Review: Digital Second Edition of Judaica Americana

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Project
The Digital Second Edition of *Judaica Americana*

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Project URL
https://singermanja2.exhibits.library.upenn.edu/

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Project Overview
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The Digital Second Edition of *Judaica Americana* (JA2) is a searchable database of American Jewish publications printed between 1676 and 1901. Built using the 2019 electronic edition of *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900*, for which compiler Robert Singerman was recently awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries, JA2 contains 3,000 supplemental entries to the print edition. The project’s features allow users to search the bibliography by author, language, holding institution, various tags, and vernacular titles, as well as find open-access links to digitized Jewish monographs, serials, and periodicals when available. As a digital bibliographic tool for scholars of American history and Jewish studies, JA2 enables further research into the communal activity, publishing, and genealogy of early American Jewish communities. As a digital humanities project, it models how print bibliographies may be adapted to serve online as curated knowledge discovery tools.

Like its print predecessor, JA2 helps researchers find and cite early American Jewish printed works. Because it provides extensive holdings information, JA2 also continues to function as a research tool for auction houses, book dealers, and collectors investigating the scarcity of a given item. It also supports the analysis of bibliometric data for macroscopic historical trends in book production and consumption. The links from JA2 entries to digital full texts offer a measure of ongoing preservation and digitization efforts by research libraries.
to make American Judaica publicly accessible. As an interactive digital edition, JA2 showcases the possibility for digital enumerative and descriptive bibliographies and their relationships to open-access repositories.

Following compiler Robert Singerman’s donation of the draft for the full text and copyright to his revised second edition in 2019, JA2 publicly launched its first phase of the site in June 2020. JA2 is implemented as an Omeka installation in order to provide a robust, searchable website of the bibliography’s relational data and prepare for future versions of the project.1 The draft of the electronic edition, as well as corresponding datasets, are available through the University of Pennsylvania’s open-access repository.2 The open-source, documented, and citable Python scripts used in the process of the project are available on Github.3

The current version of the site provides links to entries in WorldCat and open-access scans of monographic entries when available. The JA2 project team is currently working on expanding the open-access links to bibliographic entries in HathiTrust, Google Books, Internet Archive, and other sources. Future versions of the site will re-index the electronic edition and tag items for improved searchability, as well as incorporate PDF scans of available entries to make the bibliography and its contents full-text searchable.

A project of Judaica Digital Humanities at Penn Libraries, JA2 is spearheaded by project directors Arthur Mitchell Fraas, Senior Curator of Special Collections, and Arthur Kiron, Schottenstein-Jesselson Curator of Judaica Collections, and managed by Emily Esten, Judaica Digital Humanities Project Coordinator at University of Pennsylvania Libraries.4 A full description of the project’s history and list of team members is available on the site.

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**Project Review**

**Michael Haley Goldman**

The Digital Second Edition of Robert Singerman’s *Judaica Americana* (JA2) project tackles the problem of turning an immense, complicated, printed, two-volume, annotated bibliography into a digital collection. Singerman’s exhaustive, but not comprehensive, volume details close to 10,000 monographic and serial works detailing the development of Jewish thought in America before 1900. The importance of Singerman’s work itself has been better discussed elsewhere (Whiteman 1993) but this new digital version is an important step in making the resource accessible and flexible for research. It demonstrates the importance and difficulty of translating analog reference works into the binary logic of digital sources.

The team of researchers from the University of Pennsylvania — which includes Singerman himself — uses recognized digital practices to run optical character recognition (where needed) and scrape and structure the publication text (Esten 2020). The resulting raw datasets underlie the Judaica Americana website to support search and display functions of the bibliographic data. The website improves the accessibility of the original two-volume set by allowing broader access to the source as well as linking contextual references to external
resources like the WorldCat catalog and the Hathi Trust digital repository. These sites not only offer the opportunity for students and researchers to find physical copies of sources in their university libraries, but in many cases provide direct access to digital versions either through subscriptions or through open-access repositories.

The use of Omeka, specifically the Penn Libraries’ existing adaptation of the tool, makes practical sense in relationship to the project. Long-term sustainability of the project could be undermined by the creation of new customized technical systems unique to the Singerman volume that would require considerable additional time and expertise to maintain. Of equal importance is the project team’s decision to make the raw datasets available to researchers as a CSV file through the University of Pennsylvania’s Scholarly Commons. The Commons provides direct access to the cleaned datasets that other scholars might experiment with methodologically, annotate or contextualize through linked open data, or aggregate alongside other topical research projects. Although mentioned briefly in the introduction and linked from the site, the project would be well served by drawing more attention to the availability of datasets for scholars using digital methods.

The JA2 project team should be proud, but not yet satisfied, with the significant step they’ve taken in making this source available. Having worked on projects to transmogrify published sources into truly digital resources, I’m aware of the work that goes into these vital first steps in making text digital, searchable, and available. Further enhancements to the digital usefulness of JA2 abound though. First, improved usability work on the website would ease scholarly research. Some usability problems result from the difficulty of adjusting an Omeka tool created to highlight digital collections to the structure of an annotated bibliography. Browsing through pages of empty thumbnails and internal reference numbers can be confusing for all but the scholar already deeply immersed in the collection.

Second, the data painstakingly extracted from the original text could be continually improved. A simple example might be the connection of abbreviations used for various repositories with their full names. This space-saving technique for publications is not needed in a digital format. A more complicated example might be a reconsideration of the tags used for the entries. Existing tags appear to be index entries from the original volumes. While absolutely required for a publication, most index entries are no longer needed with digital search. A robust tagging project for the entries, while time consuming, would provide an important new layer of access to the work.

These improvements do not distract though from the important contribution of this project to scholarship and the digital humanities more generally. The project team should be commended for their continuing work.

References


Footnotes

1. The custom JA2 Omeka theme is available from: https://github.com/judaicadh/ja2-omeka-theme DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3894869

2. The PDF and corresponding datasets from the second edition of Robert Singerman’s Judaica Americana are available from: https://repository.upenn.edu/judaica_americana/


4. See the Judaica Digital Humanities at the Penn Libraries website: https://judaicadh.library.upenn.edu/