

IMAGINING THE DIGITAL LIVES OF AUTHORS AND CHARACTERS

Skills and strategies under development

Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
2. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
3. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
4. Uses the general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts
5. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
6. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media
7. Understands the characteristics and components of the media

Life Skills: Working With Others

8. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
9. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

Technology

10. Understands the relationships among science, technology, society, and the individual
11. Understands the nature and uses of different forms of technology

Art Connections

12. Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines

Overview

How do our computers and their contents both reflect us and shape us and how we think and work? What can a writer's method and work space illuminate about the author's works? In this lesson, students imagine and simulate the computer desktop, files and Internet habits of a writer or literary character in order to better understand his or her life and/or works.

Materials

Computers with Internet access; projector

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Section 1: In-class Activities

1. Warm-Up

Select several of Apple's «Mac vs. PC» commercials to show students, such as «Podium» (2007), «Stacks» (2009), «Biohazard Suit» (2009) and «Elimination» (2009) – <http://www.apple.com/why-mac> .

You might also show the 1996 print precursor to this ad series:

Close-cropped hair, just like Dad's when he worked at Big Blue.

Power tie: all the color he requires.

Computing is serious business. Keep a straight face.

IBM Networking Center pen kept in custom-crafted pocket protector.

Imitation Rolex.

Brooks Brothers. What else?

BACKPACK:
PowerBook Duo 230; accessories - Metricom Ricochet wireless modem - Iomega Zip drive; five full cartridges - Extended keyboard and mouse - Nokia 100 cell phone - Newton MessagePad - A few scratched up floppy disks - MacAddict - One 8-pin serial cable - Piles of notes, papers and transit schedules.

The casual "Seinfeld-cut" is in. Of course. Jerry would never use a PC.

The earring isn't making the statement it once was, but it still helps to draw the line.

Mandatory wacky watch just looks cool.

The denim shirt is standard issue. Get one.

You never know when you're going to need a PhoneNet connector.

FootLocker. What else?

BRIEF CASE:
Portégé Toshiba laptop - Microsoft Office Installation disk - PC Magazine - Byte - One Xircom Credit Card Ethernet modem - One 10-base T-cable - An HP-32S calculator - A Lotus penknife - Needlenose pliers - A multi-tip screwdriver.

THE WINDOWS USER
HOBBIES: No time for hobbies, still trying to install system.
SECRET SHAME: Has a Mac at home for "the kids". Really, really liked Microsoft Bob.
BELIEF: Thinks Bill Gates is God.

THE MAC ADDICT
HOBBIES: No time for hobbies, too busy spamming Windows-only developers.
SECRET SHAME: Still uses WriteNow for word processing.
BELIEF: Thinks Bill Gates thinks he's God.

After watching, ask:

- What stereotypes do these advertisements play with?
- Where do these ideas come from?
- What, if anything, does the kind of computer you use really say about you?

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– What does Apple’s question «Which Mac Are You?» say about the relationships people have with their personal computers?

Hand out «My Computer, Myself», and ask students to reconstruct, from memory, as best they can, their personal computer’s desktop and contents. Then, have them reflect, in writing, on the question: What could someone learn about you by browsing through your computer applications and files and tracking your media habits?

Name: _____ Date: _____

My Computer, Myself

Directions: Use the prompts below to attempt to replicate the desktop appearance and contents of your personal computer (or your files, bookmarks, etc. on a computer you share) as best you can.

First, sketch your desktop in as much detail as you can recall. Be sure to include your wallpaper, the colors of your background and/or fonts, and any folders or applications you leave on your desktop.



Then list as many of the following as you can remember, using the back of this sheet and additional sheets if you need them.

- _ Type of computer you use
- _ File folders and recently/most used files
- _ Internet bookmarks and favorite Web sites
- _ Recent searches
- _ Recently visited Web sites

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- _ Digital calendars and/or address books
- _ Other applications
- _ Games
- _ Photos
- _ Music
- _ Anything else important to your digital life

Discussion

Ask students to share their desktops, and then discuss the reflection question. Then ask:

- _ Do our computers and their contents shape who we are, or do we shape them? A bit of both?
- _ When you're famous and the «museum of you» is erected, why might visitors to the museum be interested in seeing your computer?
- _ Would you want your computer, files, and Internet search history on display to visitors to the «museum of you»? Why or why not?

2. Reading and discussion:

In «Fending Off Digital Decay, Bit by Bit», Patricia Cohen explores the new digital archives of Salman Rushdie, which includes an simulated computer environment that allows researchers to experience his work within the media and context they were created.

Fending Off Digital Decay, Bit by Bit

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/16/books/16archive.html>

By PATRICIA COHEN

Published: March 15, 2010

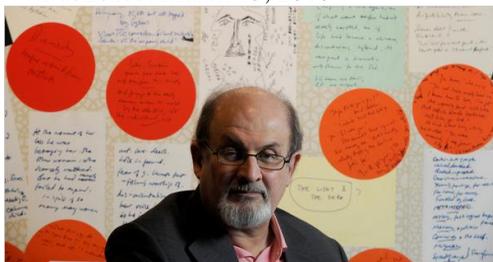


Photo by Erik Lesser for The New York Times

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Among the archival material from Salman Rushdie currently on display at Emory University in Atlanta are inked book covers, handwritten journals and four Apple computers (one ruined by a spilled Coke). The 18 gigabytes of data they contain seemed to promise future biographers and literary scholars a digital wonderland: comprehensive, organized and searchable files, quickly accessible with a few clicks.

But like most Rushdian paradises, this digital idyll has its own set of problems. As research libraries and archives are discovering, «born-digital» materials – those initially created in electronic form – are much more complicated and costly to preserve than anticipated.

Electronically produced drafts, correspondence and editorial comments, sweated over by contemporary poets, novelists and nonfiction authors, are ultimately just a series of digits – 0's and 1's – written on floppy disks, CDs and hard drives, all of which degrade much faster than old-fashioned acid-free paper. Even if those storage media do survive, the relentless march of technology can mean that the older equipment and software that can make sense of all those 0's and 1's simply don't exist anymore.

All of which means that archivists are finding themselves trying to fend off digital extinction at the same time that they are puzzling through questions about what to save, how to save it and how to make that material accessible.

«It's certainly one of those issues that keeps a lot of people awake at night», said Anne Van Camp, the director of the Smithsonian Institution Archives and a member of a task force on the economics of digital preservation formed by the National Science Foundation, among others.

Though computers have been commonly used for more than two decades, archives from writers who used them are just beginning to make their way into collections. Last week, for instance, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, announced that it had bought the archive of David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008. Emory opened an exhibition of its Rushdie collection in February, and last year, not long before his death, John Updike sent 50 5 ¼-inch floppy disks to the Houghton Library at Harvard.

Leslie Morris, a curator at the Houghton Library, said, «We don't really have any methodology as of yet» to process born-digital material. «We just store the disks in our climate-controlled stacks, and we're hoping for some kind of universal Harvard guidelines», she added.

Among the challenges facing libraries: hiring computer-savvy archivists to catalog material; acquiring the equipment and expertise to decipher, transfer and gain access to data stored on obsolete technologies like floppy disks; guarding against accidental alterations or deletions of digital files; and figuring out how to organize access in a way that's useful.

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At Emory, Mr. Rushdie's outdated computers presented archivists with a choice: simply save the contents of files or try to also salvage the look and organization of those early files. Because of Emory's particular interest in the impact of technology on the creative process, Naomi Nelson, the university's interim director of Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, said that the archivists decided to try to recreate Mr. Rushdie's writing experience and the original computer environment.

Mr. Rushdie started using a computer only when the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa drove him underground. «My writing has got tighter and more concise because I no longer have to perform the mechanical act of re-typing endlessly», he explained during an interview while in hiding. «And all the time that was taken up by that mechanical act is freed to think».

He added: «I had this kind of fetish about presenting clean copy. I don't like presenting my publisher with pages with lots of crossings-out and scribbling. So I would be manic at the end of typing a page where actually I didn't want to change anything, not at all».

Some of the early files chronicle Mr. Rushdie's self-conscious analysis of how computers affected his work. In an imaginary dialogue with himself that he composed in 1992 when he was writing «The Moor's Last Sigh», he wrote about choosing formatting, fonts and spacing: «I am doing this so that I can see how a whole page looks when it's typed at this size and spacing.

«Oh, my God, suppose it looks terrible?»

«Oh, my God, yeah. And doesn't this look wrong?»

«Where's the paragraph indent thing?»

«I don't know. I will look».

«How about this? Is this good for you?»

«A lot better. How about fixing the part above?».

At the Emory exhibition, visitors can log onto a computer and see the screen that Mr. Rushdie saw, search his file folders as he did, and find out what applications he used. (Mac Stickies were a favorite.) They can call up an early draft of Mr. Rushdie's 1999 novel, «The Ground Beneath Her Feet», and edit a sentence or post an editorial comment.

«I know of no other place in the world that is providing access through emulation to a born-digital archive», said Erika Farr, the director of born-digital initiatives at the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory. (The original draft is preserved.)

To the Emory team, simulating the author's electronic universe is equivalent to making a reproduction of the desk, chair, fountain pen and paper that, say, Charles Dickens used, and then allowing visitors to sit and scribble notes on a copy of an early version of «Bleak House».

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«If you're interested in primary materials, you're interested in the context as well as the content, the authentic artifact», Ms. Farr said. «Fifty years from now, people may be researching how the impact of word processing affected literary output», she added, which would require seeing the original computer images.

It may even be possible in the future to examine literary influences by matching which Web sites a writer visited on a particular day with the manuscript he or she was working on at the time.

Michael Olson, the digital collections project manager at Stanford University, said that the only people who really had experience with excavating digital information were in law enforcement. «There aren't a lot of archives out there capturing born-digital material», he said, referring to the process of extracting all data accurately from a device.

Located in Silicon Valley, Stanford has received a lot of born-digital collections, which has pushed it to become a pioneer in the field. This past summer the library opened a digital forensics laboratory – the first in the nation.

The heart of the lab is the Forensic Recovery of Evidence Device, nicknamed FRED, which enables archivists to dig out data, bit by bit, from current and antiquated floppies, CDs, DVDs, hard drives, computer tapes and flash memories, while protecting the files from corruption. (Emory is giving the Woodruff library \$500,000 to create a computer forensics lab like the one at Stanford, Ms. Farr said.)

With the new archive from David Foster Wallace, the Ransom Center now has 40 collections with born-digital material, including Norman Mailer's. Gabriela Redwine, an archivist at Ransom, is impressed by Emory's digital emulation, but said the center was not pursuing that kind of reproduction at the moment.

«Our focus is preservation and storage now», she said. «Over the last couple of years, we've been learning about computer forensics».

The center is trying to raise endowment money to hire a digital collections coordinator while Ms. Redwine works on preservation and processing. In the meantime, most of the digital material is off limits to researchers.

Questions for discussion and reading comprehension:

- Why are «digital-born» materials more difficult to archive than more traditional ones?
- What are some of the challenges faced by libraries attempting to archive the work of famous authors?

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- Michael Olson, the digital collections project manager at Stanford University, notes «that the only people who really had experience with excavating digital information were in law enforcement». Why?
- Why did Salman Rushdie begin using a computer? How did this change affect his writing?
- Why are people interested in «emulated environments» (electronic and otherwise)? What can they teach us about a writer and his or her works?

Section 2: Activities

Activity 1. Watching a simulation

Show students the first three minutes of the video on the Emory Archives (<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2010/03/15/multimedia/1247467357139/the-salman-rushdie-digital-archive.html>), which demonstrates a simulation of Rushdie’s computer and computer files, called an «emulated environment»: what his desktop looked like, what programs and applications he uses, his files, notes for his books, Web bookmarks, etc.

Questions for discussion:

- What are the benefits of this kind of archive for researchers?
- How about fans of Rushdie’s work?
- What famous figures’ computers would you like to peek inside?

Activity 2. Preparing for simulation:

Tell students that they will be creating such a simulation as a window into the life, mind and work of a writer or literary character by imagining his or her computer files, favorite Web sites, emails, and so on. (Of course, with a bit of imagination, this can be done anachronistically, with writers or characters from any era.)

As desired, students might focus on a writer or character studied in class, from independent reading or reading done in book groups. You might, for instance, ask the class to create «emulated environments» for a common book, assigning each student a different character.

In history classes, students might simulate the computer environments of historical figures. Science students could imagine the computers of scientists.

Activity 3. Project Work:

Hand out fresh copies of the «My Computer, Myself» handout and ask students to use what they know to brainstorm the contents of their subject’s computer.

Then, ask them to choose ten items they feel are the most «telling» about their subjects to flesh out and use to create a mock up of their subject’s computer, following the directions on «Creating a Digital Life» handout.

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Creating a Digital Life

Task: To create a simulation for a writer or literary character by imagining this person's desktop, computer files, favorite Websites, e-mails, browsing history, etc. Your final project will essentially be a limited biography or character study of sorts.

For the purposes of this assignment, imagine that anyone could have access to a computer, no matter when or where they lived. If you are creating a digital life for someone who could not have had one, think creatively about how to do this while preserving the spirit of the writer or character's life and times.

On the other hand, you might choose purposefully that a character would absolutely not have a computer. In this case, work with equivalent alternatives, such as a library and specific books, a home work space, and so on.

For example, to simulate Jay Gatsby's computer, you might include the following details:

- _ Desktop with picture of him at Oxford as the wallpaper
- _ A locked folder called «Daisy» with photos of her
- _ Recent Internet search term: fancy men's shirts
- _ A calendar application with minutely detailed daily agendas
- _ Excel spreadsheets tracking illegal income and the costs of parties
- _ MP3 files of jazz music

Follow the steps below to develop your simulation.

Step 1: Complete the brainstorming activity that you did at the beginning of class for your author or character.

Step 2: Choose the ten most compelling or «telling» items to include in your project.

Step 3: Decide how you want to present your information. You might choose to create a poster with drawings or computergenerated «screen shots» of each of the ten most interesting items. Or, you might create a digital simulation, perhaps through screen shots saved as part of a PowerPoint or Google Documents presentation, a wiki page or other format.

Regardless of the format, write a short blurb in which you explain the significance of each item to the character or writer and flesh out what it tells us about him or her. Include textual evidence whenever possible.

Section 3. Going Further

1). Invite students to go on a gallery walk to explore these richly imagined digital environments. Discuss the following:

- What is the relationship between people and their computers?
- How do they both reflect and shape us?
- What can we learn from imagining the digital lives of writers and their characters?
- Are they worth archiving?

To take discussion in a different direction, begin with the following questions:

- How does the context in which something is created affect its content?
- Would Dickens, for example, be Dickens, if he composed on a computer?

2). Refer students to the review of «Ill Fares the Land» by historian Tony Judt, which describes how Mr. Judt, who is suffering from ALS, must now compose his work by dictating to an assistant.

Renewing an Old Idea: Common Good

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/17/books/17book.html>

By DWIGHT GARNER

Published: March 16, 2010

The British historian Tony Judt is dying, slowly and painfully, from a variant of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (A.L.S.), better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. He has written matter-of-factly about his condition – he is now, essentially, a quadriplegic – in *The New York Review of Books*. At some point he will be able to communicate only by blinking an eye. For now he is dictating his words to assistants.

Best known for his book «Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945» (2005), Mr. Judt has long been an engaged and unpredictable intellectual of the left, one who is sometimes given to controversial opinions. Mr. Judt, who is Jewish, has argued, for example, that Israel is an «anachronism» that should convert «from a Jewish state to a binational one» including Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. His prose tends to be as biting as his ideas.

Mr. Judt's new book, «Ill Fares the Land», is a slim and penetrating work, a dying man's sense of a dying idea: the notion that the state can play a significant role in its citizens' lives without imperiling their liberties. It makes sense that this book arrives now, not merely during the hideous

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endgame of the national health-care debate but during mud season; this book's bleak assessment of the selfishness and materialism that have taken root in Western societies will stick to your feet and muddy your floors. But «Ill Fares the Land» is also optimistic, raw and patriotic in its sense of what countries like the United States and Britain have meant – and can continue to mean – to their people and to the world.

«Ill Fares the Land» gets off to a distressing start. Mr. Judt tells us, right off the bat, that his book was «written for young people». Which is something you never want to hear, really. It suggests that we may be in for a graduation speech. And Mr. Judt does occasionally serve microwavable brunch-time banalities. («Young people must not abandon faith in our political institutions», etc.) But these soggy bits are rare.

Instead he is persuasive about the disillusionment that smart, idealistic young people feel today. They do need a talking-to. «The last time a cohort of young people expressed comparable frustration at the emptiness of their lives and the dispiriting purposelessness of their world was in the 1920s», he writes. «It is not by chance that historians speak of a 'lost generation.'» «Mr. Judt does not talk down to these imagined young people; he talks up to them, and the effect is bracing.

Mr. Judt surveys the political and intellectual landscape in Britain and the United States since the 1980s, the Reagan-Thatcher era, and he worries about an increasing and «uncritical adulation of wealth for its own sake». What matters, he writes, «is not how affluent a country is but how unequal it is», and he sees growing and destabilizing inequality almost everywhere. He reminds us that the word «public» – in terms of what a government can provide for the majority of its people – «was not always a term of opprobrium in the national lexicon».

Wistfully, Mr. Judt cites some of the achievements of the Democratic-led Congresses of the 1960s, achievements that would be nearly impossible in today's political climate: «food stamps, Medicare, the Civil Rights Act, Medicaid, Head Start, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting».

Some of these programs are endangered, he writes, thanks to an unhealthy suspicion of our public authorities that has been «elevated to a cult by Know Nothings, States' Rightists, anti-tax campaigners and – most recently – the radio talk show demagogues of the Republican Right». About the absurdities of anti-tax campaigners, he observes that the notion that taxes might «be a contribution to the provision of collective goods that individuals could never afford in isolation (roads, firemen, policemen,

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schools, lamp posts, post offices, not to mention soldiers, warships, and weapons) is rarely considered».

Oddly enough, Mr. Judt writes, the left and right have swapped political modes. The right has become radicalized, abandoning the «social moderation which served it so well from Disraeli to Heath, from Theodore Roosevelt to Nelson Rockefeller». It's the left that now has something to conserve, «the institutions, legislation, services and rights that we have inherited from the great age of 20th-century reform».

What caused this dire loss of faith in our government and leaders? Mr. Judt spreads the blame around. He criticizes the narcissistic left of the 1960s, which was largely uninterested in social justice. «What united the '60s generation was not the interest of all, but the needs and rights of each», he writes. He blames that generation's political leaders too. What the baby-boomer politicians have in common, he notes, is «the enthusiasm that they fail to inspire in the electors of their respective countries».

He surveys an earlier and «superior class of statesmen», who, regardless of its members' political leanings, «represented a political class deeply sensitive to its moral and social responsibilities». Politically speaking, he declares, «ours is an age of the pygmies».

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the West missed an opportunity to reshape the world. «Instead», Mr. Judt writes, «we sat back and congratulated ourselves upon having won the cold war: a sure way to lose the peace». Here is his historical judgment: «The years from 1989 to 2009 were consumed by locusts».

Mr. Judt doesn't spare today's intellectuals, who «have shown remarkably little informed interest in the nitty-gritty of public policy, preferring to intervene or protest on ethically defined topics where the choices seem clearer». He fears we will be «further disappointed» by Barack Obama and other politicians. He is even more concerned that callow politicians like Sarah Palin «can only benefit from rising confusion and anxiety in the face of apparently unmanageable change».

If «Ill Fares the Land» sometimes reads like a graduation speech, then it is the Platonic ideal of one – concise, hardheaded, severe in its moral arguments. «We must revisit the ways in which our grandparents' generation handled comparable challenges and threats», Mr. Judt argues, noting that «social democracy in Europe, the New Deal and the Great Society» were among those rational responses.

It is «incumbent upon us to reconceive the role of government», Mr. Judt admonishes his audience. «If we do not, others will».

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3). Have students experiment with the relationship between their work and work method. Ask them to try tackling an assignment in a few different ways – writing on longhand on paper, simulating typing (no use of backspace, copy and paste, bold or italics, or other computer shortcuts) and/or dictating ideas to a partner.

4). After the experience, debrief by asking students to talk about how both the process and the product differed with each different method of composing.

What was lost, if anything?

What was gained?

What does this experiment tell us about the relationship between the composing method and the composition?

What does it tell us about the writer?

(By Amanda Christy Brown and Holly Epstein Ojalvo,

From The New York Times Learning Network, March 18, 2010)

ADDITIONAL READING MATERIALS

Digital Archivists, Now in Demand

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/jobs/08starts.html%3Cbr%20/%3E>

By CONRAD DE AENLLE

Published: February 7, 2009

WHEN the world entered the digital age, a great majority of human historical records did not immediately make the trip.

Literature, film, scientific journals, newspapers, court records, corporate documents and other material, accumulated over centuries, needed to be adapted for computer databases. Once there, it had to be arranged – along with newer, born-digital material – in a way that would let people find what they needed and keep finding it well into the future.

The people entrusted to find a place for this wealth of information are known as digital asset managers, or sometimes as digital archivists and digital preservation officers. Whatever they are called, demand for them is expanding.

One of them is Jacob Nadal, the preservation officer at the University of California, Los Angeles. He does not use the «digital» modifier because his duties include safeguarding analog materials in U.C.L.A.'s collection, not just preparing them to cross the digital divide.

«I don't think there's any day where I would say I'm the digital guy», he said. But he concedes that he's not really an analog, ink-on-paper guy,

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either, and that is increasingly the case in his field. These days, he noted, «if you want to work in a library, you have to deal in electronic resources».

Mr. Nadal and 10 or so colleagues at U.C.L.A. devote much of their effort to organizing and protecting material in digital form. Their duties include licensing and buying digital content from vendors, assigning identification markers called meta-tags so that material can be found easily, researching copyright matters and ensuring that files remain intact whenever new iterations of relevant software or hardware come along.

Befitting a nascent discipline like digital asset management, Mr. Nadal, 32, said he went into it almost by accident. Unsure of his career ambitions, he began work on various book-scanning and preservation projects as a student at Indiana University, then took them over when the head of preservation left. After that, he said, it «took a year or two for me to realize my career in preservation had started a year or two past».

He reckons that many of his peers have had similar experiences. «Among librarians, I think that happenstance may be a typical career path», he said.

Some backgrounds are considered better than others for budding digital asset managers. Familiarity with information technology is necessary, but it is possible to have too much tech know-how, said Victoria McCargar, a preservation consultant in Los Angeles and a lecturer at U.C.L.A. and San José State University.

«People with I.T. backgrounds tend to be wrong for the job», she said. «They tend to focus on storage solutions: ‘We’ll just throw another 10 terabytes on that server.’» A result, she said, can be «waxy buildup» – a lot of useless files that make it hard to find the good stuff.

Ms. McCargar estimates that 20,000 people work in the field today – plus others in related areas – and she expects that to triple over the next decade, assuming that economic conditions stabilize before long.

Many work for public institutions, and businesses use them, too, said Deborah Schwarz, chief executive of Library Associates Companies, a consulting and headhunting firm. Especially big employers in this area are law firms, which need experts on digital copyright and other issues tied to the migration of legal documents from filing cabinets to databases.

One comparative advantage of private-sector jobs is the pay. Digital asset managers at public facilities would do well to make \$ 70,000 a year. Salaries for their corporate counterparts are generally higher.

«Compensation varies wildly because it’s an emerging area», said Keith Gurtzweiler, vice president for recruiting at Library Associates. «Consultants who can make recommendations on systems can make

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\$ 150 an hour». Those who «manage them once they're up and running and maintain the machinery», he said, make from the \$70,000's up to \$100,000.

Michael Doane is an information management consultant at Ascentium, a consultancy in suburban Seattle that employs 100 to 150 digital asset managers in a staff of 500. He said that fresh graduates with master's degrees in information systems management or a similar discipline could «easily expect \$80,000 to \$90,000 in consulting and a little less in the commercial world».

As much as it might help his bank balance, Mr. Nadal cannot envision leaving U.C.L.A. for a corporate job. He finds the challenge of taming a vast collection of information for a major academic institution too appealing.

«We belong to the people of California and hold our collections in trust for them and for future generations of students, scholars and members of the public», he said. «Public-sector institutions just strike me as far, far cooler. They have better collections, obviously, and they are innovative, connected and challenging in ways that seem more substantial to me».