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Making More: the Medieval Electronic Scholarly Alliance as a Platform for Collaborative work with Medieval Manuscripts Online

Matthew Evan Davis
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A problem with doing any sort of research regarding medieval manuscripts and other cultural works on the internet is having to sift through the dross to find the gold. Google's algorithms make it incredibly easy to find information based on particular keywords. Once found, however, that information is not always of value to the particular purpose the researcher intends. Doing a search for "medieval angel," for example, returns as the second result not information on angels in the middle ages, but of an item in a medieval-themed video game. Image searches are just as haphazard – while there are a number of medieval images included in such a search, there are many more medievally-themed items from sites such as deviantART. Additionally, there is no context for these images or searches. This makes attempting to do any sort of meaningful work from a Google search nearly impossible, and obscures the digital resources that do exist and would be of use to scholars. Clearly some sort of curated list of meaningful sites is necessary, collected in a single location.

One solution that has recently appeared on the web to meet this need is the Medieval Electronic Scholarly Alliance, or MESA. MESA is "a federated international community of scholars, projects, institutions, and organizations engaged in digital scholarship within the field of medieval studies." That description, while accurate, only touches on both the reality of what MESA is and the potential of what it can provide for scholars both now and in the future.

From a technical point of view, MESA is, first and foremost, currently a portal. Someone who goes to the MESA site (www.mesa-medieval.org) is presented with a opening page whose style should be familiar to anybody who has used Google:



Figure 1: the MESA splash page

The bar at the center of the screen allows you to look for the information provided by those “projects, institutions, and organizations” who have partnered with MESA. Typing in a search term, such as “angel,” results in a list of the resources that have that term in their title:

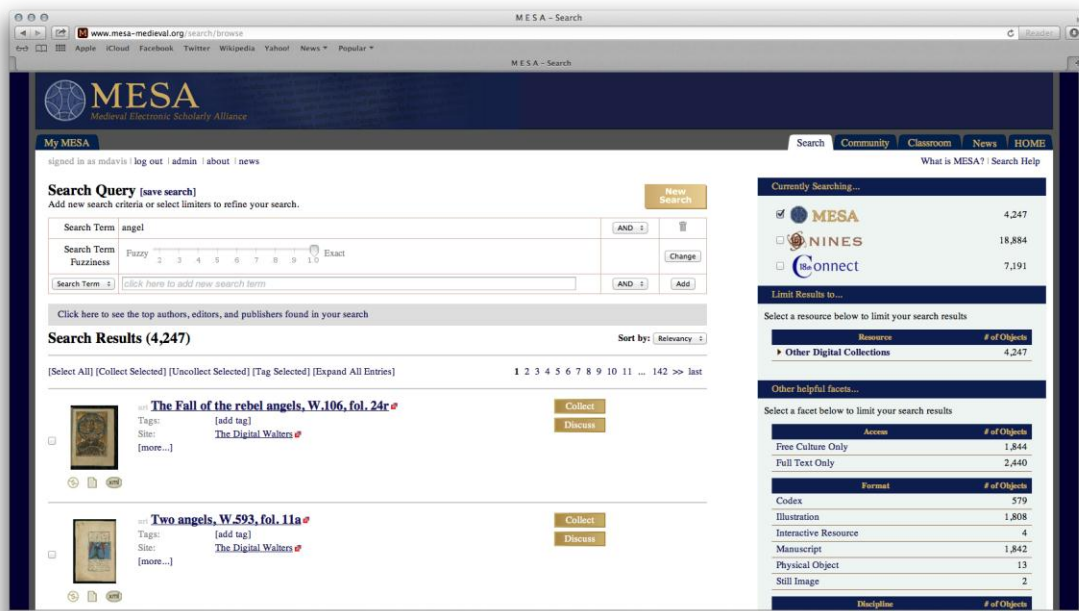


Figure 2: MESA search results and functionality

The searcher is presented with a list of results for their search with thumbnail images of the particular page where applicable, the ability to add tags to particular images, and the link to the external site where the image is currently housed. Under the thumbnail images are icons indicating whether the item is non-subscription (or “Free Culture” in the nomenclature of the site), whether the item has full text included along with the image, and whether or not there is an xml source of the item. Having this functionality makes selecting items for teaching purposes easier, as an instructor can be sure that their students will have access to the tools they need to complete the assignment they have in mind. Likewise, if the search term gives too few results, as might happen when dealing with variant spellings, the slider bar at the top of the screen provides a means to make the search more or less granular. This lets someone working or teaching with Middle English manuscripts, for example, deal with the vagaries of that language’s spelling without requiring that their students be masters of every single possible dialect of the language.

There are also a number of ways to limit the results, as can be seen on the right side of the screen. You can limit your results to only items that are non-subscription, or “Free Culture,” for example, or you can limit it by discipline. In our example search, selecting “Art History” from the discipline section reduces the number of items and a grey bar lets the viewer know which items they have selected. Search terms also stack at the top of the screen to give a viewer a visual representation of their search.

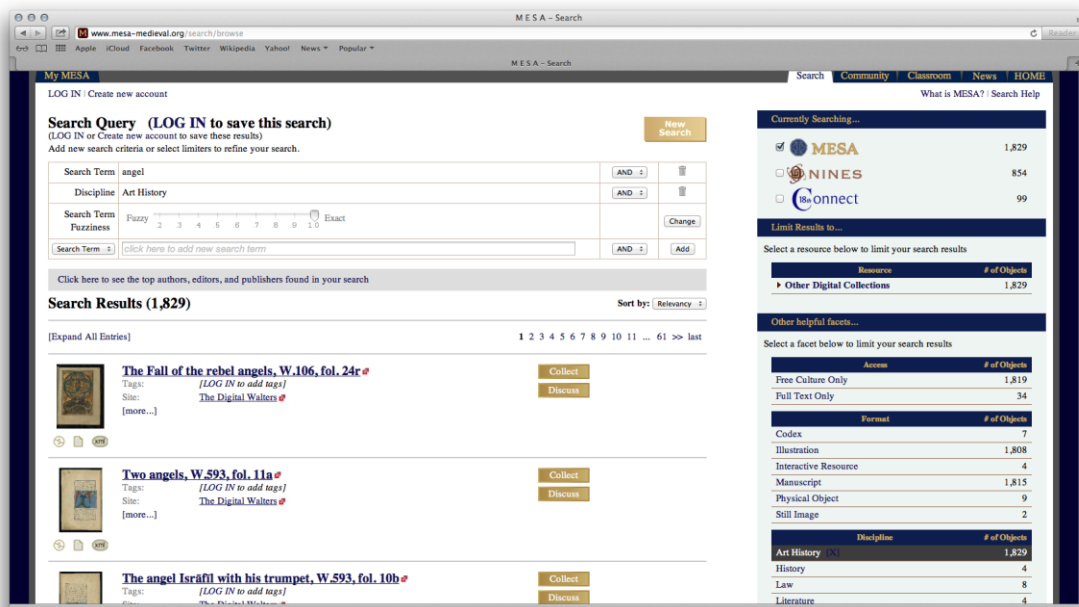


Figure 3: search results with an item selected. Note how the item becomes grey in the sidebar to let the viewer know which facets have been selected.

Another useful feature of the MESA site is its interoperability with the NINES and 18thConnect federations. This allows scholars who are working across chronological periods to reference material from the middle ages, eighteenth, and nineteenth century. As more of these federations become available for other periods viewers will be able to

conduct searches across a number of federations and to make these searches as granular or robust as they choose.

The tan buttons to the right of each item on the search results page also expands upon MESA's portal functionality to create a solid tool that facilitates scholarship. If a user selects the "collect" button, the item is then placed into a curated list on their "My MESA" page. From this list, the user can create private annotations—notes on particular items they might find useful for articles, classroom instruction, or simply as reminders for the future.

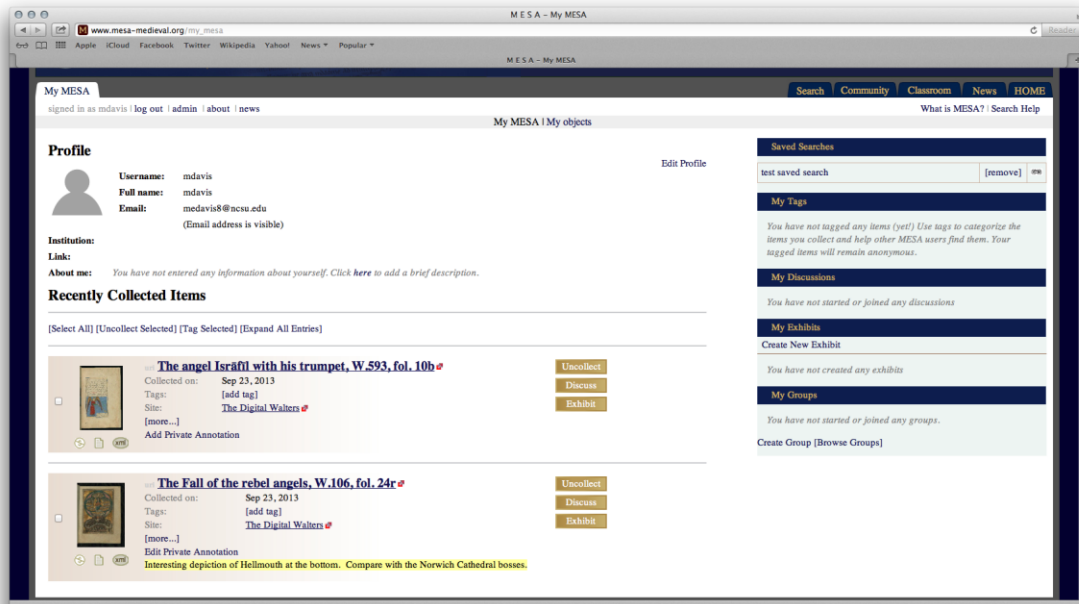


Figure 4: the MyMESA page with two results. Note the annotation on the second item.

The user can also build curated exhibits drawn from the materials saved on the MyMESA page. This is simplified through the use of an exhibit builder that allows the user to select the items they wish to include in the exhibit, create its title and short title, and add any descriptive text desired. The exhibit can then be published to the web if desired, or used internally with a class or collaborative working group.

Students can also create such exhibits as a classroom assignment, which encourages them to think critically about the results they discover on the portal rather than viewing them as a "show and tell" assignment of static images. To further encourage classroom use of archival materials, MESA has a classroom function. There, instructors find a simple mechanism to create a closed classroom group. Instructors can then place their exhibits within a single classroom environment, simplifying the process of who gets access to them and allowing real engagement with the digital materials both inside and outside of classroom discussion.

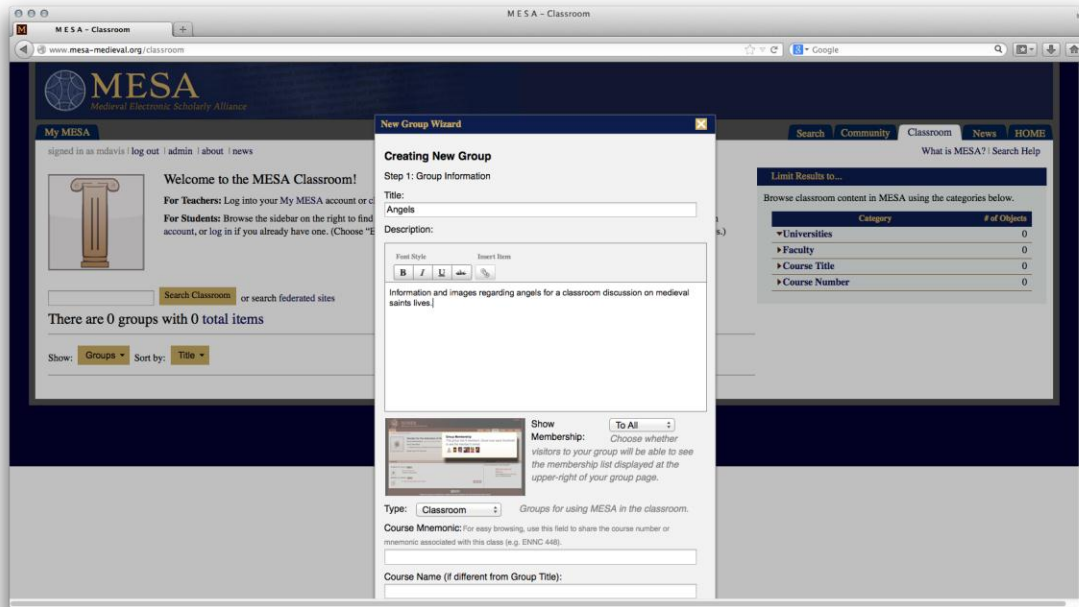


Figure 5: The MESA classroom tab, with the interface for creating a new classroom group selected.

Tools like the exhibit builder and the classroom tab are just one of the ways that MESA is encouraging the development of a community surrounding the materials users can search. Another is its peer review process. Any project submitted to MESA undergoes a period of open review, wherein the community of digital medievalists are encouraged to look at and comment on the project's technical infrastructure and scholarly import. In some cases, however, these digital projects are intended to be used for the tenuring process. There, MESA has instituted a set of guidelines more in keeping with those of traditional peer review – blind review of the site and its scholarly import by experts in the field.

Developing a community of scholars who view, comment on, tag, curate, contribute to, and teach with the materials collected and indexed on the MESA site is not only the way in which it differs greatly from the Google-based searches we have all conducted in the past, but it also suggests a way that scholars can collaborate to push knowledge of these specialized subjects forward. In this way, MESA takes the best of the traditional academy and combines it with new platforms and modes of thought in a way that can be useful both for the student just getting their feet wet with medieval manuscripts and art and the more specialized scholar for whom such subjects are commonplace.