

The Library of Congress's National Digital Library Program

Suzanne E. Thorin

Chief of Staff, Library of Congress

Introduction

I'm delighted to be here today to talk with you about the Library of Congress' digitization program: to share with you where we are in our thinking, the progress we have made, and what we are planning for the future in our efforts to make a major contribution to our Nation's digital library.

A key question we in America face today is whether or not the information superhighway will reinforce the best values of our society or, instead, will perpetually promise more than it can deliver as a communication medium. At first glance, the new interactive multimedia world we are entering would seem to engage the active mind in intellectual calisthenics and engender the creative use of information — information that is useful, abundant in quantity, and easily available. However, as we begin to ask questions such as "What will the information superhighway deliver and to whom?" and, "Will this new medium simply be a mechanism for delivering to the home video games, movies on demand, home shopping, communication services, telebanking, and customer databases?" the answer is less clear. We will not enhance education, make culture and the arts available to all, and contribute to the creation of a citizen who is better informed and more engaged with the nation and its government, history, and culture, if the highway primarily provides entertainment and expensive information on demand.

We are fortunate to be present at the creation of this medium that brings with it such extraordinary potential for stimulating progress. Libraries and museums can and should be a powerful force for a national renaissance made possible by this technological revolution. We do not want to forfeit this new technology's potential for national renewal.

The Library of Congress is embracing the online world through the National Digital Library program. We now provide over the Internet more than 26 million records, including the Library's bibliographic data; summaries and status of federal legislation; copyright registration records; and abstracts and citations to foreign laws.

National Digital Library Program

These digital materials constitute some of the core content we are contributing to the National Digital Library. During our five-year American Memory Pilot, we digitized two dozen American historical and cultural collections containing some three hundred thousand items, including prints and photographs, manuscripts, sound recordings, and early motion pictures. These digitized materials were tested in 44 school and library sites around the country. Educators and students, particularly teachers and fifth through eighth graders, found that the materials created a different environment for and attitude toward learning — history was no longer simply a book filled with long textual passages permeated with dates and accompanied by a picture or two. The record of history now included materials documented and created by people living during that period — broadsides, documents written in the historical figure's own hand, moving pictures, photographs, and sound recordings.

We hope to enrich the learning experience for K-12 youngsters, for adults striving to continue a lifelong dedication to learning, and, eventually, for researchers and scholars. We believe that people will become more motivated to delve into books in order to answer the questions they themselves ask of the materials they call up on the computer screen. In delivering such materials by electronic means to libraries and schools, we seek to reinforce local communities of learning rather than just to supplement the home entertainment center. This vision is central to the Library of Congress' Digital Library Program.

Collaboration

The Library of Congress' program is being developed in collaboration with other libraries and institutions and with the private sector. On May 1, the Librarian of Congress, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and officials from 14 other research libraries and archives signed the National Digital Library Federation Agreement. The Federation's members hope to bring together digitized materials for students, scholars, and citizens everywhere. The Library of Congress is actively working with the Federation to identify and digitize collections of American history materials for the National Digital Library. We are also exploring possibilities of collaboration with Federal partners, including the National Archives, the National Library of Medicine, and the National Agricultural Library. I mention just two specific examples of collaborations in progress: 1) Cornell University and the University of Michigan for Civil War documents, and 2) the National Agricultural Library for photographs documenting the expansion of the West. We are working with end users, conferring with teachers and students to determine the materials they need, thanks to funding from the Kellogg Foundation. With the Association of American Publishers, we are attempting to reach teachers with information about our digitized materials. We are working with NSF recipient institutions as they conduct research on

The Library of Congress's National Digital Library Program

digital libraries. The University of Michigan for user interface and the University of California at Santa Barbara for Geographic Information Systems are just two examples.

Selection

Selecting materials to be digitized is a critical aspect of the program. The Library's substantial collections can provide a broad content base for the National Digital Library. Today, we have over 110 million items, two-thirds of which are in our special collections — music, films, prints, photographs. These special materials are particularly rich in the documentation of American history and creativity.

It follows then that the greater part of the Library of Congress' contribution to the National Digital Library will consist of unique special collections or items relating to the American experience. Spanning the centuries from the founding of our nation through the early 1900's, the digital materials encompass a diversity of formats and subjects. Anchoring the digital collections will be the papers of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as well as those of Ulysses S. Grant. A cluster of materials will document the period of the American Civil War, including over 1,000 Civil War photographs and the Stern Song Sheets collections, containing material by and about Lincoln and the Civil War era. Several large collections cover decades and even centuries, tracing the evolution of architecture through drawings, blueprints, and photographs; the development of American music through broadside songs and sheet music; and aspects of theater arts through American variety stage posters, theater playbills, and program books. Other valuable materials include the papers and photographs of Margaret Mead, paper prints and fragments of lost film from the turn of the century, political cartoons, social-issue posters, and maps from all periods of North American history. Together, the digitized images will form a multi-faceted library of unique materials of aesthetic, cultural, historical, political, and social importance.

How are we coming to these decisions? We have conferred at length with the staff curators to get their opinions of what in their collections is both important and interesting and can be digitized. We are now putting together a succession of draft lists which will be vetted by scholars within the Library and eventually by scholars outside. We will share these lists with our collaborators to get feedback.

You saw in our demonstration samplings of some collections we expect to make available this year: 351 pamphlets by and about African-Americans from the period 1880-1920; 25,000 turn-of-the-century photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company; 1,300 of Carl Van Vechten's portrait photographs of celebrities ranging from Jimmy Stewart to Salvador Dali and Man Ray taken between 1932 and 1964; and 167 books and pamphlets from the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

To support our goal of digitizing five million items by the year 2000, we have set a funding goal of \$60 million. With the support of the Congress and the active participation of the Speaker of the House,

we have requested \$15 million from the Congress, and we aim to raise \$45 million from private donors. To date we have raised nearly \$20 million in private funds and are hopeful that we will receive the first \$3 million from the Congress in 1996.

The 5-year goals of the Library of Congress' National Digital Library Program are:

- To convert 200 Library of Congress collections to digital form;
- To provide access to the widest possible audience;
- To help build a national digitizing program which includes unique American history collections from many institutions.

America's library collections are part of the nation's "strategic information reserve." Source materials that illuminate our history will inevitably activate intellects by stimulating the kinds of open questions historical pieces inevitably raise, exposing students of all ages simultaneously to new technology and old values, to memory and imagination.

We intend, and we hope, that our digital venture will serve as a stimulus to the many libraries in America that will begin making their unique collections available electronically.

The Digital Library program we are building at the Library of Congress rests on a foundation that has been constructed carefully over the past seven years. I want to mention briefly what I call the nine layers of the foundation on which our program rests. Some of these may be helpful to other libraries and institutions that are considering a digitization program:

1. Support from your chief librarian (in the Library's case, the Librarian of Congress)
2. Support from your administration (in the Library's case, the Congress)
3. Unique and important materials to digitize
4. Successful pilot that tests proof of product (in the Library's case, the 5-year American Memory pilot)
5. Solid technology infrastructure (in the Library's case, years of experience with complex databases, plus the American Memory pilot)
6. Talented and interested staff (change agents)
7. Successful record of production under pressure
8. Institutional fund-raising program
9. Support from crucial constituencies (end users and technology labs)

This is our experience so far. We know we will be fine-tuning our program as we learn from those of you who have experiences in the electronic world.

The Library of Congress's National Digital Library Program

Libraries in America and the world are more important today than ever before. Libraries have always been central to the storage and sharing of knowledge, history, and culture. They have always offered access to knowledge and information, representing diverse sources and viewpoints. Libraries are adjuncts to education, a base for generating innovative thinking, a stimulus to culture, and an aid to the individual self-development of citizens.

Two years ago, the Librarian of Congress, James Billington, keynoted the grand reopening of the Nevada State Library and Archives and spoke about libraries as 'gatekeepers of culture." A native American man in the audience approached Dr. Billington afterwards and told him "We call the elders of my tribe our dreamkeepers, and I think that phrase describes libraries as well." And indeed libraries are the dreamkeepers — they store, enrich, and pass on the intellectual, cultural, and historical memory of their communities.

The National Digital Library efforts many of us are undertaking uphold the proud traditional role of libraries and expand it by providing substantive content, easy access, and the guidance needed by users to navigate the large store of data that is becoming available.

It is the collective vision of many that is creating a National Digital Library. The Library of Congress is grateful to be present at the creation; we are excited about the enormous opportunities and challenges that lie before us; and we pledge our continuing best efforts as we move forward together to make the vision a reality.