



## **A Framework for Good Digitisation in New Zealand**

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## 1. Introduction

This document outlines the draft principles and criteria for prioritising objects for digitisation from publicly held collections. Its purpose is to provide the conceptual frame for tools, guidelines and business cases to be developed upon. Its final form will be determined by a process of testing, feedback and development during the Digital New Zealand project over the latter part of 2008 and early 2009.

## 2. Purpose of framework

The framework for good digitisation is being developed primarily to provide a collaborative mechanism to compare and prioritise different types of collections and materials already selected as potential candidates for digitisation. The focus of use is both for collecting institutions (such as museums, archives and libraries) and other public bodies that hold significant content, as well as for funding agencies and budget-holders for digitisation activity.

A secondary purpose is to provide the foundation for a basic set of selection and analysis tools for identifying potential candidates for digitisation where no other selection criteria exist. This may be particularly useful for those on limited budgets starting out on a digitisation programme for the first time, or for building a new digital collection that draws on a number of non-digital sources. This document does not attempt to provide the tools and guidelines for this. These are however being created as a resource through the Digital New Zealand project development process.

As the framework limits its focus to publicly held collections, some of the criteria may not readily translate to digitisation of privately held or collections or content for office-oriented information retrieval systems.

## 3. Defining “Good digitisation”

Digitisation is a popular term to convey a wide range of meanings and expectations, and as such lacks any precise definition. It is evident that there are many types of digitisation activities that have little in common with each other,<sup>1</sup> meaning considerable care is needed in using the term digitisation to convey anything beyond a very broad category of activity.

At its most basic, and as the definition for this framework, digitisation involves:

*making a digital copy or digital recording of analogue information, where that information can reside in a document, artefact, sound, performance, geographical feature or natural phenomena.*

It includes data-entry and transcription, digital imaging, photography, sound and video recording and transfer – in fact any analogue-to-digital transfer. It excludes transcoding or migration of digital information into a different digital format or

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<sup>1</sup> for instance, e-book transcription, digital recording of oral history, and migration of video from VHS to DV tape are all widely considered digitisation activity, yet the purposes, audience and technical nature of the activity are all quite different

media (digital-to-digital transfer), software manipulation or programmed machine creation of new digital information (born-digital information), and analogue output of digital information such as printing or audiovisual playback (digital-to-analogue transfer).

The concept of “good” digitisation is drawn directly from the *Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*<sup>2</sup>, which argues that digital collection development has matured beyond proof of concept and collection-building projects to a point where digital objects, metadata and collections, in order to be “good”, must be capable of being building blocks for others to reuse, repackage, repurpose and build services upon. In the same vein, the Framework for Good Digitisation aims to place digitisation as core activity for collecting institutions, and one that fits within a wider context of good digital collection management and sustainable investment in digital technologies.

#### 4. Defining a digital object

A digital object is more than its digital content – its relationship to other objects (including the non-digital original if digitised), and the metadata that describes it are integral to the digitisation of content. Good digital objects today require interoperability, reusability, persistence, verification, documentation and rights support<sup>3</sup>. Metadata and the context of the digital content must be built into the format and creation of digital content in order to enable this. Metadata and context is also a vital precondition to access and discovery of that object among all digital objects available or searchable.

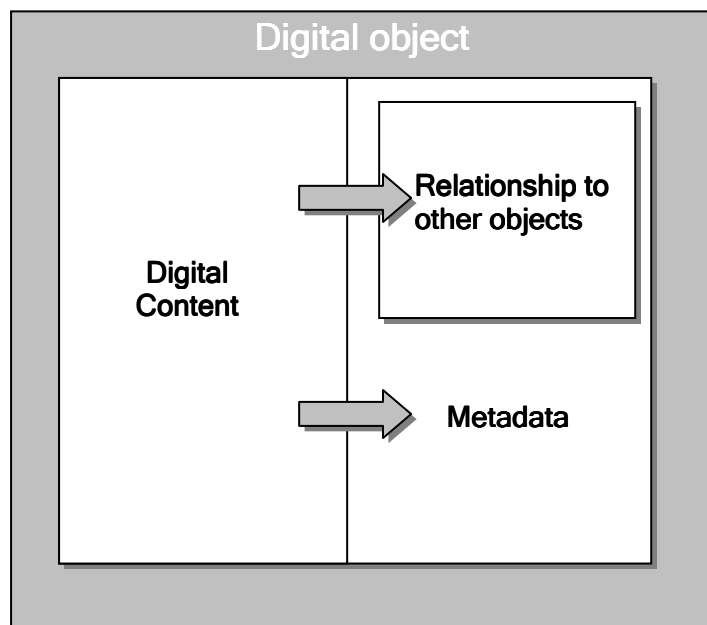


Figure 1: A digital object

<sup>2</sup> National Information Standards Organization (NISO), December 2007

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

## 5. Four assessment principles

The framework provides four assessment principles that each has a set of underlying criteria to apply to digitisation candidates:

- Access to the non-digital original
- Techniques for creating and managing the digitised objects
- Purpose for which the digitised objects are intended
- Values expressed in the digitised objects

The intention is that these four principles can be applied across the range of digitisation candidates that are covered by the framework's digitisation definition. For example, it should be possible to apply these principles to a museum artefact, a letter and a recording that all relate to a particular event or theme, and arrive at an assessment of which is the highest priority to digitise.

While it is envisaged that this framework can greatly assist decision-making, there are no definitive rules or answers for deciding what should be digitised. Each of the principles has to be tempered with good judgement before making a final decision. It is hoped however that the framework will improve consistency and transparency in the exercising of that judgement over time.

## 6. Principle 1: Access

Four criteria underlie the access principle:

- Rarity:** A good digitisation candidate is unique or has few viewable or usable copies (regardless of form) that make it not generally easy to access
- Availability:** A good digitisation candidate will be available for access to the public if digitised
- Demand:** A good digitisation candidate is in high demand for viewing or using
- Expense:** A good digitisation candidate is expensive, time-consuming or technically difficult to gain or provide access to

Making a digital copy or recording of a non-digital object can be an important step towards increasing access to that object. Some non-digital objects are readily accessible because they are common or easily substituted, in low demand, or are inexpensive to make available (e.g. a recent postage stamp or a week-old copy of a newspaper). Others are limited by privacy or security concerns (e.g. military personnel records), or by donor restrictions on public distribution (e.g. family letters). In order to gain the most improvement from access, a good digitisation candidate will likely be rare, in high demand, and expensive or time-consuming to make available (e.g. a Penny Black or an edition of the Grey Argus from 1918).

## 7. Principle 2: Technique

Three criteria underlie the technique principle:

- i. **Feasible:** A good digitisation candidate can be digitised with available and appropriate technology and without causing undue damage
- ii. **Usable:** A good digitisation candidate can provide a clear metadata description and copyright statement that supports usability and persistence
- iii. **Manageable:** A good digitisation candidate can be digitised to a format and physical carrier that will be managed, interoperable and migrated over time

The techniques and technologies used to undertake digitisation activity directly affect the utility and sustainability of the effort involved in digitisation. Where technology is not well suited for a particular object or may damage a rare object (e.g. cracking the spine of a book, breaking a fragile tape spool), or the object itself needs conservation treatment before digitising, careful consideration has to be given to feasibility. Where the choice of digital format or physical carrier will limit interoperability (e.g. proprietary technologies not in widespread use), or there is limited availability of required hardware or software, usability of the digital object will be lessened. Where there is a strategy to manage the newly digitised content (e.g. as part of a digital collection), create backups and migrate it to new physical carriers over time, the opportunity for return on the effort to digitise will be much greater.

## 8. Principle 3: Purpose

Three criteria underlie the purpose principle:

- i. **Protect:** A good digitisation candidate will be protected from added damage by digitising
- ii. **Represent:** A good digitisation candidate can be readily represented in digitised form
- iii. **Transcend:** A good digitisation candidate can enable uses in digital form that were difficult or impossible to do with the non-digital form

The purposes that institutions undertake digitisation for vary widely. Clearly understanding what purpose a digitised object may be used for is vital to the selection and digitisation strategies chosen. Digitising can protect an object from added damage by creating a high quality copy suitable for most uses. Where the format or information can be readily represented digitally without losing the important qualities of the original, potentially large volumes of objects can be made available with ease (e.g. newspaper collections, journals). Digital technology can also enable new or different functionality (e.g. virtual collections, 3D manipulation, search across text) that was not possible with the non-digital originals.

## 9. Principle 4: Values

Three criteria underlie the values principle:

- i. **Evidence:** A good digitisation candidate will have integrity as a reference source in digital form for research and citation, and remain connected with the context of the original
- ii. **Meaning:** A good digitisation candidate will retain and express the meaning or significance of the original object in digital form
- iii. **Guardianship:** A good digitisation candidate will have a clear provenance and continued guardianship for use of the digitised form

The values of a non-digital object will not always be successfully translated once it is digitised. For research and reference purposes, the physical carrier or context can be as important as the information that can be digitised (e.g. marginalia in a book, texture or smell in an artefact, a collection of letters). An original object may have an intrinsic meaning or emotional connection that cannot be replicated digitally (e.g. a bible that belonged to an ancestor). Digitisation opens up new possibilities for ownership, repatriation or guardianship of the digitised copy that may not change with the original, and may need to be negotiated (e.g. a taonga loaned for a non-digital collection may be repatriated to an iwi in a digital form).