The Convergence of Cultural Heritage  
Practical Experiments and Lessons Learned

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Abstract
While we typically think that the major challenges for digitization and digital preservation are technological, cultural and professional issues often predominate and are more difficult to overcome. Research in the convergence of cultural heritage institutions conducted at Simmons College, Boston, since 2009 reinforces this observation. This research is described, focusing on the Simmons Digital Curriculum Laboratory, digital convergence projects negotiated and completed by faculty and students, and lessons learned. Problems encountered, including concerns about controlling public access, communication difficulties, key personnel at sites being laid off, lack of technical skills, lack of strategic vision, and constraints of organizational hierarchies, are outlined. Recommendations are made.

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1. Introduction
For the past three years, faculty at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College in Boston have been engaged in conducting research and experiments in the digital convergence of cultural heritage institutions. Anticipating that most of our challenges would be technical ones, we were surprised to discover that our major issues were not technical at all but rather cultural, professional
and organizational. In this presentation we bring these issues to you for your consideration and discussion by describing our research and experiments, the obstacles we encountered and the successes we achieved. We conclude with an analysis of the challenges of digital convergence based on our experiences.

Our research was two-pronged. On the one hand it was driven by a pedagogical interest in identifying and experimenting with a theoretical infrastructure that would accommodate digital convergence; on the other hand it was driven by a need to better understand the dichotomy between the current technical ability to achieve digital convergence and the many stumbling blocks and challenges encountered, particularly by small and medium-sized cultural heritage institutions.

Although the disciplines of libraries, archives and museums – philosophically, intellectually and often even physically linked for decades – have long been grappling with the chaotic and complex realities of connecting and converging, today digital technologies can finally turn visions of connecting and converging into reality. But despite the fact that recent research has produced a hefty body of digital convergence theory and that a growing number of major public and private institutions are committing to implementing convergence models, in practice the many obstacles to convergence are often overwhelming. In 2011, the National Library and the National Archives of the Netherlands announced plans to integrate into one organization, thereby following the paths of national libraries and archives in Canada, New Zealand and Ireland. This formal consolidation acknowledges the less formalized truths that library, archival and museum materials have always co-existed in all these domains (although, generally, they have only co-existed rather than merged or, in some cases, even communicated with one another). These institutions are committed to overcoming the many challenges to convergence, but for less highly visible and resourced cultural heritage institutions with far less leverage than these national institutions – though with equally critical public mandates for access – the challenges are formidable and sometimes almost impossible to overcome.

2. Convergence

Much has been written about the convergence of cultural heritage institutions over the past decade. A leading theorist in this area writes: “While the traditions and historical areas of expertise in archives, libraries, and museums may differ, the new challenges facing all collecting cultural institutions are best addressed in concert, in an inter-disciplinary forum that explores multiple solutions and takes advantage of many skills.”¹ Collaboration is an essential element in achieving convergence. Practitioners and theorists alike agree that “incorporating collaboration into the underlying work culture is foundational to realizing that institution’s potential and achieving its mission”.² But while collaboration may be an essential ingredient in the digital convergence recipe, other elements are equally crucial. Not only do these include a strong understanding of the potential of technology and digital curation, but they equally embrace leadership and organizational skills, as well as an appreciation of the theoretical constructs underlying the separate but related disciplines of archives, libraries and museums.

In our research at Simmons College we defined convergence in terms of the institution: a converging cultural heritage institution is one that combines library, archival and museum material, and is working towards a set of standards and best practices that unites traditional theory and operations from

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² Gunther Waibel, Collaboration Contexts: Framing Local, Group and Global Solutions (Dublin OH: OCLC Research, 2010), 4.
each. There are many reasons why libraries, archives and museums are finding the concept of convergence attractive. The potential for single searching across collections, the economic leverage of joint infrastructure investments for both physical and digital content creation as well as digital asset management, working in a common collaborative context, sharing similar organizational concerns, and the opportunity to identify gaps in the collections are just a few of the advantages. An overarching public mandate for seamless access and the potential of added user value through enhancements and new combinations (such as “mashups”) are primary motivators.

The driver for convergence is, we contend, the use of technology for the representation, documentation, archiving, preservation and communication of cultural heritage knowledge. The outcome is the creation of new relationships and new knowledge by bringing digital data sets representing social and cultural activity together in novel ways.

But while libraries, archives and museums share many common concerns, roles and missions, they also come from distinct and different traditions. Not the least of these differences is that of professional education. The education of librarians, archivists and museum professionals is typically undertaken in separate library science, public history or museum studies programs. While each profession has its own established standards in areas of professional practice such as metadata schemas, search and data management tools, policies on access, the differences in organizational and professional culture may also be profound. As these distinctions carry over into careers, they may also become obstacles to crossing disciplinary boundaries.

3. Cultural Heritage Informatics

To ground our experimentation, we sought a theoretical framework and pedagogy that offered students a broad vision of cultural heritage institutions, looking beyond the silos of traditional information practice towards the confluence of a wide variety of data in both virtual and physical forms. We found that theoretical and pedagogical foundation in the concept of cultural heritage informatics. Cultural heritage informatics, a relatively new discipline arising from convergence, emphasizes collecting, managing, supporting, reconciling, merging, and making accessible digital data across a broad spectrum of libraries, archives and museums. It can be particularly applicable and effective when these different entities reside within the same institution, but also surprisingly challenging. Cultural heritage informatics offers an overarching context for the seamless connecting and merging of a wide variety of materials within and across traditional cultural information institutions.

Cultural heritage informatics is a phrase that seems to have struggled over the past two decades to gain currency. It embraces digital convergence, cultural heritage information technology, digital curation and an entire range of practices and theories. The word informatics is increasingly used in combination with other disciplines to express this technology connection as in, for example, health informatics, archeological informatics, social informatics, and community informatics. Jennifer Trant and David Bearman were among the early users of the term, beginning in the early 1990s through their series of conferences, International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meetings (1991-2007) and the ongoing Museums and the Web beginning in 1997. On their Archives and Museum Informatics web site they define informatics as “the interdisciplinary study of information content, representation, technology and
applications, and the methods and strategies by which information is used in organizations, networks, cultures and societies”.

The working definition designed by the Simmons group that has guided their particular set of cultural heritage informatics experiments follows similar lines. It asserts that cultural heritage informatics generally refers to the intersection between computer science and cultural heritage, a partnership between technology and the legacies of the past as found in such cultural heritage institutions as libraries, archives and museums. Cultural heritage informatics focuses on the use of technology for the representation, documentation, archiving, preservation and communication of cultural heritage knowledge.

More specifically, cultural heritage informatics refers both to the study and creation of added cultural value by the linking of disparate digital data sets, stored either locally or remotely according to accepted standards of description, arrangement, and metadata for archives, records management, museums or cultural materials. It encompasses the appraisal of data and data sets for enduring value in the context of archives or cultural heritage, and explores the creation of new relationships and new knowledge by bringing digital data sets representing social and cultural activity together in novel ways. It is also concerned with the policy, social, economic, organizational and legal issues of digital culture and heritage from the perspective of stakeholders such as heritage institutions and other cultural participants. The scope of cultural heritage informatics includes standards, metadata and every phase of the application of information technology, such as data capture/digitization, preservation, information/data processing, reconstruction, visualization, and documentation, as well as the dissemination of the output of these technical processes to cultural heritage communities and the general public.

4. The Research

Since 2009 a research team at Simmons College, including faculty and students, has been working with partners in cultural heritage institutions throughout New England. The goal was two-fold: to design a cultural heritage informatics curriculum for students in the Graduate Library and Information Science program; and to provide experiential learning for the students by working with partners on actual convergence projects. In this way, curriculum combines classroom learning and experimentation in a laboratory setting with practical experience. The team has undertaken three main activities: designing appropriate coursework; constructing a virtual laboratory using open source applications as an experimentation space for digital projects (see http://calliope.simmons.edu/dcl/); and collaborating with six different cultural heritage institutions on digital convergence projects. Conclusions drawn from this collaboration form the basis of this paper.

5. The Digital Curriculum Laboratory

A Digital Curriculum Laboratory (DCL) anchors the entire convergence project. This virtual space provides integrated access to digital content, content management tools, standards and curriculum-based scenarios, and allows experimentation with a wide range of open source applications relevant to digital

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4 We are indebted to our colleagues Terry Plum, Martha Mahard and Michele Cloonan for this extended collaborative definition of cultural heritage informatics.
convergence. Developed by the Simmons faculty and supported by external funding⁵, the DCL facilitates scenario-building, problem-solving, evaluation, and tool utilization by making it possible for students to apply and assess a variety of online archival and preservation procedures and techniques. The DCL was envisioned as an open access space containing a variety of digital content, providing an array of digital asset management systems for describing, preserving and managing this content, offering sets of descriptive, content, structure, and data value standards, and offering an evolving set of instructional learning modules and exercises to prepare students for today’s professional environment in cultural heritage informatics. The DCL was also envisioned as a permanent curriculum tool to facilitate experimentation with digital materials in a variety of venues and contexts. It was expected that students would bring digital issues from our partner sites into the DCL where they could test possible solutions.

6. Our Partners

In selecting institutional partners, we had a wide variety of choices in terms of both size and focus of the institution. Cultural heritage institutions abound in New England, which comprises the six states on the northeast coast of the United States and was the site of the earliest American settlements in the 1600s. People in New England are proud of their heritage and even the smallest town generally boasts a local historical society with a mixture of artifacts, records, books and paintings, often located in a historic house with appropriate gardens and landscaping. The cultural heritage institutions in New England not only offer a laboratory for experiments in cultural heritage informatics, but also pose all the issues and challenges of digital convergence inherent in small (and often struggling) under-resourced institutions. At the same time, they are also the institutions whose relatively hidden collections have the greatest need for access and whose lack of support requires the greatest need for creativity and innovation.

The cultural heritage institutions with whom we collaborated demonstrate a wide variety of aims, activities, scope of collections and technological expertise, and a significant diversity in size. All of them, to varying extents, contained museum, library and archival materials and were actively creating digital assets. Teams of students worked on aspects of creating appropriate digital convergence models that would fit each individual institution. The six institutions we initially partnered with included one public library with a special collection, one historical society, three museums each with a special focus, and one organization that served as an umbrella body for historic houses throughout New England. Each of these organizations was well-established with collections that spanned many decades; each included library, museum, and archival materials that co-existed side-by-side; each generally organized these materials using separate systems; and importantly, each desired to improve access through digital convergence and was involved in creating digital assets.

7. What We Encountered

Three of the projects will be briefly described, with a focus on the sites, the specific digital experiment, the results, and the many and unexpected issues encountered. These included concerns about controlling public access, communication difficulties, key personnel at sites being laid off, lack of necessary

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⁵ In 2009, we received a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission that directly supported the development of a virtual curriculum laboratory. Simultaneously we received an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant to develop a cultural heritage curriculum. A component of this grant supported laboratory development.
technical skills, lack of strategic vision, and constraints imposed by existing and ingrained organizational hierarchies. These led us to recognize the critical importance of understanding the policy, social, economic, organizational, and legal issues of digital culture and heritage from the perspective of stakeholders such as heritage institutions and other cultural participants.

Our initial contention was that it would be technical issues that impeded convergence, especially the difficulty of interoperability among systems and metadata. For example, one of our partners is a library of a large museum, both well-resourced. This library was formed from the amalgamation of two libraries with long histories. We suspected that there would be issues to resolve based on the use of different metadata sets stemming from different library-based systems and also museum systems, and also that there would be difficulties posed by lack of interoperability between museum and library catalog applications. Our suspicions were confirmed, but, in addition and probably of greater significance, was a cultural aspect – the museum doesn’t talk to the library, which it considers as a junior partner, and this stymied any significant action towards convergence.

Our major success story was the collaboration with the Gropius House at Historic New England. Historic New England defines itself as a “museum of cultural history that collects and preserves buildings, landscapes, and objects dating from the seventeenth century to the present and uses them to keep history alive and to help people develop a deeper understanding and enjoyment of New England life and appreciation for its preservation.” Centered in Boston, Historic New England operates thirty-nine historic houses scattered throughout New England. Among these is the Gropius House, built by architect and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius in 1939 as his family home when he moved to Massachusetts to teach architecture at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. The family lived in the house until Gropius’s death in 1969. Historic New England acquired the house and surrounding grounds in 1979. Preserved intact, the Gropius House includes furniture, artwork, books, clothing, and archival materials – all the impedimenta of family life. Gropius and his wife also designed the grounds, and the Japanese Garden and sculpture installations have been maintained as they left them.

In designing and executing a digital convergence project, the student team focused on one room in the house, the bedroom of daughter Ati Gropius. This room contained a wide variety of objects, art work, clothes, and books. By happy coincidence, Ati Gropius Johansen visited Historic New England in Boston while the students were working on their project. They were able to interview her and to incorporate the interview into their web exhibit of the room. Their convergence project involved scanning and describing all materials in the bedroom, linking items to descriptions and creating an online exhibit. Thanks to the interview with Ati, which had audio and video components they were also able to link objects to the interview in a dynamic fashion. The students added their descriptions of the objects to the Historic New England database using that organization’s prescribed metadata schema and, using the applications in the DCL, experimented with finding the best content management system for the objects in the web exhibit. They also experimented with digital mapping of the room within the wider context of the Gropius House. The final exhibit provides a model for Historic New England in working with its other sites. It was featured in their monthly newsletter and will be a permanent part of their web site.

This was a convergence success story for both the students and the site, where the exhibit seamlessly moves through different formats and media to deliver a single integrated information experience. No issues arose from the use of information technology at this site, which has an effective Systems Librarian/Archivist (the very job title illustrates convergence) who is a recent graduate from

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Simmons GSLIS and was very willing to work with our student team. Both the Systems Librarian/Archivist and the Senior Curator the students worked with had agreed on an integrated vision of how their collections should be described, displayed and accessed and Historic New England had the organizational infrastructure and will to implement the vision.

At the other end of the spectrum of success is a less well-resourced institution, a museum of American textiles, costume and material culture that combines museum, archives and library roles around the mission of “telling America’s story” through these materials. In spite of this avowed mission, the museum web site presence is entirely separated from its library, which contains an internationally authoritative collection in a wide variety of formats documenting the textile and clothing industry.

We were aware from the start of our collaboration that information technology issues would be significant. This institution relies heavily on a proprietary application that, for primarily financial reasons, has not been updated for some years. Projects initially identified as appropriate for collaboration included planning the migration of a large collection of digitized images stored on obsolete technology and mapping out the metadata into standardized metadata schema. Other projects included utilizing the DCL to create an Omeka digital exhibit to exemplify how unique objects in the collection could be enhanced and displayed through the versatility of free and open source software.

But these information technology issues, challenging enough, were trumped by economic realities. Major staff layoffs took place while the student team and staff from the museum were finalizing the projects. The few remaining library and archives staff, accustomed to years of financial vagaries, depend on the museum’s board to find a solution but seem not to feel that they have any control of that process. While the staff at the institution were eager to cooperate on a convergence project, the lack of funding and support for the library and archives, and lack of an overall vision for collaboration and convergence were obstacles that goodwill could not overcome. Outdated technology and lack of upgraded systems were challenges for students that could not be offset by a great willingness to help find solutions.

Lying somewhere in between on our success spectrum is a public library with a special collection. Founded in the late nineteenth century, this renowned colonial history collection begins with the first settlements in the 1600s, focusing on the revolutionary events that took place in this region. In particular, the collection boasts a rich collection of primary sources on the literary history of the area, including materials on the transcendentalists and their heirs. The initial convergence project was the linking of a series of fourteen paintings to related holdings within the collection. The students would scan the selected artwork, select an appropriate digital asset management system, after experimenting with several in the DCL, describe the artwork, enter descriptions into the selected system, and finally link these to related library sources, creating navigation between the exhibit and web site.

Although this project ran into technology issues similar to those experienced in several of the other projects, the overarching obstacles were the lack of communication about expectations between the site and the students and the deliberately narrow focus of the institution. For reasons related to their view of the context of the collection, the librarians in the special collection were more interested in attracting users to the physical site than to the virtual site. For this reason, they permitted only a limited amount of information on the web site and restricted linking. Additionally, although the students created a model for the project, they were unable to actually link to the site’s web site due to technical incompatibilities that were not made clear at the time that the project was initiated. The students completed their tasks and created a prototype but were unable to make it into the dynamic web site they had envisioned. Although the perspective and expectations of the site were perfectly legitimate in terms of the collections, they had not been sufficiently communicated to the students. While a more limited convergence project could have
been designed to meet the needs of this site, more discussion and analysis as well as a better articulation of the overall vision would have helped to make this project more successful.

8. Lessons

These three examples illustrate that, although many of the convergence problems centered on technical issues, importantly the larger, overarching obstacles were not technical. Rather, they stemmed from the organizational culture at the sites, from competing interests between creators and preservers and between access and preservation philosophies. The critical non-technical factors we identified are: mismatch between expectations of partner sites on the one hand, and student teams and faculty on the other; inadequate communication; and insufficiently defined expectations. Specific examples of the problems encountered were: concerns about controlling public access; communication difficulties between students and site staff; key personnel at sites being laid off; lack of necessary technical skills at the sites; lack of strategic vision in some institutions; and constraints imposed by existing and ingrained organizational hierarchies.

It is worth commenting on some of the technical issues, although they are not the primary focus of this presentation. We were surprised by the lack of technical expertise at many of the sites. At one site, for example, the institution’s accountant handled the information technology operation, apparently as an act of goodwill, providing trouble-shooting measures and occasional support. We observed a lack of understanding of and interest in open source software, some of which (Omeka, for example) is well supported and very effective. Many sites remained wedded to outdated software, posing a significant challenge not only to site staff but also to the students. File-naming conventions were generally haphazard and where they did exist were not adhered to. One site preferred HTML over Encoded Archival Description (EAD), which uses XML, for its finding aids, impairing future interoperability for the institution.

The larger overarching obstacles we encountered included the organizational culture at the sites. Constraints were imposed by existing and ingrained organizational hierarchies. There were few integrated data systems, and at the same time a resistance to change. This was exemplified at one site where the lack of collaboration between the constituent parts of the institution resulted in significant impediments to convergence and efficiency. Digital images were created and managed in at least four different sections, each of which used different workflows, file-naming conventions, metadata standards, hardware and software. Although the need was recognized to standardize and centralize its disparate and disorganized image collections for more functional use, especially by the staff, this had not translated into any action. As a consequence issues such as difficulties when trying to locate a digital image file wasted staff time because of the need to search multiple systems; effort was duplicated in redigitizing images that had already been digitized; and, because there was no institution-wide oversight on digitizing policy and workflow documentation, collection material was digitized to inadequate standards.

Another larger, overarching obstacle we encountered was the competing interests between creators and preservers, and between access and preservation philosophies. One site digitized collection materials and made them available primarily to encourage use of the physical collections and staff expertise. The view was that this collection serves as the heart of the historical community of the town and is not for external users; the interest and needs of the local community were of primary importance to the institution and local materials should be interpreted locally.
The critical non-technical factors identified are worth dwelling on. One illustration of the mismatch between expectations of partner sites on the one hand, and student teams and faculty on the other, was the inability of the technical infrastructure at several of the sites to support the scope of the proposed solutions. The lack of technology resources and expertise at the sites often meant that there was a knowledge gap, and it became apparent that in some instances the questions raised during collaboration with the partners were not understood. Although Simmons faculty attempted to clearly define expectations with all partner sites well before the students participated, differences in expectations persisted. Criteria for selecting sites were established at an early stage in this research. The sites needed to be physically accessible to students; to combine library, archival and museum materials in some way; to be interested in pursuing digital convergence of their materials; and to be actively creating digital assets. We held a group meeting of site staff, faculty made initial site visits where student projects were identified, students made site visits with faculty, then student teams worked independently at the sites and also off-site. This was, apparently, not sufficient to clearly define expectations.

The mismatch of expectations was based in part on inadequate communication, the second critical non-technical factor we identified. This applies to communication between sites and students as well as internal communications within the sites. It is also worth noting that other factors such as expectations changing during the project also contributed to inadequate communication. Although discussions about technology and infrastructure were held with the partner sites at the time of the partner agreements, inconsistencies and gaps did not become apparent until after the students began working at the sites. One site commented that students appeared to be locked into the technology they know rather than what is needed by the site (although we observe that this comment also applies in the other direction) and that students don’t have enough experience to explain what they want to do. At another site it quickly became apparent that one section of that site had not communicated what it was doing to another section, causing problems for students who needed to work with both sections to complete the project as initially defined. Other examples of inadequate communication within sites are the lack of documentation about procedures; for instance, one site had no documentation about the metadata standards it used, or about the servers available and what should be stored on each of them.

The third critical non-technical factor we identified was that expectations were not defined with sufficient clarity. This is related in part to the second factor identified, inadequate communication. Although discussions about technology and infrastructure were held with the partner sites at the time of the partner agreements, the inconsistencies and gaps did not become apparent until after the students began working at the sites. This was hampered because most sites did not have a workable vision that included convergence.

9. Recommendations Arising from the Lessons

What can be learned from these lessons? Although they are to some extent generic lessons that can apply to all endeavors, aspects of them that are specific to digital converged environments can be identified.

The overriding lesson from our cultural heritage informatics collaboration with partner sites is that developing clear expectations is crucial. This takes a lot of time, can be frustrating, and requires excellent communication on both sides. In the most successful project with the Gropius House, the staff at Historic New England was very willing to commit to significant time involvement. This meant that expectations were articulated clearly and thoroughly and that staff were available for consultation when students encountered problems. Another clear lesson is that sites need to be better aware of what is needed to
function effectively in the digital environment, in terms of both technical and general requirements. As noted, we frequently observed that the understanding of information technology requirements and possibilities was minimal, resulting in unwillingness to consider new applications, different workflows, or even an upgrade of installed applications. Also as noted, most sites did not have a workable vision that included convergence. From these lessons we can identify some recommendations for similar projects in the future.

The first recommendation is to work with sites to develop their understanding of what is required to function effectively in a converging digital environment and to assist them in developing their abilities to function effectively. This is a significant issue, of course, requiring ongoing action from educators, professional associations, and, indeed, learning by all professionals. Any future collaboration in this area will probably need to build in an educational component.

The second recommendation is to assist sites to develop clear and workable visions of convergence and of what they are aiming to do in a digital environment. This is likely to involve working with sites to identify goals that are consistent with their business use cases, develop strategies consistent with these goals, identify issues either favoring or impeding the implementation of these goals and their sustainability, recommend behavioral as well as structural modifications to improve end-user interaction, recommend systems that support the strategies defined, and suggest workflows that maintain consistent value and integrity for digital content. We will incorporate these processes into the Simmons curriculum in a new course being developed for the Cultural Heritage Curriculum, Digital Asset Management for Libraries, Archives and Museums (DAM for LAMS).

The third recommendation is to be very clear about expectations when negotiating specific projects with sites. We expect to develop a scope-of-work form to assist us in negotiating expectations at the start of the project, noting in detail what we want, what we will use, and what we need.

One common element in all of our collaborations was the use of the DCL, developed as part of this research (http://calliope.simmons.edu/dcl/) and described earlier in this paper. It was fully used by students to investigate possible applications that could be used at the partner sites. As a result of presentations and publications the DCL is currently of interest to an increasingly wide range of professionals. It is designed to be used as a sandbox in which to test applications and software tools for their applicability to a local institution. We suggest that it is a model worth investigating by local consortiums to build and use as a local tool for testing appropriate technical solutions.

10. Conclusion

The Call for Papers for this conference notes specifically that “digital continuity requires meeting technological, legal, economic, political and cultural challenges” and makes explicit some of the cultural and professional challenges: “lack of cooperation among Information Technology, legal, archival, library, museum and other professionals or institutions; organizational and institutional culture; competing interests between creators and preservers and between access and preservation philosophies, evolving skill sets, cultural sensitivity”. We encountered most of these. Despite what we initially considered to be adequate preliminary planning (environmental scans, site visits, profiling, identifying practicum projects), the implementation of our planning was not entirely successful. The real issues of convergence and digital continuity go beyond translating theory into practice, but also, and probably more significantly, call for the recognition and negotiation of the myriad issues and concerns of the cultural heritage institutions.
themselves. Lack of resources, compartmentalized and siloed mindsets, territoriality, are but a few of these issues and concerns.

References


