

Special Collections 2.0: New Technologies for Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Archival Collections
by Beth M. Whittaker and Lynne M. Thomas. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2009. 150pp, \$45,
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In this deceptively slim volume, Beth Whittaker (head of Special Collections Cataloging, Ohio State University) and Lynne Thomas (head of Rare Books and Special Collections, Northern Illinois University) map the terrain of Web 2.0 applications in rare book, manuscript, and archival repositories. A much-discussed subject in the library world in general over the past few years (e.g., Casey & Savastunik, 2009; Courtney, 2007; Kroski, 2008), Whittaker and Thomas argue that special collections repositories are notoriously late adopters of technology (p. 120), making this topic uncharted territory in these more specialized environments.

After the publication of this volume, such claims are no longer valid. Writing for an audience of professionals working in special collections repositories, Whittaker and Thomas exhaustively catalog, analyze, and illuminate a plethora of Web 2.0 technologies ranging from Facebook to Goodreads and everything in between. Based on personal investigation and research as well as a survey with more than 300 respondents, the volume both introduces Web 2.0 tools and evaluates their effectiveness in the special collections setting. The authors use thematically arranged chapters to identify resources for social networking, blogging, creating wikis, using media sharing sites, and social cataloging. The Web 2.0 terrain is vast, and the coverage here is, at times, overly exhaustive rather than focused on best bets. The “Social Book and Music Networking” section, for example, includes a discussion of Last.fm that concludes: “[W]hile there may not be much direct application to libraries, this service may be of personal interest to music librarians and music lovers” (p. 19). This thoroughness, however, results in a ready reference source for even the most obscure Web 2.0 technologies available in 2009.

At times, the book’s comprehensive investigation strikes an uneasy balance between the assumed technological reticence on the part of special collections professionals and the ubiquity of Web 2.0 technologies in twenty-first century life. The authors presuppose no prior knowledge of any of the tools discussed, resulting in incredibly thorough introductions to applications such as Facebook and Twitter that should be familiar to the reasonably regular reader of national news reports (the New York Times alone, for example, published well over 150 stories on Facebook from 2008 to 2009). Once beyond these explanations of basic functionality, however, the authors move to much more fruitful and insightful discussions of specific ways to harness these tools in a special collections environment. The sections on identifying institutional uses for blogs are particularly effective, with suggestions ranging from announcing events to hosting ruminations on the philosophy of processing. The authors’ discussion of social cataloging’s possible pitfalls in special collections is also illuminating.

The inclusion of specific ideas for the use of Web 2.0 applications and links to existing special collections blogs, wikis, and social cataloging projects prove the book’s greatest assets. While the tools discussed are typically well-known, their application in a special collections environment is not always intuitive. The examples provided are concrete and actionable, yet they still provide room for institutional sculpting and creativity. They are, moreover, readily applicable to a wide variety of repositories and not simply those housed in university libraries.

The book’s final chapter addresses “the elephant in the room” (p. 99): the challenges associated with preserving digital information in a Web 2.0 environment. This chapter and the appendix on digital preservation that follows focus on the practical, providing lists of resources for addressing known

problems, such as the necessity of archiving blog content as well as comments. More provocative, however, are the authors' introductory statements on the subject: this book itself is a "recognition that we cultural caretakers are ultimately responsible for documenting the shifting nature of our culture during this moment" (p. xix) from print to digital. By becoming involved in and conversant with Web 2.0 technologies, Whittaker and Thomas argue that archivists and special collections librarians can become more capable curators of the digital age (p. 100).

Digital preservation is not, however, the only elephant in this book's room. There is considerable irony in the authors' choice of medium – a printed monograph – for a discussion of Web 2.0 technologies. While full of helpful tips and tricks, the book was dated before the ink was dry, and it continues to age with alarming rapidity. When the book went to press, for example, the authors were correct in noting that "Facebook profiles are not publicly searchable through Google or other search engines" (p. 8); this statement is no longer true. The afterword explicitly acknowledges the tension between medium and subject, noting, "[We] are acutely aware of the irony of presenting our work in a published book format...we know that much of what we have written will be immediately out of date" (p. 119). While duly noted, the justifications for choosing to accept the limitations of print are neither discussed nor acknowledged. It is, of course, impossible to infer the reasons behind the authors' choice of medium, although suspicious readers might wonder if they relate to the printed monograph's supremacy in academic circles and its aura of authority when compared to the ephemeral and constantly changing world of the web about which the authors write with such fluency. Readers can only hope that these incongruities, once acknowledged, will lead to changes that enable a more flexible and timely platform for works such as this one.

References

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