

Book Review

Michael Fernandez, editor

The High-Impact Digital Library: Innovative Approaches for Outreach and Instruction.

By Anna Neatrour, Jeremy Myntti, Rachel Jane Wittmann, Rebekah Cummings, Jane Monson, and Megan Myres McMillan in collaboration with Core. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2025. 160 p. \$64.99 softcover (ISBN 979-8-89255-581-4).

In today's media-rich environment, if digital librarians are not reaching out to their communities, how are they ensuring they are able to collect materials of value and let users know they exist? This is the question at the heart of *The High-Impact Digital Library: Innovative Approaches for Outreach and Instruction*. Using survey responses, interviews, and case studies, the authors show how outreach and instruction should be a core part of the digital librarian's job.

Although this book positions itself as providing "innovative approaches" for outreach and instruction in digital libraries, it also reads as a new addition to the mid-2000s "Accidental Series," where digital librarians, archivists, and special collections librarians who find themselves "accidentally" in outreach roles can learn about success stories and failures, and pick up tips.¹ One of the main questions asked in the interviews is whether outreach is in the interviewee's job description. In the majority of cases, the librarians and archivists interviewed are doing outreach because there is an expectation that outreach efforts be done by their position rather than it being a formal aspect of their job. Outreach ranges from community tabling events and running social media accounts to teaching classes on digital collections. Some of the professionals feel qualified and supported in their outreach efforts, whereas others are more hesitant or struggling to find the time in their busy schedules.

The theme of accidentally needing to perform outreach to collect digital materials and show their value continues into the case study section of the book. While many of the examples are from three of the authors' home institution, the University of Utah, they do a good job of showcasing a variety of libraries and archives, digital collection types, and outreach efforts. Chapter 5 ("Digital Scholarship and Digital Humanities"), which highlights outreach efforts for digital scholarship and digital humanities, was particularly interesting to me because it seems like a natural partnership, but it turns out that connecting with faculty and students studying digital humanities still takes significant effort.

It is inevitable that a book full of case studies from the last few years will mention the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of the case studies in the book seek to demonstrate how the rapid move from in-person to online communication and learning during the pandemic led to a greater appreciation and need for digital libraries and librarians. It also led to a greater need for outreach when seeking to create collections quickly.

The pandemic and the events and movements that took place during it, such as the Black Lives Matter protests, provide the authors a timely framing to describe the struggles of creating collections in response to rapidly evolving events with rapidly evolving technology. The authors acknowledge the difficulties librarians and archivists face when creating rapid-response or community-driven projects.

I appreciated that they included sections on the difficulties archiving social media (particularly Twitter/X) when previously successful archiving methods fail. They also mention the idea of trauma-informed collecting, both for the community and for the librarian or archivist doing the collecting and processing. Including these examples allows the reader to gain a greater understanding of the levels of expertise that go into creating digital collections and highlights the value of connections with other experts, including those inside and outside the field.

With its wide-ranging subject matter and study types, the authors generally do a good job of maintaining focus on outreach and instruction, but the book does meander from the point occasionally with sections that feel slightly out of place in the overall thesis. For example, in chapter 2 (“Survey and Interview Findings”), one of the interviewees was a rare books librarian whose work barely touched digital libraries. While the interview is interesting to read—the librarian is definitely performing outreach and instruction—the authors acknowledge the work is outside digital libraries and make a somewhat flimsy attempt to tie the interview into digital libraries. I suspect their interviewee screening could have been more stringent to ensure the professionals interviewed were working with digital libraries, or they could have simply chosen to leave this particular interview out of the book.

I was pleased to see an acknowledgment of what I felt was missing from the book in the conclusion, namely, the effect of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on digital libraries. The authors express a hopeful, but cautious tone when describing ways in which AI may transform or harm the work of digital librarians and archivists, and the collections they curate. While I will admit that I am not a digital librarian or archivist, as a librarian who has frequently found myself performing tasks well outside my job description, I related to the stories and studies in this book. I was also left with a good sense of how essential outreach is to ensure digital library content is collected and discoverable. Given the breadth of examples, those who do work in digital libraries will definitely find ideas for expanding their outreach and instruction efforts, and increasing the impact of their digital library, just as the title promises.

—Meghan Burke (meghan.burke@queensu.ca), Queen’s University, Ontario, Canada

Note

1. “The Accidental Series,” Books.Infotoday.com. Information Today Inc., accessed October 3, 2025, <https://books.infotoday.com/accidental.shtml>.