

# Malleable Finding Aids<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract.** We show a prototype implementation of a Wiki-based Malleable Finding Aid that provides features to support user engagement and we discuss the contribution of individual features such as graphical representations, a table of contents, interactive sorting of entries, and the possibility for user tagging. Finally, we explore the implications of Malleable Finding Aids for collections which are richly inter-linked and which support a fully social Archival Commons.

**Keywords:** Archives, Finding Aid, User Engagement, Wiki.

## 1 Towards Malleable Finding Aids

There have been increasing calls for an archival commons. Leveraging what users and archivists are already doing to enhance access or description in an online environment (and not as another process), is inherent in processes to bring it into the “archival box” of records contextualization [6]. Ian Anderson [2] identifies broad functionalities an archive can offer the user in a six-tiered model of archival functionality, ranging from the static poster to interactive elements. Anderson and Allen [4] describe several services which might be supported by an archival commons. These include: linked data; continuous (re)arrangement; tagging and “folksonomies”; names service; annotation and contribution with narrative tools; provenance of the narrative; reputation of the agents; recommendations and collaboration; collection-to-collection association; and visualization.

Strong finding aids would be key to an archival commons that engages users. Finding aids are the primary way for users to understand what is in an archival collection. They were originally developed to be used in conjunction with the materials they describe, not as stand-alone documents. The overview provided by collection-based finding aids is important to researchers as they search for suitable materials [5, 7]. However, finding aids are unfamiliar and, possibly, opaque to uninitiated users [13, 14]. Moreover, while traditional finding aids are helpful, they are generally inadequate to meet researcher

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<sup>\*</sup> This work was completed while both authors were at Drexel University.

needs or preference in the electronic environment [3]. Even when they are online, finding aids are generally passive. They do not engage users. This passivity may make some basic tasks such as known-item searching nearly impossible [9]. Yet, a finding aid generated from an Encoded Archival Description (EAD) need not be passive. Gilliland-Swetland [8] describes the possibility of on-the-fly-faceting of a group of finding aids providing, for instance, teachers with the ability to note specific educational materials for instructional purposes, and cross EAD searching.

Given the difference between what actually exists (often unfamiliar and sparse finding aids), and what is desired by users (rich detail at the item level in a familiar presentation or environment), Yakel proposed that the reference mission for archivists should move beyond the simple provision of finding aids towards a new mission of active engagement with users, records, and systems, so that “clienteles can effectively use records”. This mission should be accomplished in the user’s time and place, without loss of context of what was (from the record perspective), while recognizing the many contexts of user need or intention (item tracking, summation, comparison, etc. of records). To this end, Light and Hyry [11] introduce the idea of colophons and annotations to capture the context of the work being done when processing materials within the context of the archive and subsequent use. Krause and Yakel [10] provide a test bed in which six interactive features are embedded in the Polar Bear Expedition Collections. Their Next Generation Finding Aid group implemented bookmarking, user commentary, link paths, browsing categories, searching, and (optional) user profiling. These are significant steps for making selected materials more malleable, accessible, and useful to a broader range of users. We develop a still more extensive set of services and base those services on a readily available development platform.

## 2 A Prototype Malleable Finding Aid

We aim to support users to more readily find items in a collection by the: (1) addition of descriptors to or about the collection; (2) annotation or addition of related objects that are better tied to general Web-based social or discovery services; and (3) facilitation of possible alternative arrangements of objects to develop new insights or meaning derived for a specific purpose or use. We implemented a prototype finding aid with these attributes in an off-the-shelf Wiki<sup>1</sup>. This prototype natively supports many interface features similar to those we have recommended for an archival commons [4]. For content we used an award-winning finding aid for the T.C.H. Jacobs collection<sup>2</sup> which was created and posted as a static Web page.

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<sup>1</sup> We used the Confluence Wiki which is a commercial application with liberal educational and not-for-profit licensing, <http://www.atlassian.com/software/confluence/>

<sup>2</sup> A finding aid for the T.C.H Jacobs Literary Papers at Pennsylvania State University was used as a example:  
<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/dam/psul/up/digital/findingaids/4995.htm>

This Wiki-based Malleable Finding Aid implements the following services:

**Key-Word Tags/Labels:** The wiki platform has a built-in “labeling” function that allows users to contribute tags. In addition to appearing on the finding aid itself, the contributed tags are ingested into a “tag cloud” that aggregates all the tags in the defined space and can be applied to other wiki based pages (such as other finding aids in the same wiki space).

**Table of Contents:** The wiki application has a self-generating table of contents. In addition to providing navigational help with a familiar “look and feel”, the table of contents adapts to changes in the section structure while also providing visual clues to the structure.

**Brief Overview:** This service implements a three-part section of the finding aid. First, a three-sentence narrative overview of the collection is created, drawing from the biographical and summary information in the collection. Second, there is a colored bar chart of the number of folders represented in each section. Third, some administrative information about the collection is included in a table.

**Graphical Representations:** In addition to the bar chart in the Brief Overview, there is a WorldCat-database-generated timeline with information about T.C.H. Jacobs’s literary output linked from the “prolific author” phrase in the Brief Overview.

**Maps:** Another page shows an interactive Google map indicating where T.C.H. Jacobs was born.

**Timeline:** A basic timeline generated from information outside the collection itself is included as a graphical element through the “prolific author” link in the Brief Overview.

**List Sorting:** Traditional finding aids have a vertically-oriented and nested box/folder presentation which makes sorting or filtering difficult. The same information can be presented in a column-based table with sorting functionality. This approach compresses the same information into less space and is a well-known form for manipulation. In addition, collapsible sections can be introduced with links to larger pages of secondary information (bibliography, etc.).

**Related Materials:** A section of additional materials with three subsections is included in the finding aid and the table of contents.

**Bibliography:** The bibliography of works by T.C.H. Jacobs is partially wiki-enabled with functionalities such as sorting and linking.

**Linking/Analytics Section:** A section about the page provides common information, such as the inbound and outbound links spread throughout the finding aid, aggregated together in one place for quick viewing.

**Comments:** Comments are allowed at the bottom of the wiki-based finding aid. These are similar to commenting features which are commonly found on many social websites and services.

**Page History/Recent Changes:** The “page history” functionality is exposed via the “tools” drop-down icon on the wiki pages and allows users to make comparisons between page versions.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <http://wiki.milleriville.edu/display/findingAids/T.C.H.+Jacobs+Literary+Papers+1907-1974>. The page title is "Guide to the T.C.H. Jacobs Literary Papers, 1907-1974".

**Table of Contents:**

- 1 Biographical Note
- 2 Scope and Content
- 3 Processor's Notes
- 4 Separation Methods
- 5 List by Series
  - 5.1 Series I - Biography
  - 5.2 Series II - Correspondence
  - 5.3 Series III - Research
  - 5.4 Series IV - Journals
  - 5.5 Series V - Miscellany
    - 5.5.1 Sub-series V.1 - Journals
    - 5.5.2 Sub-series V.2 - Typescripts
    - 5.5.3 Sub-series V.3 - Typescripts with Accompanying Materials
    - 5.5.4 Sub-series V.4 - Published Works
- 6 List by Series, Box, and Folder
- 7 Collocations

**Brief Overview:**

T.C.H. (Thomas Curtis Hecks) Jacobs, was a prolific English pulp fiction author of Westerns, romances, true crime stories, and spy and detective fiction.

The T.C.H. Jacobs Literary Papers, dating from 1907 to 1974, document the writing life of a twentieth-century pulp fiction writer. The collection includes Jacobs' childhood writings, authorial correspondence, research clippings, typescripts, publications, an authorial record book, and correspondence.

**Number of Folders:**

Series	Number of Folders
Series I - Biography	~10
Series II - Correspondence	~15
Series III - Journals - Research Books	~5
Series IV - Journals - Record Books	~5
Series V - Research	~10

Fig. 1. Malleable Finding Aid page with table of contents, brief overview, links in, and graphical representation

### 3 Feedback about the Malleable Finding Aid

To compare the static Web-page version to an enhanced and malleable Wiki-based version, a 75-minute interview was conducted with a practicing academic librarian. This librarian is also a former special collections cataloguer with deep understanding of finding aids, cataloging practice, subject expertise in literature, and working knowledge of instructional pedagogy. In short, the user is especially well qualified to critique finding aids. The interview was conducted to highlight obvious advantages and weakness, than as a systematic user evaluation. The features of the wiki-based finding aid were explained and ratings of the utility of those features were collected. The features are listed below in rank order. Comments about the features made during the interview are also included.

- #1 Table of Contents:** The most useful feature was judged to be the interactive table of contents. The wiki table of contents was endorsed also because its purpose and functionality were instantly recognizable.
- #2 Graphical Representations:** The bar chart in the Brief Overview indicating folder volume within each series was deemed very valuable for its ability to convey at a glance where the bulk of the materials were within the various series.
- #3 Brief Overview:** This section was deemed very useful for providing a summary overview of some of the longer sections. The interviewee said it was like an executive summary adjacent to the table of contents and excelled at providing a basic context for the remainder of the document.
- #4 Map:** The interviewee said, "I frequently do mapping anyway" as a routine matter of trying to figure out where various geographic locations or entities are located either independently or in relation to one another.
- #5 Linking:** The interviewee said "Linking is natural" for aspects of this content. Not only is linking a very common activity, it provides all manner of "expected" functionality and navigational assistance.

**#6 List Sorting:** The utility of sorting depends on the size of the series and/or number of folders. Given the manageable nature of the individual series/folders in this collection, visual inspection seemed sufficient. However, the sorting utility was thought to be more helpful when the *entire* collection (all series and folders) was brought together in a single list.

The services which were judged to be relatively less important were **#7 Related Materials**, **#8 Tagging**, **#9 Bibliography**, **#10 Timeline**, **#11 Comments**, and **#12 Page History**.

## 4 Linked Resources and Social Annotations

The use of a Wiki as the platform for Malleable Finding Aids has advantages beyond natively providing interface features. It can be readily expanded; for example, each resource could be given a separate page. Moreover, multiple finding aids and their contents could be more readily inter-linked as a step toward modular digital libraries.

Thus, Malleable Finding Aids can be a step toward granular digital collections with rich conceptual models to represent the contents. In addition, the Wiki platform could support social annotation which is a key component of the archival commons. Zarro and Allen [15] explore the types of user annotations for individual items in a site with photos from LC. Ultimately, annotation may go beyond simple comments to weaving complex stories and positions. Indeed, those could be presented as trails in a graphical interface [1].

Interactive participation in traditional archival activities can address some weakly documented societal perspectives. The records or collections in an archive must be connected in both *strong* (well documented) and *weak* (less documented) societal settings to facilitate the ability to make full use of these collections by both those with in-depth knowledge and those with passing interest [12].

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