

Review of the Digital Library of Appalachia

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### Abstract

This is a review of the Digital Library of Appalachia from a user's perspective. Factors considered are the goals of the DLA, as set forth by the Appalachian College Association, the features of the website, and the types of resources contained within it. Also discussed are the origins of the project and the technology in use.

Keywords: digital library review, Digital Library of Appalachia, Appalachian College Association

## Review of the Digital Library of Appalachia

The Digital Library of Appalachia is an effort by a regional consortium to provide convenient, central access to items of local historical significance. The Appalachian College Association, comprised of three dozen institutions in several states, conceived the DLA in 1999 to serve a range of popular and scholarly interests. Its mission is “to provide online access to archival and historical materials related to the culture of the southern and central Appalachian region” (Appalachian College Association, n.d.).

The DLA has been supported by an unspecified amount of funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Appalachian College Association, n.d.). It is available at <http://www.acadla.org/cdm4/>.

### **Organization**

The DLA includes photographs and textual items such as letters, diaries, books, and newspaper articles. Sound recordings in the collection include Appalachian bluegrass music and oral histories. In total, the library contains more than 12,000 items. By combining these materials and offering them for free on the World Wide Web, the ACA aims to heighten interest in the traditional mountain culture of Appalachia. In doing so, ACA grants researchers both near and far convenient access to cultural gems otherwise too far flung to be enjoyed together (Appalachian College Association, n.d.).

### **Service Features**

Visitors to the Digital Library of Appalachia are greeted with a carousel of images from the collection beside a brief description of its purpose. Below, three black and white photographs serve as wordless exemplars of the collection. Arranged vertically on the left side of the page, seven options confront the visitor. From top to bottom, these options facilitate

searching and browsing, provide information about the DLA, offer usage assistance, and permit visual customization of the archives.

Inexplicably, the images on the front page, the carousel and static photographs, do not link to the full records to which they correspond. This prevents visitors from indulging a fleeting interest in these items. Nevertheless, the search and browse features are easy to use and effective.

The simple search box is positioned above the other navigation options, so I decided to enter “banjo music” and hit the *go* button. My vague query, which I intended to reflect that of the average user, yielded 2,432 results. The software that powers the DLA collection, ContentDM, provides a handful of refinement options to the left of the search results. Users are able to narrow their results by subject, format, creator, and date. I hastily scanned the top results and picked number four: an audio recording of J. Roy Stalcup playing banjo interspersed with dialog about the song. The item page showed the information about the recording, the “metadata”, including the song title, file size, names of the artist and interviewer, and the holding institution. Centered at the top was a link to “Access this item”, in other words, “play the song”. The recording played in a separate window that consisted of simply a play/pause button, progress bar, and volume control.

Backing up two pages, I chose the advanced search option. Advanced controls include the proximity of key words, fields for conducting AND and OR searches, as well as narrow searches: title, subject, creator, date, etc. Since I enjoyed the item from my simple search, I decided to look for more like it. I narrowed my search to the same holding institution, Berea College, and looked for items of subject “banjo” and format “audio”. The first of my 350 search results was a rollicking bluegrass tune by Lily May Ledford called “Banjo-picking Girl”.

Changing gears, I decided to search for historical photographs. I went back to the home page and clicked “Preferences” so that I could customize the display options. A grid layout seemed more conducive to comparing visual resources, so I selected a four-by-five grid. I then used the simple search to find items containing “blue ridge”. Surprisingly, the 4,525 matches included only sound recordings, so I went to the advanced search. It was here that I realized that the DLA makes it very difficult to search for broad categories of material, such as images. The format field is a free-form text field like all the others, but it would be far more beneficial to present a selection box of a few types, including audio, text, and imagery. A free-form field forces visitors to perform multiple searches (“audio”, “sound”, and “music”, for example) or risk missing out on some relevant resources.

Perplexed that I could not find a single image labeled “blue ridge” or even “mountain”, I floundered for a while until I found a picture of a geographic feature called Blowing Rock. Examining the metadata, I saw that it had no format specified. Examining a few others, I determined that some, perhaps all, of the images were missing the format element. Surely a person looking for scenic vistas and scholars seeking pictures of moonshine stills would expect to get pictures if they asked for them. Problems of incomplete metadata are compounded by the advanced search, which I mentioned does not provide the user with a short list of format types. This seems to be a glaring oversight in the DLA.

Going back to the main page, I decided to explore the *Browse by Library* feature. Glancing at the 24 institutions in the drop-down list, I chose Lincoln Memorial University. (I was glad to see our sixteenth president memorialized in Appalachia.) On the first page, I saw a brief newspaper segment titled “A Tribute to Lincoln” by Madge Pollard. I was excited that

DLA offers the text of the document in addition to the scanned image. However, this item was never transcribed, either digitally or manually, so that option was a dead-end.

On page two of Lincoln Memorial's holdings, I saw several old photographs depicting, among other things, boys at a summer camp in Kentucky and a May Day celebration on the LMU campus. I noticed that the format of these photos had been designated as "photograph", unlike those I had seen earlier. Apparently, the archival staff at each participating library did not all follow the same procedures.

ContentDM has a feature called *Clip image* which is represented by a button with a scalpel icon. It lets the user trim and crop the full image to suit an ad hoc purpose. I can imagine how valuable this feature would be in pedagogy, forensics, and journalism.

### **Technology**

The Digital Library of Appalachia employs digital repository software called ContentDM. ContentDM is a product of library giant OCLC, the Online Computer Library Center. The Appalachian College Association chose Dublin Core for its metadata standard, another OCLC product. Dublin Core provides fifteen basic fields, which appealed to the consortium's desire to simplify the archival process to avoid costly errors or inconsistencies (Parker, 2005). In the case of the missing format specification, this concern was well-placed.

Once Dublin Core was chosen, the consortium set out to define standards and practices for the DLA. For each field, they decided whether it should be mandatory or optional, free-form or controlled, and whether to put it under authority control. Finally, they created a style guide to promote consistent, high quality metadata (Parker, 2005).

### **Summary**

ContentDM provides a robust foundation for a digital collection numbering in the tens of thousands. OCLC can, if it chooses, bring the resources to bear to develop and improve its ContentDM software for customers like the Appalachian College Association. A benefit of this particular collection is its variety of material types and diversity of holding institutions.

Among the disadvantages are the inability to select a specific item format in the advanced search and the inconsistent application of the format element. These metadata issues could be solved without too much effort, and the result would be an even more valuable trove of audio-visual materials of interest to journalists, scholars, history buffs, and the general public.

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