



Turning hidden gems into strategic assets

How librarians are employing academic AI to manage and showcase special collections

Academic libraries are at a pivotal moment in their evolution. As digital collections grow in scale and complexity, the need for innovative tools to manage, preserve, and showcase these resources has never been greater.

The importance of digital collections extends beyond preservation. These resources are central to research, teaching and the institutional identity of universities. Yet, as Wolfgang Mayer of Vienna University Library said in a recent webinar, traditional workflows often struggle to keep pace with the demands of modern digitization projects. Cataloging, metadata enrichment and exhibition building require significant expertise and time — resources that are increasingly stretched.

Now, Ex Libris, part of Clarivate, is expanding its Alma-based solutions with Alma Specto, a transformative solution designed to address the unique challenges of managing digital special collections. Like all Alma solutions, it was developed in close partnership with leading libraries — including Bocconi University Library and Vienna University Library — ensuring that the platform reflects real-world needs and priorities.

In the following pages, we explore the challenges of managing digital collections, the unique value of Alma Specto and the impact of AI-driven workflows on library operations. Through the voices of those who have helped shape the product, we examine how Alma Specto is redefining what's possible for special collections and why it matters for the future of academic libraries.

"The most important thing of every development partnership is the opportunity to have input, to have insight into the thoughts of the data providers, to exchange best exercises or use cases with other product development, and to give some input on what could be useful for a possible customer."

Wolfgang Mayer, Head of Content & Data, Vienna University Library

Alma Specto: Opening doors to digital special collections

Alma Specto is an advanced platform that leverages AI to streamline the management of special collections, particularly those rich in image files and non-textual materials. By automating and enhancing metadata creation, Alma Specto empowers libraries to make their collections more discoverable, accessible and valuable to researchers, students and the broader academic community. Its unique features empower institutions to unlock the full value of their digital collections, strengthen institutional identity and engage users in new and meaningful ways. Alma Specto supports libraries with:

- **Semantic cataloging and enhanced discovery:** One of Alma Specto's core strengths is its ability to improve the semantic cataloging of digital materials, making collections easier to find and use for research and teaching.
- **Integrated workflow management:** Unlike traditional tools, Alma Specto covers the entire workflow of digital document management, from ingestion and cataloging to exhibition building.
- **Exhibition builder and institutional storytelling:** The Exhibition Builder feature enables libraries to curate and present digital collections in engaging ways, supporting both academic and public outreach.
- **Integration with discovery tools and open data:** Alma Specto is designed to integrate seamlessly with existing discovery systems and supports the use of linked and open data, further enhancing the reach and utility of digital collections.
- **Flexible access for diverse user groups:** The platform supports both expert and general users, offering tailored discovery experiences for researchers, students and the broader community.
- **Importantly, Alma Specto puts AI to work at producing higher quality metadata,** automating and enriching metadata creation, while keeping librarians in control and addressing the bottleneck that has long limited discoverability.

"The developer's ability to guide us development partners and to welcome our feedback in an environment where everyone felt at ease was a success for me. What I especially appreciated was the clarity in timing and feasibility of incorporating our requests and suggestions in the tool."

Academic Librarian and Alma Specto Development Partner

Metadata: The bottleneck of digital collections

"The application of AI to entity recognition and enrichment of bibliographic records gave us a glimpse of the possibility of making the cataloging process smoother, faster, and more complete."

Academic Librarian and Alma Specto Development Partner

As the vast and diverse collections of academic libraries become increasingly digital, new and complex challenges arise in preservation, cataloging and discoverability — especially when it comes to non-textual materials like images, maps and archival documents. These non-text items can be what make a collection especially engaging and valuable, but they also present unique challenges for metadata creation and discovery.

Alma Specto's use of generative AI for metadata creation and correction is one of its most transformative features, offering both substantial benefits and important considerations for library professionals.

"It's not only about metadata creation, but also metadata correction. There were thousands and thousands of hours spent by cataloguers during the last decades to either correct false data or to adopt rules that have changed. These things could be made so much easier with AI if AI is trained by the correct guidebooks."

Wolfgang Mayer, Head of Content & Data, Vienna University Library

AI-driven metadata creation enables libraries to process large volumes of digital materials, especially images and non-text resources, more efficiently than manual methods. "While cataloguers and metadata experts can skillfully describe books and scholarly articles without deep subject expertise, non-text resources — especially in the arts and humanities — demand intimate knowledge of the material," said Wolfgang. **"Employing enough librarians to meet this need is simply not feasible. That is where Alma Specto and academic AI become indispensable allies, offering scalable support for resource interpretation and metadata enrichment."**

While AI handles scale and repetition, Alma Specto ensures librarians provide oversight, validation and strategic direction. With Alma Specto, librarians remain central to metadata enrichment by using AI as a collaborative assistant rather than an autonomous decision-maker. The platform generates metadata suggestions based on existing content, but librarians retain full control over reviewing, editing, and approving these outputs. This workflow allows professionals to guide the enrichment process, ensuring metadata aligns with institutional standards, authority files and contextual accuracy.

Additionally, Alma Specto is designed to support human-led curation by enabling librarians to define key entities and themes before AI extrapolates across collections. This preserves professional judgment and ensures that automation enhances the expertise librarians bring. Librarians oversee quality control, validate semantic tagging and shape the narrative of digital collections, keeping them firmly in charge of how materials are described, discovered and presented.

Alma Specto's impact at real libraries

The true value of Alma Specto is best understood through the experiences of real librarians. Wolfgang offers a compelling example of how the platform has transformed his approach to digital collections.

"Most of the collections we receive from faculty members have metadata quality that is very, very low. Many of them are simply numbered pictures or just state the owner of the material."

Wolfgang Mayer, Head of Content & Data, Vienna University Library

The Vienna University Library receives many digital collections directly from faculty and researchers. These often come with minimal or inconsistent metadata, making them difficult to catalog and discover.

Working as a development partner for Alma Specto was an opportunity to find a way to make these collections more discoverable through curated metadata and improved integration with the library's discovery systems, creating scalable metadata enrichment, especially for the image-heavy collections.

Wolfgang and his team used Specto's AI capabilities to extrapolate metadata from a small set of images across large sets once a few key entities were identified and verified. By identifying one person in a photo and using AI to roll out that metadata across similar images, Specto dramatically increased efficiency.

Plus, Wolfgang found there was more benefit to come. With Alma Specto, he was able to make the collections more discoverable and to showcase them, supporting more effective institutional outreach, reputation and fundraising.

"The exhibition tool of Alma Specto provides an easy smooth way — even for non-experts — to exhibit collections for special exhibitions, presentations of new collections or museum acquisitions. It's an interesting way to say, 'This is the thing we need some funding to create,' and it's easy to understand for the non-academic public as well."

Wolfgang Mayer, Head of Content & Data, Vienna University Library

The expanding role of digital collections

Wolfgang and other development partners are among the librarians who foresee digital collections becoming vital not just for research and teaching, but also for strengthening the reputation and social mission of academic institutions

"Digitizing and promoting our heritage is a matter of reputation. An important way to strengthen the ties with our community and with prospective students and alumni. At the same time, the awareness of the need to participate in a broader social mission is becoming stronger. Making once exclusive knowledge heritage available to all means contributing to this right."

Academic Librarian and Alma Specto Development Partner

These forward-thinking librarians are building a future where digital collections are not just preserved, but actively transformed into sources of engagement, institutional identity and social impact. Alma Specto can be a key enabler in this transformation, helping libraries connect with their communities, support research and teaching and fulfill their broader mission.

Are you ready to open the door to your special collections and deepen user engagement? Request a tailored consultation to explore Alma Specto.

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