Book Review: Managing Digital Cultural Objects: Analysis, Discovery and Retrieval, Edited by Allen Foster and Pauline Rafferty

By: David Gwynn

Abstract:

As digital initiatives in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) have moved beyond simple projects presenting scanned representations of photographs and other two-dimensional objects, the need for resources on a more diverse array of digitization and digital humanities projects has become more and more apparent. Allen Foster and Pauline Rafferty have made a significant contribution addressing this need with Managing Digital Cultural Objects: Analysis, Discovery, and Retrieval, published by Facet Publishing in the United Kingdom and ALA-Neal-Schuman in the United States. This review is based on the U.K. version; the U.S. release has a different cover and a different layout, though the content seems to be identical.

Keywords: digitization | digital collections | metadata | digital preservation

Article:

As digital initiatives in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) have moved beyond simple projects presenting scanned representations of photographs and other two-dimensional objects, the need for resources on a more diverse array of digitization and digital humanities projects has become more and more apparent. Allen Foster and Pauline Rafferty have made a significant contribution addressing this need with Managing Digital Cultural Objects: Analysis, Discovery, and Retrieval, published by Facet Publishing in the United Kingdom and ALA-Neal-Schuman in the United States. This review is based on the U.K. version; the U.S. release has a different cover and a different layout, though the content seems to be identical.

Managing Digital Cultural Objects consists of nine chapters in three sections. The first section is primarily conceptual, and includes a chapter by one of the editors that sets the context for the book as well as chapters on data modeling and social media collections. The second section contains three case studies of digitization and digital humanities projects, while the third section consists of three chapters on metadata creation and analysis, specifically for social media and web-based materials. The three sections appear to be a means of tying together a collection of themes that might not otherwise have much in common, which gives the book something of a "conference proceedings" feel. The layout is uncluttered, with several tables but very few graphics outside the chapter that deals with visual imaging.

The topics in the book range from the general and somewhat basic to the very specific. A chapter on data modeling presents an overview of everything from Dublin Core to the portability of file formats; this primer on metadata creation and management would be extremely useful to students and institutions who are just beginning the planning process for digital collections. Another chapter on collection planning at the British Library provides a similarly broad overview which would be of interest both to new and more seasoned collection managers, particularly those whose responsibilities include born-digital and commercially acquired content in addition to digitized materials.

On the other hand, the chapters with very specific examples of data mining and folksonomies in social media and various audio–visual collections, may be more suited to practitioners who have been working with digital objects for some time. As a professional who increasingly deals with multimedia formats, particularly with my institution's extensive oral history and music collections, I found the chapters on digital preservation for audio materials and on metadata strategies for accessing film collections particularly interesting, the former for its technical information and the latter for its examination of different means of providing discovery for materials that lack a textual component that can be easily indexed. Several of the chapters also address both the promise (inclusiveness, ubiquity) and the challenges (subjectivity, lack of authority) inherent in the use and systematic harvesting of social tagging for audio–visual and social media content.

A standout, however, is the chapter on digital visual humanities and strategies for automating the extraction of metadata from visual image files. The discussion of specific processes and formula for data extraction provides important information for both researchers and those who produce and manage digital collections. It is always important to remember that end users may be doing things we had never imagined with our collections.

Chapter authors based in Europe and the Americas present an international perspective on the issues, and represent a diverse spectrum of metadata and technology librarians, digital humanists, and other academic educators and researchers. As a librarian who occasionally doubles as adjunct teaching faculty and works with research support, I would suggest that Managing Digital Cultural Objects presents material that is beneficial both for practitioners and educators in the cultural heritage communities.