

# JLSC

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## Brief Reviews of Books and Products

### Discoverability in Digital Repositories: Systems, Perspectives, and User Studies

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## BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

Book review: Woolcott, L., & Shiri, A., editors. (2023). *Discoverability in Digital Repositories: Systems, Perspectives, and User Studies*. Routledge. 232 pp, ISBN-13 9781000856330, 29.96 USD (eBook).

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Digital repositories are ubiquitous platforms that academic and other cultural heritage institutions use to store and publish scholarly work and unique, high-research-value digitized materials. However, the matter of exposing the valuable work done in these institutions to users, both within and especially outside of the repository website itself, has not gathered a great deal of attention. And, in today's information environment, easy discoverability plays an outsized role in how and whether these collections are found and used. As the editors pose the question in the introduction, "How do we design discovery platforms that are Web-scale, interoperable, and linked data enabled, that support the creation of knowledge graphs, that benefit from search engine optimization, and that provide positive user experiences?" (p. 2)

The overarching goal of *Discoverability in Digital Repositories: Systems, Perspectives, and User Studies* is to raise the profile of this severely overlooked institutional component. The topic of discoverability in libraries has often revolved around integrated library systems, and digital repositories have been relegated to a small piece in a large system. Such treatment ignores the many specific dimensions in which digital repositories require different parameters of consideration, such as set metadata schema versus a focus on metadata as data. Therefore, the book seeks to redress the gap by covering, both in an introductory way and then in greater detail, the current major categories in which a repository would be expected to facilitate discovery. The approach encompasses essays, case studies, and recommendations.

The book is especially useful for these library roles: "digital repository managers, practitioners, and researchers, metadata librarians, systems librarians, and user studies, usability, and user experience librarians" (p. 1). With an intended audience broader than a specific role, this book is aimed at those who are newer to the field of digital collections, as well as those who teach in these areas. I found this claim to be largely validated; certainly, anyone who works with digital repositories in some capacity could likely benefit from the information presented here. As each



chapter presents a foundational definition for the concepts under discussion, the claim that the book serves developing practitioners is indeed borne out.

The contributors include a metadata librarian and dean; a program director for digital libraries, administrators, and librarians in other areas such as digital initiatives; a Web and application developer; and a doctoral student focusing on linguistics and information technology (IT). The variety of backgrounds shows the range of library roles that intersect with digital collections daily. The uniformly good quality of prose and simplicity of language in discussing sometimes difficult concepts is further evidence of the expertise and ability the reader can expect.

The book is clearly organized, with an introductory essay discussing the background and rationale for the volume. Divided into two parts, the book's first part focuses on functionality of digital repositories. This first part is further divided into chapters detailing critical parts of this functionality: types of digital repositories and how it relates to discoverability (Chapter 1); repository functionality and structure (Chapter 2); metadata (Chapter 3); linked data (Chapter 4); and user behavior and backgrounds that can impact discoverability (Chapter 5). The reader comes away from the first part with a holistic sense, thoroughly informed by current literature, of what digital repositories are meant to do within the greater library/archival ecosystem, the various kinds of repositories there are, and some salient characteristics of the typical users of these repositories that will affect how material is found.

The second part is dedicated to case studies that put the concept of discoverability/visibility into practical use by analyzing actual behavior in various platforms: within the library's systems and layers (Chapter 6); with Wikipedia/Wikidata (Chapter 7); and with popular internet search engines (Chapter 8). This organizational strategy is in keeping with the book's stated aims of providing the introductory content and then going in for a deeper examination of the topic. Although this happens within each chapter in the first part, the second part, in a user-friendly manner, deepens the discussion and shows why the themes have been selected. For instance, the chapter on sharing metadata via Wikidata touches on the role of linked data, i.e., why it is important, as well as concrete examples of how it can be implemented. Importantly, they point to examples such as the University of Pittsburgh, which saw a marked increase in use of their digital collections after adding digital assets to Wikipedia articles (p. 140).

Given the nature of the topic, one can reasonably say that it would be important for the user to understand the following: 1) the general structure and possibilities of each information environment outside the repository; 2) the currently known methods for making material in

a repository discoverable in that environment; and 3) some real-world examples of these concepts in play. The second part accomplishes that.

According to the editors, there has been no major, monograph-length works that have made it to common consciousness in the field. Perhaps the most similar work is *Making Institutional Repositories Work* by Callicot, Scherer, & Wesolek, from 2015. This work is a more holistic review of institutional repositories. Discoverability does have a separate chapter here but is heavily focused on Web search and does not contain the breadth of material covered in *Discoverability in Digital Repositories*.

The quality of each chapter is laudably high, and the book delivers on its dual promise of a foundational discussion before moving into more advanced considerations. Future editions of the book would be well-served to include material that goes more deeply into the issue of digital collections that originate from archival collections. Specifically, the way that archival collections are structured presents an interesting complication for the keyword-centric approach to discoverability that is the standard both in the profession and in this volume. There was perhaps a missed opportunity in that archival and special collections discoverability did not merit a separate chapter.

Overall, this book fulfills a glaring omission from the current work on discoverability in libraries. As is usual in areas of technology, some of the material will likely age rather quickly, necessitating new editions or works in the future. But, as a snapshot of the state of the field at present, this volume is a much-needed work that will no doubt spur further vital discussions and works to come.