

Book Review: Cultural heritage information: Access and management, edited by Ian Ruthven and G. G. Chowdhury

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Abstract:

Digitization of cultural heritage resources and the related discipline of Digital Humanities have been key discussion topics among librarians, archivists, and museum professionals for two decades or more, with issues as diverse as imaging ethics, costs, metadata interoperability, usability, and preservation driving the conversations. With a nod to the specific distinctions between digitized primary source materials and born-digital collections, Ian Ruthven and Gobinda Chowdhury provide background, theoretical context, and a measure of attention to future trends with regard to the creation, presentation, and management of digitized cultural heritage material.

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Article:

Digitization of cultural heritage resources and the related discipline of Digital Humanities have been key discussion topics among librarians, archivists, and museum professionals for two decades or more, with issues as diverse as imaging ethics, costs, metadata interoperability, usability, and preservation driving the conversations. With a nod to the specific distinctions between digitized primary source materials and born-digital collections, Ian Ruthven and Gobinda Chowdhury provide background, theoretical context, and a measure of attention to future trends with regard to the creation, presentation, and management of digitized cultural heritage material.

Eleven chapters by 18 authors present an international perspective on general definitions and theory (Chapters 1–3), practical concerns surrounding the creation and presentation of digital objects (Chapters 4–6), strategies for enhancing usability and user engagement (Chapters 7–10) and sustainability (Chapter 11). Generally more theoretical than “nuts and bolts” in its focus, the book's chapters often read primarily as literature reviews that attempt to place the current state of the topic at hand into perspective. Several chapters, however, also include case studies or analyses of specific projects as part of the narrative. Notably, Paul Clough and colleagues discuss the PATHS (Personalised Access To cultural Heritage Spaces) project to increase user engagement with the Europeana digital library through algorithms and metadata enhancements in Chapter 10. Shigeo Sugimoto and colleagues also present an interesting example using manga as

an illustration of the application and issues surrounding FRBR, Dublin Core, and metadata mapping and interoperability in Chapter 5.

Cultural Heritage Information is unusual in that it addresses both the technical and content aspects of digitization initiatives. While the focus is very much on the information management side, Chris Alen Sula's chapter on the Digital Humanities and the discussion by Shigeo Sugimoto and colleagues of metadata imperatives should please catalogers, archivists, and historians as much as Melissa Terras's contextual narrative on the past three decades of digitization technology and Sudatta Chowdhury's analysis of information management and display systems. Most of the concepts presented will be familiar to digital collections librarians and other technologically focused cultural heritage professionals, but the book's focus on general issues related to digital content (rather than a focus on specific platforms or metadata schemas) should make it of interest to professionals who are just starting to work with digitization initiatives and to those who work "adjacent" to them.

Particularly interesting with respect to the discipline of Digital Humanities (DH) was one assertion by Gobinda Chowdhury that initiatives should be as transparent as possible so that results could be replicated with other projects. This assertion places DH on a level with scientific research that some may find very intriguing. Also intriguing were the distinctions made between simple usability and "user engagement" advanced by Juliane Stiller and Vivien Petras, and furthered by Paul Clough and colleagues. This distinction is a crucial one, defining the line between information access and information use, which is so often ignored in digital collection development. Stiller and Petras criticize the Europeana project for being an insufficiently "social" and "collaborative" environment for end users, while Clough and colleagues suggest ways that the PATHS model could employ a more "social" context to create data pathways that could make Europeana more relevant for all users.

Editors Gobinda Chowdhury and Ian Ruthven have written extensively on the subject of digital libraries and have assembled an international collection of chapter contributors, mostly centered in the United Kingdom. The global perspective definitely adds to the appeal of the work. One minor criticism of the book is that it is somewhat lacking in visual appeal considering the subject material.

While some seasoned digital collections professionals may not find much in the way of new material here, *Cultural Heritage Information* provides food for thought and should be of significant utility to most who work with cultural heritage collections. As with Gobinda Chowdhury's earlier *Introduction to Digital Libraries*, this book has great potential as a text for students of digital libraries; its theoretical basis and lack of concentration on any one specific platform make it ideal for classroom use, potentially for years to come.