

Open Library Review

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One of the primary concerns of any student, historian, researcher, librarian, or archivist is access to materials. We are living in the Digital Age and as such we have come to expect the immediate appearance of resources when we type into a search engine. This is not always the case as many repositories and institutions have neither the time nor the money to scan their materials and make them available to the public, thus reducing their visibility online and their potential for public awareness of their collections. There are, however, alternative ways of making these materials accessible without the limitations of geography or their physical state impeding access. Open Library is one of those alternatives, a space where archival repositories can, in lieu of setting up a digital collection, at the very least make their finding aids available to a greater span of potential users.

An initiative of the Internet Archive, Open Library began in November 2007 with the ambitious goal of making every book available. There are two main categories on Open Library: the Books to Read section of over one million free to download “classic” eBooks and the Books to Borrow section that functions as a digital Lending Library with over two hundred and fifty thousand titles from the “modern era” of literature and publication. The difference between the two is the length of time the user has access. The free downloads are just that, free, but in the Lending Library the user has access to the more recently published materials for a span of about two weeks.

Archivists, however, will find the item-level editing capabilities of the site of more interest. Open Library equates itself to Wikipedia, allowing users to add and edit information regardless of whether they are a librarian or someone casually surfing the net. Each book’s webpage functions as its own finding aid with users able to add tags, subjects, keywords, geographic information, and even provide a description of the record if one is missing. This is definitely a matter of concern to archivists since the finding aid is the means by which our institutions inform the public of what is in our collections. And while a detailed item-level description is ideal it is not always feasible. The contrasting method of Meissner and Greene’s “More Product, Less Process” (MPLP), however, leaves finding aids bereft of item-level descriptions, putting the process of discovery and knowledge less in the hands of archivists and more into the user’s. Open Library’s system presents a possible compromise; upon initial creation records contain the most basic information, but as more users access the records more information is added, strengthening the descriptions and fleshing out the record. There is even an optional field where users can comment on what

they changed in the record, providing a means of documentation that is not always accessible or available in repositories or institutions.

Ultimately, Open Library offers a measure of visibility to archival repositories with limited resources. If a smaller repository does not have the ability to maintain a digital collection, they can at least provide links to finding aids within the descriptions on Open Library. The site allows for links to be included on the item level, which is an effort on their part to give users access to as much information as possible. Adding links offers archival repositories a chance to gain access to more users through the site by letting them know that there is additional information to be found. Similarly, repositories can attach the link for Open Library to their finding aids, giving researchers access to supplemental materials that may not be found in the archive. It is not an ideal tradeoff; the archive looks as though it is a function of the library instead of an individual entity. And even if links are provided, there's no guarantee that they will get any more traction for the collections if the links are considered supplemental to the books.

Open Library has a great deal of functionality that archivists can take advantage of should a digital space be required for their collections. Unfortunately, the relationship is very much one-sided, putting the advantage on Open Library's side with archivists still fighting to be seen.