Searching for *julkort*:

Observations on Resource Discovery in Large-Scale Digital Libraries

Diamond Alexander

Library and Information Science, University of Denver

4810: Digital Libraries

April 20, 2023

Large-scale digital libraries such as Europeana, the EU's premier digital library and its United States' counterpart, the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), must contend with a wide variety of users, their needs and goals, materials, and contributors when making their collections available to the public. This paper is the result of my explorations and observations of each institution's search, access, and retrieval process while searching for an object with an international reach: Christmas cards or *julkort* in Swedish.

Searching

On Europeana's site, I initially searched "Christmas card" in English but realized I could also search in Swedish to find cards specific to the country, which was my goal. I narrowed my topic further to only Christmas cards featuring children but realized I would have to rely on visually picking out those cards because subject-specific search wasn't available. While *barn* or children was listed as a subject in the metadata of the object itself (See Figure 1), it wasn't hyperlinked to allow for cross-referencing and "Subject" wasn't a search filter option.

In comparison, DPLA does allow for subject-based searching and made my search for Christmas cards with children incredibly easy (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Comparison of subject metadata between Europeana and DPLA.

Europeana's modern user interface made the navigation challenges I experienced even more surprising: no visible search bar on the results page; the search term was displayed as a chip at the top of the page as if it were a filter; and my selected filters remained in the sidebar, sometimes out of view. One exception to my frustration with the filters was the usability of the sidebar itself. I found the ability to use a scrollable and searchable dropdown for my filters was user-friendly in a way that DPLA's sidebar wasn't (See Figure 2).

What it lacks in modern visual design, though, DPLA makes up for with important and expected search patterns: a search bar at the top of all pages; my original search term remaining visible in large, bolded letters; selected search filters displayed in a group at the top of the page; and a default list view which allowed me to skim the objects' dates, descriptions, and contributing institutions quickly as I scrolled (See Figure 3).

Figure 2

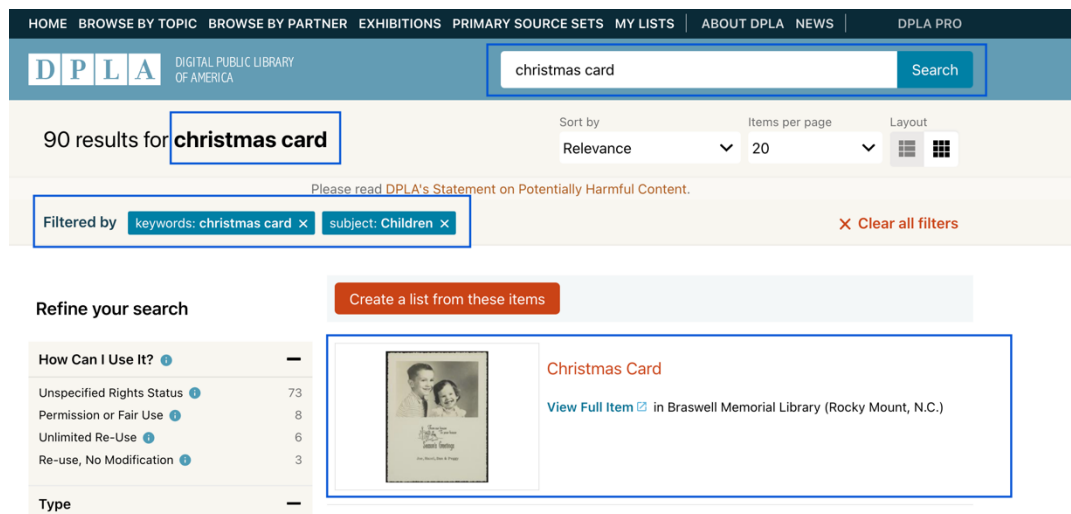*Comparison of search filter sidebars between Europeana and DPLA.*

Figure 3

View of DPLA search results page.

Accessing and Retrieving Objects

Despite my critique of its search functionality, I found Europeana's individual object

pages to be much more user-friendly. Features that stood out to me as particularly helpful or

compelling were: "Good to know" vs "All metadata" tabs for progressively displaying

information; a slick copyright tag linked to its corresponding rights statement (something not

consistently added to DPLA's pages); chips encouraging users to discover related collections;

and a grid of additional objects to view based on the original search term. Retrieving my objects

proved to be less intuitive, however. When viewing the objects, they were displayed in a slider

with two identical looking versions (See Figure 4). Without any helper text, it's not clear that they

are downloadable access files with two different dimensions, hence the duplication. I figured this

out by looking at the URLs of each image when I clicked them and then experimenting with the

slider and "Download" button.

Figure 4

View of digital objects in Europeana's collection.

Public Domain   1/2   SHARE   DOWNLOAD

In contrast to Europeana's on-page access and retrieval of objects, DPLA's model is to provide access to a thumbnail (or placeholder) and basic metadata for each object while using a large "View Full Item" button to link out to that partner institution's object page. I found this constant switching of context from DPLA to a different system tiring after just a few searches because no one institution's link behaved the same. While Temple University's link took me to an object record page similar to DPLA's, Winding Rivers Library System's (WRLS) was linked to an outdated ResCarta image viewer (See Figure 5) and a link to a Smithsonian object sent me to yet another search results page, requiring me to click further to access the object itself. This inconsistency extended to object retrieval as well: I could right-click and save the image from Temple's website whereas I could only save a PDF of my object from WRLS' image viewer. When an object wasn't available for retrieval, I was sometimes able to rely on an institution's custom rights statement for guidance on how to gain access.

Figure 5

Examples of institution websites linked from DPLA.
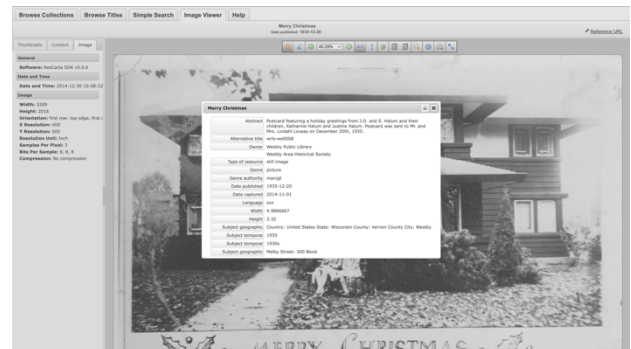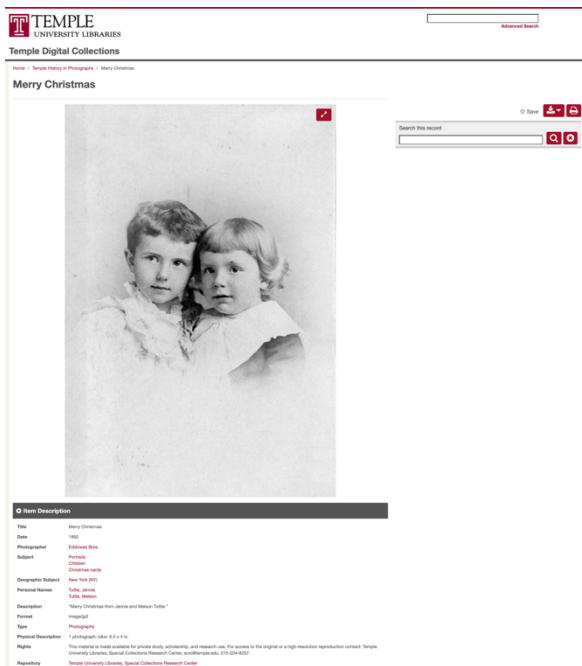
Creating a system that is intuitive and accessible but still powerful enough to support the diverse ecosystem that digital libraries serve is a complicated endeavor. Both Europeana and DPLA offer access to the information and items users are seeking but differ enough in their respective missions – the European institution encouraging cultural heritage discovery and the US library fostering learning, growth, and contribution – that this distinction impacts each platform's architecture, usability, and access to objects. I believe this has important implications for future large-scale projects and how they architect the process of resource discovery to their intended users.