

A young man with glasses and a backpack is interacting with a large digital display in a modern setting. The background is a blurred interior space with warm lighting. The image is framed by a purple background with a yellow triangle pointing down and a blue triangle pointing up.

# AST

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## eBook: Digitizing the Museum and Library Experience

*Accessibility & inclusion tactics to reach diverse audiences*

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## Introduction

Digitization isn't new for cultural institutions, but the need to adapt to a greater online presence is accelerating. Leaders at today's museums and libraries who are embracing this shift are finding new ways to interact with their audiences and extend their communities beyond their physical locations. Additionally, as the cultural sector evolves to accommodate online spaces, it's also implementing technology that improves accessibility and inclusivity in the process.

Automatic Sync Technologies (AST) [hosted a live event](#) to explore these new engagement opportunities and showcase the inspirational work being done at institutions that have embraced digitization like **The Phillips Collection** and **The National Constitution Center**.

While today's current digital-first and accessibility initiatives may have been unimaginable just a few short decades ago, the effort to create inclusive cultural experiences continues to be a work in progress.

This eBook provides historical background for the digitization taking place, along with the next steps that professionals at museums and libraries can consider to better accommodate diverse audience needs. With modern technology and access to a professional community of captioners and transcribers like AST's, the cultural field has an opportunity to pave the way for a more inclusive future.

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## Contributors:



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This eBook serves as a guide for museum and library professionals on how to embrace an increasingly digital world. Uncover exciting examples and inspiration from institutions that are modernizing their experiences and employing effective technologies to expand their audiences and increase their inclusivity practices.

## eBook Insights & Sources

Automatic Sync Technologies organized a live virtual event, [Digitizing the Museum and Library Experience](#), for thought leaders in the cultural sector. AST gathered insights from the live event featuring four speakers and adapted them into this eBook.

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## Why Museum Digitization and Inclusion are Topics of the Moment



**Jenna Winterle Kehres**

Director of Learning & Engagement,  
National Constitution Center

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*As the National Constitution Center’s Director of Learning and Engagement, Jenna Winterle Kehres shared her inside knowledge about the digitization and inclusion trends that recently impacted museums.*

“We’re having the [digitization] conversation now because of events of recent years in the pandemic, people being stuck at home, not being able to get to museums, so we’ve had to make sure that all of these things were accessible,” she said. “But it’s not that it’s more important now. It’s just that we’ve realized how important” digital experiences are.

Specifically, the pandemic forced cultural institutions to expand their online offerings and develop creative ways to engage with the public. Initiatives aimed at updating archives became more pressing, and museum events moved to online spaces where curators and other professionals promoted their collections through webinars. Winterle Kehres said that timing was key in shaping the shift to online cultural experiences.

“Luckily we have the technology to do it well and make it happen... The pandemic gave us that push to utilize these technologies to do something that has always been important,” she said.

Darci Vanderhoff, the Chief Information Officer for the Phillips Collection, agreed and explained that digitization “used to be a much more expensive and cumbersome process.”

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Verbit’s John Suau pointed out another concern he’s witnessed among many institutions. Museums and libraries invested heavily in audio and video resources, but those formats do not last forever. Even in cold-storage environments, film has a shelf-life.

Suau stated that many of “these collections are now reaching an at-risk state that they will be lost forever.”

Fortunately, while digitization can prevent losses, it also offers a chance to update content so that it’s available to wider audiences. For instance, AST is working to add captioning and audio description to collections as institutions work to preserve their assets in digital formats.

According to Suau, “in that process of digitizing, we want to make those collections accessible and inclusive. The captioning, the audio description is a natural part for a lot of these institutions that are going through the process.”

Armed with both the motive and means to dive into a digital future, Vanderhoff and Winterle Kehres worked with their museums to create engaging and inclusive experiences that accommodate audiences near and far while preserving their valuable collections.

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## Digitization at the Phillips Collection



### **Darci Vanderhoff**

Chief Information Officer,  
The Phillips Collection

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[The Phillips Collection](#) is a small modern art museum in Washington D.C. and home to a collection of about 5,000 artworks and artifacts. Its extensive archives also include interesting and unusual assets, such as a handwritten letter to the Collection's founder from Georgia O'Keeffe.

Vanderhoff witnessed the evolution of digitization efforts at the museum and worked to meet the growing need to preserve cultural assets in digital formats. When the Phillips Collection began digitizing its collection, the staff had to collect colored transparencies that they shipped to California to a company that scanned them and sent them back on CDs. That process proved costly and arduous.

Currently, the museum can digitize its archives much more efficiently using its own technology or by hiring a photographer who creates digital copies on site. One of the most significant benefits in the last decade is that quality cameras and scanners are no longer prohibitively expensive, even for smaller institutions. As a result, digitization is far more attainable.

Eventually, the Collection received an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant that covers costs related to digitizing the entire archival collection. Now, after nearly two decades, the process is 95% complete. However, Vanderhoff points out that there is always more to do when it comes to digitization and accessibility.

For example, the museum began creating its own videos and audio tours in 2007, sparking a great demand for captioning and audio description services. Digitization and tools that make digital art more accessible will only grow in importance as museums craft increasingly interactive and innovative experiences.

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## Digitization Programs at the National Constitution Center

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According to Winterle Kehres, [The National Constitution Center](#) had an advantage when it came to digitization because it opened “in a very digital age and so the museum has a lot of video content, a lot of touchscreen interactives.”

For instance, the Center has long used iPads to display accessibility solutions, such as captions and audio descriptions, for its in-person experiences. Unlike older institutions, the Center had these tools at its disposal when building its exhibits, displays and events.

However, the highly interactive and engaging exhibits it hosts in its theater proved overwhelming for some audience members. Therefore, the Center started holding sensory-friendly days where these individuals could enjoy the collection and learn in a more comfortable environment. These efforts illustrate the Center’s commitment to inclusivity.

As a modern institution, leaders at the Center knew they needed a robust digital presence and were steadily increasing their online offerings. However, in 2020, the Center had no choice but to accelerate its digitization and translate its exhibits into online content.

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## Adapting in a Crisis



### Jenna Winterle Kehres

Director of Learning & Engagement,  
National Constitution Center

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*Although the Center embraced technology, it faced some challenges moving to digital spaces. Winterle Kehres wondered, “how do you create this very immersive experience at the museum online?”*

When the pandemic shuttered physical museums across the country, the need for the Center to adapt became more pressing. For 10 years, the museum had been posting videos, and it had been holding live events for one year. Still, without the ability to host in-person tours of its educational collection, the Center’s online activities “exploded.” The museum began posting more videos and holding five live online classes every week. The rapid rise in activities online meant the Center needed a fast, efficient captioning solution.

Currently, the Center is open to physical visits but continues to hold around three weekly online events.

According to Winterle Keales, the online events offer a different but equally valuable experience and give staff members some unique opportunities to connect with people who want to know more about the US Constitution. One benefit is that the staff “could get people up closer to those artifacts that they might not have gotten as close to if they had visited because it’s behind glass.”

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Another significant plus to the online experiences was that students had “a lot more time devoted to one-on-one interaction with our staff in the virtual world because if we were seeing thousands of visitors a day, our staff can only interact with so many of them. But if one member of our staff is completely devoted to an online Zoom tour of an exhibit, then they can really answer all those questions and interact with the students and get that really great one-on-one experience.”

Winterle Keales was quick to point out that visiting the museum in person is also a wonderful experience. Connecting online and in-person are “different experiences, but it doesn’t mean that one is less than the other.”

The innovative exhibits and events at museums like The Constitution Center are more impressive because of the relatively short history of captioning and other accessibility solutions.

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## Exploring The Evolution of Video Accessibility

*The history of captioning highlights how rapidly accessibility expectations and capabilities have evolved. Here are several essential milestones to be aware of on the journey to more accessible media.*

### The 1970s



The first captioned program on television in the US was The French Chef with Julia Child. An image from that 1972 program shows large captions in the middle of the screen. Those watching who didn't want the captions were out of luck as they were burned into the film following a costly, several-day-long process.

A short while later, World News Tonight became the first news program with captions. Friday broadcasts were repurposed with captions for Sunday on a PBS station so that viewers who were Deaf or hard of hearing could see the two-day-old news. Amazingly, that was the first time anyone who was Deaf or hard of hearing had access to the news.

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## The 1980s



By the 1980s, The Wonderful World of Disney began offering closed-captioning that viewers could turn on and off. However, those who wished to use the service had to request a special decoder box. To acquire that piece of equipment, people had to apply through the Department of Education.

## The 1990s



In 1990, laws made it mandatory for every television to have a decoder box and captioning capabilities. During this time, only certain programs had the option of captions.

## The 2000s



In 2006, laws finally made it mandatory for all television programs to have optional captions. Advocates for captions became excited that they could caption everything on television. Of course, at that same time, the internet came along and presented new questions about video and audio accessibility.

Rules for the internet and online videos weren't clear, and even streaming services like Netflix did not initially offer captions on all of its content. The National Association of the Deaf filed a lawsuit against Netflix for its lack of accessibility. The NAD prevailed, setting the stage for captions on other streaming platforms like Hulu and Amazon.

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## Today

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YouTube videos and other online content now often include captions. Many individuals producing videos now understand that the benefits of accessibility extend beyond those for people who are Deaf and hard of hearing. In fact, [75% of individuals](#) report they consume video most frequently on their mobile devices and 92% of individuals are viewing without sound, making it more difficult to get messages across without captions. These individuals often use captions to stream as a matter of preference.

The pandemic likely sparked the next jump in accessibility by pushing libraries, museums, businesses, schools and others to adapt to a digital existence that offered more inclusive experiences. The next step in a successful trajectory in content accessibility is projected to be adding audio description to content to effectively include individuals who are blind or have low vision.

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## Audio Description: Accessibility's Next Big Thing

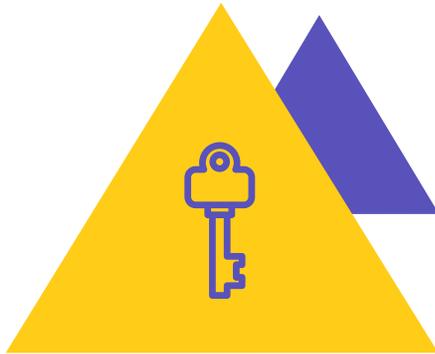
While captioning helps accommodate viewers who are Deaf and hard of hearing, making content and video accessible for people who are blind or low vision involves audio description. Heather York of VITAC said she believes that audio description is the next service that producers will make widely available on video content.

Audio description involves a voiceover that offers a detailed description of imagery to give a more complete and equitable experience for people who are blind. York stated that VITAC offered this service for the Oscars, where they described “the dresses and the musicians, then the awards” and what people were doing during the event. Museums that start using audio description to improve access to their online content can earn a place as pioneers of inclusive cultural experiences.



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## Key Takeaways



Digitization is critical for cultural institutions. It preserves collections and makes resources accessible to broader audiences. While the last few years served as a crash course in digitization and how to make online environments more accessible, it prompted significant progress within the cultural sector.

Museums are hosting more online events, and many are embracing their digital spaces as a new way to serve and connect with their communities. However, as leaders at cultural institutions work to build their digital collections, archives and experiences, they'll also need to incorporate accessibility at every level to remain compliant, but they'll also reach greater audiences and project an atmosphere of inclusivity in the process.

The institutions that do this best and search for innovative ways to go beyond required accommodations will help foster the next era of inclusive cultural experiences.

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AST serves as an essential partner in driving inclusivity within the cultural sector by providing accessibility solutions that support museums, libraries and other institutions. [Contact us](#) to learn more about how our captioning, transcription, translation and audio description solutions can help your institution create more inclusive experiences online and in person.