSU Guide app currently available for iphone and hopefully soon for android, which will enable greater wayfinding and access for people are blind/low vision on campus. We hope to contribute to this and are also looking into Google Indoor Maps for providing basic wayfinding information at the building level to find entrances, exits, bathrooms, our reading room, and exhibit areas.

Thank you for listening to my presentation! My husband, Jeff, who is legally blind, is here in the audience and would be happy to answer questions or demonstrate his Zoom text and screen reader at the end of this session.
Here are links to additional MSU resources. I also have handouts on web accessibility.

Resources

- Michigan State University Web Accessibility tutorials, resources, and templates
  - [http://webaccess.msu.edu/index.html](http://webaccess.msu.edu/index.html)

- MSU Libraries Accessibility Statement and Assistive Technology Center
  - [https://www.lib.msu.edu/general/accessibility/](https://www.lib.msu.edu/general/accessibility/)

- MSU Special Collections Video Tutorials
  - [https://www.lib.msu.edu/spcvideos/](https://www.lib.msu.edu/spcvideos/)

- MSU Guide App for iPhone