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DH Dev. Report #2: Comparative analysis of tools and text and image

“One person’s metadata is another person’s data,” says meta|morphosis: film-to-digital’s tutorial on the Basics of Metadata.[[1]](#footnote-1) Where data ends and metadata begins is blurry, and how much metadata is necessary depends on the subject and the platform on which it is being presented. As we move through various tools for presenting data on digital platforms, we see how metadata can correspond to the degree of storytelling possible. Text-heavy sites, such as Blogger, will primarily use temporal metadata to organize posts and narrative is centered, but as we move into visual-centric platforms, such as Omeka, mastering metadata becomes to key to narrative storytelling (if you can sort out your metadata, that is).

Blogger is user-friendly and has a low-bar for entry into publishing text-heavy sites on a digital platform, best suited for stories that move temporally or thematically. If a user (or the creator) is looking for something specific in a blog post, the point of reference will be the date of creation or a key word. WordPress’s indexing is not as temporally centered as Blogger’s, meaning metadata other than date of creation can be used to organize elements of the site. As we saw with the UNL Campus Archeology website, a temporal organization for a blog does not always work depending on the subject of the site. Often, we need to be able to arrange the components of a website by object, by subject, or other kinds of metadata.

But the best platform will depend on its intended purpose. Shorter blog posts with less text and more visual elements are beneficial to both users and creators because visually rich pages hold attention better than pages of long text blocks. Either Blogger or WordPress could work for a project with this type of longevity, but in order to create visually diverse and engrossing pages, WordPress is beneficial for the plethora of options it provides regarding page design. Though Blogger and WordPress have similar navigation interfaces, Blogger is much easier to navigate and create with than WordPress, which requires a greater investment of time for learning the interface. That being said, the potential of WordPress far surpasses the possibilities offered by Blogger – if you’re willing invest money and time. WordPress targets those users with either previous knowledge of web design or those willing to invest time and effort into it. Blogger is designed for anyone with an impulse to share observations and experiences (such as the students in this class).

Moving away from text, Flickr seems to be a beginner’s visual image metadata dream. The options for adding metadata to each individual photo are user-friendly but can also highlight a photographer’s expertise. I wonder about this platform’s potential for transformative digital humanities. It may be useful as a repository for archival work, for archival researchers that take hundreds of pictures of documents and need a place to store and organize all of those images. Because of its capacity for metadata attached to each individual image, Flickr would be an efficient way to organize visual research. However, considering the greater objectives of digital humanities, especially historical enterprises that are not image-heavy, I question its ability to “encourage critical humanistic discourse.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Flickr automatically uploads metadata, making the upload and building process easy, but limiting the narrative that can be developed.

The inverse presents in Omeka. The landing page for Omeka touts it is a platform “for sharing digital collections and creating media-rich online exhibits.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For a historian interested in digital projects, these descriptions seem to offer the whole package for web-based historical story-telling through digital visualizations. However, Omeka is clunky in the sense that all metadata connected to items you wish you utilize in your exhibit must be discretely filled-in. Omeka appears to have a lot of potential for storytelling through digitized images and collections, but there is a steep learning curve to navigating the seemingly endless possibilities of metadata. Such a platform, that relies on fluency in metadata, makes one question which stories get told (those heaviest in images) as well as who gets to tell them. On other platforms, such as Flickr or Blogger, an auto-collection of metadata makes the “making” intuitive and centers the story-telling.

When considering striking a balance between metadata and narrative, the question remains: what is lost and what is gained? These tensions will always exist as there is no right or wrong answer, just a consideration of projects within the larger context of the “real” world. If metadata is loaded on the backend, how, if at all, does that benefit the front-end narrative?

[756 words]

1. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0vc6LeVa14> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Hunter, Katherine Faull, and Diane Jakacki, “Reifying the Maker as Humanist,” *in Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities*, Jentery Sayers, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See: <https://www.omeka.net/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)