Shedding Light on Hidden Collections

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R. Ranganathan’s fifth rule of library science, first noted in 1931, stated that “the library is a growing organism.” No one then or now will dispute that collections of information, including libraries, continue to grow and change, offering endless opportunities to add to the retrieval of records appearing through discovery and use of the materials by researchers. Tools to “find” resources have also been evolving from traditional catalogs, indexes of all types, keyword searching, and other organizational strategies—each augmented and strengthened by the powers of the electronic age and especially through the marvels of digitization.

In the 21st century, searching and retrieval have reached new heights, and yet hidden collections that are undescribed, under described, and/or undiscoverable lurk in almost every library or information center in the world. Creating, or repurposing detailed description, then pushing that data out on the Web where people are searching, increases the possibility that they will find and use our valuable and unique items, opening our collections to an increasingly global community of researchers. The Archives & Regional History Collections and the Special Collections departments of the University Libraries have been working hard to do just that: shining a light on previously “hidden” collections.

The concept of a finding aid is nothing new to archives and special collections departments. A finding aid is a document that describes a collection, lays out its physical and intellectual organization, and assists users in the discovery and access of materials. With the help of trained and tireless staff and student workers, Archives & Regional History Collections and Special Collections have been bringing their finding aids to the Web. Word documents of box lists, folder titles, and unique items are being transferred into spreadsheets, ready to upload into a new content management system called Archon where they’ll be displayed as collapsible, completely searchable, online finding aids. Many collections, like the WMU World War II Propaganda and Print Collection, have extensive, hundred-plus-page finding aids, often with materials in multiple languages, so the added benefits of the digital environment are not just a boon to potential researchers, but also to the University Libraries, as the site is a way to both track and organize their collections. “This is not just an issue of increasing visibility, but also of security and inventory control,” said Susan Steuer, Head of Special Collections. New collections, like a recent acquisition of comic books, and older collections without detailed finding aids, are also being loaded into Archon with newly added description and box listings.

A descriptive finding aid can be an invaluable guide to a researcher. Since the advent of the Internet, librarians and archivists have tried various methods to put their finding aids on the Web. The most important advancement to date has been the creation of EAD (Encoded Archival Description), which is an XML (Extensible Markup Language) standard that allows for the encoding of finding aids for use in a digital environment. Many libraries are now loading their EAD files to the Web, including the Library of Congress. Other organizations are posting their finding aids as HTML on websites or as EAD files within content management systems such as CONTENTdm. The University of Illinois created their own platform for finding aids called Archon, originally developed as a research project in 2005 with the Sousa Archives as their prototype. Archon continued to develop and is currently in version 3.21 with hundreds of users. The developers of Archon are already working with the creators of Archivist’s Toolkit (AT) to combine the best features of each program into a next generation archives management tool called ArchivesSpace, which will include a user-friendly public and staff interface. Much like archives, the programs used to describe them are also always changing.

Archon organizes and displays archival description, generating discovery and access through a linked environment for subjects, creators, and description. Researchers can search across multiple collections, down to folder-level descriptions, using keywords, or browse by record group, title, subject or creator. Controlled headings for subjects and creators create quick links between collections sharing similar subjects of persons of interest. Complete finding aids can be found, searched and printed easily by researchers. The administrative side of Archon allows for multiple users. Multipage finding aids can be loaded quickly by uploading a spreadsheet, and are easily edited or added to by administrators. Changes are immediately reflected in the display. This flexibility allows archivists to easily update descriptions and add boxes and folders to the finding aid, as new materials are acquired. Archon has the ability to import and export EAD files, as well as XML and MARC, making the data easy to extract and transfer from the Archon platform.

Advancement has already been made in populating WMU’s Archon site: Twenty-nine descriptive finding aids for collections in Special Collections and over sixty from the Regional History Collections have been loaded into Archon. Eventually, all WMU finding aids will be linked to a collection-level catalog record, both in the WMU Libraries’ catalog and WorldCat.org, a Google-crawled Web discovery environment. By pushing the data to the Web, Archon opens our collections to additional methods of discovery, bringing new researchers to materials that may have been hidden from them before.

The well-used Regional History Collections paper finding aids will be moved along with everything else when the WMU Archives & Regional History Collections move to the new Legacy Collections Center. When looking at the legacy finding aid to one of the larger collections, it is easy to see how archival collections are often described as being alive. Notations in different handwriting mark changes to the original typed text, as box numbers are crossed off and changed, then crossed out again. New folders are added in neatly penciled rows. Accruals are added in new sheets at the back. One can see the growth and change of the collection from the way the finding aid had been updated throughout the years, although the final result might not be so easy to read. And while those documents will always serve an historical purpose, the digital finding aids are much easier to edit and add to, as well as share online with

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researchers wanting to do off-site research. Sharon Carlson, Director of the University Archives and Regional History Collections, reported on the streamlining effect of having digital finding aids: “We have been working with finding aids for many years and have made those available electronically when requested. Now researchers should be able to discover them without making special requests. This is great!”

Carlson understands the challenges facing researchers. “Researching archival collections is always a different proposition than traditional library research.” But the archivists and staff are always up for a challenge. “The WMU Archives and Regional History Collections has always worked with on-site and off-site researchers to facilitate access. In the last three decades, dozens of books, articles, exhibits, and other scholarly output is a testament to the efforts of the staff to make these collections accessible. Newer discovery techniques will greatly facilitate researcher access in the years to come.”

These significant efforts in Archon add to a growing WMU Libraries presence on the Web. Digitization projects carried out the last few years have also brought more attention to the treasures in Special Collections and the Archives & Regional History Collections. CONTENTdm hosts the Cistercian Liturgy Series and the Liturgy O.C.S.O. journal of Gethsemane Abbey; both series gather together and present rare Cistercian publications in full text. Also in CONTENTdm are eight diaries and twenty-nine letters digitized from originals in the Archives, which together form the U.S. Civil War Collection. The digital platform called LUNA holds images of historic costume, WWII propaganda, and medieval manuscripts, all scanned from materials housed in Special Collections. Steuer attests to the digitization projects’ success: “We have a significant amount of traffic to our CONTENTdm collections, which saves a tremendous amount of time in answering reference questions and providing materials through Resource Sharing.”

Through our digitization projects, these materials, once hidden, are now openly available online, adding to the scholarly discussion by presenting rare publications and unique primary sources. Plans are in the works to scan and provide metadata access for more of Rare Books’ priceless medieval manuscripts and to add to the WWII Propaganda Collections.

As the WMU Libraries, with Special Collections and Archives leading the way, continues to evolve as a growing organism in both the real and virtual worlds, so also evolves the associated metadata. Metadata, simply defined as “those data that describe other data” is never really finished, but, in fact, is continually being revised and reused in exciting ways. Organizing and placing our collective data and information on the Web, where many researchers start their search, increases the possibility that every user will find and use our valuable and unique items in new ways. In addition, getting the records and finding aids out on the Web allows for the possibility of linking the data with other information sources, including images, biographical and geographical information, and scholarly articles, increasing the educational value and visibility of our collections.

In the end, we return to S.R. Ranganathan and two contemporary library organizers, Michael Gorman and Walt Crawford, who in 1995 postulated a new “law” precisely applicable to the world of information that surrounds us in the 21st century: “Use technology intelligently to enhance service” (Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness, and Realities [American Library Association, 1995], p. 8.) And so we in the WMU Libraries have done, are doing, and will continue to do!