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From a University Press--Wandering the Stacks

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From A University Press — Wander the Stacks

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Since the fall of 2015, I've been fortunate to be part of an **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**-funded project looking into the possibility of creating a discovery and access platform for university press humanities content. The group, spearheaded by the **Association of American University Presses (AAUP)**, is made up of publishers, librarians, technology gurus, and digital humanists. It's a marvelously diverse group, each of whom come to the project with different backgrounds and ideas about what end product would be most useful and how it might be structured for greatest usability.

We've met in person and by phone a number of times now, and we're still working to define exactly what this platform could or should be, who it's for, and how it can be made sustainable over time. Each time I'm tempted to be surprised at the course of the discussions, I remember that these questions are big ones, applicable not only to this yet-to-be-named platform for scholarship. These are also, for the most part, the same big picture issues for publishers and librarians that will define the future of the scholarly ecosystem. Who supports scholarship, its development, discovery, and dissemination? This is the foundational issue that will drive much of our collective work in the decade to come.

Before refining a business model, those charged with developing the shape and scope of the platform have to decide what it should do and who exactly it serves. Certainly, libraries are near the center of this. But we also have to consider the scholar as customer. To do this, we needed more information about how scholars work and what they find themselves needing and wanting in the course of their daily work.

To gain some insight into the potential user base, members of the working group set up interviews with several types of scholars: tenured, non-tenured/early career, adjunct, retired or independent scholars, digital natives and non. We spent several hours on the phone with our subjects, talking through their individual research projects, their work processes, what tools they currently use, their pain points, and their hopes and dreams for how to do their work differently. In my interviews, I was once again reminded that just as libraries differ in their makeup, operation, acquisitions strategy, and a hundred other things, these scholars, too, differ in their situations and needs. As universities rethink tenure and staffing and teaching structures, the scholars publishers serve are an increasingly diverse group.

For my calls, I spoke with two scholars, one an associate professor of history at a medium-sized state university and the other an adjunct (trailing spouse of a tenured professor) in media studies at a large Canadian university. (I still hope to interview a community college professor, as I think this could be a large but

sometimes-forgotten demographic within our scholarly community.)

The history professor was focused on a community cookbooks project, and he was constantly seeking new primary materials and information on food in a historical context. In his work, he manages a large quantity of bibliographic data and source materials. He is confident in being able to discover new works and knows what is happening in his field. He's self-reliant in terms of acquisitions resources; he uses his university library a good deal, but he also told me some years ago (in a different conversation about electronic scholarship) that he regularly buys scholarly books on his own. He does this for the sake of ownership and expediency, rather than waiting for his library to get access to what he needs. He went on to note that individual historians likely have a surprisingly large number of subscriptions to *Ancestry.com*, simply because the fee is reasonable and these professors would rather access the records on *Ancestry.com* from the comfort of their home or office as opposed to pouring over microfiche records in a library basement.

This historian is what our group would term the "confident scholar," someone who knows the pathways to the knowledge he or she needs and who self-creates access solutions. For this type of scholar, the pain point is not the inability to find relevant published scholarship; instead it is the feeling that there are relevant but difficult to discover primary materials out there in special collections. He gave the example of wanting to look for information about food culture in a child's diary that might be housed as part of a Civil War or other historical collection. Traditional keyword searches would likely not yield results about a couple of diary pages on the deeply granular subtopic of food in daily life. This material is only easily discoverable if you already know specifically what you're looking for. He wished for something to go beyond traditional subject and keyword searches, something that digs deeper into source content in context.

The second scholar I interviewed differs in many ways. She'd love to have better avenues for finding others working in her field; her research focus is industrial films looking specifically at women and car culture, and it's a small field. She noted that tenured faculty have a well-defined set of contacts and frameworks, but when you're working non-tenured, it's much more difficult to connect with other scholars and to build research and professional networks.

This scholar has always worked across disciplines, and she finds that cross-

cultural study is second nature to her. She's examining vintage car posters, contemporary advertisements, and the items amassed by memorabilia collectors to understand how women are portrayed as a part of car culture. She frequently uses eBay and loves the collectors who categorize things by year, which makes it easier to identify material within the scope of her research. She also accesses a number of online archives to look at African American newspapers (though she's frustrated by archives where she has to pay for the material before she can scan the content to see if it contains material she actually needs).

In talking about the work she does online, this scholar — somewhat wistfully — harks back to the "old school" process of doing research in physical archives. She recalls that in the process of looking for one thing and reading through a whole African American newspaper, she would come across something else, say a very relevant advertisement in that same edition. These sorts of great "finds" are harder, if not impossible, using a keyword search for a specific item. She laments the fact that with the remarkable access and precision that come with online research, she's had to give up the delight and benefits of serendipitous discovery.

Even though these two individuals have different profiles and research pathways, I was struck by two great commonalities in their situations and research desires. Special collections hold such great promise for scholarly work, and yet so much of what they contain remains undiscoverable to the online researcher. High-level abstracts and keywords miss much of the rich detail of the materials in these archives, and unless someone knows what they're looking for, those details often go undiscovered in virtual searches. What technologies could better unlock the full potential of these collections, allowing for a rich exploration experience online?

The other common point, which is more relevant to the work of developing the discovery platform for university press content, is the fact that both scholars talked about the desire for serendipitous discovery. They acknowledged that the physical process of wandering the stacks sometimes yielded wonderful and unexpected information — sources that had in the past shaped the direction and content of their scholarly work. This wandering, the experience of the unanticipated, cannot yet be replicated in electronic searches. Thanks to the work of the bright technical minds at work on the AAUP discovery platform, the hope is that we'll once again become stack wanderers, this time in the virtual stacks. 🐾

