

The Role of the Librarian in MOOC Development: Some Thoughts Based on Our Recent Experience at Hamilton

RESOURCE DOCUMENTATION

Documenting one's sources is a hallmark of good scholarship. The reasons for doing so are well established, but their importance isn't always recognized (even in an academic setting). Given the nature of the MOOC enterprise, we felt it was important that our course served as a good example of scholarly documentation that at the very least:

- acknowledged the creator and repository for all sources used in creating the course;
- established credibility in a manner that is often lacking in the arena of public discourse;
- provided a means for those enrolled in the course to continue their exploration of the topic.

This last point was particularly important to us. We provided full citations and links to the original for every still image included in our videos and embedded on our course pages. We also linked to the full text of cited books in Hathi Trust (when available) and catalog records from worldcat.org to assist students in finding a copies of the texts. When choosing images for the course pages, we tried to point to images in stable collections that included additional resources that might be of interest and provided robust metadata that helped contextualize the image.

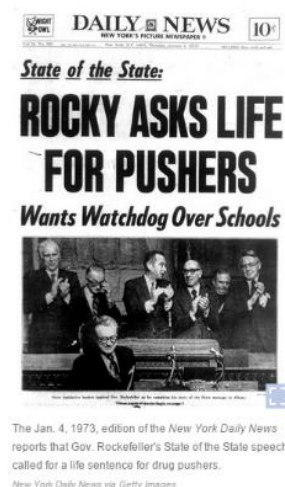
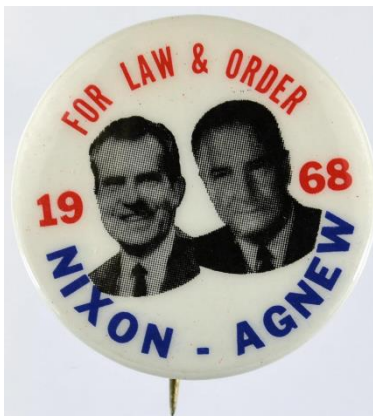
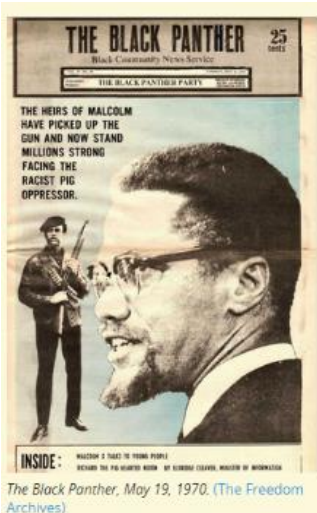
RESOURCE DISCOVERY

Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film, *The Godfather*, closes with the image and sound of a shutting door. The action closes a scene in which Michael Corleone, having just taken his father's place as head of the family's business enterprises, is confronted by his wife Kay in his study. Michael lies to Kay about the killing of his brother in law and demands she never again ask about "his business." Following Kay's retreat, she is shown looking back into the study from an adjoining room until the door swings closed, shutting out both her and the movies audience. The films sound designer, Walter Murch, has written how important it was for this scene to produce the sound of "a firm, irrevocable closure that resonated with and underscored Michael's final line." Commenting on the scene in a 1996 *Fresh Air* interview with Terry Gross, Murch recalled walking through Coppola's house with the director in search of a door that sounded like "betrayal" when it closed. If images and other multimedia resources are to be experienced as something more than supplementary material within the MOOC environment, someone needs to engage in a search for resources akin to that of Murch's and Coppola's hunt for the perfect-sounding door.

That role does not necessarily have to belong to a librarian, but there is no reason it shouldn't. In fact, it often requires a librarian give herself or himself more latitude than is typically the case in assisting patrons with identifying resources. Ideally (and given enough time) it involves a deeper engagement with the work of those whom we are assisting than we usually have. The role requires we move beyond resource provision into the realm of editorial collaboration in order to unearth images and other material that can support and expand on the course's narrative.

For a number of reasons, we were only partially successful in doing this for Incarceration’s Witnesses. Still, some examples of the thought process that went into choosing (or electing to forgo the use of) particular images for the MOOC may be instructive:

- Jack London published two essays in 1907 recounting his experience with the New York State prison system a little more than a decade earlier. The first choice was easy. A number of public domain images of London were available for use, none from his time in jail. Still, it didn’t make sense to use a stock head shot or an image of the older, established author in a suit. We chose an undated image of a younger, informally-dressed London taken by Bain News Service that is made available by the Library of Congress. As it happens, the book in which London’s articles were published did include some images of an upstate prison. They were, however, of low quality and showed a prison setting without people. We elected not to include these in part because of their quality, in part because they presented a rather sterile image of the prison setting, and most importantly, because they took the focus away the subject of the course—the prison witnesses themselves.
- We had a choice on how to portray the influence of Malcolm X on the Black Panthers in a section on the civil rights leader. Rather than include one of the better known images of party members brandishing weapons, we instead chose an image from the cover of from the party’s newspaper featuring an image of Malcolm with the heading “THE HEIRS OF MALCOLM HAVE PICKED UP THE GUN AND NOW STAND MILLIONS STRONG FACING THE RACIST PIG OPPRESSOR.”
- We included an image of page one from the list of 99 books taken from the cell of Jackson in August, 1971, instead of simply linking to it from the text in order to highlight both his influences and the larger theme of prison education that emerges in other parts of the course.
- We would have liked to have found an image that conveyed the idea of “law and order” for a section on the political calculus that led to the rise in mass incarceration beginning in the 1970s. A Nixon/Agnew campaign button from the 1968 presidential election that included the candidates’ images under the words “For Law and Order” was available. We decided not to use the image of the button because it was at odds with the narrative’s point that both Republicans and Democrats were active in advocating similar policies.



PERMISSIONS

Copyright restrictions proved to be a significant challenge, as might be expected for any topic with a focus on the 20th and 21st centuries. One reason for the creation of the American Prison Witness project that forms the backbone for the course was the paucity of first-person accounts from within the prison system. The thin documentary record applies equally to prison images from the 1940s forward. Most images were created by either the prisons themselves or journalists who were provided access to these facilities. For their own reasons, both groups had good reasons for not releasing images into the public domain.

Ironically, images for this period are not always difficult to find on the web. Unfortunately, many of these images are either hosted by new organizations and subject to copyright restrictions or were pirated from news websites by others without permission. For example, when searching for an image that would convey the idea of “war on drugs” we landed on an image of the front page of the New York Daily News from January 4, 1973. The page includes a picture of Governor Nelson Rockefeller addressing the New York State Legislature with a banner headline reading “ROCKY ASKS LIFE FOR PUSHERS.” Pirated versions of the image is readily available on the web and were likely lifted from [one of a series of articles about the future of mass incarceration produced by NPR in 2013](#). The original image licensed by NPR is available through Getty Images—at a price. Linking to the NPR article was, of course, an option, but not one that met our need for an illustration within the site.

INTERFACE DESIGN AND USABILITY

Librarians necessarily spend much of our time interacting with web interfaces that prove to be less than ideal for many of their users. In doing this, we not only develop an in-depth knowledge of a variety of interfaces, we are able to observe the challenges faced by different user groups in using them.

The edX course environment provided a number of challenges along these lines.

- The course environment was not particularly helpful at orienting users. The default page layout options did not provide a means for differentiating one section from another—the look and feel of every page in the course environment was the same. Default headings were particularly unhelpful in this regard. We added page headings with colored backgrounds in an effort to address this deficiency. We also added an overview page with links to each section.
- The default navigation for the site, particularly at the top and bottom of each page, was also problematic and did not allow users to easily move between sections. We added breadcrumbs at the top of each page and labeled “next” links at the bottom to overcome this.
- The default image settings did not provide a way to include captions or attribution links. We added custom code for each image to achieve this.

THE GOOD READER

- Serve as a surrogate for those taking the course during its development stage
- Attention to detail need in a copy editor

View this course as: **Student****Courseware**

Course Info

Discussion

Bibliography

Maps & Graphics

Video Credits

Links from Participants

Progress

Incarceration's Witnesses

Week One: From Utopia to
Dystopia—A Brief History of
the American Prison

Week Two: Dispatches—A
Survey of U.S. Prisoner
Writing from 1900-1970

The Shaping of a Convict**Week Two Overview****From Plantation to Penitentiary****The Early Modern American
Prison****Reform Efforts****Prison Writing Between the Wars****Conclusion****Discussion: Another National
History****Fact Check**Fact Check due Apr 12, 2015 at
00:00 UTC**References**

Week Three: The Predicted
Gulag—The Rise of the Mass-
Incarceration State and its
Anticipation in
Prisoner Witness

[Home](#) / [Week Two](#) / The Early Modern American Prison (2 of 5)

Jack London

Jack London's essays, "Pinched: A Prison Experience," and "The Pen: Long Days in a County Penitentiary" (1907) are representative of the phenomenon described in the introduction. London writes of being picked up on a "vag" charge with several other hobos in Niagara Falls in 1894. Looking back on his courtroom experience, he anticipates what is to follow: "And now I shall faithfully describe what took place in that court-room, for know that my patriotic American citizenship there received a shock from which it has never fully recovered" (*The Road*, 77). (London later pointed to his jail experience as the reason he became a socialist.) He goes on to describe a kangaroo court in which each hobo stands for fifteen seconds, each to be sentenced to thirty days in the Erie County Jail.

*Jack London.* (Library of Congress)

As for me, I was dazed. Here was I, under sentence, after a farce of a trial wherein I was denied not only my right of trial by jury, but my right to plead guilty or not guilty. Another thing my fathers had fought for flashed through my brain—habeas corpus. I'd show them. But when I asked for a lawyer, I was laughed at. Habeas corpus was all right, but of what good was it to me when I could communicate with no one outside the jail? But I'd show them. They couldn't keep me

London documents the violent order the Hall-men must impose in order to live. Other writers take up different facets of the conditions that either create or result from jail and prison culture.

REFERENCES

Franklin, H. Bruce, ed. *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*. New York: Penguin, 1998.[Find in a library](#)London, Jack. *The Road*. New York: Macmillan, 1907.[View full text at Hathi Trust](#)[Find in a library](#)**Next:** [Political Prisoners](#)