Open roundtable discussion
Technology in the archive
May 28, 2022, Saturday, 9:00AM -10:15AM

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Description: This panel proposes to discuss the ways innovations in technology and the changing attitudes of institutions towards technology in the archive has shaped the experiences of researchers in the reading room. From shifting policies towards digital cameras and phones, to the pressures of data collection, to the availability or permissibility of hand-held black lights, light sheets, or other viewing devices, archives and libraries are rethinking their relationship to technology. I'd love to hear from others about their experiences with technology in the library and how their research has changed because of it.

Discussion questions and topics

For our discussion, I want to consider both physical tools and devices and library policies related to them, and the related use of software in rare book and archival settings. Changes in policies that allow for greater data gathering or different types of data acquisition often require adjustments to research practices.

Most Reading Room policies that mention tools and technology are centered around the most common activities: photography and note-taking. The simplest photography policies (now far less restrictive than only a decade ago) state that you may use a digital camera to take photos for personal reference, but you may not use flash or a tripod. Some institutions add further restrictions: you may not use additional lighting, camera stabilization devices, templates, or other special photographic equipment, or stand on furniture (we can all picture what caused that restriction). Many of these restrictions point to the fact that some researchers come to take *a lot of photos* and want to do so as professionally and reliably as possible.

Simultaneously, funds for research travel have dropped and the challenges of travel in a global pandemic have mounted. Time in the archive has always been precious, but how do tech policies and training in managing the resulting data affect research?

Other, less common tools are often necessary in archival research. Libraries may have both high and low tech available to borrow or which they permit researchers to use: whether that's magnifiers, rulers, black lights, light sheets, or document cameras for remote visits. Other specialized tools may be allowed after consultation with the appropriate librarians: digital microscopes, optical collators, or (incredibly rarely) scientific instruments like a microCT scanner. How does the *lack* of advertised policies about these types of tools affect scholars planning research trips?

Research Methods
- How has digital photography affected your research style?
- How do you store, organize, and reference large numbers of photos? Has it changed over the years?
- What kind of software do you use for your research, and did you receive any training in data management during your graduate career? Or after?
- What device or tool is most useful for your research? What was unexpectedly useful?

- In what ways are institutional policies about permitted tech in dialog with other issues, such as lighting and environment, or policies for "publishing quality" images?

Policies and Permissibility
- Fairly recently many institutions did not allow personal digital photography. What other changes might be coming to research tools?
- What soft skills do new researchers (or researchers new to a specific archive) need to develop to take advantage of their time in the archive?
- What innovations have come about thanks to the disruption of COVID?