

Paper

The Library of Congress World Digital Library Initiative

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In November 2005, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington announced an initiative to develop a plan to create a World Digital Library (WDL) for use by scholars, libraries, and the general public worldwide. First outlined in a June 2005 speech at Georgetown University to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, the WDL will build upon the Library's experience since 1994 in creating the *American Memory* web site devoted to U.S. history and its more recent experiences with partners from around the world in digitizing international content for the web.

American Memory began as a five-year project to make available online by 2000 five million items (manuscripts, maps, prints and photographs, early films, sound recordings, and so forth) relating to American history. Under a unique public-private partnership, funding was provided by the Congress (\$15 million) and corporate and foundation donors (more than \$45 million). The project now includes more than a hundred thematic collections. Most are from the Library of Congress's own holdings, but 23 collections were contributed, under a competitive grants program funded by the Ameritech Corporation, by libraries, museums, historical societies, and archives from throughout the United States.

American Memory adheres to certain basic principles that follow from its objective of bringing the primary source material of American history to students, libraries, and the general public. Whole collections are digitized, with a minimum amount of editorial and interpretive content. Over time, additional interpretive materials (e.g., "Today in History," classroom lesson plans) have been added, mainly to assist primary and secondary school teachers in using the site.

The Library's first major international digital library project, *Meeting of Frontiers*, was launched in 1999 as a collaboration between the Library of Congress and the two Russian national libraries, the Russian State Library in Moscow and the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg. Other partners that have since joined the project include several dozen academic, municipal, and regional libraries as well as archives and historical societies in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Funded by a special, \$2 million appropriation in the Library's FY 1999 budget, the objective of the project was to help further contacts between the United States – in particular Alaska and the West Coast – and Siberia and the Russian Far East by developing a joint digital library that would highlight the historical connections between the two regions and countries.

Subsequently, the Library launched similar partnerships with national libraries in four other countries – Brazil, France, the Netherlands, and Spain. A project with the National Library of Egypt is just getting underway. Collectively, these projects are known as the Library's *Global Gateway* initiative.

These projects generally follow *American Memory* practices and standards, albeit with some differences. The projects use more narrative and explanatory material (usually written by professional historians from the United States and the partner country) than *American Memory*, as this was judged as essential to give coherence to highly disparate collections of images. The sites are also bilingual (English-Russian, English-Portuguese, English-French, etc.), with all explanatory materials, captions, subject headings (but not, of course, original documents) presented in both languages.

So far, all of the projects (except for the one with the National Library of Egypt) have followed the *Meeting of Frontiers* model in focusing on the links and parallels between American history and these partner countries (the role of France in exploring and settling North America; the Spanish presence in the American West; the parallels between the United States and Brazil as “frontier” societies). This focus on U.S. connections has given rise to complaints in some quarters about American “parochialism” or “narcissism.” In point of fact, the Library chose to concentrate, in working with foreign partners, on digitizing materials related to U.S. history not out of parochialism, but in order to avoid raising concerns that it was seeking to place other countries’ “treasures” on its own servers in a way that could preempt worthy efforts by these national libraries themselves or such international projects as UNESCO’s *Memory of the World*.

(In this sense, *Meeting of Frontiers* and the other *Global Gateway* projects can be seen as a logical, digital-age continuation of longstanding programs by U.S. government agencies to collect copies of manuscripts and other materials relating to U.S. history held by foreign repositories. It is worth noting that as early as the 1840s the U.S. embassy in Paris employed clerks to make copies of documents in the French archives relating to the early exploration and settlement of North America and that throughout the 20th century the Library funded copying and microfilming projects in the archives and libraries of France, Russia, and other countries.)

In this tradition, the *Meeting of Frontiers* project is digitizing manuscripts, maps, documents, books and other materials in Russian repositories relating to the Russian exploration and settlement of Siberia and its late-18th-mid-19th century extension, Russian America/Alaska. To facilitate this work, the Library has provided equipment and funding for scanning centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg and has set up a mobile scanning operation based in Novosibirsk. To identify interesting and unique collections located at smaller repositories in Siberia and the Russian Far East, the Library partnered with a Russian foundation to organize a competition through which libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies from throughout Russia could apply for grants to prepare collections for digitization which were then scanned by the Novosibirsk-based team of Russian technicians. The images produced were then made available on the *Meeting of Frontiers* web site hosted by the Library of Congress, on the home institution’s own web site, and on a centralized *Bibliotheca Sibirica* being created in Novosibirsk. The Library of Congress also has contributed rare and unique materials from its own collections, as have participating libraries elsewhere in the United States (the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Alaska State Library, and the New Bedford Whaling Museum) and in Germany (the Asch collection of *Sibirica* at Göttingen).

The WDL initiative opens a new chapter in the Library’s longstanding commitment to

expanding the amount of high-quality digital content on the Internet. The goal is to build upon the experience and knowledge gained in *American Memory* and in *Global Gateway*, but to dramatically increase the scale and scope of the digitization efforts and the material presented.

As yet we are purely in the planning stage – open to suggestions from our bilateral partners, from organizations such as UNESCO, IFLA, and from the various regional initiatives that are already underway, including in the Middle East.

Although much is being done by other projects and institutions, there does seem to be a need – identified by Dr. Billington in his June 2005 Georgetown speech and in his November 2005 interviews and op-ed pieces provided in connection with the announcement of the WDL – for a project that will present online unique or rare historical and cultural materials that represent and “define” a particular culture. Such a project would fall somewhere between the various mass book digitization projects underway, the “top treasure”-focused projects such as *Memory of the World* or the *European Digital Library Treasures* project, and the highly specialized, scholarly projects of the type mentioned by Professor Cooper in his paper.

For each participating country, the goal would be to have many thousands of images (the precise number will vary over time and by size of country) of manuscripts, works of art, musical scores, recordings, films, photographs and plans of a country’s buildings and architectural monuments, recordings of popular songs, posters, and so forth that in some way “represent” that country and culture in a way that is likely to increase international understanding, promote language learning, encourage travel and reading, and provide links to other web resources that for one reason or another are not appropriate for direct inclusion in the WDL. Selection of these materials ideally would be by committees or groups of scholars most knowledgeable about a given country or culture.

Given the ambition to create a truly global digital library, it will be important to avoid political and cultural controversies by moving away from a “publications” model used in *Global Gateway* (and certainly away from the focus on American history and connections) and to present whole collections with a minimum of scholarly commentary and interpretation. Materials might best be ordered by country, repository, format, and chronology rather than relying on “themes” that could give rise to controversy.

Presentation of materials and searching will need to be in several languages rather than just in English. Where images are hosted will be a crucial technical/infrastructure issue with potential political overtones. One option might be to establish a network of regional centers around the world, each of which would host partial sets of the images/collections in the WDL. The Library of Congress will be seeking advice and technical support on the hosting issue from private industry partners.

Experience suggests that the material – original source material that is interesting and attractive to scholars, students, and the public – is “out there,” waiting to be digitized and integrated

into large projects. Library of Congress cooperative scanning operations in Russia have vastly exceeded all initial expectations, showing the potential for international projects to pull together unique, valuable materials from widely dispersed institutions, many very small and with extremely limited resources. Several dozen institutions – ranging from the M.N. Khangalov Museum on the History of Buryatia to the Tomsk Oblast Museum of Regional History and Folklore to the Yakutsk Museum of Permafrost – have contributed collections heretofore largely unknown and virtually inaccessible to Russian much less international scholars. Although it was not an explicit goal of the *Meeting of Frontiers* project, preservation objectives also have been served, both in the added attention paid to the physical collections and in making copies of collections that are highly vulnerable to fire, floods, theft, and natural decay.

In 2005, the Library of Congress provided scanning equipment to the National Library of Brazil, in the expectation that the successful collaboration that the Library of Congress has forged with Russia will be repeated in Brazil. Similar efforts can be envisioned for partner institutions throughout the world, and can contribute collections to a World Digital Library.

Such a project obviously will require an expanded level and intensity of cooperation among national libraries, other libraries and repositories, and national and international organizations than has existed heretofore. It will require building a network, which in turn will require detailed attention to issues of standards, meta-data, interoperability, intellectual property, and much else. The Library of Congress intends to host a complete set of all of the material on the WDL, but complete sets also should exist at other locations around the world. Beyond the technical questions, issues of governance and organization (will the WDL be a membership body? what will be its relationship to existing organizations?) will need to be resolved to the satisfaction of all participating partners.

These are just preliminary thoughts on how the Library of Congress sees a project developing, following from Dr. Billington's initial articulation of his vision for the WDL. Google has made a generous grant of \$3 million to continue with the development of a plan, to engage potential partners, and to learn from the experience of other successful projects. Additional resources will be needed to implement the plan once it is complete.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in this workshop on a Digital Library for the Middle East and look forward to discussing how the World Digital Library initiative can both contribute to and benefit from this project.