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Special Collections and the New Web: Using LibGuides to Provide Meaningful Access

Short Title: Special Collections and the New Web

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Abstract:

Librarians have long struggled to find user-friendly mediums to provide meaningful information to patrons; using bibliographies, pathfinders, and subject guides with varying degrees of success. Content management systems, such as Springshare's LibGuides, have recently been developed to facilitate the creation of online subject guides. Special Collections units also struggle with this issue. This article examines how special collections are presented on the Web, the use of LibGuides for special collections, and how the use of LibGuides is facilitating the goal to provide information in a meaningful way by Special & Digital Collections at the University of South Florida Tampa Library.

In 2004, Dupuis, Ryan, and Steeves stated that “[o]ne of the most difficult tasks facing librarians today is deciding how to present information to users in a meaningful way” (271).

They were certainly not the first to express this sentiment, nor will they likely be the last. For decades, librarians have struggled to find a user-friendly medium to convey the depth, breadth,

and value of library resources to patrons, clients, and customers, et al. Bibliographies, pathfinders, and subject guides are among the tools used with varying degrees of success to provide assistance to users in their search for information. In recent years, content management systems (CMS), such as Springshare's LibGuides, have been developed to facilitate the creation of online subject guides.

Special Collections departments also face the quandary of how to present meaningful information about and access to their resources for patrons. According to Byrd (2001), "the key to eliminating... the marginalization of special collections has been the active promotion of access" (163). With user expectations and options for locating information growing at an astonishing pace, special collections personnel must find solutions to the problems of access to and meaningful presentation of their collections. As Stam (2001) declared,

Our special collections must be democratized, must overcome their exclusionary origins in the monastery or aristocratic library, must shed their image of aloofness and preciousness, must get their precious treasures and scholarly ephemera into the sometimes dirty hands of potential users, must place a higher priority on access to unprocessed material, and must build a wider audience including the traditional scholar (whom we've always tried to serve), the innovator in new uses of old stuff, and most importantly for survival, the inquiring student (2).

The expansion of access to the World Wide Web and the growth of digitization projects by Special Collections together are helping to make that democratization possible and addressing in part the marginalization of special collections. However, neither addresses the difficulty of meaningful presentation.

Special & Digital Collections (SDC) at the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa Library is no exception. Digitization of special collections began in the mid-1990s at USF and the digital products of this effort have been accessible online through various discovery tools since 1999. In addition, Web pages with information about collections were made available. But, how meaningful was this information to SDC's users? What is special about simply providing access to a collection of photographs? How is that different from a photo album on Facebook or Flickr? What were other holders of special collections doing to serve their users in a more meaningful way? As these questions were researched and answered, the concept of collection guides that provide meaning to users by contextualizing the collections and providing value-added information to the student, teacher, and researcher was developed. This article examines how special collections are presented on the Web, the use of LibGuides by academic special collections units, and how the use of LibGuides is facilitating the realization of USF SDC's goal to provide information in a meaningful way and enhance the user experience.

Literature Review

Subject guide literature tells the story of librarians' efforts to meet the information needs of their patrons, and there are many potential lessons for special collections departments. Vileno (2007) and Morris and Del Bosque (2010) provide two excellent reviews of the history of and literature about pathfinders and subject guides. The literature on the online presences of academic libraries' special and digital collections initially focused on describing how the Web was being used to present information about special collections and the scope of the content. In one of the earliest articles on special collections Web sites, Love and Feathers (1998) surveyed and evaluated 28 academic libraries in the U.K. Although there were exceptions, their finding

showed that the sites were “being used primarily for promotional purposes” and not for access to digital content. (221) Normore (2003) investigated 24 institutions of varying size in the U.S. to determine how special collections were represented on the Web. The study’s criteria included the existence of online finding aids, the availability of collection databases, accessibility to digitized special collections content, and the presence of Web exhibits. The results indicated that most of the institutions provided “some form of online access to selected parts of their collection or selected collections” (para. 31). Referencing Neal and Schreyer that the growing online accessibility of special collections harkens the “golden age of usability,” Albanese (2005) discussed the opportunities presented to and challenges faced by special collections librarians as their content moved online (40).

In the past few years, librarians also began exploring the development and evaluation of special collections Web sites from the user’s perspective. Donlen (2005) described the early development process and evolution of the Library of Congress’s Web sites, including the *American Memory Project*. User feedback and consideration of their audiences’ needs led to significant changes in the sites. In a comparison of online exhibits versus online collections created for the 2007 bicentenary of the parliamentary act that abolished the British slave trade, Roberto (2008) concluded that the targeted audience of the site, the desired “emotional or intellectual response,” and the availability of time and resources are the determining factors in deciding whether an online exhibit or online collection Web site should be created (70). In his account of the development of the University of California–Berkeley’s Institute for Research on Labor and Employment Library Web sites, Huwe (2009) introduced “thematic websites” that “allows curators to interpret collections with related material and present them in a simple yet

elegant fashion” (16). In each of these cases, the goal of “present[ing] information to users in a meaningful way” is evident (Dupuis, Ryan, Steeves, 271).

Special and Digital Collections on the Web

Many libraries with digital collections are adopting the concept of themed or contextualized Web sites that provide background information, related resources, scholarly essays, and similar types of material to inform and orient their visitors to the topics presented in digital format. In other words, they are striving to create meaningful presentations of their content. While a full review of these sites would be a tremendous endeavor, three sites provide excellent examples of contextualized collection Web sites created by Special Collections units.

As mentioned above, the developers of the Library of Congress *American Memory Project* Web site (<http://memory.loc.gov/>) utilized user feedback and consideration of their audiences’ needs to enhance their presentation. Today, the *American Memory Project* site blends access to dozens of collections related to the American experience. Collections include photos, text, audio, video, maps, and other formats often presented in online exhibits with contextual essays and teacher resources. Access is provided through multiple search tools and browsing is available by collection, topic, date range, location, and format.

Another exemplary online presentation of contextualized digital collections is *Documenting the American South* (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>) developed and offered by the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to uniting twelve digital collections of texts, photographs, oral histories, and maps into an online resource guide about the American South, a scholarly essay about the broad topic of each individual collection is provided as an introduction to the material. The essays include hypertext links to

digital objects that are mentioned in the text. Each collection can be browsed alphabetically, by topic, and by subject. For example, the topics related to "North Carolinians and the Great War" are Propaganda Posters, The Home Front, and The Soldier's Experience, each of which also has its own introductory essay. A classroom section provides resources for teachers including a toolkit, lesson plans, and links to other related Web sites and sources of information. Through this Web site the user not only has access to the digital collections, but also to a wealth of significant information about the topic that adds context to the collection.

Lincoln at 200 (<http://lincolnat200.org/>), a collaborative effort by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, the Chicago History Museum, and the Newberry Library in Chicago, "explore[s] the legacy of the sixteenth president of the United States through two Web exhibitions." The site provides numerous essays on Lincoln's early life and his views on slavery, as well as on the impact of the Civil War and Lincoln's place in history, all with links to items in the digital collections including maps, photos and lithographs, broadsides, political cartoons, and pamphlets. In addition, the site provides information on print resources and links to other sites for the researcher's further study. Although perhaps not as sizeable as *American Memory Project* or *Documenting the American South* site, *Lincoln at 200* is another fine example of presenting information about and access to a special collection in a way that provides added value to the researcher.

LibGuides

There are many tools and systems for creating Web pages and sites for special collections. As a framework created specifically for libraries and that contains many features of the new Web, LibGuides is one tool for Special Collections units to consider. Yang (2009)

identifies the characteristics of subject guide 2.0 to include the following features: inclusion of multimedia components; content in multiple formats; “the capability to receive and incorporate input from users”; ease of use by guide developers and by users; ability to make global changes to content; searchability and browsability; link checking; social bookmarking; RSS feeds; user tagging; subscriber email; interactive chat; user evaluation; statistics (92). Yang goes on to state that LibGuides is the only program that has all the advanced features of a 2.0 subject guide.

According to the September 1, 2010 posting on the Springshare Support Blog (<http://support.springshare.com/>), in August 2010 over 100,000 guides existed consisting of almost 700,000 Web pages, which received 31 million page views. Some libraries use LibGuides exclusively for subject and course guides, others use the framework for their entire Web site, and various other combinations of use exist in-between. In addition, Springshare introduced CampusGuides and CommunityGuides this year, enabling the expansion of their use beyond the library.

When USF began its implementation of LibGuides in July 2009 there were few examples of their use by special collections units. With the increased use of LibGuides that has changed over the past year but LibGuide use for special collections Web sites is still not widespread. Of the top 10 libraries with the most published LibGuides, only Murray State University’s Pogue Library (<http://libguides.murraystate.edu/>, 364 published guides) and Duke University Libraries (<http://guides.library.duke.edu/>, 476 published guides) are currently using LibGuides for their special collections and/or archives Web pages. MSU’s guides provide descriptions of its manuscript collections, oral histories, and university archives. The Library does not yet appear to provide online access to these collections. Duke currently has only one archives’ LibGuide, the

Economist Papers Project, which describes the project and lists the collections, but does not provide direct access to the collection.

A brief review of other LibGuide sites tells a similar story. Pelletier Library at Allegheny College (<http://library.allegheny.edu/>), which uses LibGuides for its entire Web site, has a Special Collections guide and a guide to their Merrick Archives with information about their collections. Access to digital content is via a link that takes the users out of the LibGuides framework. At San Jose State University the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library has a Special Collections & Archives LibGuide (<http://libguides.sjsu.edu/specialcollections>) that provides description of their collections with links to online finding aids and a few image copies, but access to their digital collections is outside the LibGuides system. Ullmann at the University of Southern California created a guide for the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library (<http://libguides.usc.edu/feuchtwanger>), which has links to finding aid documents. However, the University has not used LibGuides for its many other Special Collections and Digital Library Web sites. Finally, the Sheridan Libraries at Johns Hopkins University has created several instructive guides to their Rare Books and Manuscripts collections (<http://guides.library.jhu.edu/rarebooks>). In addition to a home page that provides general information about the collections, using the materials, holding classes, and the staff, their holdings in various areas of study are well described and contextualized. Links to EADs are provided, but access to digital collections is once again external to the LibGuides system. Although not all the sites of the almost 1600 institutions that use LibGuides were viewed, this sampling indicates that most Special Collections units have not moved to LibGuides for their Web presence. For those that are using LibGuides, the content consists primarily of

organizational information and descriptions of their collections with access to digital collections realized on other Web sites.

The USF experience

In September 1995 the USF Libraries embarked on a system-wide project to develop a virtual library. That project resulted in the Libraries' first Web site, developed in HTML and launched in November 1997. HTML versions of the Web site went through various iterations until 2006 when the Library commissioned the development of a custom Content Management System (CMS) for the administration and presentation of its Web site and digital collections. Although the system was initially a success, it soon became apparent to the librarians maintaining the content that the system was inflexible and could not accommodate many Web 2.0 features.

Enter LibGuides. At about the same time that Library administration became concerned about the lack of flexibility and functionality of its custom CMS, the presence and popularity of the LibGuides framework was growing. Library staff utilized the trial version of LibGuides to evaluate the system, communicated with existing customers for feedback about the tool, and in July 2009 became a LibGuides client. As Library content was being migrated to LibGuides, SDC staff realized that the system could also be a solution for their content. However, our goal was to provide meaningful access to our collections in the form of contextualized guides. In addition, we wanted to achieve that access within one framework, enabling the user to search digital collections and view results on themed and/or contextualized collections pages without being redirected to another Web page or site. Could that be done using LibGuides? Yes. Using Adobe Flex (<http://www.adobe.com/products/flex/>), "free, open source framework for building

expressive web applications that deploy consistently on all major browsers, desktops, and operating systems,” a Flash interface to our Fedora digital asset management system was internally developed that could be embedded in a LibGuides’ streaming video/audio box. This interface enables users to perform simple searches, advanced searches, and browse individual collections or the entire digital repository then view large thumbnails and metadata of the results without leaving the collection LibGuide. The use of open source content viewers, such as Djatoka JPEG 2000 server and IIPImage IIPMooViewer, allow the user to view and download original size copies of the digital objects. With this solution in hand, SDC began the move to LibGuides.

The initial process of implementing LibGuides for SDC entailed the migration of all of our Web content from the old CMS. Content was evaluated and some discarded or revised. Templates were created in LibGuides to ensure a consistent look and feel to the new site. Since LibGuides is such an easy CMS to use, four members of the SDC unit accomplished the entire SDC migration with minimal training. All of SDC’s Web site, including its collection pages, now resides in LibGuides. The guides for those collections that have been digitized utilize the Flash interface to provide embedded access to the digital content. Between January and September of 2010, SDC Web pages received almost 100,000 hits, a statistic that was not available through the previous CMS. Commenting is enabled on many guides so that user feedback may be captured and analyzed. RSS feeds are available to inform users about updates to guides in which they are interested. Chat help service via Ask-a-Librarian has been added to many guides to provide an extra level of service to users. LibGuides recently released survey tools will enable us to design and embed surveys into SDC’s guides to evaluate the various aspects guide design, information provided, and usefulness to patrons. We are currently working

on our goal to develop many of our collection pages into contextualized collection guides that provided value-added resources. Two in particular exemplifies our desired outcome: the Farid Karam, M.D. Lebanon Antiquities Collection Guide (<http://guides.lib.usf.edu/karam>) and the Oral History Program Guide (<http://guides.lib.usf.edu/ohp>).

The Karam Collection was donated to USF in the late 1990's by Dr. and Mrs. Farid Karam and consists of 149 objects that date from the 1st through the 4th centuries A.D. Most of the items, consisting of jars, goblets, bottles, oil lamps, unguentariums, and busts/figures, came from Roman Syria. The Karam guide provides access to the digital collection of photographs of all of the items in the collection, a bibliography of related resources, links to Web sites and online databases for further research, and a glossary of terms. A two-dimensional photograph of a three-dimensional object, however, severely limits the researcher's ability to adequately view the object, and to overcome this limitation, SDC developed a process by which a virtual 3-D animation of the entire object could be created. One of the first steps was the selection of 20 – 30 items from the collection that: 1) were visually different from many angles, 2) could be safely placed and rotated on a turntable, 3) were representative of the collection as a whole, and 4) could be described with a high degree of certainty. Using a Kodak Professional DCS Pro SLR/c digital camera, each object was photographed as it was rotated on its axis in 5-degree increments (72 shots). The digital images were edited in Adobe Photoshop CS3 to remove the background and jpg versions were created. An AVI movie was created from the jpgs using M Encoder from the MPlayer/MEncoder suite then converted to a .flv file with Adobe Flash CS3 Video Encoder. Finally, Adobe Flash CS3 was used to create a .swf file, embed the .flv, and add the viewer controls. The resulting animation of each object was embedded in Karam LibGuide pages that also contain the object's metadata and curator notes. Future enhancements to the guide will

include links from each animation to an e-book that contains the individual photographs, enabling the researcher to view and zoom into the digital surrogates of the object from many angles.

The Oral History Program (OHP) at the USF Tampa Library “creates and disseminates original interviews” in the areas of: urban development and sustainability; Holocaust, genocide and crimes against humanity; and culture and identity. Each interview is recorded and then transcribed prior to being made publicly accessible. The OHP LibGuide provides streaming access to interview audio files and transcripts from over 20 oral history collections. The guide also contains resources for the oral historian, such as instructions for recording and transcribing and equipment and software recommendations. Announcements about upcoming and past events related to the Oral History Program are also included. Until recently, users could only listen to the audio using QuickTime or print or view a pdf version of the transcript. Once again using Flash, SDC personnel created an advanced OHP viewer, which plays the audio file while the transcript text is revealed in an embedded window. The text scrolls in sync with the interviewer/interviewee exchange and highlighting is used to indicate the text that is being spoken. Users may utilize scroll bars and progress bars to move forward or backward in the interview. In addition, the interview is full-text searchable enabling users to easily find the specific information for which they are searching. The synchronization and searchability of the text and the spoken word is accomplished through the embedding of time codes in the transcripts, which has been SDC policy since Spring 2010. Although SDC is not currently planning to retrospectively embed time codes in transcripts, all future oral history transcripts will be time coded enabling use of the advance OHP viewer and providing the user with a more meaningful presentation of the oral history collections.

Conclusion

Through the use of LibGuides to create collection guides, USF SDC has taken advantage of the many Web 2.0 features included in the platform to communicate with and receive feedback from their users, thus providing SDC with valuable information to improve their guides. In addition, SDC's inclusion of bibliographies, essays, historical information, and links to similar resources in collection guides places the collections in context and adds value to the researcher. As special collections are digitized and made accessible via the Web, Special Collections departments have many options in the tools they use to provide that access. For USF SDC, LibGuides has proven an effective and easy to use tool to present its collections and to make the presentation of their collections meaningful to users.

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