11 January 2013

To the SPIRL Jury:

This letter comes to nominate the NYPL Labs of the New York Public Library for consideration for the Stanford Prize for Innovation in Research Libraries. This effort has received a fair amount of attention and publicity, and I’ve been watching with keen interest its evolution over the past months. NYPL seems to have achieved in a distinctive way a kind of success that many others have spoken about but few have been able to bring to reality. The Labs project represents the best intersection between a "skunk works" and a user-driven service bureau.

I am not associated with NYPL and am not in a position to provide the package of information that you request of self-nominators. The core of publicly available information for them is on their website at http://www.nypl.org/collections/labs, and their blog linked there at http://www.nypl.org/voices/blogs/blog-channels/nypl-labs offers some richness of context for what they are doing. They list team members, but I have no way of knowing, e.g., who is full-time and who is on secondment part-time, who is library staff and who is consultant. I hope that SPIRL can give serious consideration to the project in spite of the defects of my knowledge and thus of this letter.

NYPL Labs introduces itself as a "startup" within the New York Public Library, devoted to an impressively wide-range of projects that apply digital technology to collections, services, and the institution’s mission in imaginative and effective ways. They have an excellent record of delivering product quickly. Some of this they achieve not by doing huge projects in short times, but by designing projects where "product" begins to be available and useful at an early phase of the project, even while other work continues. Almost everything they do has something to show for it very quickly, even if the full richness of the work will take time to accomplish.
What has struck me as I have watched their work over time is that they use the spirit of a startup and skunk works well to expand in imagination and in fact the range of the library's contribution. By this, I mean that they do not look to automate traditional processes or digitize traditional collections; much of that is necessary and any library worth its salt has learned how to do those things. They do not even look to expand at the margins by doing more-better-faster. Under that category I think of projects, e.g., that develop metadata for materials that are already in collections but had been impractical to document before the advance of digital technology.

Instead, NYPL labs is looking about with a fresh eye and an eager ability to make real world projects happen right now, asking the question: what else is there that can benefit from the discipline, professionalism, commitment, and skills of librarianship, once you provide libraries with tools? So the project to figure out how to use new technology to re-enliven old stereograph photographs from the nineteenth century will have some of the effect of conservation and some of the effect of documentation, but will in fact be bringing a huge quantity of archival materials back to a life very much like the one they had when new.

Similarly, the "Mapping New York's Shoreline" project roots itself in their ambitious New York City Historical GIS project, but goes beyond the basics of GIS to draw in archival photos to supplement digitized and geo-rectified maps with historic photos that give a visual dimension to the work, enabling users to go from the mapped history to a representation of that history in old photographs and other images. Both the maps and the images become more valuable in the process of that collocation.

I would also praise their ingenious use of crowdsourcing in their "What's On the Menu" project. Crowdsourcing is a tricky business, because of issues of quality control and responsibility, but NYPL Labs hit a sweet spot here with a huge collection of archival menus from New York City restaurants. Such documents would be hard to submit to any automated OCR, given the stunningly nonstandard variety of layouts, fonts, abbreviations, and conventions. Hand-coding is needed, but no significant technical education is required to read and transcribe a menu. They tweeted an invitation, had 2000 participants in forty-eight hours, and a year later had transcribed entries for over 800,000 dishes. The project is undoubtedly entertaining for both library staff and participants, but the result will be a serious resource for students of New York social, cultural, and culinary history -- and not only for New York. But the real genius of this project is that it engages public participation in a way that also communicates very effectively the seriousness and interest of library work, the kind of contribution it can make to the self-understanding of a community, and thus some of the reasons why such institutions need support. This is a project that can be initiated and run with low overhead, with immediate and real product, and with collateral benefits that more than reward the investment.

In a different and more focused way, NYPL Labs are using crowdsourcing in their "Map Rectifier" project, inviting public contribution to the clarification and correction of maps. Here the underlying mapping project is complex, technical, and hardly susceptible to crowdsourcing, but asking New Yorkers to look at maps and tell what they see is wrong
or misplaced or misspelled is an intellectually simple move that, again, can improve the quality of a very serious problem and engage the public in a way of benefit to all.

Other projects bring new technology to work to create valuable resources for the history of sports and the history of business and the history of show business. NYPL Labs also contributes significantly to projects of a more traditional library and scholarly nature, as with the upcoming work on the Shelley-Godwin archive, drawing together materials from libraries around the world, the better to do stewardship and curatorship for the Pforzheimer Shelley collection, held at NYPL and comprising something like 90% of the Shelley manuscript resources worldwide. High culture and low, low-hanging fruit and more venturesome projects, the portfolio NYPL Labs has created is imaginative and successful. I infer that one strength of the project is the way the projects are designed and integrated both to take advantage of the staff resources on hand, but also to enhance development of staff both for individuals (with skills and experience from one project supporting future work) and for the library (building a team with capacity that can move from each project forward to more ambitious ones).

I do not envy the SPIRL selectors their task of comparing and evaluating what I am sure will be a significant assembly of nominations highlighting the best work of contemporary librarianship. From my perspective, NYPL Labs will make a distinctive showing in any such comparison. I hope they make your work very difficult indeed!

With best wishes,

James O'Donnell  
University Professor  
Georgetown University
Dear Sonia, please find in this email and attached some materials in support of our nomination for SPIRL by James O'Donnell. These just help provide a little background info for the prize committee's convenience. It was my understanding that Mr. O'Donnell's nomination was the official entry, and that this is supplemental. Please let us know if you need anything else!

Here are some Labs links:

General info page (contains links to live projects): http://www.nypl.org/collections/labs

Signature projects:

- Stereogranimator - http://stereo.nypl.org
- Direct Me NYC: 1940 - http://directme.nypl.org
- Map Warper - http://maps.nypl.org
- Archives prototype - http://archives.nypl.org/collection1

Recent press (selected):

- Library Journal - "Dicing Data with NYPL Labs" (cover story)
- Chronicle of Higher Ed - "Breaking Down Menus Digitally, Dish by Dish"
- Gothamist - "Recluse J.D. Salinger Found Using NYPL’s 1940 Census Tool"
- Huffington Post - "Elephant-Shaped Buildings and Other Curiosities"
- Food + Tech - "NYPL Digitizes Restaurant Menu Archive, turns it into Open Data API"
- WNYC - New Tech City - "The Future of Libraries" (audio)

Best,

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ABOUT NYPL LABS

Founded in 2011, NYPL Labs is an experimental design and technology unit creating interactive experiences around research library collections and data. Based at NYPL’s flagship branch on 42nd Street, Labs operates as an in-house startup, working closely with curators to develop projects that push the envelope of library practice, engage new audiences through user collaboration and crowdsourcing, and accelerate the flow of cultural heritage content, data and code into the digital commons.

In *What’s on the Menu?*, Labs worked with NYPL’s Rare Book Division to develop a public transcription initiative around the Library’s famed Buttolph Collection of restaurant and banquet menus. With the users’ help, this unique, continually expanding resource now contains over a million dishes that can be searched, tracked and analyzed across the collection. One of the most successful and celebrated library crowdsourcing projects, *What’s on the Menu?* has inspired similar initiatives at Oxford’s Bodleian Libraries and elsewhere, and is providing a template for more scaled user participation efforts at NYPL.

In *Direct Me NYC: 1940*, Labs worked with NYPL’s Milstein Division of Local/U.S. History and Genealogy to develop a quick, creative response to the release this past April of the 1940 Federal Census records. To assist users in navigating the then unsearchable census, Labs
digitized 1940 telephone directories from the five boroughs of New York City and connected them to a street index of census districts. In just a few simple steps, users could find a name/address in the phone book, convert that address into a district, and then continue to the National Archives to explore a local set of census records.

In the Stereogranimator, users invited to transform stereographs from the Library's Photography Collection into web-friendly 3D formats (animated "wiggle" GIFS and red-cyan anaglyphs). Originally inspired by a patron’s art project, tens of thousands of new works have been created by the public in what is perhaps the Library’s most successful viral media experiment.

Over the past six months, Labs has deeply immersed in work with the Library’s Manuscripts and Archives division on a new finding aid interface and data platform. The new interface just made its debut in a prototype release around the Emmet Collection of materials pertaining to the American Revolution and will gradually come to encompass all archival data and digitized assets at NYPL.

NYPL Labs also continues to be deeply engaged with the Library’s Map Division, providing support to its ongoing Map Warper GIS project, and helping to frame out an ambitious digital gazetteer project aggregating geospatial data of historical New York City.

Through these and other projects, NYPL Labs imagines new possibilities for humanities research in the digital medium, and in involving curators and archivists so deeply in the design and conceptualization of tools, has pioneered a unique interdisciplinary approach to library technology work.

Ben Vershbow, manager of NYPL Labs, joined The New York Public Library in 2008. Previously he worked with Bob Stein as editorial director of the Institute for the Future of the Book, a Brooklyn-based think tank exploring the evolution of reading, writing and publishing. Ben holds a B.A. in theater studies from Yale and is active around New York as a writer, director and performer.
What’s on the Menu?

Direct Me NYC 1940

Jerome "J.D." Salinger, 1133 Park Av, Manhattan, NY

1940 Census ED numbers for this address

Search results by selecting cross or back streets on the same name city blocks (use reference maps to help locate).

Tip: you may not be able to reduce to a single ED (block).

Select cross back street.

Results powered by the One-Stop
work of Stephen Morse and Joel
Whitnood.

Click ID# to explore 1940 Census
Records at National Archives:

31-193A 31-1302B 31-815
31-816 31-816 31-815
31-815 31-821 31-947
31-850 31-860 31-1331
31-1305 31-1306 31-1337
31-1308 31-1309 31-1312

Maps for reference purposes only. Original location could differ.

Mfd. 1941-1942

News for 09/27/1940

Consumer to Be Asked to End Stagnation. He Adds to Oniona . . . R A ?

Headlines via The New York Times