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How University Libraries Can Improve Access and Preserve Collections

Some university libraries are home to archives of more than 15 million volumes. Today, these institutions are taking steps to preserve those collections in digital formats. They're also investing in making their assets accessible to people with disabilities.

Although preserving and updating these massive collections might seem daunting to some, upgrading archives is faster and easier than ever before. Automatic Sync Technologies (AST) has been working hand-in-hand with educational and cultural institutions for 18 years to accelerate their accessibility efforts.

Here are compelling reasons why libraries can no longer afford to hesitate. They must begin upgrading their collections to both prevent loss and make for savvier, digital formats that also fuel greater access for everyone.

The ravages of time and vinegar syndrome

Archives around the world are at risk. Time is not kind to analog recordings. Libraries need to start taking steps to prevent their archives from deteriorating and being lost forever.

Video assets

Films contain chemicals that break down over time, causing these collections to self-destruct. As the chemicals age, they emit a vinegary smell, which earned this dreaded condition its name, “vinegar syndrome.” Not only can this issue impact videos, but microfilm and negatives may also break down because of the chemicals they contain.



Books and paper

Pages in books may become brittle, fade and suffer tears. Maps, scrolls and other paper items can face similar wear and destruction as time passes.



Audio recordings

Analog audio recordings, such as archives of oral histories, also degrade. When people play or copy vinyl records and cassette tapes, the sound quality slowly declines.

Digitization is the key to preserving all of these materials before it's too late. Unfortunately, libraries continue to suffer losses before they take steps to protect their archives.

Did you know?



Thanks to decay, about 75% of silent films haven't survived. Sadly, the losses include major productions from Hollywood's early years, like *The Great Gatsby*, which no longer exist in their complete forms. However, experts hope that some versions may still be hiding out in archives around the world.¹

¹ [Majority of American silent films lost to decay](#)

Planning to protect archives from emergencies

Time isn't the only thing that destroys library collections. In 2021, the University of Cape Town's library caught on fire. The blaze damaged much of the building and reduced many of its assets to ash. Losses included rare books, original artworks, films, photographs and records. Members of the University's community expressed their devastation as they assessed which priceless artifacts from African history were housed among the library's worst-hit areas. ²

History is full of other examples of libraries lost in war times and natural disasters. Luckily, digitization is helping cultural institutions preserve their collections and prevent destruction in the event of an unexpected fire, flood or another sudden disaster.

When it comes to protecting priceless collections from sudden emergencies, the best time to start is now.

Did you know?



The most legendary lost library in the world - the Ancient Library of Alexandria, served as inspiration for the modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Today, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a digital hub with multiple ongoing preservation projects aimed at protecting history from the unexpected.³

Planning to protect archives from emergencies

Digitization isn't just making it possible to better preserve collections, it's also allowing more people to enjoy them. Accessibility and inclusivity are higher priorities today than they were decades ago. Modern solutions can support these accessibility efforts.

University libraries that are digitizing their collections can include accessibility features in their archival materials.

Here are a few ways to extend access to library collections:



Captions

Captions are a critical accessibility tool for people who are Deaf and hard of hearing. Adding them to video content in libraries is essential to include these audience members. Additionally, many individuals without hearing loss simply prefer to watch videos silently or with the captions as an additional aid. They'll be thankful for the opportunity to also consume content in different ways. Thanks to built-in integrations with video platforms, adding accurate captions to videos with AST is quick and straightforward.



Transcriptions

It's possible to make audio-only files accessible by offering word-for-word transcripts of the content. AST's searchable transcripts are especially useful for library research. Offering them for video content helps people locate videos and reference the specific parts of videos they're looking for more easily within extensive library collections.



Audio description

Audio description delivers access to people who are blind or have low vision so that they can understand the content and context of the visual aspect of the video. In videos with audio description, a speaker provides detailed descriptions of the events, scenery, people and other visual cues to extend an equitable experience to anyone who can't see the images. AST developed its audio description with a pioneer in the field to support an effective tool that offers "extended audio description." This functionality pauses the video for more in-depth descriptions to offer a smoother experience.

By creating accessible collections, university libraries can further their stewardship and knowledge-sharing missions. AST is able to handle bulk uploads and accommodate any scale needed so that even libraries with the largest collections can quickly address accessibility for their audio and video archives.

Did you know?



The [Library of Congress](#) is home to the world's largest archive. The LoC partnered with AST to ensure that it's making its massive collection accessible to people with disabilities.

Did you know?



In 1994, libraries spent nearly \$2.5 million on primarily print journal subscriptions. Today, they spend almost \$6.2 million on digital journal subscriptions, which means their digital archives are [rapidly growing](#).

Supporting global audiences

In addition to protecting assets, digitizing them means people will be able to access them from anywhere in the world. This feature is especially useful for today's professionals, academics and students, many of whom may be learning or researching virtually. Digitization means greater access to materials they currently can't review without onsite visits.

Becoming a researcher's haven

Digital assets can also support researchers by offering time-saving searchability features. When it comes to video and audio content, searchable transcripts are often the best way to make archives accessible to search engines.

Further, while university libraries need to adhere to [accessibility regulations](#) outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, top institutions are looking beyond the letter of the law. Today's leaders are proactively offering inclusivity on their campuses. As an essential resource for students and faculty, university libraries should be at the forefront, promoting a welcoming and accessible environment for everyone.