

Investing in Project Maintenance: Auditing the Digital Transgender Archive

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Abstract

In this case study of the Digital Transgender Archive, www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net, the authors discuss the results of a yearlong audit of the project. While scholarship in the field has focused on both the startup and sustainability stages of DH project lifecycles, far less attention has been paid to fostering healthy project growth and self-evaluation during the maintenance stage. After discussing the motivations for our audit and the methods we employ, this article offers five key observations and summarizes our responses to them. Our hope is that other DH project teams will find that some of these observations are applicable to their work and will then benefit from the responses we developed.

Archival materials related to the experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming people are often difficult to locate due to the relative scarcity of these materials and the access barriers presented by brick-and-mortar archives (e.g., geographic, financial, environmental, intellectual) [Page 2017] [Rawson 2009]. The global pandemic exacerbated such barriers, causing in-person research to be temporarily suspended and, as of this writing, continually disrupted. Digital access is therefore more important now than ever. 1

The Digital Transgender Archive (DTA) is a free online collection of trans-related primary source historical materials and information on undigitized archival collections held throughout the world. The goal of the project is to leverage an open-access digital archive to mitigate barriers to research on transgender and gender-nonconforming people. When the DTA moved institutions in mid-2020, we chose this natural lull to conduct the project's first audit. Our aim was to thoroughly examine every aspect of the project to identify our strengths and areas for growth while charting a course for continued development and vibrancy into the future. In preparation for this audit, we searched for published models, examples, or theorizations of auditing a digital project, but we found little scholarship to guide our work. To contribute to this area, this article presents a project report that shares the findings of our yearlong audit of the DTA. We begin with an introduction to the DTA alongside a discussion of existing scholarship on Digital Humanities project lifecycles and evaluative procedures. We then highlight five key observations that the audit revealed and how we addressed (or plan to address) those observations. In using this observation/response structure, we offer readers the distilled results of our audit in a format that we hope will be easy to apply to other Digital Humanities (DH) projects. 2

DH projects generally move through fairly predictable cycles, often including startup, dissemination, maintenance, and sustainability (or abandonment) stages. Given that cultural and institutional pressures guide digital humanities scholars towards innovation [Maron and Pickle 2014], it is unsurprising that there is an abundance of scholarship, resources, and workshops designed to aid digital humanists at the planning and inception stages of a project's life, leading some to suggest that DH scholars "specialize in imagining and launching digital projects" [Rockwell et al., 2014]. On the opposite end of the project lifecycle are well-known concerns about the problem of orphaned projects left to wither on the vine [Meneses and Furuta 2019] [Miller and Taylor-Poleskey 2020] [Smithies et al. 2019]. Projects have met more successful 3

ends when transitioned into being preserved as digital archives [Carlin 2018]. Of course maintaining an ongoing project exists as an alternative to ending or abandoning projects. As an archive recording trans histories which remain ongoing and often inaccessible except through the DTA's interventions, we are committed to maintaining and developing the DTA.

Like many DH projects, the startup phase of the DTA, from approximately 2013 to 2018, was a period of feverish growth. Following a model that will be familiar to readers, the DTA is a collaborative online aggregator of historical materials that are contributed by a range of cultural heritage institutions. Boosted by the support of a Digital Innovation grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, the DTA initially launched in January of 2016 while Rawson was a faculty member at the College of the Holy Cross. For the next several years, Rawson worked to build the collection with a dynamic team of undergraduate students and, when funding allowed, Digital Archivist Nicole Tantum. Software developer Steven Anderson, an external consultant funded through small internal grants, has also been key to our success as he is responsible for both the preliminary development and continued maintenance of the site. During this initial growth stage, we focused on deepening our collaborative networks and implementing a functional database that would have sufficient resources to attract researchers.

As we invested more time and resources into the project, our collaborative network expanded and the size of our collections grew. As of January 2022, we have 70 contributors from eight countries (Brazil, Canada, England, Ireland, Norway, Spain, South Africa, United States). These collaborators represent a range of cultural institutions—from grassroots archives and historical societies to university and public libraries—and most are primarily brick-and-mortar organizations. We currently have approximately 8,800 items available on our site, a small percentage of which were directly donated to the project and are not available for researchers to access in physical archives. The project's primary purpose is to increase the accessibility of trans history. We accomplish this through our centralized database of primary source materials and our efforts to identify and include a wide range of materials fitting under a capacious banner of pre-2000, non-normative gender practices. In other words, our collections are not only focused on individuals who identify as transgender; instead, we include documentations of any experiences relating to transgressions of gender norms (in relation to particular cultural and historical contexts).

With our expanding collaborations and content, we became increasingly aware of the responsibilities involved in maintaining this important resource. We attuned ourselves to conversations in DH about orphaned projects and project sustainability, though we noted the lack of consensus among digital humanists as to what sustainability means exactly [Fenlon 2020]. Within the unique challenges of the digital ecosystem, sustainability may involve “continuity of funding, data preservation (including choice of standards and longevity of data) and the need for flexibility in order to change business models,” particularly as digital platforms transform or become obsolete [Zorich 2003]. Thus, building a sustainable project can mean maintaining an organization or institution with evolving goals beyond the initial project, preserving data and metadata internally for continued access and (inter)operability, or transferring the project to the community so it can be adapted to stakeholders' evolving needs [Edmond and Morselli 2020]. Yet, according to [Edmond and Morselli 2020], sustainable DH projects are often expected to be accessible to users long-term “without further requirement of investment or resources from the original funder of the work.” This model of sustainability centers around ongoing access without considering growth and responsiveness to shifting contexts. As a result, recommendations for stagnating long-term projects typically include renewed dissemination efforts and interdepartmental collaboration to increase visibility [Maron and Pickle 2014].

While we found these discussions of the startup and sustainability stages of DH project lifecycles to be quite helpful, we also observed that the maintenance stage has received considerably less attention, perhaps because it is the least glamorous part of any DH project. As Ashley Reed notes, there remain many opportunities to discuss how to maintain a DH project and keep it healthy and thriving [Reed 2014]. In order to prevent project decay, a robust approach to the management and continuation of projects can helpfully supplement attention to the startup and sustainability stages. However, long-term collaborative projects may not always document or publish the critical maintenance work they undertake after the first stage of dissemination. Therefore, we find ourselves in agreement with Edin Tabak that DH must better attend to issues of project management and, moreover, develop models and principles specifically suited toward our field [Tabak 2017]. Attending to these issues is particularly important because DH approaches change not

only the ways scholars disseminate information, but also the ways “they work, the tools they build, the disciplines they connect to” [Edmond and Morselli 2020].

With respect to the DTA, as we focused on developing and launching the platform and meeting grant deliverables, we had little time to evaluate the project as it emerged. Many of the DTA’s features, policies, and internal documents had not been reviewed since the first few years of our startup phase. In some cases, policies that had become integral to the project over the years had never been formally recorded. The majority of the DTA’s materials have been processed by revolving teams of undergraduate students, making it difficult to maintain consistent practices. These issues were exacerbated by the DTA’s move to Northeastern in fall 2020 and the complexities of working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, as our previous model for workflow depended on a physical lab space in which new team members were trained by veteran ones. Because crucial process-based work went undocumented, it also could not be critiqued or modeled by community stakeholders or fellow DH practitioners, which is a noted problem in the field [Edmond and Morselli 2020]. Similarly, the movement from a physical lab space to a digital environment made processing materials a less collaborative and efficient experience, resulting in metadata that required additional review before it could be made public and demonstrating why project workflow must be sustainable across changes in platform [Sheffield 2020].

When Rawson began a new position at Northeastern University (NU) in the fall of 2020, the move presented an ideal opportunity to hit pause on expanding the project and instead conduct a robust audit in order to adapt to a new institutional environment. The audit was also well-timed from a project development standpoint because the DTA had settled into collections development without conducting a thorough evaluation of our site, our holdings, or our planned growth. In order to move toward future grants and new collaborations with purpose and intention, it was important to fully and candidly consider where we stand now.

We understand audits as comprehensive and evaluative analyses of data collected on a given project to gauge efficacy. Audits are common across many realms, and can be particularly useful for digital humanists seeking to appraise a project’s success and plan for future development. In auditing the DTA, we evaluated the site’s goals and the degree to which it accomplishes those goals while also developing concrete strategies for growth. Most importantly, we sought to ensure the DTA was adequately serving its mission of making trans history accessible and identified ways to better serve that mission. To conduct the audit, Rawson was able to enlist two NU Ph.D. students—co-authors Eamon Schlotterback and Cailin Roles—who led the audit as part of their 10-hour-per-week graduate research assistant positions. In order to comprehensively audit the project, we decided to spend the full year on this work (with some of our time still focused on small-scale processing and supporting a 3-member team of volunteers)^[1]. Our goal was to assess every aspect of the project, paying particular attention to scope, accessibility, usability (for researchers inside and outside the academy), and outreach (especially social media presence). Because Eamon and Cailin were still gaining familiarity with the DTA and were thus uniquely positioned to respond to the project from the perspective of a new user, our approach was broadly structured to move from the outside in. Therefore, we pursued our audit through the following steps: (1) we began with our outward facing presence, including social media, static pages on our site, and reviews of the project; (2) we examined other projects and targeted areas for feature development; (3) we focused on the database and collection scope by evaluating the status of our collaborations, researching new materials from existing collaborators, and identifying gaps in our holdings; (4) we closely reviewed our metadata and addressed areas of concern; and (5) we concluded by evaluating our options for project workflow and lab space on campus.

Throughout each step of the audit, we also employed a series of checks to ensure that the DTA site content and features aligned as much as possible with widely accepted standards for accessibility. Specifically, we compared our practices to those recommended in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 and ran the site through accessibility evaluation tools such as Functional Accessibility Evaluator 2.2 and WAVE Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool. We also reviewed blogs and forums written by and for screen reader users and downloaded an open-access screen reader, NV Access, to test the site. We plan to continue running these checks routinely to ensure the DTA site is as accessible to as many users as possible, and we encourage others to adopt similar practices.

In publishing our account of the audit and its results, our purpose is twofold: first, we want to share specific insights into

the state of our project and the results of this maintenance audit; and second, we want to offer a model for DH practitioners who are performing their own evaluations of their projects or who may want to extrapolate some of our results to improve other DH projects.

Observation #1: Assessment of Scope

Since the DTA initially launched in 2016, there have been significant developments in the understanding of trans history and the language used to describe gender-nonconforming (GNC) people and practices. With renewed scholarly and public interest in trans identities, there has also been an increasing push to digitize more trans-related historical materials, in part due to dissatisfaction with the oversaturation of materials relating to white trans women. Within this context, we spent a significant amount of time during the audit evaluating the DTA's scope to better adapt to the shifting landscape of trans history.

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We were interested in interrogating scope on a number of levels, including: genre of materials; dates covered; race and ethnicities represented; trans identities represented; and types of experiences documented. Among the elements of scope we considered, race and ethnicity were particularly important to us. As VanHaitsma and others have observed in reviewing the project, and as Rawson has discussed in interviews and his own publications, the DTA's holdings skew toward white U.S. and Canadian subjects [VanHaitsma 2019] [Bergen 2016] [Rawson 2018]. This trend reflects a larger concern regarding the lack of diversity in the digital humanities writ large. Per [Risam 2015], many of the most developed digital humanities projects preserve the writings and histories of well-known white men, individuals unlikely to be otherwise forgotten. While our materials disrupt that trend by focusing on individuals whose lives have been largely relegated to the margins of history, it is also true that white U.S. and Canadian trans histories have been better preserved than any others, resulting in concerning racial inequities in archival representation.

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As one of extraordinarily few archives focused on trans experiences, it is critical that we attend to these issues of impact and access. Researchers interested in trans history have had to negotiate a number of systematic challenges — including lack of communication across archival institutions and the recent emergence and cultural specificity of the term *transgender* — that make it difficult to determine where trans materials are held and what those materials are. Furthermore, historical materials depicting people of color who transgress gender norms are even less likely to have been preserved or archived. Unless we pay careful attention to these issues, it is all too easy for projects like the DTA to unwittingly reproduce a narrative of trans history focused on the experiences of white North Americans and Europeans.

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[VanHaitsma 2019] further suggests that the DTA's holdings skew toward transfeminine-related materials with a proportionally smaller number of transmasculine materials. Such inequities in our holdings reveal the complexities of representation in a project guided by trans-affirming ethics. As we expand our collection of transmasculine objects, we recognize that the differential representations of transfeminine and transmasculine subjects is due in part to a visual regime that renders trans men “invisibilized and ignored” and trans women “glamourized and vilified” [Green 2020]. More images of transfeminine people can be archived and published in part because of how transfeminine people have been spectacularized by a transmisogynist social context [Green 2020] [Koch-Rein et al. 2020] [Rodriguez 2015]. This is also complicated by the fact that certain forms of trans visibility often further marginalize trans people and lead to transphobic violence, which disproportionately targets trans people of color [Stanley 2017] [Griffin-Gracy et al. 2017]. Although part of our audit was to identify and fill gaps in our collections, simply adding items to fill a quota was insufficient to our aims. The complex histories of racism and transphobia demanded we reevaluate the quality of the items we host.

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Before we began working to increase the number of people with marginalized identities represented in the DTA, it was necessary to closely examine how and why we choose to represent people's identities overall. Our audit began at the tail end of the summer of 2020, when the United States was reckoning with its continued history of anti-Blackness following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, which deeply informed our work. The audit became an opportunity to renew our approach to archiving objects depicting BIPOC, to learn from Black and anti-racist archival practices, and reconsider how we frame historically significant objects depicting racism [Antracoli et al. 2019] [Black Women's Suffrage n.d.] [Brathwaite-Shirley 2020]. Over the course of the audit, we identified a number of gaps in the

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content we make available on our site, as well as issues with the DTA's current representation practices, particularly regarding marginalized groups we (three white settler academics) are not a part of. For instance, the complexities of Two-Spirit identities and their inclusion on the DTA was a recurring concern, one we realized could only be addressed through deeper collaborations with Two-Spirit groups. Our work to address scope therefore became inseparable from our ethical commitments to and work with BIPOC communities.

Response: Extending Our Collaborations, Building Our Collections, and Planning for the Future

A central project completed over the course of our audit was our search for potential additions to our holdings, both to diversify the scope of the project going forward and to ensure that we provide broad access to as many trans-related historical materials as possible. We approached this search for materials with two objectives in mind: 1) to identify new materials at institutions we have existing relationships with; and 2) to locate new institutions and collections for future collaborations. 18

Among our partnered institutions' collections, we found over 300 items that were already digitized and could be made available on the DTA, ranging from nineteenth-century medical literature to 1960s glamour shots. Of these, we prioritized certain materials for immediate processing based on gaps in our current holdings. For instance, materials related to incarceration and GNC children became higher priorities, whereas drag show programs were less pressing since we already have a preponderance of those items. As we filled some of the gaps in our collection, we sought opportunities to not simply add items *depicting* marginalized individuals, but to prioritize materials in which these subjects speak for themselves. These materials include items such as oral histories with trans men and people of color, manifestos written by trans women of color, and a collection of web resources related to Two-Spirit communities. 19

Our search for new partners was fruitful beyond our aims. At the start of our audit, we had 64 contributing partners, but we have since added five more to the DTA site and identified an additional 15 that we plan to reach out to in order to form collaborations. These new institutions include organizations with significant holdings related to transmasculine individuals, Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, and Asian Americans. Our goal in collaborating with more archives, especially community- and trans- and BIPOC-led archives, is not only to make more items related to trans history available online, but also to build mutually beneficial relationships with our partners. Another result of these efforts is that we are currently pursuing funding for a large-scale project that will allow us to work with our partners to digitize thousands of pages of materials related to trans people of color, as well as improve our anti-racist description practices through a BIPOC-led steering committee. 20

Even six years since it went live, the DTA remains one of extraordinarily few archives devoted to trans experiences, and many of our materials are only accessible to the public through the DTA. Our position as one of the few freely available archival resources on trans people necessitates that we expand our holdings to better represent the full spectrum of trans experience and to continually strengthen our commitments to ethical representation. Like many long-term DH projects, our work over the years has often focused on expanding the quantity of materials rather than quality of representation. This is not uncommon — as [Risam 2018] discusses, DH projects often “[equate] decolonization with the need for diversity in the field,” as if “the mere addition of ‘diverse’ bodies will transform the practices of digital humanities” and the traces of colonialism therein. Instead, as we evaluated the scope of the DTA, we also worked to strengthen and extend our relationships with BIPOC-focused initiatives, pursue funding for projects to enhance access to trans BIPOC histories, develop antiracist description policies, and enact more informed mechanisms of representation. 21

Observation #2: Metadata Concerns in Relation to Privacy and Description Policies

Assessing the DTA's scope led us to larger questions about the ways we describe materials hosted on the site. Since the project's start, we have attempted to maintain consistent descriptive practices by implementing a metadata application profile (MAP), a detailed document that outlines requirements and best practices for each metadata element 22

(e.g., Title, Subject Coverage, Description). However, over the course of the DTA's history, a number of different people from different backgrounds and levels of archival experience have participated in processing materials, which has resulted in discrepancies in the metadata for different objects.

Although DTA materials are discoverable through metadata and the terms used within the materials, there were numerous inconsistencies regarding the usage of certain elements and descriptive practices for trans identities and practices. For example, the most commonly used term in subject coverage was “crossdressers,” though in many instances the materials predated the term and it was unlikely the subjects represented would identify with it. This practice was in contrast to our policy, which cautions against assuming individuals’ identities without self-acknowledgement. At the same time, this policy was more consistently applied in regards to race and ethnicity, which meant that materials focused on people of color were too often unmarked in the metadata. As a result, race often became hidden or obscured while gender identity was frequently overdetermined. Additionally, we noticed that in some cases, our metadata reproduced harmful language practices from other institutions and that some items were published with little description because team members were unsure how to interpret their content and account for their complexity.

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Our policies regarding privacy, explicit content, and descriptive practices have always been publicly available on the project site, and the DTA has been widely praised for its collaborative nature and continued accountability to the community [Patterson 2019] [Shepard 2020] [Sabharwal 2021]. In recognizing this strength and the benefits it has offered to others, we saw an opportunity to further develop this dimension of the project. Simultaneously, as the project has grown and we have received feedback, our implementation of our policies has become more complex—for example, determining whether exploitative or private materials should be public or how to address harmful language—and we wanted to find a way to convey that complexity. In other words, we needed to evaluate whether there were any gaps between our stated policies and our everyday practices and to consider how we could make our internal processes even more transparent for users.

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Response: Revision of MAP and Policies

To get a better sense of what MAP and policy changes might be in order, we began by evaluating our collections and compiling a list of metadata-related concerns and best practices. Aware of our limitations as a U.S.-based team that is predominantly white, we researched the policies of a number of BIPOC-led digital archives, DH projects, and social justice organizations. In addition, we found Antracoli et al.’s *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources* to be a particularly helpful resource [Antracoli et al. 2019].

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In some cases, addressing metadata issues on the DTA required simply correcting typos. Other issues necessitated case-by-case analysis and editorial flexibility. For example, we reached out to an individual represented in our materials who changed his name to ask how we should refer to him when processing materials he created before the name change. His answer — that we could either update his name or maintain both names — reflects his personal choice rather than archival best practices.^[2] This example shows why it is important to consider not only whether data practices are consistent and (inter)operable but whether they are ethical and what impact they have on people. When possible, it is ideal to reach out to individuals represented in the collections so that they can determine how they should be described in the metadata.

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We also expanded our project-wide policies to clarify our processes for describing gender, race, ethnicity, and other identity markers. Though our metadata typically adopts language already used in the materials and language known to be used by the individuals represented, we often process items that cannot be neatly categorized, such as photographs with no extant context. The decisions we make in describing these items may not be immediately clear to visitors of the site, which could make them difficult to locate or result in misunderstanding of historical terminology. Therefore, as we evaluate ways to best represent individuals’ identities, we also turn a critical eye toward harmful language practices in the archival field. We have sought to disrupt racist and transphobic materials or descriptions by questioning whether to make available compelling but ethically questionable items, adding critical framing to descriptions of complicated items, and removing harmful descriptions and metadata inherited from contributing institutions. To support our team members

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in describing complex items, we began writing short reference documents that include language and framing suggestions as well as contextual information to guide them through the difficult and thorny process of respectfully and accurately representing trans and GNC subjects. We have also developed content warnings within the Description field for items with potentially harmful language and imagery.

As we resolved specific metadata issues and revised our policies and processing workflow, we also began to write a new edition of the DTA MAP that better reflects our current descriptive practices. This work includes clarifying how fields like Spatial Coverage become searchable so team members can apply it more effectively and updating Subject Coverage examples to match the newest version of Homosaurus, the LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary we use to supplement the Library of Congress Subject Headings. While in the past the MAP has only been available to team members and contributors, we have chosen to make the DTA MAP 3.0 publicly accessible on the project website, both to encourage feedback from our stakeholders and to provide a model for other DH projects writing or revising their own MAPs.

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Observation #3: Incomplete Tracking of Project Use and Reception

In the six years since the DTA went live, the project and items from its collections have been taken up by academic researchers, pop culture journalists, intrigued readers, documentary filmmakers, and teachers of all kinds. We have taken great joy in seeing how the DTA has been utilized and engaged, often posting to our social media channels items that refer to the DTA and circulating these items among students working on the project. At no point, however, did we formally track such qualitative usage, even though measurable evidence of a project's impact is critical for grant writing efforts. Additionally, while the DTA's mission is to make trans history more accessible to a wide public audience, we had no dedicated methods for evaluating users' experiences in accessing our materials.

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Throughout the life of the project, we have relied on Google Analytics to track site usage and Google Alerts to keep up-to-date with mentions of the DTA online.^[3] While analytics seem reliable, alerts have proven to be quite fallible and we often became aware of invaluable references to the DTA long after the fact. Our sense of this engagement was impressionistic, favoring the more memorable coverage, and we could not report with confidence on trends and patterns in the data. Without a means of consistently tracking project use and reception, it became difficult to measure the impact of the DTA for funding applications or to prioritize our users' needs when forming new collaborations.

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Response: Systematic Collection and Summary of Reviews and Usages of the DTA

We initially considered conducting a typical usability test to better understand the project's uptake and user interactions; however, we quickly recognized that soliciting test users during the pandemic would be difficult and potentially unsafe. Tabling the usability test for the time being, we decided instead to systematically evaluate usage of the project through reviews, discussions, and mentions of the DTA across academic databases, institutions' websites, public forums, and social media platforms. In addition to bibliographic information, we tracked articles, chapters, theses and dissertations, resource lists, articles on pop culture outlets and non-academic websites, and social media posts. We noted what items people were using or responding to, paying particular attention to the DTA's accessibility for young readers and individuals unfamiliar with digital archives. We also recorded feedback from formal reviews of the DTA, particularly reviewers' observations regarding ways to expand the project's scope and functionality and the need to clarify some site features.

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Reviews of the DTA and articles highlighting its usage in classrooms by [Chatterjee 2020], [Shepard 2020], [Watson 2019], and others allowed us to gain a better understanding of the site's perceived functionality by new users. For example, Nikita Shepard's 2020 write-up on the DTA for *Reviews in Digital Humanities* indicated that the function of the Map search tool was unclear, which we have attempted to resolve by providing explanatory copy above the tool. Similarly, several researchers have reported being unsure why certain "outdated" terms are used on the site or how to effectively search using those terms. Recognizing that the creation of metadata is a highly subjective and political act and that trans-related terminology is both personal and contextual, we describe individuals' identities and practices

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using terms provided within the materials, terms known to be used by individuals represented in the materials, and, when we have no other information, terms contemporaneous to the period or culture. Since this practice influences search results in ways that may not be immediately apparent, we developed a front-facing Search Tips & Terms page that explains how we use search terms and suggests terms for researchers to consider based on their interests.

Along with identifying areas for improvement, we learned a great deal about how the DTA has been used in academic research. While scholars such as [Adler 2016], [Powell 2018], and [Alilunas and Erdman 2018] analyze our practices to advocate for restorative archival projects, others use the DTA's materials to examine public reception of trans historical figures [Jackson 2020] and consider the ways digital platforms permit the recirculation of early trans activism [Steinbock 2019]. Through library guides, resource lists, and teaching modules, we have also discovered that the DTA is widely recommended by teachers at colleges and universities across the United States. To better connect with our community members and share the critical resources they have compiled, we are now considering ways of highlighting research and teaching tools on our website.

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In reviewing uptakes and usages of the DTA, it became clear that the project inspires a wealth of valuable engagement that is often overlooked by Google Alerts and other automated searches. Bearing this discovery in mind, we now dedicate lab hours at the end of each month to actively locate and record engagement to improve our understanding of users' experiences and remain accountable to our communities' needs.

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Observation #4: Social Media Underutilized

Social media offers a useful tool for better connecting with potential users of the DTA, particularly those outside of academia. As [Ross 2012] discusses, when adequately utilized, social media platforms for DH projects can become spaces for "self-representation, expression or reflection and more organized forms of collaboration and knowledge building." The DTA maintains three social media accounts—Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Early in the audit, we determined that our social media posts had a few shortcomings: they were inconsistently published, their contents were not standardized, they varied in the amount of information provided, and they were not always fully accessible. Further, our engagement with our followers was minimal, often occurring only through responses to comments rather than proactive communication. It was unclear who our audience was or what they sought from the DTA on social media, which made it difficult to foster a sense of community on these platforms.

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Response: Development of Social Media Workflow and Style Guide

In response to these concerns, we developed a Social Media Style Guide to foster more consistent and effective use of our social media presence across all three platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). To create this guide, we evaluated platform-specific analytics to identify our audience's demographics and track trends in post engagement. Next, we reviewed each platform's accessibility guidelines and discussed ways to ethically present materials addressing discrimination and trauma. These data points allowed us to begin posting more accessible content (e.g., providing alternate text to describe images, using CamelCase for hashtags) that was better tailored to the interests of our social media communities. We also shifted the timing of our posts to our followers' peak activity hours and developed a list of important annual dates to ensure that we commemorate events important to our work. Because some of our materials discuss violence and discrimination, the Social Media Style Guide includes best practices for content warnings.

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Additionally, as a collaborative archive that relies upon the labor of countless individuals and organizations, we wanted to make sure we were consistently crediting our partnering institutions on social media posts, directing traffic to their websites and social media presences as well as our own, and calling attention to exciting new projects. Therefore, we created policies for citing the sources of our content and began sharing more posts about the archives and websites that inspire us.

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Given that physical archives can be uniquely inaccessible to trans people, we have found that social media is one additional way we can ensure that we are reaching the people whose histories are the focus of our work. Already, we are seeing positive responses to these changes, including higher rates of post engagement, increased site traffic originating from social media, and more consistent responses from our communities. Our Social Media Style Guide

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functions as a living document that we continually revise as we receive feedback and track usage. By formalizing social media policies while retaining space for further experimentation, we are now better able to create informative outreach content that is consistent with our goals and ethical commitments.

Observation #5: Static Pages Neglected

Since the driving mission behind the DTA is making trans-related history more accessible, we have a strong commitment to ensuring that our website content is welcoming and functional for as many of our visitors as possible, irrespective of their academic background or level of experience with archival research. While the majority of our day-to-day work is focused on developing and expanding the database itself, there are a series of static pages on the site that serve as important features of the project. These include “About” pages explaining the history of the project, our team and board, and our policies, as well as “Learn” pages that offer a starter’s guide to the DTA, a race and ethnicity research guide, a glossary, and a list of global terms. Many of these pages were created in the early stages of the project and have not been consistently updated.

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As new team members, Roles and Schlotterback brought fresh perspectives on the project, and they conducted a comprehensive reading and analysis of our website copy and images. They were specifically focused on consistency, accuracy, intellectual accessibility, and user experience. Their review ultimately determined that while we were generally successful at presenting our content in an easy-to-navigate format with a style and tone that was appropriate for a generalist audience, there were significant inconsistencies across our static pages, including some content that was concerningly outdated.

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Response: Creation of a Static Page Style Guide and Revision of Copy

Identifying the areas of our static pages that needed further development led to a number of changes. Some of the edits were quite simple, such as fixing typos and broken links. Yet even such minor changes pointed to the need to clarify our editorial practices. To eliminate inconsistencies in grammar and terminology, we devised and implemented a Style Guide for the DTA’s copy. Though we decided to defer to the AP Style Book for many stylistic decisions, we collectively established best practices for the specificities of writing about sex and gender, topics often neglected by mainstream style guides.

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To better facilitate user engagement with the various functions on the DTA site, we developed explanatory and instructional copy for certain features, such as the Map tool. Among the front-facing pages of the DTA, we identified a number of areas that required more sustained care, such as the Glossary and Global Terms pages. Rather than attempting a short-term, superficial revision during the first phase of the audit, the Glossary was significantly expanded by Roles and Schlotterback during the spring 2021 semester. In addition to revising existing definitions to better represent the complexities of trans experiences, Roles and Schlotterback identified a number of new terms to define, including the most commonly used words in DTA materials’ subject coverage, as well as historical terms like “female impersonators” and “masquerading” that are less familiar to present-day readers. As we highlight in the introduction of the revised Glossary, our goal in defining these terms is not to prescribe a single, correct definition, but to clarify how the DTA understands and uses terms throughout the project. We view this page as a living document that will be revised and expanded upon as needed, and we encourage DTA visitors to offer suggestions for terms to add or clarify. As of this writing, revision of the Global Terms page is ongoing.

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Conclusion

The five observations and responses discussed above capture the key results of our year-long audit of the Digital Transgender Archive. The results of our audit have already proven to be tremendously insightful. In brief, we accomplished the following: our project scope has been critically analyzed and we have identified areas for intentional growth moving forward; more of our project documentation is written and publicly available; our project values have been articulated and shared; many of our static pages have been significantly revised; our social media presence is now more consistent and purposeful; we have more qualitative and quantitative user data to include in our grants; and we

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directly responded to reviews and feedback on the project.

We have shared these results in the hopes that our observations resonate with other project teams and their work. Irrespective of the specific outcomes, we found the process of auditing the DTA to be a highly effective time investment for a project that had passed through the startup phase and was just beginning to settle into ongoing maintenance. While there is always some pressure to innovate and expand, spending most of our year auditing our work allowed us the space for genuine self-evaluation so that we can now move forward with clearer intention and purpose.

Notes

[1] As a project executed during a pandemic, our audit of the DTA was a completely digital process (in fact, the three of us have still never met together in person). Since we were unable even to consider whether it was desirable to establish a dedicated lab on the Northeastern campus, we instead built a “digital lab,” both to facilitate work and to foster stronger team relationships and communication. We worked entirely over digital platforms, including Zoom, Slack, Google Workspace, and the DTA website itself.

[2] Although name authority records often list variations of individuals’ names that they may have been known by or used throughout their life, these variations are controlled under a single uniform name and only the authorized name is displayed in a record. This subject’s preference to maintain both names in a single record defies the logic of a name authority and shows how, for some trans people, prior names not should be treated as “dead names.”

[3] Google Analytics is often recommended to library, museum, and archives decision makers as a tool for measuring and improving users’ experiences [Fang 2007] [Breeding 2008] [Turner 2010]. However, as [Galbraith 2016] has discussed, the fact that Google Analytics data “belongs to Google and is housed on U.S. servers, where data may be subject to the legislation of that country,” raises serious concerns about user privacy, particularly for a trans-focused project. As the DTA and its user base grows, we find ourselves reevaluating whether Google Analytics fits into our project values.

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