

## **The World Digital Library Initiative**

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Librarian of Congress James H. Billington proposed the establishment of a World Digital Library (WDL) in a speech to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO in June 2005. The initiative was discussed at a UNESCO Experts Meeting in Paris on December 1, 2006, and construction of a prototype site is now underway with the participation of partners from Brazil, Egypt, Russia, and the United States. Institutions in other countries are expected to join in the coming months. The Experts Meeting also resulted in the establishment of four working groups, which are open to participation in and inputs from partners from around the world.

The major objectives of the WDL will include: (1) the promotion of international and inter-cultural understanding and awareness; (2) service to education; (3) the expansion of non-English and non-Western content on the Internet; (4) promotion of awareness of foreign languages (which in turn could encourage and facilitate language learning); and (5) contribution to scholarly research.

To achieve these objectives, the WDL must have a large body of content that can be accessed through a user-friendly site that provides excellent connectivity and reliability, multiple access points, powerful searching, and interpretation and presentation of content by leading scholars and curators. In keeping with the trend toward interactivity and user participation, the WDL also should provide opportunities for direct involvement on the part of users, without compromising its intellectual and curatorial integrity. In order to be useful in developing countries, many of which do not have significant and plentiful broadband access points, the WDL also will have to be able to deliver some services to users that require low bandwidth or mobile device solutions.

The World Digital Library should concentrate on presenting rare and unique collections that are physically stored in geographically dispersed locations and which, when brought together with other collections through cross-national and cross-cultural multilingual search and browse capabilities, will yield new knowledge and insights and will be of value to educators, students, and the general public, as well as to researchers.

Such content can come from two sources: it can be re-purposed from existing institutional, national, and regional digital library projects and contributed to the WDL; or it can be scanned expressly for the WDL (and then re-purposed, if desired, for use in institutional, national, and regional projects). The WDL should use both methods.

For developed country participants that already have staff and equipment for digitization and that already have digitized many cultural treasures, re-purposing is mainly what is needed. For the developing world, the WDL project should aim to provide equipment, training, and whatever else might be needed (including preservation work if it

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is required prior to scanning) to enable institutions in these countries to participate in the project.

A key goal of the WDL project should be to offer a seamless user experience and a high degree of functionality. The WDL site must be fast, reliable, and easy to use.

Providing a good user experience will depend at least in part on the volume of digital content available. In addition, the WDL should offer intellectual added value that users can quickly recognize and exploit. This value will be provided in three areas: (A) *access* through multilingual search, retrieval and display, including cross-cultural, cross-national, and cross-temporal searching and browsing using multiple access points; (B) *context* through the provision of narrative and interpretive content; and (C) *participation* by inclusion of social networking and related features that allow users to interact with the WDL and with other WDL users, rather than just passively view its content.

Current plans are to offer the WDL interface in the six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish), plus Portuguese.

Search, browse and display also should be in these seven languages.

In addition to search, content should be accessible through browsing by means of six different options: institutional repository and collection; type of item; year or time period; place; topic; and “today’s featured theme.”

In addition to its search and browse features, the WDL should offer intensively edited and curated digital features that build upon and showcase selected items from the digital repository. The purpose of these presentations should be to provide context and interpretation, and to offer general introductions to the collections and items contained in the WDL.

These country- or culture-specific presentations are envisioned as “Memory of ...” features that will be developed by committees of scholars, linguists, and historians. The central organizing feature of each “Memory of ...” presentation might be a time line showing the major periods in a given country’s history, which could be introduced and explained by a brief narrative (vetted by scholars, but written to appeal to the non-specialist, general user). These narratives could be illustrated by images selected from the collections in the repository.

The Library of Congress welcomes the opportunity provided by this workshop to learn about digital library initiatives in the Maghreb and elsewhere, and welcomes participation in the WDL planning process and the eventual full-scale development of the WDL by libraries and other cultural and scientific institutions in the countries of the Maghreb.

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The planning process for the WDL is being funded by a \$3 million grant from Google, Inc. Additional resources, both financial and in-kind (expertise, equipment, assistance with cataloging, programming and web design, translation, curation, and so forth) will be sought from partners around the world as the planning process moves forward.

More information about the project can be found at: [www.worlddigitallibrary.org](http://www.worlddigitallibrary.org)