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What's in a name: Usability of digital exhibits, collections, sites, and other 'stuff'

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What’s in a name?

Usability of digital exhibits, collections, sites, and other ‘stuff’

Anna Michelle Martinez-Montavon // Melissa Harden // Mikala Narlock

University of Notre Dame

MRN -- 30 seconds

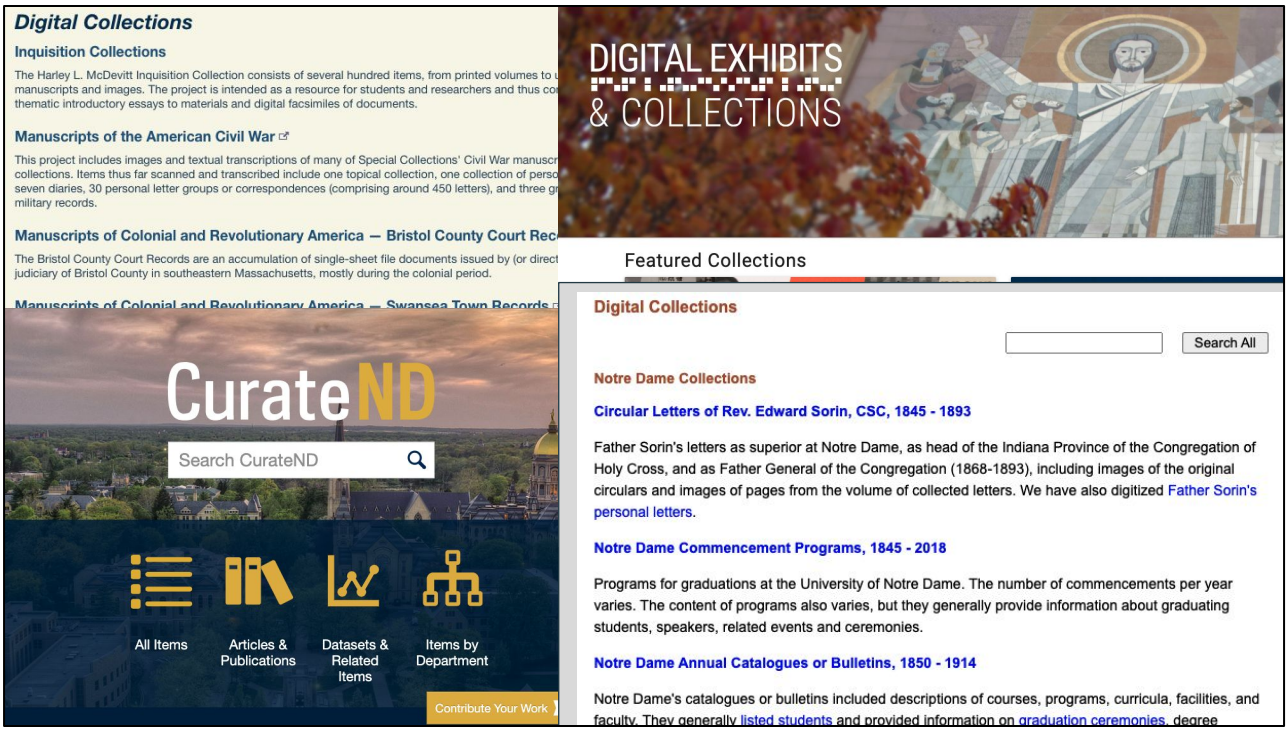
Hello all and thank you for joining us today for our presentation, “What’s in a name? Usability of digital exhibits, collections, sites, and other ‘stuff’”.

Outline

1. Digital ‘Stuff’ at Hesburgh Libraries
2. Our survey project
3. Initial findings
4. Next steps

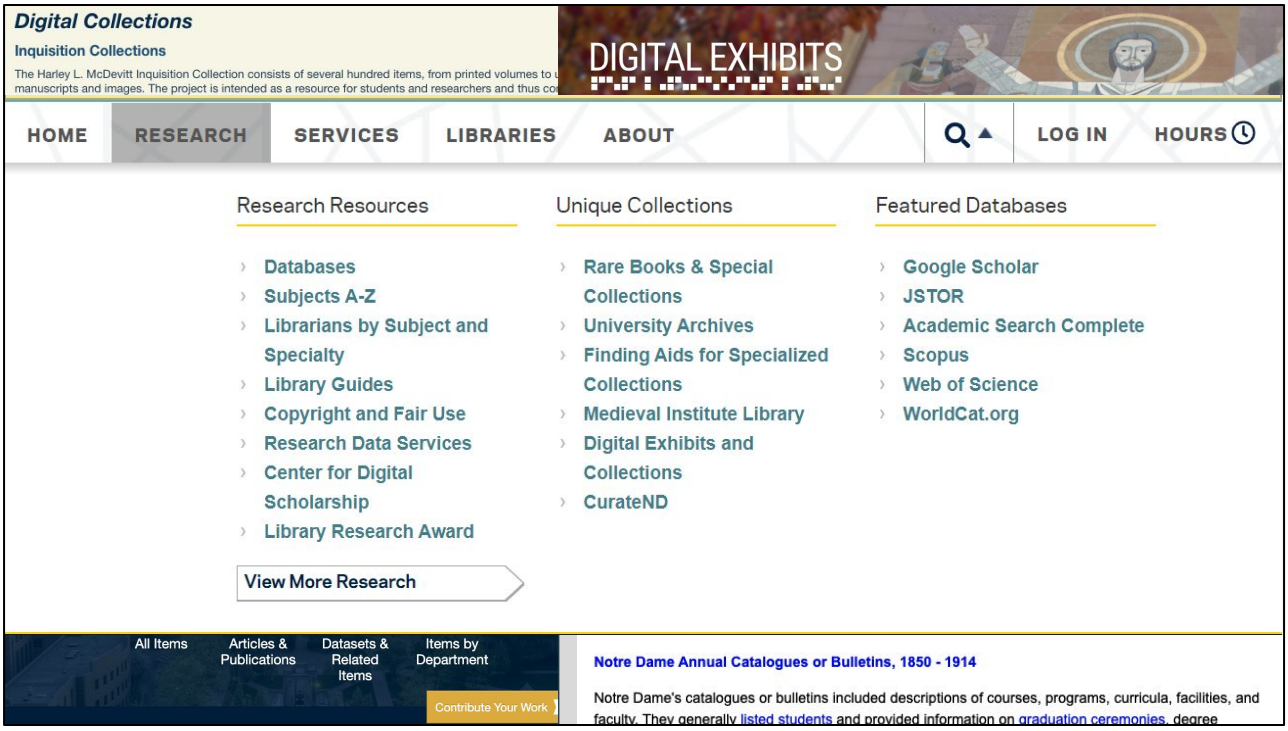
MRN -- 30 seconds

We have an action-packed outlined for you today! We are going to jump right into discussing our digital library presence at the University of Notre Dame: Hesburgh Libraries. After a little bit of institutional context, we will describe our most recent research effort -- a series of surveys designed to better understand how we describe and name our library’s digital collections, exhibits, and projects in a concise yet descriptive manner. We will describe our initial findings and anticipated next steps for this work, and there will be time for some Q&A at the end.



Mikala - 1 min

Like many institutions, the digital collection and library presence at hesburgh libraries developed in an ad hoc fashion-- curators and specialist created and shared digital collections, exhibits, and projects using the most recently available technologies. This ranged from custom, boutique HTML site, like shown in the top left, through our institutional repository in the bottom left, and up to our home-grown software created to support the curation of digital exhibits in the top tight. This tools were available inconsistently for internal users-- ambiguity around roles, responsibilities, and guidelines meant that some individuals would just use whatever technology was most convenient. Additionally our university archives only just recently came under the purview of the library in the last ten years or so, and had developer their own tools for providing access to digital collections, as is shown in the bottom right.



Mikala - 1 min

With this proliferation of platforms, it can be incredibly difficult for users to find what they're looking for: in the very center of this slide, you'll see a screenshot from our main library navigation. Under the tab "Unique Collections," users have to know which of these sites will bring them to the digital collection platform they need-- because in reality, some collections might be in curate, or the university archives, or they might see the title "Digital Exhibits and Collections" and assume that is where all of our digital collections are -- which to be fair is totally logical.

Melissa, Anna, and I are part of a new program in our library, established in March 2020, dedicated to creating and implementing a unified approach to our user facing online products. In our new roles, we are invited to think holistically about our web-presence, our assessment and user experience, and our strategy around digital collections / exhibits.

This could not have come at a better time -- as we are currently nearing the end of a 3-year grant to build a unified display and exhibition platform for digital collections from our library and campus art museum.

The prompting situation

Marble

Museum, Archives, Rare Books and Libraries Exploration

DEC

Digital Exhibits and Collections

MRN -1 minutes

While the disparate platforms and varied link language made it difficult for users to find and browse all of our digital library holdings, the problem came to a head with this three year grant. Named the Marble project, this platform features digital collections from the Snite Museum of Art, Rare Books and Special Collections, and University Archives. Moreover, it provides support for curating portfolios-- a sort of middle ground between a pure ‘collection’ and a more robust ‘digital exhibit’-- in which users can make and annotate their own content but cannot provide advanced customization, like one would expect with an exhibit.

It quickly became clear that, if we wanted to add a link from our library’s main navigation site to the Marble project, we would need to carefully consider the terms we use to describe not only this platform, but the extant collections and tools. So, we embarked on a research project to better understand not only what we call these individual projects, but how do we describe and present these tools out of context?

In particular, our problem statement was: how do we label links to our digital library tools in a way that makes it clear to users what they are getting based on a link? And, with the recognition that various products have names that are immutable, how can we label links in a way that is more helpful than just the tool’s name?

ARL Environmental Scan

Mikala -- 30 seconds

To start this project, we did what every good librarian does: we looked to see if our peer institutions had solved this problem for us. We recruited some student workers to help us conduct an environmental scan of the link language used by ARL Libraries. We provided them a list of libraries, with links to the main navigation, and asked them to capture the terms used in the main navigation that looked like: digital collection, online exhibit, digital project, etc. As you can see from our pretty word cloud here, there was no consensus around the terms used-- especially because some of the links captured went to institutional repositories, digital scholarship centers, digital collections, or some middle ground between the three.

So, while this provided helpful information, we had to continue investigating what link language we might leverage, and for that I'll turn it over to Melissa

What we know already

- Library users don't understand library jargon // natural link language is important.
- Branded names for library platforms are not necessarily helpful.
- Others have tested terminology related to digitized cultural heritage collections (e.g., Burns et al., 2019).
- Words have meanings

Melissa

- A 2012 document by John Kupersmith called "Library Terms that Users Understand" highlights key findings from 51 usability studies and covers a wide range of library terms. We know from this document—as well as other individual studies—about the importance of avoiding library jargon and using natural language when naming links. However, we also know we can't use terms that are too general because they don't provide enough contextual information for users.
- Additionally, we know from several studies included in Kupersmith's document that brand names of library services are not helpful to users. As previously mentioned, we currently call the new digital collections site "Marble," which is an acronym. But the name "Marble" on its own is not meaningful.
- So the challenge we identified at the start of our study is finding link terms for the Marble site and our digital collections platform (internally, we call this "DEC") that meaningful separate out what these two things do—one is for digital collections and the other is for digital exhibits—using words that are natural and meaningful to our general campus population but are not so general so as to be vague.
- Burns et al. (2019) reviewed terminology used by Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member libraries to identify which terms were most commonly used to label digitized cultural heritage collections. They identified a variety of terms used to describe these digital collections and designed a survey-based study to identify the terminology landed well with users and which terms caused confusion. The label options provide respondents on their task-based

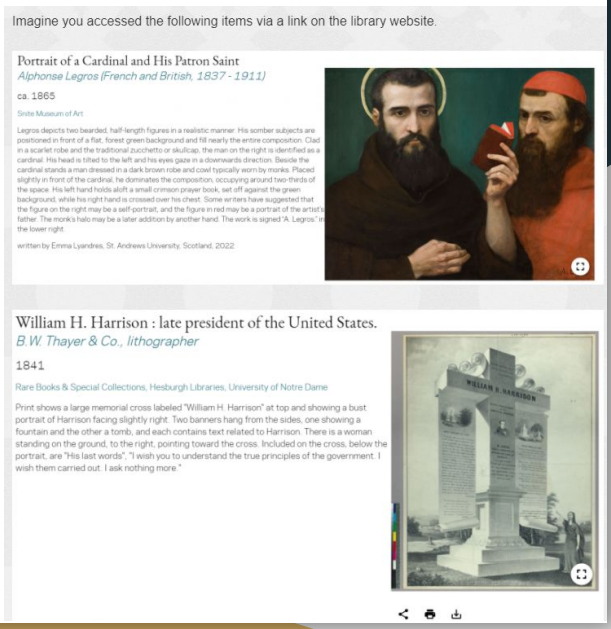
- questions included Digital History Collections, Digital Library, Digital Archives, and Digital Collections (p. 7)
- While their results are useful for our consideration, they did not test the phrase “Digital Exhibit” as one of their options. Additionally, there is no mention of best terms for digital collections and digital exhibits in the document “Library Terms That Users Understand” (Kupersmith, 2012).
- The three of us are also very aware that certain terms used in this problem situation I’ve just articulated have very specific meanings, especially for librarians, archivists, and curators. In some circles, these terms might be even be considered jargon, but it is important to accurately use these terms where appropriate. We need to take that into account when we decide on the final terms we will use to describe these two platforms.

Surveys

First survey

What we're testing

- What terms would students use to title groupings of items? (student-supplied terms, open text response fields)



Melissa

- In both surveys, we only surveyed undergrads and graduate students.
- In our first survey, we wanted to get student-supplied terms for various types of digital items.
- The challenge: We needed to keep the questions vague on purpose because we didn't want to prime students by using certain terms in the questions themselves. Struggle: How much context is enough to help them understand what we were asking without priming them?
- Because we are specifically interested in how well students understand the use of terms like "collections" and "exhibits," we voided using those on the survey.
- We referred to things on the survey as "items" and "groupings."
- Screenshots from the Marble site and DEC platform were cropped to exclude "collections," "exhibits," and any other contextual information that might show up in the header or elsewhere on the item page.

Initial findings

- The vagueness of the questions led to some interesting responses (some oddly specific and some very general)
- Many students wrote in “artifacts” and “historical”

Melissa

- Our purposefully vague questions led to some interesting responses, including some that were very specific (like “19th century art”) and some so general that they are not helpful.
- Many students mentioned the words “artifacts” and “historical” in their responses.
- “Artifacts” is an interesting example because, as mentioned previously, words have meanings, and the word “artifact” has a pretty specific definition. However, undergraduate students may not be aware of the specificity of the definition, and when used generally, is probably pretty well understood by others. Even if this term were to be widely understood by the majority of students on our campus, we wouldn’t use it in the link language for either of our platforms because we know the meaning that this term has, especially for curators and academics.
- “Historical” is also interesting. Many of the items on these platforms are, in fact, historical, but we can’t assume that everything that gets digitized or included in the future will be historical. Also, “historical” is contextual to different people in the general population. Digitized items from the 2000s may not seem historical to some of us, but to some of our students, this was. Similarly, the term “primary sources” is a tricky because primary and secondary sources can also be contextual. Whether something is a primary source or not depends on your research question and is not necessarily an inherent characteristic of the source itself.

Melissa
Here are the terms students chose to label items from what we call “digital collections.” Major terms include:

- Historical
- Art
- Artifact / artefact

Digital Exhibits

Melissa

- Here are the terms students supplied for items from what we call “digital exhibits” -- so digitized items plus additional contextual information you’d expect to find in an exhibit.
- We should note that our screenshots from a sample digital exhibit included images of animals, which is why “animal” shows up so clearly in this word cloud.
- “Call” shows up because students wrote “I’d call this…”
- Also of note: “digital” and “collection” were supplied for digital exhibits, further highlighting the complexity of this online environment.

Second survey

Testing specific terms

- Used options generated by our ARL review and first survey
- Asked students about content expectations
- Asked students to choose a link label

- Digital Collections
- Digital Exhibits
- Digital Artifacts
- Digital Showcase
- Digital Archive
- Digital Projects

Anna

- For our second survey, we chose to test a mix of terms based on our current practice, other ARL libraries, and student-generated suggestions from the first survey. You can read the list of six terms we tested on the right of this slide.
- The survey had two sets of questions to ask students about their content expectations and then asking them to choose a link label

If I clicked on a link called **Digital Exhibits**, I would expect to see...
Select all that apply.

- [ ] Artwork (e.g., Photographs, paintings, sculptures)
- [ ] Ephemera (e.g., Posters, broadsides)
- [ ] E-books
- [ ] Archival or specialized collections (e.g., rare books, manuscripts, diaries, letters)
- [ ] Scholarly journals and articles
- [ ] Item details (e.g., metadata)
- [ ] Explanatory information about the items
- [ ] Historical and social context of the items
- [ ] Interactive features (e.g. dynamic timelines and maps)
- [ ] Related items
- [ ] Datasets and databases
- [ ] Other

Peru's First Newspaper

In colonial Peru, official information traveled by word of mouth and in print. Town criers (pregoneros) announced royal, viceregal, and city council orders in public plazas beginning in the mid-sixteenth century. Broadsides bearing civic and religious decrees adorned public buildings, reinforcing and complementing the oral proclamations.

On January 18, 1744, the Gazeta de Lima joined these sanctioned sources of information. Although earlier issues were published, this date marks the beginning of the regular and continuous publication of this first Peruvian newspaper. At once an organ of the viceregal government and an Enlightenment project, the Gazeta de Lima's anonymous editors viewed their publication as an American extension of an established European newspaper tradition.

What link would you follow to get to the item above?

- ○ Digital Collections
- ○ Digital Exhibits
- ○ Digital Artifacts
- ○ Digital Showcase
- ○ Digital Archive
- ○ Digital Projects
- ○ Other

Sample survey questions

Anna

- Here's what those two sets of questions looked like.
- The first set of questions asked students about the type of content they would expect to see after clicking on a particular link
  - You'll notice that we've included things that might show up in digital exhibits or collections (such as artwork, ephemera, and metadata) and we've also included things that probably wouldn't show up in those categories (like ebooks and datasets). Students were encouraged to select all the item types they thought would apply.
  - We provided the same set of content options for each of the six terms we were testing.
- The second set of questions showed students an object and its corresponding information from our collections or exhibits and asked them what link they thought might bring them there
  - Students were only able to select one choice. This specific item, Peru's First Newspaper, is part of one of our digital exhibits.

Initial findings

- No consensus on what words fit what context
- Some trends towards art-like items in Exhibits; broader expectations of types of content in Collections

Anna

- We're still working on a full analysis but our initial review of responses shows very little consensus about which terms fit a particular context. All of our link-label questions had a mix of responses from students. Although a few coalesced around a majority, the labels applied were not consistent across the questions.
- We did notice some interesting patterns about the the expected content type.
    - There were some trends towards art-like items in Exhibits, both in the content questions and the link-label questions. Perhaps students are most familiar with Exhibits in a museum context?
    - There were broader expectations of what might be included in Collections - including ebooks and scholarly journals
    - A surprisingly few percentage of students expected to find metadata or related items in *any* of our link labels

- Here you can see the distribution of responses for the second set of questions, asking students to choose a link label for each item.
    - "Shoes," a work of art held by the Snite Museum, was overwhelmingly chosen to be labeled as an exhibit. This item currently lives in our digital collections platform, Marble. The text shown to students included a brief description from the item label in the museum, and a list of metadata.
- Here's where these items actually live
    - Shoes (artwork held in Snite Museum) - collection
    - Peru's First Newspaper (journal held in Special Collections) - exhibit
    - Collegiate Jazz Festival (concert program held in Archives) - collection
    - Meeting d'aviation (poster held in Special Collections) - collection
    - The Author, The Journal (journal held in Special Collections) - exhibit
    - The Ferrell Bible (illuminated bible held in Special Collections) - exhibit
    - New edition of a general… (book of Irish ballads held in Special Collections) - collection

What now?

Reflections

- User responses are all over the place, indicating that they don't uniformly understand the meanings of specific terms
- Importance of balancing user responses with librarian/archivist/curator professional knowledge

Anna

- User responses are all over the place, indicating that they don't really understand the meaning of this specific language in the same way we do (e.g., "artifacts," "exhibits, "archives")
- Even if we had found strong preferences for particular terms, we also want to balance user preferences with our professional knowledge. Certain terms, such as archives, have a very specific meaning in libraries and for experienced researchers.
- There is no set of terms that we could use to label these links without context
- Contextualizing the link titles seems to be most important (let users know what these terms mean using context clues).

Next steps

- Work on contextualizing links
- Future user testing
- Breaking out of dichotomy of collections and exhibits

Anna

- Work on contextualizing links - designing what navigation menus on the main library website might look like in order to accommodate extra information (e.g., redesign which will include mockups, basic testing)
    - Like to restructure library website main navigation to include more contextual information
- Future user testing of contextualized links - does it help students understand what they might find at each location?
    - Using this as a passive learning experience. Students can learn what exhibits are and how they differ from collections. Contextualizing links provides implicit instruction.
- Breaking out of Black/White dichotomy of collections and exhibits -- continuum (internal users)
    - We also plan to use this data for adopting a collections as data mentality to our collections and exhibits. Instead of setting the two as opposites or the only two options for a digital collection , we are using this data to encourage approaching the content, the curatorial text, and other information to be more flexible, more adaptable. With the evidence that our users are not as concerned about the difference between collections and exhibits, we can explore more nuanced middle areas to provide access to our content.

Questions?

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