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# Digitizing the *Ivan Doig Archive* at Montana State University: a rise to the challenge illustrates creative tension

[ivandoig.montana.edu](http://ivandoig.montana.edu)

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## Abstract

This article contextualizes the leadership concept of creative tension by describing the acquisition, processing and digitization of the *Ivan Doig Archive* at the Montana State University Library. The project is framed as an illustration of strategies that can generate and sustain momentum toward achieving ambitious goals while building staff confidence. Perspectives from library staff and faculty who worked on the project are included alongside the view of the dean and an external organizational development manager.

## Keywords

Ivan Doig; special collections; archives; digitization; cultural heritage; creative tension; leadership strategies; learning organizations; staff engagement; vision; outreach

## Introduction

Ivan Doig was a Montana-born writer whose sixteen novels and memoirs established him as the “dean of western writers,” an informal title previously bestowed upon Wallace Stegner by the literary community (Clarridge, 2016). Doig passed away in April 2015 after an eight-year battle with multiple myeloma, a disease he described as “the waiting room of Hell furnished with side effects (I. Doig, 2007).” He wrote his last four novels as the disease ravaged his body.

Despite having lived in Seattle the last forty years of his life, the settings for Doig’s stories were almost exclusively Montana and the characters were usually composites of Montanans he grew up with in the shepherding and ranching communities, first in White Sulphur Springs, north of Bozeman, and then on the Rocky Mountain Front, west of Great Falls. He was known for his meticulous research, his command of the English language, and an imagination that didn’t quit until he passed away. His widow, Carol Muller Doig, is fond of saying that Ivan didn’t run out of ideas, he just ran out of time.

In the summer of 2015 Carol Doig and Betty Mayfield, a close personal friend and librarian who had helped Ivan organize his papers in the last months of his life, began to shorten the list of possible universities from which they planned to solicit proposals. Montana State University in Bozeman landed on that short list. Aside from the obvious concerns about whether the chosen library would provide proper care and storage of the print collection, Carol and Betty sought an institution that would honor Ivan’s wish that the collection be quickly made available to the public as well as to students and faculty researchers.

The dean and associate dean of the MSU Library visited the Doig residence in Seattle in August to review the collection, and less than two weeks later MSU submitted a proposal to Carol Doig.

## The Proposal

The proposal to acquire the archive was a joint effort of the Library and the College of Letters and Science (Arlitsch & Rae, 2015). Outstanding aspects of the proposal were:

1. Digitization of the entire collection and availability on a public website within one year.
2. Integration of the collection with CLS history and literature classes.
3. Markup of the digitized text for machine readability and development of software applications to facilitate digital humanities scholarship.
4. An international symposium to be held in Bozeman in September 2017.

Twenty-six letters of support from local writers, leaders in the community, and university faculty and administrators helped tip the balance in MSU's favor. The archive was awarded to the MSU Library in early September 2015.

## The Archive

The *Ivan Doig Archive* reveals the exquisite detail with which the writer chronicled his life and his work. Doig was a diligent author who strove to produce roughly 400 words nearly every day, and yet he still found time to write hundreds of letters to fans and colleagues, document his extensive research, write copious notes, and keep a journal. The archive includes manuscripts of each of his sixteen novels marked up with Ivan's own hand; notecards with ideas or phrases ("Scotchisms," for instance); correspondence; interviews; notebooks; memorabilia; and thousands of photographs. Formats include audio and video files, as well as 35mm slides, photograph albums, notebooks, loose paper, loosely-bound manuscripts, etc.

Among the more poignant pieces of the archive are the twelve rejection letters ("Harcourt Brace Jovanovich - This House of Sky (cont.)," 1977) Ivan received from publishers before Harcourt Brace Jovanovich agreed in 1977 to give a try to his first, and subsequently most famous book, *This House of Sky*, a wrenching memoir of his childhood, laced with pain and the realism of 1930's rural Montana from its very first line:

*Soon after daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. And then stopped.*

*(I. Doig, 1978)*

There is more. Interviews with family members and former neighbors informed later books. Speeches he delivered were marked by hand to assure just the right tempo and flow when he delivered them verbally. And Ivan's fight with multiple myeloma is documented in his medical records along with his own notes and observations of the disease.

## Staff Engagement

The collection was retrieved in Seattle by MSU archivists, Kim Scott and Jim Thull, in early October 2015 and brought to Bozeman, where processing began immediately to integrate the print material into the *Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections* of the MSU Library. Initial excitement at having acquired the archive soon sagged in the face of the task ahead. At a meeting in November the team that had been assigned to digitize the collection expressed shock when they realized the short timeline for digitization that their dean had promised Carol Doig. The idea that the entire collection could/should be digitized was questioned.

As the project progressed and staff delved deeper into the archive, personal connections began to form with the content that helped to fuel the creativity, collaboration, and excitement necessary to digitize the collection within the given timeframe. Much of collection covers areas proximate to Bozeman and greater Montana, and many of the staff working on the project are familiar with those places and even with the archetypes of the characters in Doig's writings.

White Sulphur Springs, Doig's birthplace, is separated from Bozeman by the Bridger Mountains and an 80-mile drive. This closeness to the landscape that inspired Doig encouraged staff to form personal relationships with the archive. The adjacency even influenced two project team members to embark on a journey in search of the original David Doig Homestead, site of the 1978 Doig Family reunion and a well-documented location within the photographs in the collection. In theory, the endpoint of the trip was just over the hill, but the chosen route and the risk involved to locate the homestead was too much. They never reached it but have plans to attempt the excursion again.

The attachment staff began to feel toward this collection spurred road trips, but it also powered ambitions to work collaboratively, eventually utilizing the skills, talents, and abilities of staff across six different departments within the library. In a project of this size and scale, distress and apprehension are inevitable, but they were minimized through the collaboration of the tightknit team. Outside influences were also very much at play. MSU Library forged a tremendous relationship with Carol Doig, as she shared her knowledge of the collection and served as a catalyst for staff morale. Receiving positive comments, appreciation, and accolades from the person who knew Ivan best kept staff cognizant of the human element. Staff were entrusted to undertake a project that revealed the most private moments of two lives, and that responsibility alone bolstered much of the care and attention given to the archive.

The diligence of the staff was appreciated early on by many in Montana and beyond who knew Doig personally or only as a writer. For example, Doig corresponded with a friend by the name of Theresa Buckingham, who has since passed away. Staff made contact with Theresa's daughter to ask permission to make the correspondence public, and in exchange, the letters and oral interviews that Doig conducted with Theresa in 1977 and 1986 were also shared with Theresa's daughter. It was heartwarming to reconnect someone to their parents' voices through the archive. Throughout the project, staff continued to only receive positive

reactions from those who felt Doig had rightfully returned home to Montana, the place he had claimed held him in its spell.

### Processing the Print Collection

MSU Special Collections staff worked quickly to process the collection and create the finding aid (I. Doig, 2016), a detailed inventory of the archive that describes the order and organization of the physical collection. The finding aid also illustrates the capacity of the physical collection, which consists of 183 boxes divided into 12 series and 31 sub-series, and occupies 110 linear feet of shelf space. The development of the finding aid allowed project leads to begin negotiations with vendors and metadata description, but vendor conversations depended on knowing information about the material before the Special Collections staff had time to fully assess it.

The disruption of normal archival workflows caused tension between the those processing the physical collection and the staff tasked with outsourcing some of the digitization. Often, the specific details needed by vendors hinged on the order of the archive as determined by Special Collections. In order to provide accurate quotes and timelines, digitization vendors needed specific information, such as how many folders were in a box the details of their physical contents (double-sided or single-sided pages, typed or hand-written notes, etc). Tensions were eased by opening channels of communication, which clarified goals through many diplomatic conversations.

### Digitization and Database Loading

Within a week of the physical collection arriving in Bozeman, Special Collections staff began digitizing some of the content on location. Manuscripts and other manageable paper formats, including Doig's personal diaries, were scanned in-house by students working in Special Collections and in Resource Description and Metadata Services (RDMS). More cumbersome formats, such as the notecards, 35mm slides, audio reel-to-reel and cassette tapes, and video VHS and CD, were outsourced to several different digitization firms.

Each collection series was loaded into the database in the form of a spreadsheet, which captured the MODS schema used for the metadata. Over fifty fields were utilized to make the digital collection useful to researchers and enthusiasts alike. Not every object had values assigned to all those fields, and many of the fields were specific to the media. For example, the audio and video objects had genre-specific metadata fields that did not make sense to use for a manuscript. The RDMS team focused on completing the metadata fields that were needed to be interoperable in other larger digital collections, such as the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA).

### Website Development

Website development began in early January when the 'ivandoig.montana.edu' domain was secured, and space was created within the university's content

management system. A plan to add content was established and work to populate the website began immediately. By the end of March, the website was made available to users beyond the MSU network, although the URL was not promoted. As the database and digital content grew, so did the amount of content released to the website. In July, the website was verified through the Google Search Console so that staff could begin tracking search queries and traffic through Google Analytics. Through cooperative efforts, inbounds links were created to connect the website to [ivandoig.com](http://ivandoig.com), the site maintained by Doig's publisher.

### Setting Realistic Goals

One of the techniques the staff used to address the challenges was setting milestones to keep the project within the overall deadline. RDMS staff were asked to describe thousands of scanned objects within just a few months, which seemed overwhelming and unobtainable. To ease anxiety, the larger task was divided into several smaller projects and assigned individual completion dates for upload into the database. The dates projections were based on when digitized material was expected to return from vendors.

The deadlines were intended to help pace the metadata team, but as the launch date drew nearer, the task still seemed intimidating. To ease panic, the original milestones were modified to calculate the completion of records per day required in order to stay on track. 35 records a day sounds a lot less daunting than 1662 records total. This new way to visualize the goal kept the project grounded in reality, which in turn boosted staff morale and motivation.

The goals and communication methods that were established and set forth by staff were transparent. Through the use of emails, small team meetings, an intranet and shared drives, everyone assigned to the project had access to documents, spreadsheets, and files that could be referenced at any time to gain an understanding of where the project stood. Core project leads had open door policies to welcome feedback or ideas and were willing to take concerns to library administration when appropriate. Although the project manager sent reports and updated the dean on the team's progress, staff appointed to this project were usually self-sufficient and tended to work together to create solutions before involving higher leadership.

### Student Engagement

In late spring semester of 2016, Professor and Outreach Librarian Jan Zauha, who serves as subject librarian to History, English, and American Studies, collaborated with Kate Ryan, a faculty member from the MSU English department. Together they planned a series of classes for students who were completing their capstone writing requirement (WRIT 494), the first class at MSU to engage with the archive. The basis of these senior students' assignment was to design potential future digital humanities projects that could stem from the *Ivan Doig Archive*. To complete this project, the students were given access to the available digital content. They were

also introduced to the MSU Special Collections Reading Room and encouraged to explore the physical collection. When Zauha asked students to describe working with the archive one of the students called it “fascinating and hard to put down.” Another stated, “This was truly one of the coolest experiences I’ve had in a course at MSU.”

In fall 2016, Zauha is co-teaching history capstone students (HSTR 499), with Mary Murphy, a Montana historian and MSU Letters and Science Distinguished Professor. Students in this course are reading an Ivan Doig novel of their choice and using both the digital and physical collections as a springboard into other archival and digital collections at the MSU Library. In addition, Ryan and Zauha are again partnering to integrate the *Ivan Doig Archive* into another digital rhetoric writing course (WRIT 371). The focus is on digital humanities and students are being asked to create web texts that will engage others in the *Ivan Doig Archive*; these will be published on the website.

## Outreach

The proposal to acquire the *Ivan Doig Archive* promised not only to make the collection accessible in physical and digital formats, but it also included plans to expose and promote the collection. Ivan Doig's appeal to readers and his life-long activities in the book community in Montana and beyond make his archive potentially attractive to a wide range of people, including scholars, students, readers, locals who knew him, and writers at all levels. Without promotional efforts, however, the archive might suffer the fate of other special collections and remain an unused jewel.

In order to spread knowledge and build community and academic interest in the archive, Outreach Librarian Jan Zauha began seeking appropriate presentation venues as soon as digitization began. In March 2016, a local community discussion program sponsored by the Friends of MSU Library provided the first opportunity for Zauha and McKelvey to showcase images of Doig Archive jewels. Zauha and McKelvey's panel program was then accepted for the Montana Library Association's (MLA) annual conference in April 2016. This panel featured library staff members representing all aspects of the project, from processing to teaching, and further solidified cross-departmental relations. By fall 2016, a panel presentation at the Western Literature Association's (WLA) annual conference expanded the library's collaborative circle to include a local bookseller, the owner of Bozeman's *Country Bookshelf*, who knew Doig and who promotes his books extensively in the community. This presentation assured the wider exposure needed to seed academic interest in the Doig Symposium planned for fall 2017.

These outreach efforts continue and include introducing local books groups to the archive as they read Doig's works, providing public or personal tours of the archive on demand, a nascent campus book group, another MLA proposal for spring 2017, and extensive planning for international and local content at the Ivan Doig Symposium in fall 2017.

## Official Launch of the Archive

In September 2016, less than one year after acquiring the archive, MSU Library held an event to officially open the print and digital versions of the *Ivan Doig Archive* to the community. Three hundred people attended, including Carol Doig and Betty Mayfield, who served on a panel discussion, along with author Rick Bass, historian Marcella Sherfy Walter, and MSU professor of history, Dr. Mary Murphy. University president, Waded Cruzado, Dean Arlitsch, and Dean Rae addressed the audience, and Profs. Zauha and McKelvey demonstrated the website. Audience members were invited to speak and many took the opportunity to relate personal stories to what they were already discovering on the website (“Ivan Doig,” 2016a).

## Why this Project is Different

This project stands out from most other acquisitions of archival collections due mainly to the speed with which it was processed and digitized. Archival processing backlogs are a well-known and longstanding problem, with studies showing that “60% of repositories have at least a third of their collections unprocessed” and that the problem is global (Greene & Meissner, 2005). A 1998 study from the Association of Research Libraries found that “significant portions of many special collections have not yet been cataloged or processed,” and noted that “these backlogs impede full access and optimal use of special collections materials” (Panitch, 2001). A study by Research Libraries UK found that 18.5% of the total holdings of special collections in the libraries of England, Scotland and Ireland were essentially “hidden,” meaning that no cataloging record or inventory existed for a given collection (Mertens & Garcia-Ontiveros, 2012).

The reasons for these hidden collections have mostly to do with limited resources, but “overprocessing” is also a noted concern and some reports have made suggestions to improve the process (Greene & Meissner, 2005). The known lack of access influenced the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) to launch its *Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives* program in 2008 (CLIR, 2014), and which has now evolved into a *Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives* funding program. Both programs have been supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Internet access to archival collections is most often limited to finding aids, but even there it is estimated that “internet-accessible finding aids currently exist for only 44 percent of archival collections” (Santamaria, 2015). Processing backlogs frustrate scholars and other users who would like to see the materials, and can result in unhappy donors (Greene & Meissner, 2005). Ideally, Internet access to archival collections includes not only the finding aid but the digitized objects of the entire collection, or at least its more significant parts.

The presence of Ivan’s medical records in the print and digital collection is also unusual. Carol Doig was insistent that his medical journey, which many people would choose to keep private, was an important part of the story because “no estimate of Ivan’s achievements as a writer would be complete without consideration of what he accomplished after he had been diagnosed with a fatal

disease”(C. M. Doig, 2015). Ivan’s last four novels were written as he struggled with his cancer.

The integration of sound into the website is a further unusual aspect for a literary archive. Recordings of interviews with Ivan were a part of the collection, as were recordings of interviews he conducted with some of the subjects of his research and some of the speeches and presentations he gave. Those were digitized and made available on the website, but the MSU Library also leveraged its own natural sounds archive, the *Acoustic Atlas* (Montana State University Library, 2013). The executive director and principal recordist of the *Acoustic Atlas*, Jeff Rice, ventured into the Montana settings of Doig’s childhood, and into the wider Montana and Washington state settings of his books. The resulting recordings, which include interviews with people familiar with Doig and his family, are available on the website and will become of a part of the software applications that are currently being built.

The focus on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and discoverability is a priority for all digital repositories at MSU Library, and was heavily emphasized in the proposal given to Carol Doig. As a result of this emphasis, staff had to address challenges that other digitized collections might not, but SEO has ensured this collection is discoverable by search engines and machine readable. One minor example of SEO emphasis was creating unique titles for each digital object. Approximately one third of the photographic slides were untitled or had duplicate titles. These titles needed to be altered to address the knowledge that search engine crawlers soon give up on indexing metadata if they cannot distinguish unique items (Arlitsch & OBrien, 2013). The existing Wikipedia article about Doig was also enhanced (“Ivan Doig,” 2016a), as was the Wikidata record (“Ivan Doig,” 2016b), both of which will help supply machine-readable structured data to search engines that are relying ever more on the entity-based environment of the Semantic Web.

## Future Plans

Digitizing a collection to make it available for viewing and reading on the web dramatically increases its reach, but so much more is possible in the age of digital scholarship. Plans for making the collection usable to digital humanities scholars include a short-term proof-of-concept project to mark up the text of one manuscript with Schema.org, load that data set into a triple store database, and provide a SPARQL endpoint for queries and analysis. The data model that is developed for this single manuscript will then be applied to other materials in the archive.

Longer term plans (in the next 1-3 years) include development of several software applications to help scholars take advantage of the marked up and geo-referenced text. Some preliminary ideas that were scoped in the proposal include:

1. A geo-visualization application mapping a tour of places and characters in Doig’s novels.

2. Crowdsourced annotations to select manuscripts, allowing readers to share thoughts and commentary on the manuscripts.
3. An application similar to Google Maps with a historical slider that shows time and space in Doig's novels and how landscapes and environments change over time; using manuscripts as source for the data.
4. An affinity mapping and graph visualization app of Doig collaborators and partners to show his influence over time and show the broader author tree that explains his writings origins.

## Leadership Lessons

The *Ivan Doig Archive* project presented an opportunity for MSU Library's staff to envision an ambitious, concrete, and near-term future that looked radically different from the reality they knew in 2015. It also presented an opportunity for staff to imagine a nightmare scenario in which months of hard work on an insurmountable task would lead to public failure. What enabled the staff to overcome their initial skepticism and achieve such impressive results?

MSU Library's experience illustrates the power of a principle popularized by Peter Senge in his seminal 1990 article on learning organizations (Senge, Peter M., 1990). Drawing on the work of Robert Fritz, who developed a theory of the creative process that he sought to apply in both personal and organizational contexts (Fritz, 1989), Senge argues that creative tension is the primary tool a leader should use to move the organization forward. Creative tension is generated by the gap between a vision (a compelling picture of where we want to go) and the current reality (an accurate assessment of where we are in relation to that vision). Senge contrasts this approach with problem solving, which is focused on "attempting to get away from an aspect of current reality that is undesirable" (Senge, Peter M., 1990). Creative tension is instead focused on achieving the vision, using current reality as a jumping-off point. Senge claims that the creative approach draws on intrinsic motivation that will sustain energy for change when the "picture of what might be is more important to people than what is" (Senge, Peter M., 1990).

When the vision for the archive was first laid out, MSU Library's staff felt what Fritz describes as the "burst of energy" that accompanies the early stages of a creative process (Fritz, 1989). That energy was maintained by: 1) internalization of the vision through deep engagement; and 2) ongoing efforts to understand, communicate, and redefine the current reality. As staff worked with the contents of the archive, each other, and external stakeholders, they moved into a new stage of the creative process, where the vision took root and began "growing organically, developing from within, and calling forth inner resources" (Fritz, 1989). Handling artifacts, visiting sites, and communicating with Carol Doig and others who knew the author allowed staff to literally feel, see, and hear the vision taking shape. As the vision became clearer, the current reality also came into sharper focus. Creation of the finding aid, for example, provided a sense of scope and order, allowing staff to view and describe the project in rational terms. Incorporating processing rates into the milestones served as a reality check when staff felt overwhelmed and allowed

staff to see that their daily work was actually bringing current reality closer and closer toward the vision. Giving students access to the incomplete archive validated the value of work already done and demonstrated the potential impact of the final product. The positive results of these efforts demonstrate that “an accurate picture of current reality is just as important as a compelling picture of a desired future” (Senge, Peter M., 1990).

Leaders who want to engage staff in achieving ambitious goals can use the principle of creative tension to set up a structure that naturally generates momentum. This requires developing a vision that is:

- **Bold** - the difference between today and the desired future has to be significant enough to capture people’s imagination and compel action
- **Tangible** - the desired future must look like something that people can relate to; the leader should be able to describe it in specific, outcome-oriented terms (*create a world-class, publicly accessible archive of one of our most important western writers that anyone in the world will be able to freely use*) rather than general, process-oriented ones (*digitize the Doig papers*)
- **Meaningful** - the desired future must be grounded in the values held by the organization and the individuals involved; people must feel personally attached to creating the vision

Working with creative tension also requires a continual assessment of current reality. The leader should be prepared to engage in multiple conversations revolving around:

- **Sharing data** - people involved in achieving the vision must have access to objective information about where things currently stand and what it will take to get from here to there; leaders must be open to discovering and acting upon information from others
- **Testing assumptions** - data and experimentation can be used to differentiate between what people may believe about the situation and what is actually occurring
- **Revising perspective** - as the group makes progress toward the vision, the current reality changes; leaders should help others see their role in creating that new reality and seek to understand how it will influence the direction of the project

## Conclusion

It should be noted that the *Ivan Doig Archive* project was not completed without flaws and that it challenged the learning curves of some staff who weren’t new to the library, but were new to their positions in relation to the project. These challenges included negotiating with a multitude of vendors and grasping the unique lingo used to describe different formats within the collection, specifically the audiovisual material. Perhaps the most complex challenge was keeping the multiple phases of the project coordinated through constant communication. These phases

included data storage management, database and application development, website design, copyright, metadata, digitization outsourcing, outreach, Semantic Web and SEO techniques, integration with an existing digital collection, and conducting user experience research.

During the last year, challenges have taught staff new knowledge and equipped them with valuable insights. To ensure longevity and on-going commitment to the success of the archive, staff intend to assess the overall impact of the *Ivan Doig Archive* on the MSU Library. A detailed project report is in the works which will highlight successes and failures, lessons learned, and include suggestions for approaching future digitization projects of this scale.

The tangible results of this project are obvious. A world-class literary archive is now easily available to students, researchers and the lay public, either by visiting the MSU Library or by viewing the digitized version of the collection at <http://ivandoig.montana.edu>.

The intangible results are less obvious, but for the MSU and its library organization they are perhaps even more important. First, MSU has gained prestige, particularly in its community and among its local writers. The collection will help strengthen MSU's humanities programs and the richness of the experience of its students and faculty. Second, in completing what they initially thought was an impossible task, the library staff and faculty have gained an immeasurable sense of confidence and pride.

Some of the same staff are currently engaged in another large project to migrate to a single cloud-based Uniform Resource Management system, along with 15 other academic libraries in Montana. This historic effort of the academic libraries promises a future of greater cooperation that will increase student and faculty access to information sources regardless of their location or affiliation. It also brings deadlines and steep learning curves that result in new stress. Once again, staff and faculty are being stretched to achieve a bold, tangible, and meaningful vision. The confidence they earned from the successful completion of the Doig project is immeasurable in this context.

## Acknowledgement

The authors are pleased to share the following comments from Carol Muller Doig, who reviewed a draft of this article prior to submission: "I am enthusiastic about the progress made during MSU's first year of work on the *Ivan Doig Archive*. I've now met the staff and have congratulated them on their superb work."

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