Photogrammar
http://photogrammar.yale.edu/
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Photogrammar is an innovative online project that allows users to explore approximately 170,000 photographs created by the United States Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information (FSA-OWI) between 1935 and 1945, now housed at the Library of Congress. Primary investigator Laura Wexler, a professor of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale, leads a brigade of cross-disciplinary experts including librarians, instructional technologists, a statistician, and a GIS specialist. This balance of strengths results in a well-executed and engrossing portal to a rich collection of American photography.

Initial phases of the project were funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities from 2011 to 2015.[1] Appealing to a wide audience, Photogrammar generated buzz in a variety of media outlets at the time of its public launch in late 2014. In 2016, Wexler was awarded a Digital Extension Grant from the American Council of Learned Societies to expand the platform to include oral histories of photographers from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art and Federal Writers Project documents from across repositories.[2] The results of this ambitious expansion are still forthcoming.

Even in its current iteration, however, Photogrammar presents a compelling resource for scholars and casual browsers alike. Robust metadata permits a variety of entry points for this potentially overwhelming body of materials. The search page, the most traditional of the entry points, allows for a keyword search as well as faceting by a photographer, lot number, subject classification, location, and date. An "About" tab leads to a digestible summary of the FSA-OWI's history and mission, links to additional information, and a brief rights statement. Happily, the majority of the images are in the public domain. Among the more innovative entry points, one highlight is the map, which collocates images at the county level and gives users the ability to pivot by date and/or photographer.

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[1] "Funded Projects Query Form, Photogrammar Project," National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed March 10, 2017,
https://securegrants.neh.gov/publicquery/main.aspx?q=1&a=0&n=0&o=0&k=1&kv=photogrammar&kj=or&w=0&f=0&s=0&p=0&d=0&y=0&prd=0&cov=0&prz=0&wp=0&pg=0&ob=year&or=DESC.
[2] "Laura Wexler, F[ellow] '16,"American Council of Learned Societies, accessed March 10, 2017, https://www.acls.org/research/fellow.aspx?cid=ec188c35-f6a4-db11-8d10-000c2903e717.

As a metadata specialist, I found the interactive data visualizations, or "Photogrammar Labs," to be the site's most engaging feature. The Metadata Dashboard, currently only available for California, goes a step beyond the nationwide map and provides a county-by-county look at the distribution of subject classifications, dates, and photographers. The Treemap visualizations cover the full corpus and allow browsing by subject according to the original 1942 classification system. In this system, the user can view broad subjects, such as "Work" (by far the largest category at 19,106 images), "The Land," and "Organized Society," or drill down into increasingly more specific subjects (e.g., "Work > Agriculture: Crops, Livestock, Ranches > Strawberries"). The visualizations are an excellent way of preserving the original intellectual order of the material while offering a bird's-eye view of the collection's thematic topography. In addition to viewing the visualizations themselves, the user can at any time simply click on a heading to view all the images of that subject.

Once the viewer has selected an image, they are presented with a clean and intuitive interface. A high-quality image can be enlarged with one click and is accompanied by the original caption, descriptive metadata, a call number linked to the image's Library of Congress catalog record, and a selection of similar photos. For uses beyond searching and browsing, nearly all images can then be downloaded as high-resolution TIFF files from the Library of Congress catalog. A handful of images, taken by photographers outside of government employment, have uncertain copyright status and are not available at high resolution.

The project's one disappointing feature is the blog, which has just a few posts from 2012 and 2013. Considering the team's rich expertise, I think that library and archive technologists and digital humanists would welcome more content like the two behind-the-scenes technical posts. Archivists engaged in reference and instruction could also benefit from examples of use cases, features on FSA-OWI photographers, and the like.

Overall, however, Photogrammar is an exemplar of what a talented, well-resourced team can accomplish with archival materials, and is a strong argument for the importance of good metadata to discovery and play. Archivists developing their own digital projects might look to Photogrammar as they consider how to make the most of digital affordances. Which interactive features best represent the collection? How might various audiences want to explore archival content? What metadata enhancements should be prioritized to make that exploration possible? Photogrammar provides insight and inspiration in thinking through these questions. An interactive finding aid of sorts, its value goes beyond the individual catalog records by making context visible and illuminating links among disparate materials. In addition to being highly browsable and suitable for all audiences, it is an essential reference work for anyone researching the FSA-OWI or other topics in American photography, twentieth-century agriculture, and the culture of the American West.