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Special Collections: Improving Access and Usability

SUNGHAE RESS

Wimberly Library, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL

This article explores ways to increase access and usability of special collections by leveraging the value of open access and the value of collaboration. Tools that enhance discovery of special collections through the Internet, contextualize, and actively engage the user such as BibilioBoard, Historypin, and Augmented Reality can be an integral part of a strategy to increase access to special collections. More importantly, reference librarians can play a key role in facilitating discovery and access by including special collections in reference searches and by expanding their collaborative and liaison activities.

KEYWORDS Augmented Reality, BibilioBoard, Historypin, metadata, open access, reference, special collections

BACKGROUND

In this evolving information landscape, special collections are positioned to fill the gaps created by main collections that appear more and more uniform across academic libraries. The uniqueness of special collections provides a value-added service by filling information gaps for researchers, students, faculty, and the community at large. Therefore, increasing access and use of special collections can concretely demonstrate impact in advancing institutional missions of scholarship and research. However, there are challenges to making these unique materials available for use. Librarians have a dual responsibility to special collections. As caretakers of special materials, there is the responsibility of preservation and safekeeping for the benefit of future generations, as well as the equally important responsibility of making these

Address correspondence to Sunghae Ress, Wimberly Library, Florida Atlantic University, Room 223, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton, FL 33431. E-mail: sress@fau.edu

very same materials available for use now. Librarians can fulfill both respon-sibilities by leveraging open access, metadata, and collaboration to build a user-centric strategy for improving access and usability of special collections. More important, reference librarians can play a key role in facilitating dis-covery and access by including special collections in reference searches and by expanding their collaborative and liaison activities.

BUILDING A STRATEGY TO INCREASE ACCESS AND USABILITY

One of the core missions of an academic library is to increase access to its collections to promote learning, teaching, and research. Access includes the process of discovery coupled with the ability to use this material in various ways—ranging from viewing it online to downloading to a user's devices to printing. Libraries have made progress in making special collections accessi-ble through digitizing, cataloging, creating finding aids, displaying exhibits, and integrating special collections into curricula. No one magical tool or pro-cess can solve the access issue. Rather, a cascade of services and tools are required to build an effective strategy.

Value of Open Access and Metadata

To truly facilitate broad dissemination of special collections, open access cannot be ignored. Johnson (2002) stated that one of the essential ele-ments of an institutional repository is being "open and interoperable." Although institutional repositories were originally created for grey literature and other institutional outputs, putting digitized special collections in insti-tutional repositories increases access (Whittaker, 2006). As more users turn to the Internet to search for information, metadata plays a crucial role in discovery. Sutton (2012) cited Schaffner's article "Metadata is the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections, Synthesized From User Studies," and "The Digital Information Seeker: Report of Findings From Selected OCLC, RIN, and JISC User Behaviour Projects" which found that metadata are becoming more important for information dis-covery on the web. Releasing collection- and item-level metadata for search engines to crawl and index also heightens discovery of special collections via Google.

Value of Collaboration

Special collections are relevant to the academic community, and equally well suited for the community at large for independent research, lifelong learn-ing, or leisure. Using special collections for outreach and fund raising is

well documented in the literature, for it strengthens community relation-
ships and aligns with institutional missions (Harris & Weller, 2012; Seal,
2012). Other examples of collaborative opportunities for special collections
are with interlibrary loan and reference departments. According to Gee and
Legge (2012), using interlibrary loan and digitization on demand to broaden
access to special collections is growing in acceptance. Smooth workflow
processes can be put in place to maximize efficiency and collaboration
both within and across institutions. In 2012, the ACRL Board of Directors
approved the *ACRL/RBMS Guidelines for Interlibrary and Exhibition Loan of
Special Collections Materials* to increase access and awareness of special col-
lections. Whether actual lending of truly rare materials through interlibrary
loan will become mainstream is yet to be seen, but libraries can also learn
from museums, as museums have practiced lending and borrowing of art
between institutions for a long time. Library instruction is an integral part
of reference service. In addition to engaging in collaborative instructional
programs, Samuelson and Coker (2014) described how their special col-
lections librarians worked with reference to include many primary sources
into their LibGuides and linked existing databases to special collections. For
example, their botany database was linked to special collections on herbs
and herbaria, and the state history LibGuide was linked to finding aids on
notable local historical characters (p. 14). This provides local or historical
context to information found in LibGuides.

EXPLORING NEW WAYS TO INCREASE DISCOVERY
AND ACCESS WITH TOOLS

Tools that increase discovery of library resources starting from the Internet
and leading into the library can heighten access to libraries' special collection
holdings. Twitter hashtag #rocketcats recently ignited public interest in an
old manual about pyrotechnic weapons attached to cats that the University
of Pennsylvania had in its collection since the 1930s or '40s. However, this
viral activity was short-lived and did not lead to a sustained interest in the
university's digital manuscript repository (Kolowich, 2014). Balancing the use
of tools that lead to long-term sustainable increase in access coupled with
judicious use of social media can be an effective complementary strategy. For
example, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Archives and Special Collections
coupled its Twitter feed with Historypin to highlight their photograph col-
lection. This complementary strategy led to "more than 24,000 individual
views and, each day, the site attracts about 100 new views" (University
Communications, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2014). In addition, expand-
ing modes of access and creating a user-centric experience necessitates that
librarians consider usability. This paper explores three collaborative tools
that seem particularly well suited for special collections due to their usability

features—ease of use, interoperability, interface, and mobile application: BiblioBoard, Historypin, and Augmented Reality.

BiblioBoard

BiblioLabs was founded in 2006 in Charleston, South Carolina. It curates historical digital materials by theme and supports branding through apps for cultural and educational institutions globally. At present, it has two major applications: BiblioBoard Library and BiblioBoard Creator (and a game, BiblioShuffle). BiblioBoard Library is a mobile library platform to give users a "ReadersFirst" experience where there is no check out, no returns, and one is never locked out by multiple users at one time. BiblioBoard Creator makes it easy for anyone to become a publisher. Many libraries, including ones at the College of Charleston, University of Denver, and Wake Forest University have used this tool to curate special collections and archival materials by theme, create online exhibits, and design customized curricula. BiblioBoard Creator is an easy interface for highlighting special collections content and digital humanities projects, but is equally applicable for any thematically curated material including STEM and business especially if one wishes to provide a historical context or perspective to the anthology. Reference librarians and faculty can create customized lesson plans using institutional repositories and digitized local primary materials. BiblioBoard's mobile platform enhances worldwide awareness and can increase access to academic libraries' unique collections and services. For example, the British Library 19th Century Collection app resulted in "250,000 downloads in three weeks from more than 160 countries" (Reid, 2012).

Historypin

Historypin, in partnership with Google, was created by We Are What We Do, a nonprofit company and launched globally in 2011. It is based on crowdsourcing and makes learning fun, interactive, and collaborative. Anyone can pin a photograph, audio, or video into Google Maps to make history come alive in context. It encourages global storytelling across cultures, is intergenerational, and unlimited by the barriers of time as it juxtaposes the past with present. Many libraries, museums, and archives have created content on Historypin and linked it to their own site, such as the University of Saskatchewan Library using Historypin to increase discovery and access of its postcard collection (Harkema & Nygren, 2012). Other academic libraries using Historypin include Stanford University Archives, Pepperdine University Special Collections & Archives, and the University of Florida. Historypin aims to open up the world's archives and other "hidden" collections to tell and share our global collective history. Users can log in with their Facebook,

Google, or Twitter account. The Historypin mobile app even has an augmented reality tab allowing users to see what their current location looked like in the past. This leads us to the next tool.

Augmented Reality

What is augmented reality? Simply put, augmented reality merges virtual with real life and results in real-life situations being modified or augmented by technology. In augmented reality, technology enhances the perception of reality, unlike virtual reality where users are not able to distinguish what is real and what is not (McKalin, 2014). In 2011, the University of Manchester and Mimas (Mimas is part of the Digital Resources Division at Jisc) were awarded a grant to develop an augmented reality application for using special collections. This project is called SCARLET, "Special Collections using Augmented Reality to Enhance Learning and Teaching" (Jisc, 2014). Augmented reality makes possible teaching in new ways by combining real life with accompanying and related digital information existing in disparate locations within and outside a library. It brings the virtual world of digital materials into the real world allowing digital information to meld easily with reality. For example, students and professors can see in person a rare, fragile manuscript and simultaneously interact, manipulate, and contextualize the physical material with digital information held some other place right from their fingertips. It uses Junaio, an augmented reality browser that users can download into their mobile devices.

Although this article explored only three tools, there are others that can be creatively applied to increase access to special collections. Some like Aeon are specifically designed to automate workflow of managing special collections. For example, people can order special collections materials from Encoded Archival Description finding aids, order digital copies, or schedule in-person appointments with special collections librarians using Aeon. Each library needs to think about the return on investment and weigh the monetary capital and human capital costs of implementing these tools.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

An exploration of tools can also be viewed as an exploration of interfaces. Technology is opening up myriads of ways to search, access, view, and interact with information. Now, what do reference librarians have to do with special collections? And how can they play an essential role in increasing access to special collections? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *interface* is defined as a "means or place of interaction between two systems, organizations, etc.; a meeting-point or common ground between two parties, systems, or disciplines; also, interaction, liaison, dialogue."

Reference librarians have always served as the interface between the public and a library's resources. That role is not only still valid but also more essential in today's linked information world. Even with ubiquitous Google, or one-stop-search systems like Summon or EBSCO Discovery Service, special collections materials may elude the user because not everything is digitized, indexed, or crawled. Furthermore, even if special collections materials are retrieved in a search, users may not be able to discern their relevance.

The key role reference librarians can play is in adding value to the scholarly communication chain by including special collections materials in reference searches, and helping users cull the most relevant resources for achieving their research goals. Other ways reference librarians can contribute to creating a strategy to increase access is to be at the forefront of conducting regular environmental scans to scope out new and interesting technology to enhance a library's ability to highlight special collections. This will include experimenting with makerspaces, using materials from special collections and archives, and inexpensively generating media blasts to market library exhibits, workshops, and tours with cogent and timely use of social media. Given that research is a human activity, reference librarians can expand their collaborative and liaison roles to serve as facilitators for increasing access and usability of special collections for research, learning, and teaching.

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