

Archival Speed Processing (ASP): Using Digital Images and Video as the Initial Step in Collection Description

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In general, due to extreme under-resourcing, most archives have historically had a large processing backlog. In 2005, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner invented the “More Product, Less Process” (MPLP) strategy for accelerating collection processing to reduce archival backlogs. MPLP is based on retaining the original order of archival material as received from the donor. Greene and Meissner also advocated minimal description at all levels of the collection. At the folder level, inventories are to be created using original titles as much as possible. Based on this inventory, the description of the collection can be intellectually re-arranged without changing its folder order. Since 2005, MPLP has been largely accepted, to varying degrees, by the American archival profession as a valid strategy for speeding up collection processing. However, the problem of large, even massive, backlogs remain, particularly for large repositories. For example, the AFL-CIO Records held in the George Meany Memorial Archive at the University of Maryland has approximately 4000 linear feet of processed records and a backlog of over 30,000 linear feet. With one processing archivist, it is estimated that it would take 315 years to process these records, even using a partial MPLP strategy. What can be done to solve this fundamental problem?

Ultra MPLP is an experimental strategy following in the tradition of the original concept. It is an attempt to explore the innovative possibilities of using smartphone imaging capabilities to create a new way to describe collections. Simply put, the idea is to take videos or photographs of boxes of unprocessed material for use in identifying their content. The image files would be linked to any collection level record available internally, or on the web, so that previously inaccessible material would become visible to researchers.

About the author:

Ben Blake has over twenty-one years of experience as an archivist, including developing labor and social justice related collections at archives in Cleveland, San Francisco, Youngstown and Baltimore. He has an MA in labor history from Cleveland State and an MLIS specializing in labor archives from the University of Pittsburgh. Since 2016, Ben has been the archivist for the Social Justice and Labor Archives Program at the University of Maryland, College Park. His current responsibilities include all aspects of archives, including acquisitions, processing, digitization, web development, outreach, and reference service. Ben manages an archive with a volume of over 35,000 linear feet, which includes the official repositories for the national historical records of the AFL-CIO, carpenters’ union and the bakery workers Union. Ben has been involved in major projects around the country documenting steelworkers, teamsters, health care workers, and the LGBTQ community. In 2021, he was the primary author of a \$350,000 grant to digitize 80,000 pages and 20 documentary films of the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department Records. Ben’s scholarly interests include depression era labor and left political history, the current and historical intersectionality of organized labor and Black workers, developing photo and video techniques to speed up collection description, and the current state of the theory and practice of labor and social justice archives. Most recently, Ben has been

experimenting with ways to document social protest as it happens, including Black Lives Matter, pro-choice and labor actions in real time.