

Promoting the Culture and Development of Regional Communities with Digital Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries and archives have always been major information sources for the history, culture and literature of regional communities. It is quite natural that in an increasingly electronic world, these rich collections are becoming available in digital form. Digital libraries permit local materials to be made available to a wide public, where they become a significant feature in the dissemination of regional culture (Love & Feather, 1998). Locally oriented digital libraries deal with specific communities, regions or states. The relationship is clear in this definition, published by the Washington-based Council on Library and Information Resources:

Digital libraries are organizations that provide the resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity of, and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works so that they are readily and economically available for use by a defined community or set of communities. (Waters, 1998)

BACKGROUND

The Digital Library Federation Database of Public Access Collections (<http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/b/bib/bib-idx?c=dlfcoll>) lists nearly 500 North American digital libraries. The Association of Research Libraries Digital Initiatives Database (<http://www.arl.org/did/index.html>) also lists 500 systems from the same area. No less than 600 Canadian digital libraries have been identified (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/E/View.html>). The information is generally brief, but a significant proportion of these collections focus on specific places and communities within North America. Digital services are less documented in other regions of the world but everything indicates that digital libraries in these regions also offer valuable local content.

The digital library field is firmly established as an area of study, with textbooks (Arms, 2000; Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2003; Lesk, 1997); electronic journals from

the U.S. (D-Lib Magazine: <http://www.dlib.org/>) and the UK (Ariadne: <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/>); even encyclopedia articles (McCarthy, 2004). Digital libraries are also firmly established internationally. Beagrie (2003) reviews national digital preservation initiatives in Australia, France, the Netherlands, and the UK. Current technology permits relatively small institutions to establish digital library services.

By their nature, digital libraries attract a wider range of users than traditional services. It is necessary to travel to traditional collections, which have fixed opening hours, but digital libraries are available to a much wider population. Valuable materials from academic libraries, which the public previously had little opportunity to consult, become widely accessible when digitized. Traditional services require specific commitment, whereas digital libraries attract browsers interested in a wider range of aspects of community life. Access to traditional collections is basically by in-house catalogs, while indexes to Internet resources are widely available. The success of digital libraries comes despite the fact that only relatively small proportions of library collections have been digitized. Modern books are not generally available. Only a small percentage of non-copyright (pre-1923 in the U.S.) books and only the most important archival and photographic collections have been digitized.

This paper examines a variety of digital library services over different parts of the world to exemplify their contribution to the strengthening of regional culture. The technological basis of digital libraries is covered in a separate paper in this encyclopedia: "Digital Library Structure and Software."

SAMPLE DIGITAL LIBRARY SYSTEMS

Wales, a region which has made great efforts to maintain its unique features, has created highly relevant digital library services. Perhaps the most important Welsh site is *Gathering the Jewels: the Website for Welsh Cultural History* (<http://www.gtj.org.uk/>), set up by a consortium of Welsh cultural organizations, including universities, museums, libraries, and the National Library of Wales.

Access is via categories such as Neighbourhood and Community, Religion and Belief, or The Domestic Sphere. Alternate access is by keyword search or by clicking on a map of Welsh counties. A specific page offers access for schoolchildren, via "Discovery Trails." Naturally, all parts of the site are fully bilingual. Another major bilingual site is dedicated to the *Treasures of the National Library of Wales* (http://www.llgc.org.uk/drych/drych_s004.htm). The library offers digital access to many of its treasures, ranging from medieval poetry manuscripts to 18th Century watercolors, early photographs, maps and diaries.

Other regions of the United Kingdom also maintain significant digital library services. The National Library of Scotland maintains a series of fascinating collections, covering Scottish maps, 19th Century calotype pictures of Edinburgh, playbills and famous Scottish authors, from Robert Burns to J.K. Rowling (<http://www.nls.uk/digitallibrary/index.html>). *SCRAN: The Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network* (<http://www.scran.ac.uk/>) offers over 300,000 images from museums, art galleries and archives. The system maintains specific sites on special topics, such as Robert Burns or The Union of the Crowns. Most images are within thematic collections, such as The Scottish Seaside Holiday or North Britain before 1000 A.D. Basic images are available to all users, who are encouraged to subscribe to obtain access to larger images and text.

The troubled politics of Northern Ireland, from 1968 to the present, are reflected in *CAIN: Conflict Archive on the Internet* (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>), sponsored by the University of Ulster. Documents are presented in three categories: Background, Key events, and Key issues. The system was founded in 1996-97 with the support of the British Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib). Contributors give permission to use their materials, which have been accessed a total of more than 22 million times.

The U.S. South offers numerous examples of digital libraries with regional impact. One of the most wide-ranging systems is *Documenting the American South* from the University of North Carolina (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>). This includes more than 1,200 books and manuscripts on subjects such as "First-Person Narratives of the American South," "North American Slave Narratives," "The Church in the Southern Black Community," etc. This site welcomes feedback and links to a 23-page analysis of reader reactions, which have been highly enthusiastic. Another Southern collection is *Louisiana Purchase 1803-2003*, created by Louisiana State University to commemorate the bicentennial of the incorporation of the states bordering the Mississippi into the U.S. (<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/purchase/>). This includes pamphlets, manuscripts and government documents, including much material in French, plus Teachers' Guides.

Probably the most important digital library relating to the Southern United States is a project which specifically attempts to transcend the borders of that region. The *Valley of the Shadow Project* permits detailed digital comparisons of a Northern and a Southern community during the American Civil War (<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/>). Searchable newspapers, tax records, letters, diaries, images, maps, censuses and military rosters permit detailed comparisons between Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, before, during and after the Civil War. The system was created at the University of Virginia with funding from the U.S. National Endowment of the Humanities.

More recent events in the South are focused by the *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive*, a fully searchable database of rare library and archival resources on race relations in Mississippi (<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/>). Mississippi was central to the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. This project was created by The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries, Hattiesburg, which was the location in 1964 of the largest *Freedom Summer* project. Digital libraries also deal with specific events of the same period, such as the Virginia student strike documented in *Separate But Not Equal* (<http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/pec01.html>). In 1951, the students of an all-black high school, tired of their poor conditions, walked out, demanding facilities equal to those provided at white schools. This site includes photographs contrasting poor-quality black and comfortable white schools.

Canada has also established numerous regionally oriented digital libraries (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/E/View.html>). NSARM, the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual>) offers three online resources focusing on the explosion which destroyed a large part of Halifax in 1917. One exhibit describes the explosion, another, the reconstruction, while a fully searchable database lists the nearly 2,000 dead. On the other coast of Canada, *Vancouver's Golden Years* presents historical photographs from a similar period, 1900-1910 (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/vancouver/index.html>). This Vancouver Public Library's collection of 1,500 digitized photographs by Philip Timms is backed up by a biography of the photographer, and the full text of a book about him. The interface is in English. A comparable collection is available in French at Montréal: *Municipalité-Métropole 1920-1960* (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/mtl/>). This collection offers over 300 historic photographs of places, personalities and municipal services, from the Montréal city archives. Some Canadian digital library services have been established in remote areas. 85 articles dealing with the Northern Territories were digitized at *Portraits du Nord* (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/nord/index.htm>). These were originally published in *l'Aiglon*,

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