Contact Adriana Harmeyer at aharmey@purdue.edu if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

Building a Community-Driven Digital Readiness Toolkit

By Kristen Whitson, WiLS

Recollection Wisconsin's Digital Readiness Community of Practice project officially began in 2019 with funding from the National Historic Records and Publications Commission (NHPRC), but the driving force behind the project has been the community itself formed over a decade of local history digital collections work.

Recollection Wisconsin is a consortium managed by WiLS (Wisconsin Library Services, an independent, nonprofit member organization) and led by six governing partners: Marquette University, the Milwaukee Public Library, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and the Wisconsin Historical Society. As Wisconsin's hub for the Digital Public Library of America, Recollection Wisconsin brings together more than 600,000 digital cultural heritage resources from Wisconsin libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies. Our work often leads us to small and underresourced historical organizations, such as county historical societies staffed by volunteers or the local history room of a rural town's public library. Organizations ask, "We'd like to put our collections online, but they're not digitized yet. Can you help us figure out where to start?"

Beginning in 2019 and continuing until the end of 2021, Recollection Wisconsin and the Division of Programs and Outreach at the Wisconsin Historical Society coordinated community-driven digital readiness initiatives supported by Archives Collaboratives grants from the NHPRC. To develop a plan for the Digital Readiness Community of Practice, we collaborated to learn about digital collection development needs, goals, and gaps among the society's more than 410 local history affiliates across the state. This planning work was guided by public history practitioners and organizations most directly impacted by a lack of digital readiness, including local historical societies, county historical societies, historic house museums, and historic preservation organizations. Between July and December 2019, we undertook information-gathering and planning activities including a web-based survey, five community conversations, and three strategic planning sessions.

That strategic planning process told us that local history practitioners lack the time, money, and expertise to feel confident in undertaking digital collections projects. These themes continued in our work with the community in 2020 and 2021, when attendees at our virtual Digital Readiness Fairs (https://recollectionwisconsin.org/cop/digital-readiness-fairs) confirmed that they felt stuck, lost, or overwhelmed in approaching digital collections. The fairs, held virtually in the summer of 2021, attracted 270 attendees from 50 different organizations and featured presentations from local history practitioners and invited experts, as well as opportunities for networking, conversation, and community building.

In conversation with a launch committee made up of local history leaders from around the state, we developed the "Digital Readiness Levels" (https://recollectionwisconsin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Digital-Readiness-Levels.pdf), a framework for digital readiness based on the National Digital Stewardship Alliance's Levels of Digital Preservation. The levels are a structured roadmap for public history organizations to plan and sustainably grow their digital initiatives to improve access to collections. But the community asked for more. They wanted to know: HOW do we implement these "Digital Readiness Levels"? HOW do we make a project plan? HOW do we choose standards for digitization?

The community wanted a comprehensive, start-to-finish, step-by-step guide to digital projects (preferably in a format that could be downloaded and printed). In June 2022, after many rounds of editing and testing, we released a 100+ page pdf manual we called the *Digital Readiness Toolkit*, available in both print and web formats at http://recollectionwisconsin.org/toolkit.

In researching similar manuals, we found that there are many resources available from an academic or technical perspective, but very few resources for a nonspecialists. (One fantastic set of resources that served as an important inspiration and model comes from the Sustainable Heritage Network [https://sustainableheritagenetwork.org] managed by the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University.) The toolkit is intentionally written to be clear, direct, and easily

understandable for amateurs and experts alike. To make this content as accessible as possible, we've repeatedly reviewed the language for reading level, aiming for an eighth-grade reading level, which is the average reading level of the American public. We also spent a lot of time combing through the documentation with our reviewers for any terms, acronyms, or jargon that might be intimidating, overwhelming, or not intuitive, and out of that effort, we built a large "Digital Readiness Glossary" (https://recollectionwisconsin.org/digital-readiness-toolkit/digital-readiness-glossary). We also designed a "Digital Project Planning Worksheet" (https://recollectionwisconsin.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Digital-Project-Planning-Worksheet.pdf) to guide practitioners through the planning process.

The development of the *Digital Readiness Toolkit* and related content has been a community-driven, iterative process. From designing the *Digital Readiness Toolkit*'s structure to the final testing steps, the end product has been created by and for Wisconsin's community of local history practitioners. The *Digital Readiness Toolkit* and associated resources are better, clearer, and more useful as a result.

- Drafts of the "Digital Readiness Levels" were reviewed by 25 digital projects colleagues, including the 11 members of our project's Launch Committee. The Launch Committee was made up of staff and volunteers representing cultural heritage institutions of varying sizes across Wisconsin.

- The "Digital Readiness Glossary" was requested by the community as a point of access to often-confusing terminology; the glossary was then designed and reviewed by the Launch Committee.

- Digital Readiness Fair participants were asked in postevent surveys if they would be willing to provide further direction and feedback for digital readiness resources; those who volunteered were included in rounds of content review.

- The "Digital Project Planning Worksheet," a key component of the *Digital Readiness Toolkit*, was reviewed by invited experts (Biz Gallo, Library of Michigan; Ann Hanlon, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; and Tamara Ramski, South Central Library System) for structure, content, ease of use, and relevance. This worksheet was informed by a digitization planning workshop conducted for the Wisconsin Historical Society's Local History and Historic Preservation Conference. Workshop participants provided feedback

that reflected their desire for planning steps to be broken down as much as possible.

- Content created for the *Digital Readiness Toolkit* directly responds to questions received from the community during community conversations, surveys, and Digital Readiness Fairs.

- The Launch Committee dedicated several meetings to toolkit development, including identifying exemplary models (including the AASLH STEPS program and ICCROM's ReOrg workbook), identifying personas to articulate the toolkit's target audiences, and providing feedback on multiple drafts of the toolkit's structure, layout, and content.

- Five practitioners took the *Digital Readiness Toolkit* through a beta testing process in their own work. These beta testers had little to no previous experience with digitization initiatives and were a mix of paid staff and volunteers in their organizations.

The community-driven nature of the Digital Readiness project has been essential to ensure results that are the most useful and beneficial to the community itself. The continuous feedback loops have ensured that we at Recollection Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Historical Society don't get stuck in what we think is common knowledge in digital projects. Community members repeatedly asked us to back up, start from scratch, and clarify terms and concepts—steps we were happy to take to share digital collections practices and knowledge. By asking and listening to the people who can contribute to increased access in local history organizations, we can empower those community members.

A foundational concept for the Digital Readiness project is that expertise comes in many forms. Lack of advanced training in archives or library and information studies shouldn't be a deterrent for leading or participating in digital initiatives. That training is important, and we don't mean to deemphasize the importance of professional training and standards, but aiming for unrealistically high standards out of the gate can be a barrier for some people and organizations. While it's great if a practitioner has a degree in history or LIS, it's not the only or even the most important criterion when thinking about who plans or initiates a project to digitize and preserve a community's history. Restricting participation in digitization initiatives to those only those with advanced degrees unnecessarily excludes community members with unique voices and experiences to add to the historical record.

What's Next?

We were pleased to advise the Community Archiving Workshop (CAW) of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) as it prepared its own Archives Collaboratives grant proposal for the NHPRC, Assessing and Addressing Digital Readiness for Audiovisual Collections. Beginning in May 2022, we are collaborating with CAW to incorporate guidance on audiovisual resources into the "Digital Readiness Levels." We are thrilled by this opportunity to enhance our work and extend its reach both geographically, through AMIA's partner network across the United States, and in scope, to better support the preservation of a highly at-risk category of content.

In addition, we are committed to working with the Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board (WHRAB) in its current NHPRC grant cycle to provide training in digitization project basics for local affiliates of the Wisconsin Historical Society. We will offer two WHRAB-sponsored in-person workshops in conjunction with the statewide Local History and Historic Preservation conferences in October 2022 and 2023.