10-11-2019

The Espy Project: From Paper Archives to Digital Scholarship

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**Recommended Citation**

Wolfe, Mark; McMullen, Melissa; and Partridge, Amanda, "The Espy Project: From Paper Archives to Digital Scholarship" (2019). *University Libraries Faculty Scholarship*. 171.  
https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/ulib_fac_scholar/171

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The M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives has digitized the most complete existing collection of execution records collected by M. Watt Espy, and is making them available for digital scholarship.

The New York Times crowned M. Watt Espy (1933-2009) as "America's foremost death penalty historian," who devoted more than 40 years to documenting each legal execution dating back to the founding of the Jamestown Colony. In 2008, the M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives acquired the hallmark collection and in 2016 was awarded a grant by the Council on Library and Information Resources to digitized 24,000 index cards and over 100,000 pages of reference material to document each case.

Espy Metadata Editor

The project needed an innovative tool to solve the challenges of updating and creating metadata records for over 24,000 index cards and over 100,000 pages of reference material, plus merge old ICPSR data with the newly created records.

Our project manager, Greg Wiedeman created a Ruby on Rails application, which allows metadata technicians to flip through each page of reference material using links or arrow keys. The Espy Metadata Editor allowed metadata technicians to focus on the intellectual task of cataloging historical data and records instead of using cumbersome file systems or spreadsheets.

The list of persons executed from the Espy file were made searchable with auto-complete functionality. Auto-complete allows technicians to type names or dates in a field and quickly select matches. For records not listed in the Espy File, metadata technicians create new records.

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Control Panel
We connected with ICPSR to "seed" our metadata and match it to the documentation in the Espy Papers.

Small Index Card
Smaller index cards give brief details of an execution.

Large Index Card
Larger index cards expand upon executions if available to Espy.

Metadata Challenges
- No suitable standard schema or Linked Data ontology
- Inconsistencies that arise with multiple metadata technicians
- Vague, incomplete or illegible records
- Duplicate records leading to potential redundancy by metadata technicians
- Unconfirmed executions
- Extrajudicial executions required new categories
- Modifying biased terminology and categorizations without affecting the integrity of Espy's mission

Conclusions
This is the largest digitization project the department has ever undertaken. The metadata editor minimized the potential pitfalls involved in processing the voluminous digitized materials, and controlled the complexity of linking, creating, and updating metadata records.

While the sheer overall workload of the project was unexpected, even after conducting multiple time and motion estimates for creating metadata, the metadata editor brought new efficiencies. We aim to use the editor for future metadata work.

Source Material
Information sourced throughout initial project. The documentation links to the index cards that summarizes the information of each execution.

Metadata Fields
These are all the variables that will make the final Espy metadata record. A user will be able to not only search and find a record, but see the source of the data, with links to the digitized document.