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Digital Asset Management
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Project #1: Flickr and Metadata

While I've used Flickr in the past for casual use, I had not explored its full capabilities. It functions better as an image publishing tool than as a digital asset management system. Instead, it works best as a platform for browsing and serendipitous discovery rather than focused searching. As such, the tools for metadata creation are minimal, whereas tagging and collection building is robust.

Collection notes

Location of Flickr albums:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mjaeggli/albums/with/72177720302098685>

The James Monroe Sigafus family collection was initially arranged and described according to DACS. It was then cataloged at the item level using Dublin Core, the content standard Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO), and the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT). As a fully described and digitized collection, it has allowed me to use the content to populate and test Omeka and Preservica in the context of digital curation. The Omeka iteration can be found at <https://sigafus.omeka.net/>.

Metadata fields and justification

Because Flickr provides few metadata fields for manual input and does not adhere to a schema like Dublin Core, the free-text description box does a lot of heavy lifting. Therefore, I

developed pseudo-fields for the description box. This is a practice used by other archives and museums. See Figure 1.



Figure 1. [From the Powerhouse Museum](#) on Flickr.com

I created the fields based on Dublin Core and used CCO for the content standard. In addition to the provided title field, I added core "fields": creator, date, description, format, dimensions, collection information, and rights. Subject was used within the Flickr supplied tags field. I left out any field not applicable to the collection's content, such as publishing, identifier, relation, or source. I didn't add language elements because most Flickr users aren't interested in archival aspects of object description. For similar reasons, I left out type. If the collection were intended for digital preservation and reuse, I would have included it.

For further clarity, I split the format field into format and dimensions. Both can either be crosswalked into the DCMI "format" field or separate fields, like that of VRA Core's material (type) and measurements (type) fields. Unfortunately, because Flickr is not designed to be interoperable with other content systems, attempting to crosswalk metadata would present a considerable challenge.

Description and keywords

The descriptive metadata used, including keywords, were context-specific. Therefore, descriptive metadata for the glass plate negatives differed from the Sigafus collection of historical prints. Controlled vocabularies were used and augmented by a colloquial folksonomy. I used the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) because it is more specific than the Library of Congress's Thesaurus of Graphic Materials (TGM). This was important for the glass plate negative albums. The albums for glass plate negatives were less about the original content or artistic vision than the study of the physical objects. Therefore, subjects were object-oriented, such as "silver gelatin dry plate" and "glass plate negative." Content description was minimal as it wasn't appropriate to the context of that collection. The descriptive metadata in the title and description fields reflects that.

Conversely, the Getty AAT can be more specific than a Flickr user might be interested in. For example, "silver mirroring" is a commonly used term to describe a type of photographic deterioration. AAT favors "oxidative-reductive deterioration; In the context of Flickr, "silver mirroring" is more appropriate.

Where the glass plate negative collections are object and archives-specific, the Sigafus collection is intended to share a historical legacy of a gold mining family. The content of the images in the Sigafus collection is more important than the physical object; thus, less emphasis was given to photographic processes. While I have used LOC Thesaurus of Graphic Materials as a general go-to for controlled image content vocabularies, again, it is limited in its specificity; "family portraits" isn't included in the taxonomy, but "group portraits" is. That lack of context specificity is problematic for use cases where marketing or an amateur genealogist is looking for a group portrait of a family, not a group portrait of friends. The Getty AAT does better here, as does a folksonomy.

Where used, person names were formatted according to the Library of Congress's Name Authority structure of last name, first name, date of birth - date deceased.

Organization and curation: collections, albums, and galleries

The first album I created was the Sigafus family album, which is the most complete in its description. But as a single series of photographs, it doesn't sub-divide. Therefore I added additional albums for three different glass plate negatives studies which were then grouped into a collection.

Additionally, I developed a small gallery of images from other Flickr users' albums, "Historical Postcards of Mansions." The intent was to investigate the collaborative aspect of using Flickr. This is another important criterion when selecting a DAMS—users must be able to curate, contextualize, and reuse the content in a meaningful way for them and their user group.

Flickr's approach to managing image objects first and curation second is a critical feature of any DAMS, CMS, or other digital repositories. Digital object-centered management allows linking that object to multiple folders, albums, or collections. This entails that metadata, permissions, or any additional information determining the use of the digital object are tied to the file and not to its container. Users then have more freedom to develop relationships between objects. They can reuse the same image across galleries, albums, collections, and groups. These are merely flexible constructs based on subject and applied context, making objects more discoverable. This is, in my opinion, where Panopto fails; access and video management are tied to their parent folder, necessitating duplicate files in order to exist within separate collections of videos. (Re)use of videos is unnecessarily restricted.

Automatically generated metadata

As a digital archivist on a digitization team, I regularly refer to EXIF and other embedded metadata in a file. I often assess whether the file meets preservation grade standards, when it was digitized, how, and what sort of post-editing occurred. This helps me determine which collections of negatives need re-digitization. Additionally, identifying a physical object's digitization method—scanner or camera—indicates how accurate the surrogate is to reality. Camera phones, scanners, and many DSLRs automatically enhance the output file, whereas a Phase One camera shoots only raw and according to the parameters manually set in the imaging software.

Alternatively, the publication editor I work with primarily looks for image quality and file format. Both determine whether the file is good enough for print publication or only web. The photographic team is likely interested in the parameters of the shot and embedded rights statements. A digital archivist will also want all of the above and any other technical or structural data that assists in managing and preserving digital objects.

As an interesting side note, while the EXIF information captured the software used for processing the raw files for the bridge album and the software used for scanning the Sigafus album, it did not capture that the Sigafus images had been edited using Affinity Photo 1.9.3.

"Bulk" entry data and batch uploading of digital images.

While figuring out the process of batch uploading and describing my digital images, I missed the opportunity to bulk add metadata. I was able to use Organizr to rectify that, but it required copying and pasting the tags in each of the missed images.

Even more frustrating was belatedly discovering that Flickr has a Batch Organize feature. Instead of manually adding additional tags to individual images in Organizr, Batch Organize allows the content manager to select images within and across albums for further metadata

editing or rotation. Unfortunately, there is no "find and replace" function. This is problematic and time-consuming if there is a misspelling or a missing part of a descriptive term: for example, replacing "glass plate" with "glass plate negatives."

Regarding bulk ingesting files, the drag-and-drop or file selection and upload works fine for a small batch of assets. However, with extensive collections, it is faster to batch import a CSV sheet populated with metadata tied to their assets. I recently worked with 900 1940s badge images, and ingesting those into Flickr without a bulk import tool would be prohibitively time-consuming.

Licensing and/or legal information

Because the albums I created for this project are historical and out of copyright, there are few licensing or legal complications. I placed no restrictions on the glass plate negatives and marked them as public domain. They have no collector, no accompanying contextual information, and are well out of any copyright restrictions. However, I assigned the Sigafus collection photographs Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike and added a rights statement in the description box. The statement stipulates that users must seek authorization to reuse the content. Requiring attribution is a common practice in archives, and the Sigafus collection belongs to a person with a vested interest in protecting that content, even if the images are in the public domain.

Conclusion

Flickr isn't a DAMS, or even a photo manager, despite its claim as the latter. Instead, it is a presentation and sharing platform. It has a particular user experience goal, and as such, it does its job well. The scope of hidden tools certainly surprised me, such as Organizr and the Batch Organizer. While they are clunky and difficult to find for first time users, they provide casual

users enough support to lightly describe and curate their photo collections in a way that promotes serendipitous discovery and community collaboration. As an archivist, I would use Flickr as one of many methods for community outreach, but it wouldn't be where I house and manage my digital media collections.