

Omeka: A platform for online exhibitions

Omeka: A platform for online exhibitions – Web Exhibits task force

Project staff: Andy Hickner, Francesca Livermore, members of Library IT

Introduction

Because online exhibits have the potential to reach much larger audiences than physical exhibitions, it is incumbent upon Yale University Library (YUL) to represent its collection in a professional and engaging manner. A single platform for online exhibits at the library would be beneficial to staff as well as the broad global audience that our online presence attracts and serves. In the past, Yale curators and librarians have created online exhibitions using any tool that was available to them. As a result, there are now a number of “legacy” exhibitions which are hard to support, rarely updated or maintained, orphaned when a staff member leaves, difficult to brand or identify as a Yale project, and challenging to carry forward as YUL has moved to Drupal and new servers. One platform for online exhibits would create efficiencies in time management, workflow, and training by simplifying the decision-making that goes into web design and writing. It would free exhibit curators to focus on their content and remove some technological impediments to mirroring physical exhibits online. Selecting a platform like Omeka would also produce online exhibits that are highly preservable and sustainable, easing maintenance and migration cycles. For YUL patrons, a standard platform yields a professional look with consistent branding and navigational options providing easy pathways to more library content. For these reasons, the Web Exhibits task force seeks LEC approval to adopt Omeka, an open source tool, as the official platform for online exhibits at Yale University Library.

Background

The Web Strategy Committee was prompted to form the task force as a result of the migration of library web content to Drupal.¹ There are many legacy online exhibits connected to the YUL website with varied content and format. The Library Information Technology group (LIT) has managed them on servers that are being phased out as LIT transfers library web content into Drupal. Because of their variety and the customization that would be required, Drupal is not a good fit for these legacy exhibits. The task force was formed to investigate a common solution for this wide variety of content in need of a new home. Without this, a number of these exhibitions will soon lose their online presence completely.

The task force started by identifying the common needs for any tool the library might adopt for this purpose. These include:

- Easy for exhibit curators to use
- Allows for text and image adjacency
- Allows for reuse of digital content
- Allows for customization
- Supports complex objects
- Integrates with the library's digital repository

The task force then investigated several different options for online exhibitions, including a Drupal module already in use at the Beinecke; Google Art Project; and Spotlight.² After exploring these options, Omeka was the only exhibition tool that met the task force's "common needs."

¹ Members include a spectrum of individuals across the library system: Peter Leonard, Librarian for Digital Humanities Research; Kerri Sancomb, Exhibitions Coordinator from Preservation; Robin Dougherty, Librarian for Middle East Studies; Melissa Grafe, John R. Bumstead Librarian for Medical History; and Francesca Livermore, Arts-Area Digital Librarian.

² <https://github.com/sul-dlss/spotlight>

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Omeka is the project of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University: <http://omeka.org/>. According to the website:

Omeka is designed with non-IT specialists in mind, allowing users to focus on content and interpretation rather than programming.... It makes top-shelf design easy with a simple and flexible templating system. Its robust open-source developer and user communities underwrite Omeka's stability and sustainability.

Omeka's approach closely aligns with the task force's common needs, allowing for ease of use, customization through flexible templating, and much more.

The task force surveyed other libraries' sites to see how they were using Omeka for online exhibition. Most notably, the University of Michigan Library has a successful online exhibition program using Omeka (<http://www.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/>). The task force contacted Michigan's group via conference call to discuss its development and use of Omeka. This group's comments were very positive. After investigating Omeka and ready to begin testing the tool itself, the task force proposed a six-month pilot with Omeka to the Web Strategy Committee.

Omeka pilot

From May-October 2014, Yale's Omeka instance³ was populated with exhibitions by a variety of librarians across YUL, from a combination of legacy exhibitions and new online exhibitions. The task force began developing a number of exhibits representing several units across the library including the Medical Library, Music Library, Arts Library, International Collections and Research Support, and Manuscripts and Archives. As the pilot draws to an end, the task force members are all in favor of continuing to work with Omeka.

³ exhibits.library.yale.edu

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Library IT is also interested in the pilot's success and finding the right way to move out of the pilot phase.

Resource requirements

The Systems Infrastructure group in LIT and Art Belanger and Andy Hickner from the Medical Library collaboratively manage the current Omeka instance. Both Omeka servers (production and development) are virtual machines running Red Hat and are hosted on University Information Technology Services VMware infrastructure. Ray Frohlich, Director of Enterprise Systems and Architecture in LIT, suggests that this structure could remain in place were Omeka to move out of the pilot phase. The virtual environment will provide great flexibility as usage increases. The Systems Infrastructure group in LIT would continue to provide system administration for the server. Besides the staff contributions in kind, no additional funding is sought or required.

Task	Time	Staff	Notes
Finalize look and feel for the Omeka theme	10 hours	Member, User Experience Group	Most likely this work will go to the to-be hired Web Manager
PHP development, customize code, integrate functionality	20 hours	Member, User Experience Group	Most likely this work will go to the to-be hired Web Manager
Application administrator	10%	Andy Hickner	As approved by his supervisor, Mark Gentry (see Appendix A)
Primary resource for migrating content, learning the tool, and building exhibitions	10%	Francesca Livermore	As approved by her supervisor, Allen Townsend (see Appendix B)

Timeline

As the pilot instance of Omeka will not require server migration at this time, there will be no delay to adding more exhibits to the site.

Completed by June 2015:

- 3 Legacy exhibits, Medical Historical Library (Melissa Grafe and Andy Hickner)
- 2 Legacy exhibits, by Lewis Walpole Library (Susan Walker and Andy Hickner)
- All upgrades to the Omeka theme as well any additional PHP modifications (LIT)

Sustainability

During the pilot phase, it became clear that there are large issues to be addressed in guiding online exhibition beyond simply choosing a platform as this proposal seeks to do. The Web Exhibit task force proposes the formation of a user group to facilitate this work by partnering with colleagues across the library to address questions of standards and presentation. The group would require a 3-5 percent monthly time commitment from participants for three months. This time would be used to develop a Libguide that refines the emerging guidelines and best practices the task force has developed over the course of the pilot. The user group would also consult with Joan Emmet to set baseline standards for intellectual property rights future online exhibitions, as part of the best practices documentation. After the initial three-month period the time commitment would be approximately 1-2 percent for monthly meetings as needed and summer training sessions. This group would be formed from the Web Exhibit task force members. The user group would also act as “expert” users for other librarians interested in publishing an online exhibition.

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After the project to implement Omeka officially is complete, the task force proposes linking from the Digital Collections landing page to the site as well as marketing this new resource more fully to our exhibition curators and support staff. At that time, the User Group could also offer broader training sessions. Beyond the baseline purpose of supporting Omeka - mirroring the library's physical exhibits - new exhibitions could include digital-only or collaborative projects between students or classes and the library.

Summary

In the past, the library has provided broad access to collections through online exhibitions in a disaggregated way. Through Omeka, the library will be able to move toward a more comprehensive system. Because Omeka provides a graphic user interface (GUI) with simple workflows, it will ease the work of those who build online exhibits. Omeka also creates exhibitions in a database environment, which affords curators the opportunity to reuse content across online exhibits. The data is preserved in a structured way, and as Omeka provides an OAI-PMH plug-in, it reduces the burden on LIT to manage and migrate online exhibits over time. Altogether a tool like Omeka will position the library to present its online exhibits in a cohesive, friendly manner to YUL users and a global audience.

APPENDIX A

Subject: RE: approval for Omeka
Date: Friday, October 31, 2014 4:22:53 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From: Gentry, Mark
To: Livermore, Francesca
CC: Gallagher, John, Hickner, Andrew

Hi Francesca,

You can take this response as our approval for Andy Hickner to devote 10% of his effort to the Omeka project.

John and I discussed reviewed the proposal and observed that the time commitment is open-ended. We assume, as with most projects, that the utility of the application and structure of the support team will be reviewed on a period basis.

The Medical Library is happy to support this very worthwhile initiative.

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From: Livermore, Francesca
Sent: Friday, October 31, 2014 3:19 PM
To: Townsend, Allen; Gentry, Mark
Cc: Hickner, Andrew
Subject: approval for Omeka

Hello Allen and Mark,

I am in the process of preparing to submit the proposal for implementing Omeka at the library. A requirement for submitting the proposal is to include signatures for any supervisors agreeing to staff time commitments. Since it is so late in the day, Bobbie has agreed that an email from you giving permission (for 10% of Andys and my time). Could you send an email to me at francesca.livermore@yale.edu indicating that you have reviewed and approve the project?

I will then append it to the proposal.

Mark, please let me know if you'd like to see the full proposal.

Thank you.
Francesca

Subject: Re: approval for Omeka
Date: Friday, October 31, 2014 5:42:56 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From: Townsend, Allen
To: Livermore, Francesca, Pilette, Roberta
CC: Gentry, Mark, Hickner, Andrew

Dear Bobbie,

As requested, this email will signal my approval for Francesca Livermore's participation in the Omeka project as described in her proposal submitted earlier today.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions or concerns.

Yours truly,
Allen

Sent from my iPhone

On Oct 31, 2014, at 3:18 PM, Livermore, Francesca <francesca.livermore@yale.edu> wrote:

Hello Allen and Mark,

I am in the process of preparing to submit the proposal for implementing Omeka at the library. A requirement for submitting the proposal is to include signatures for any supervisors agreeing to staff time commitments. Since it is so late in the day, Bobbie has agreed that an email from you giving permission (for 10% of Andys and my time). Could you send an email to me at francesca.livermore@yale.edu indicating that you have reviewed and approve the project?

I will then append it to the proposal.

Mark, please let me know if you'd like to see the full proposal.

Thank you.
Francesca