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Overview of networking cultural heritage initiatives in the United States and Canada

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Abstract

Both the Library of Congress and Libraries and Archives Canada (LAC) are large-scale providers of cultural material on their respective websites. The Library of Congress, an early adopter of digitisation, has concentrated its efforts on the 'American Memory' website, with its 7.5 million images illustrating United States history and culture, but many other programmes add to the richness of its provision. LAC's networking projects, over 80 in total, are funded mainly through a federal government programme: all are fully bilingual in English and French.

I have only two countries to cover in my brief survey, the United States of America and Canada.

But between them the two relevant institutions, the Library of Congress and Libraries and Archives Canada, offer possibly the world's richest menu of cultural heritage initiatives. In part this reflects the concentration in Washington and Ottawa of the capital resources

and human skills required to accomplish major digitisation programmes. It also reflects the hugely rich print and non-print resources to be found in their collections.

1 The Library of Congress

The Library of Congress was one of the first major libraries to realize the potential of computer technologies, and especially digitisation, for giving wider public access to parts of its cultural collections.

The flagship of the Library's National Digital Library Program is 'American Memory'¹. It began as a pilot project as early as 1990, before the World Wide Web became a vehicle for easy worldwide access through the internet. At that time digitised images taken from the print and non-print collections of the Library were distributed via CD-ROMs to schools, colleges and libraries. Today the website is one of the largest single sites of its kind in the world.

American Memory aims to illustrate the history and culture of the United States by presenting digital surrogates of items from the collections of the Library and from the collections of other major research archives. Over seven and a half million images are now available free over the Web to 'Congress, scholars, educators, students, the general public, and the global Internet community'. The number continues to grow, thanks to generous funding from Congress and from private sources, including the Ameritech Corporation.

The images are organized in 100 collections, according to subject, format or original collection. Each collection is prefaced by introductory information, including technical information about digitisation. The formats of the originals include books and pamphlets, manuscripts, photographs, maps, posters, sound recordings and moving images. It is possible to browse and to search for individual items, both within and between the collections.

American Memory is remarkable for more than its scale and diversity. The Library has placed much emphasis on the application of consistent standards. For example, metadata are assigned in such a way that they can conform to the Open Archives Initiative (OAI) protocol. Likewise, adherence to standards has been important in capturing digital images, in text mark-up, and in the preservation of images. Other features are the attention paid to the needs of teachers and learners, through the 'Learning Page' area of the site², the 'Ask a Librarian' service³ for personalised online assistance with using

¹ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>.

For information on the origins and early development of American Memory, see Caroline R. Arms, 'Historical collections for the National Digital Library: lessons and challenges at the Library of Congress', *D-Lib Magazine*, April 1996, <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/april96/loc/04c-arms.html> and May 1996, <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may96/loc/05c-arms.html>.

² <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/>

³ <http://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib/ask-memory.html>

American Memory, and ‘Chat with a Librarian’⁴, a similar, but real-time online service. Users also have the opportunity to comment on American Memory, and to correct errors.

There are nine other major initiatives to digitise and network cultural heritage materials in the Library of Congress:

- 1 America’s Story from America’s Library
<http://www.americasstory.com/cgi-bin/page.cgi>

A site designed especially for young people, including selections of primary material from the Library’s non-print collection. Offers games, surveys, timelines, treasure hunts and questions.

- 2 Digital Interlibrary Loan
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/loan/illscanhome.html>

On this site, started in 2000, the Library offers digital copies (pdf files) of material too fragile to be lent in their original form (‘scan on demand’).

- 3 Global Gateway
<http://international.loc.gov/intldl/intldlhome.html>

Brings together in its ‘Digital Collections’ site examples from the Library’s international collections. Countries include are ancient Sumer, China, Liberia, Germany, Japan, Poland, Latin America, Russia, Spain and the United Kingdom. Collections include Lewis Carroll’s scrapbook, Roger Fenton’s Crimean War photographs, maps of Macau, and photographs of pre-revolutionary Russia by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii.

- 4 I Hear America Singing
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/ahas/ihashome.html>

Presents the Library’s performing arts collections. Media include musical scores, audio recordings, films, photographs and maps. To give one example, the Gerry Mulligan site offers scores, sound recordings, an oral autobiography, photographs and a discography related to the jazz composer and saxophonist.

- 5 National Audio-Visual Conservation Center (NAVCC)
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/mopic/avprot/avprhome.html>

The Library’s Digital Audio-Visual Preservation Prototyping Project, begun in 1999, is exploring the digitisation of sound and video recordings, in preparation for the opening of the NAVCC in Culpeper, Virginia in 2005.

- 6 National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP)
<http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2005/05-082.html>

⁴ <http://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib/chat-memory.html>

A programme announced by the Library and the National Endowment for the Humanities in April 2005 that will make available on the Library's website the digitised texts of selected US newspapers between 1900 and 1910.

7 Prints and Photographs Online Catalog
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/pphome.html>

About 65% of the Library's photographs, from the US and many other parts of the world, are listed in the Catalog. Digital images are provided for 90% of these - about one million in all - although thumbnail images only are available when copyright restrictions apply.

8 Save Our Sounds
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/sos/index.html>
<http://www.saveoursounds.org/>

A joint programme with the Smithsonian Institute to preserve and make available on the Web the non-commercial sound recordings, housed in both institutions, of the musical and spoken word heritage of the United States.

9 Veterans History Project
<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>

Set up by legislation in Congress in 2000, the Project collects together oral history interviews and other documents, such as correspondence or photographs, gathered from US veterans of conflicts from World War I to the present. Veterans and others are encouraged and helped to add their testimony to the collection, which now contains over 1,000 digitised collections and 48,000 individual items.

In addition to these programmes, it is worth adding that the Library has a policy of presenting online versions of the exhibitions it stages in Washington and elsewhere.⁵ Around 60 are currently available. The website also includes a series of webcasts of lectures sponsored by the Library, many of them on cultural topics.⁶

It is impossible not to be impressed by the size and diversity of the cultural material presented by the Library of Congress on its website, and by its ambitions for the future. No doubt the Library would say that its achievements so far are only a small start towards what it would like to accomplish in future. A review of the sites prompts a number of thoughts on:

- The relevance of developing or adopting satisfactory standards for all aspects of the digitisation process, in order to help the user, avoid duplication of effort, and aid interchange of data.

⁵ <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/>

⁶ <http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/index.php>

- The importance of tackling intellectual property issues, and of giving guidance to users about their re-use, by downloading or printing, of online images.⁷
- The difficulty of ensuring uniformity and ease of use in a large institution, where programmes have been developed independently. The different digital sites look and operate in very different ways, and there is no ‘digital library’ homepage to gather them together.
- The concentration on primary and unique material as the focus for digitisation in the Library. Perhaps this is beginning to change, with the addition of newspapers, and may change again with the advent of mass digitisation of printed material, as announced by Google in December 2004.

2 Libraries and Archives Canada

Canada’s potential for presenting cultural heritage has been greatly expanded by the merging in 2004 of the former National Library of Canada and the National Archives of Canada to form Libraries and Archives Canada (LAC) / Bibliothèque et Archives Canada.⁸

Within LAC the Web Content and Services (WCS) Division is responsible for web-based services, including the networking of cultural material. It is funded primarily through the Canadian Culture Online (CCO) programme, which is part of the federal government’s Department of Canadian Heritage and which seeks to ‘encourage a uniquely Canadian presence on the internet’.⁹ Other funding is derived from public and private partners, and from the central LAC budget.

WCS projects rely on establishing partnerships with other regional, national and international cultural institutions. Over the last five years between 12 and 24 digital projects have been developed each year, resulting in about 1 million images. All websites are bilingual in English and French, and are provided free to the user.

What follows is a selection of the 80 or so digitisation projects produced by WCS. They cover almost all aspects of the history and culture of Canada.

1 Canada and the First World War

<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/firstworldwar/index-e.html>

A commemorative website covering all aspects of Canada’s involvement in World War I. Over 1.5 million digital images of original documents can be viewed.

2 Canada by Train

<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/trains/index-e.html>

⁷ <http://www.loc.gov/homepage/legal.html>

⁸ <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/index-e.html>

⁹ http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/pce-ccop/index_e.cfm

- Uses text, images, advertisements, narratives and audiovisual material to tell the history of Canada's railways. A 'Kids' Site' adds an educational element.
- 3 Canadian Poetry Archive
<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/canvers/>

Gives the texts of poems by over 100 early English- and French-language Canadian poets.
 - 4 Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online
<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/index.html>

An online version of the *Dictionary of Canadian biography / Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*, first published in print in 1966. Its first phase covers those who died between the years 1000 and 1930.
 - 5 The Evidence Web
<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/education/sources/index-e.html>

Part of 'The Learning Centre', a site for learners of all ages and their teachers. The Evidence Web encourages historical research and appreciation among younger learners. It presents digitised primary sources: selections of original documents, including photographs, letters, diaries, art works, cartoons, newspaper articles and music.
 - 6 The Glenn Gould Archive
<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/glenn Gould/index-e.html>

LAC is the official repository for the archives of the great pianist Glenn Gould. The site offers a virtual exhibition, archival audio tapes, documents, bibliographies and discographies, full-text writings about Gould, films and videos, and works of art and poetry inspired by his playing.
 - 7 Images Canada
<http://www.imagescanada.ca/index-e.html>

The users can search for thousands of images held on the websites of numerous Canadian cultural institutions. LAC contributed almost 4,000 images from the *Canadian Illustrated News* (1869-1883) and 550 illustrations taken from pre-1800 publications in the Rare Book Collection. The site features 'image trails' (pre-selected searches on particular themes), 'photo essays' (narratives on themes) and educational resources.
 - 8 The Virtual Gramophone
<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/gramophone/index-e.html>

Established in 1998 The Virtual Gramophone features Canadian recorded sound between 1900 and the 1940s. A database will, when complete, contain information on and images of 78-rpm and cylinder recordings, along with background text on performers, companies, styles, recording technology, educational resources and audio files (available in streamed and downloadable format).

It is also worth mentioning two other sites maintained by LAC. The Canadian Genealogy Centre provides electronic access to the family history resources of Canada, especially through the provision of online databases on various aspects of the population of Canada.¹⁰ The Electronic Collection contains online publications deposited by publishers with LAC to ensure their preservation: over 13,000 book titles and 45,935 serial issues are included.¹¹

Plans for the future in LAC include the possibility of working more closely with Early Canadiana Online¹² as well as the development of a national digitisation strategy for publications.

As with the Library of Congress, the size and variety of the cultural resources delivered online by Libraries and Archives Canada are impressive. What conclusions can the user of these resources draw?

- the LAC's approach to bilingualism is thorough and consistent: at all points the user has a choice of French or English. It is a model for other national libraries working in bi-or multi-lingual environments.
- the separate funding stream for most of the sites, through Canadian Culture Online, encourages a co-operative, cross-institutional, truly national approach to digitisation.
- curiously, as with the Library of Congress, the LAC website (admittedly in the early stages of development) fails to co-locate the many different sub-sites where primary cultural material can be found. On the home page there is only a simple search facility covering the entire LAC site.
- again as with the Library of Congress, the selection of material for digitisation and display is strongly influenced by intellectual property restrictions. This is evident in the relative paucity of moving image material (though the latter is also affected by bandwidth restrictions).

¹⁰ http://www.genealogy.gc.ca/index_e.html

¹¹ <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/glenngould/index-e.html>

¹² <http://www.canadiana.org/eco/english/index.html>