

The World Digital Library

MAIN

ARTICLES

John
Van
Oudenaren
USA



Reading Room
at the Library of
Congress's historic
Thomas Jefferson
Building,
Washington, D.C.
Photo by Carol
M. Highsmith,
between 1980
and 2006

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington first proposed the establishment of a World Digital Library in a June 2005 speech at Georgetown University to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. Billington called for a cooperative project, to be undertaken by the Library of Congress and partner libraries from around the world in cooperation with UNESCO, to digitize and make freely available over the Internet primary source documents that tell the stories and highlight the achievements of all countries. Such a project, he argued, *would hold out the promise of bringing people closer together precisely by celebrating the depth and uniqueness of different cultures in a single global undertaking.*

In December 2006, the Library of Congress and UNESCO jointly convened an experts meeting at UNESCO headquarters in Paris to solicit input about the proposed project from librarians and



*View from the
Inclined Plane,
near Philadelphia,
by Wild, J. C.
(John Caspar),
ca. 1840*

technology experts from around the world. The results of the Paris meeting included the establishment of working groups for technical architecture and content selection and a decision that the Library of Congress would develop the prototype of a future world digital library for presentation at the October 2007 UNESCO General Conference. The prototype was presented as planned, with content provided by six partner institutions: the National Library of Brazil, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina of Alexandria, Egypt, the National Library and Archives of Egypt, the National Library of Russia, the Russian State Library, and the Library of Congress.

Following eighteen months of intensive planning and development, the World Digital Library (www.wdl.org) was officially launched at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Developed at the Library of Congress on the basis of the 2007 prototype, the site featured content contributed by institutions from eighteen countries, including the national libraries of China, Egypt, France, Israel, Japan, Russia, Serbia, and Sweden as well as major university libraries from several nations. The number of WDL partners has since grown to 171 institutions from 79 countries.



Most partners are national or university libraries, but from the beginning it was envisioned that archives and museums would be contributors to the project. A major archive, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in the United States, and a very important museum, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in Mexico, were among the initial group of partners. Museums that have since joined include the Walters Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, and the Smithsonian Institution in the United States.

Following the initial set of bilateral arrangements between the Library of Congress and UNESCO and between the Library of Congress and the partners, in 2009-2010 the WDL was restructured to become more of a multilateral institution with a (deliberately light) set of rules and permanent governance structures. In March 2010, the WDL partners adopted a formal charter that provides for an annual partner meeting, an Executive Council elected by the partners, and permanent committees for Technical Architecture, Content Selection, and Translation and Language. The charter also provides for an institutional project manager, responsible for maintaining and building the WDL Website, and designates the Library of Congress as the institutional project manager for the period 2010-2015. The first WDL partner meeting under the charter took place in Washington in June 2010. (Information about organization and governance - including the charter in the seven WDL languages - can be found on the WDL project Website at <http://project.wdl.org>.)

In its role as initiator of the project and, since 2010, institutional project manager, the Library of Congress has sought private funds to cover the cost of Website development, content creation, meetings and travel, and selective capacity building in developing country cultural institutions aimed at enabling these institutions to participate and to contribute content. Financial support has been provided by Google, the Qatar Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Microsoft, and the James Madison Council of the Library of Congress. Many other organizations and institutions have made in-kind contributions, including the partner libraries, archives, and museums which, with the exception of those institutions that have received assistance for capacity building, cover the costs of digitizing their own content and preparing the associated metadata for inclusion in the WDL.

The World Digital Library Website

The key features of the WDL site are:

A comprehensive and ambitious approach to multilingualism. All navigational information, metadata, and interpretive text is provided in seven languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. The WDL seeks to provide an equivalent user experience in all seven of these languages. At any point on the site, a user can switch from one interface language to another. Additional interface languages may be added in the future.

Consistent, high-quality metadata. Every item in the WDL complies with the WDL metadata standard. Each item is catalogued for place, time, topic, item type, contributing institution, and

language. Supplemental fields provide information about the physical features of an object and other relevant subjects.

Multiple methods to browse, search, discover, and compare content. These methods include geographic clusters, a timeline that allows users to zero in on particular time periods, options to browse by place, time, topic, item type, and contributing institution, and open-ended search. Options can be used individually or in conjunction with each other.

Curatorial and scholarly intellectual added-value. Every item in the WDL contains a paragraph-length description that explains what the item is and why it is important. Written by scholars and curators, these descriptions provide context that goes beyond basic cataloguing data. Selected WDL items feature videos with curators that offer in-depth explanations and that bring users into contact with curators.

Enhanced display and zoom features. Every item in the WDL, including every page of every book, can be viewed using state-of-the-art zoom features. For books, all fold-outs have been digitized and are presented in colour with the zoom feature.

Exposure to search engines. All WDL metadata is individually indexable by external search engines, in all seven WDL languages.

Web 2.0 features. The WDL provides numerous options to download, share, and re-use content.

Accessibility. The WDL complies with the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines WCAG 2.0. Voice-enabled browsing of WDL Webpages is provided to assist the visually impaired, people with learning disabilities, and people studying foreign languages.

Speed and reliability. Because the WDL is targeting a global audience, significant resources have been expended to ensure maximum speed, performance, and reliability around the world.

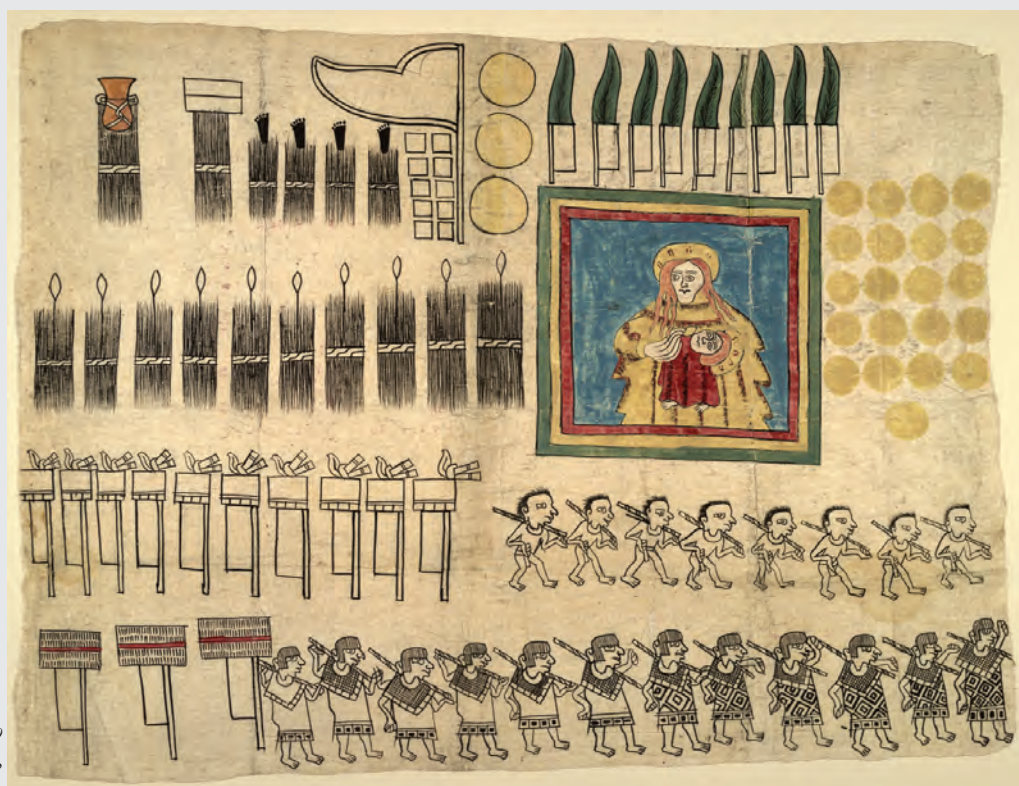
Selection

The key to the WDL is selectivity of content. The WDL is not a mass digitization project, nor is it a portal that attempts to aggregate comprehensively from a particular region or type of content. Rather, it aims to present a selected body of content that is explained and rendered accessible to the user, as indicated above.

Selection has been a great deal less controversial than was feared by some in the early days of the project. The preamble to the WDL charter states that *the WDL is a non-commercial project intended to recognize the richness, diversity, and contributions to humanity of all the world's cultures, and not to promote or espouse particular political positions or viewpoints*. In keeping with this pledge, strife over politics (religion, ideology, and so forth) generally has been avoided.



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Codex,
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The content selection working group established after the December 2006 experts meeting held two meetings prior to the launch of the WDL: in Paris in October 2007 and in Cairo in January 2009. At the Cairo meeting, the group developed a selection philosophy and general guidelines for content selection. The concluding document of the meeting called upon the WDL to present *sources for understanding the history of humanity*. Partner institutions were encouraged to select items or collections of items for the WDL that best present their respective national cultures. In addition to presenting their national cultures, partner institutions were encouraged to contribute items from their holdings that relate to the history and culture of other countries. Partner institutions were especially invited to contribute collections from their holdings that are listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World registry.

The activities of the content selection working group (formally designated the Content Selection Committee in the WDL charter) have been supplemented by the work of a number of sub-committees which, operating within the general guidelines established by the main committee, have provided advice on specific regional, linguistic, or thematic selection goals. These include a committee on Arabic scientific manuscripts that met in London twice in 2008, a Chinese-language content committee that met in Washington in January 2010, and a committee on Mesoamerican codices that met in Mexico City in May 2010.

Working within the guidelines established by the Content Selection Committee and, where relevant, the specialized regional and thematic committees, the individual partner institutions have taken the initiative in proposing content for the site. Allowing individual institutions maximum latitude in selection has been effective, as it is the institutions and their curators that know their collections and can identify what is likely to be of greatest interest to visitors to the WDL.

In proposing content for the WDL, different institutions have taken different approaches, all of which represent workable selection models. The national libraries of France, China, and Japan, for example, have created in effect anthologies of their national histories by providing a range of content from different time periods and genres. Other institutions have chosen to contribute a single, high-profile collection, for example the Mexican Indian codices contributed by INAH or the photographs from the Thereza Christina Maria Collection offered by the National Library of Brazil. Still others have chosen a thematic focus, for example the Arabic scientific manuscripts contributed by the National Library and Archives of Egypt, or the Galileo materials provided by several institutions in Italy.

Prospects

The priorities for the WDL are to add content, increase the number of partners (with particular emphasis on countries and regions that are currently under-represented), and build usage and the WDL's global audience.

As of early June 2013, the WDL contained nearly 8,000 individual library items, comprising approximately 400,000 images. The long-term goal is to increase the amount of content to ensure that all countries, time periods, topics, and languages are adequately represented. 100,000 items is a rough estimate of the minimum number of items needed for this purpose. The WDL is also working to develop tools and applications that will lower the costs and speed the processing of content. New tools are especially needed to lower translation costs, which will be particularly important as the volume of content grows and as consideration is given to adding new interface languages.

The WDL's goal is eventually to have at least one content-contributing partner in each country of the world. To reach this goal from the current 79 countries will require outreach and, to the extent possible, cooperative capacity building efforts in countries that currently lack digitization capacity.

So far, the WDL has mainly worked with libraries, but it would welcome additional partners from the museum community. Museums already are contributing two-dimensional objects (e.g., the codices from INAH), and a few three-dimensional objects are already represented on the website. The WDL recognizes that for many countries and cultures, the oldest and most important cultural artefacts are not documents but three-dimensional objects: everything from small beads and coins to the great pyramids of Egypt. The Cairo meeting of the selection working group discussed treatment of three-dimensional objects, and agreed that a practical experiment with



inclusion of 3-D materials at some point would be useful, and would require partnering with institutions that have extensive experience in this area. This was in many ways a call to action for expanded dialogue and cooperation with the museum community, but one that largely remains to be acted upon.

Since launch in 2009, the WDL has had approximately 25,000,000 visitors; current usage runs about 4.5-5 million visitors per year. The top countries by numbers of users have been Spain, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, China, France, Colombia, Portugal, and the Russian Federation. Spanish is the mostly heavily used of the seven interface languages, followed by English and Portuguese. Efforts are underway to increase usage in all languages, with particular emphasis on Arabic and Chinese, where usage is growing, but from a low base.



*Twelve Months
by Toyokuni:
First Dancing Practice
of the New Year,
by Utagawa,
Toyokuni,
1854*