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The University of Alabama, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, a Critique of Web
Presence

<http://www.lib.ua.edu/libraries/hoole/>

This paper aims to evaluate information retrieval and user access methodology at The University of Alabama, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library's website. Specifically the usefulness and effectiveness of access-related information will be analyzed in order to consider the needs and expectations of the user.

An immediately apparent issue with the presentation of collections is that the web presence for the various libraries of the University of Alabama appear to be homogenous; it is difficult to discern what are the exclusive collections of one institution as opposed to another. Links to the various libraries of the university are present at the top, auspiciously indicating links to separate sections of the website. However if one is to visit these links, only a small picture in the top right of the design changes – all the navigation bar options remain the same. Indeed, only the “Bruno” library appears to have distinct presence, as a query into the digital database of the others returns identical records. The University appears to have a unified database of digital collections. Accordingly for purposes of this paper I am wary to evaluate this aspect of the website, as it is not unique to the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library.

It is worthy to note however that the similitude and of the library web portals at the University's website offer a confusing environment for the user to navigate. The incestuous design makes evaluating any one institution difficult; much of the web

content links to pages held in common, and there is little sense of separation or specialization of services. Lazy web design may be affordable, but does not speak to the interests of the user.

The bulk of the institution's unique content is linked in the center of the website's home portal. A four cell grid is distinguished by bold rubrications: Services, Find, Collections, About Hoole. Under each heading are a number of hyperlinks including links to appropriate content. Herein is the stepping off point to the collections. Under the "Collections" header are a list of specific collections, ranging from the "Alabama Collection" to the "Jeanne N. & Joseph M. Smith Collection on Alcohol and Addiction Studies."

Venturing into those links provides a multi-paragraph abstract on the respective collection. Strangely, no finding information is provided on these pages, only descriptions of content of the collections themselves. A scant few of the collection pages contain discretely indicated hyperlinks within the text block which lead to subpages. The page for the "The David Walker Lupton African American Cookbook Collection" for instance contains a link to yet another page with a large, plaintext list constituting the records. Yet this page, like many on the Hoole website, is an oddity – it is a one off, virtually hidden resource which appears to have been created without regard to any greater plan for design or access. Clearly these subpages were created with little awareness of Web 2.0 design standards, as they are static HTML with a lack of interactivity or real usefulness. They appear to be nothing more than analog resources made digital, a piece of paper transcribed into HTML.

If one is to click on the bold “Collections” link on the main page he/she is brought to yet another list of links, some of which appear on the main page, some of which do not. In this medium the resources are divided into two categories: primary and secondary sources. This is classical poor web design: having two navigation bars, two lists of resources, both of which are incongruous.

While there is basic contextual information provided on the website in regard to collections, there is little effort made toward specifically listing the contents. Only the library’s collection of manuscripts is given a more thorough listing of contents, albeit the list is said to be incomplete. A plain text, (Google) searchable database of collection names is offered. More alarmingly, only a small percentage of collection names are linked to finding aids, and for those entries which are not, it is not possible to discern circulation number, only a one to two sentence summary of contents is provided. The linked collection point to PDF files. The finding aids themselves have scant information: the biographical notes, abstract and scope are rarely detailed beyond two sentences. The finding aids are DACS compliant, following the Society of American Archivists’ descriptive standards. That being said, the aids are so skimpy that a researcher would be unable to grasp the full complexity of the collections without a more intimate inspection of them, the very thing a good finding aid should help avoid. Of course, this would mean visiting the plant and using the reading room after undergoing a formal reference interview. Do the finding aids increase “findability?” Perhaps more so than if they did not exist at all, but I am not convinced that they would provide a researcher a sound basis of metadata required to perform an informed campaign of research.

Clearly it would be difficult to conduct “distance research” utilizing such resources. The library has not from appearances embraced digitization and Web 2.0 standards of interactivity. Of course the scarcity of digital finding aids and other access information may hint at staffing shortages rather than a conscious decision to avoid developing such an environment, and a brief email response I received from the institution appears to reinforce this possibility. Furthermore there is a commitment stated at the top of the manuscripts database to “add more to the list as we convert our paper finding aids to electronic aids for web presentation.” The W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library is in a state of transition. A researcher may be better served conducting a formal reference interview, calling or emailing the institution rather than relying upon the web resources. It not possible for instance, as stated before, to discern a collection’s reference code if it is not linked to a finding aid. This poor presentation of information is an encumbrance to the user and the archivist: the absence of information denies to the researcher basic information needed to request services and compels the user to request basic information from the staff, interfering with otherwise important reference queries.

Luckily information on how to contact the institution is abundant and clearly displayed on almost every page of the website. The initial portal containing the four grids has a section called “Services” including a link for reference requests. Options for email, fax and snail mail are provided. On almost every page an email link to contact the staff is marked. Unfortunately this may refer to the website’s inability to otherwise provide a resource; i.e. the website presents basic information and then suggests that the user contact the staff for further assistance. There is no means for a would-be

researcher to conduct the research on his own – the model appears very reliant upon the intervention and service of staff. This is fine, but many users will simply pass up the library and seek a more interactive service wherein information retrieval can be affected in a more or less procedural fashion, accessing digital databases, wikified text and heuristic search engines. In this contemporary age a library must at least have a listing of its contents on the internet in order to flourish, and the Hoole library is incapable of even accomplishing this task, finding aids and other discovery tools excepted.

The library offers a curious service: they offer to digitize or photocopy items for a fee. This could be useful for a researcher who is in want of accessing some of the records listed on the site but has no means by which to visit the physical plant. This is the only option other than visiting the plant, as only a very small percentage of the collections have been digitized. The only collection I could find on the website which was digitized was an archive of Alabama maps, although it is unclear whether or not that collection is organic to the Hoole library, as it links to an external and separate webpage. There is, as mentioned in the first pages of this paper, a digital collection which apparently is part of the greater university system, but the contents are not delineated as being special or otherwise part of the Hoole library. At best the Hoole library's website provides an incomplete digital list of analog contents, and when compared to other sources provides both fewer and lower quality finding aids. The whole presentation hints at an institution which is geared toward local student populations, capable and willing of visiting the physical plant, rather than an expanded national, global or even state-wide user base.

Some ancillary services are provided to increase findability and to streamline information retrieval. The library system's template, common to all of the Alabama University libraries including the Hoole, includes a prominent link to Google Scholar. Unfortunately, and this refers back to the initial criticisms of the website, the university's integration of Google Scholar is incapable of delineating collections. Furthermore it appears geared toward secondary rather than primary archival materials. Accordingly the inclusion of such a service does nothing to improve information retrieval of Hoole collections, only confusing a would-be researcher. Another link offers undergraduate research assistance, and again, it is unclear which library or staff is providing that service. Finally the Hoole website points as well to a common "ask a librarian" page, which offers a means by which a user can ask questions in a semi-public forum and receive supposedly quick responses to reference queries. Even though this link appears on the Hoole website page, the service appears to be run by staff of the Gorgas library, and would not be useful for information retrieval in regard to special collections. The various other features universal to the library system, including search boxes, are also poorly integrated and are functionally useless: I was unable to find links using the "DiscoverySearch" engine that were listed on the front page of the Hoole's library website.

The Hoole library might look to improving the information retrieval experience of their website and thus the findability of their collections by dedicating effort to adapt the pillars of Web 2.0 development. While much of the content on the website is findable in Google, the content the search retrieves is malnourished. Brief, almost to the point of being irrelevant, finding aids, incomplete lists, descriptions without records behind them

and inconsistent and pages of poorly visible static HTML are some of the features a user will encounter. The website has a decent enough appearance, but as an information portal, and as a system of information retrieval, it leaves something sorely to be desired.

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