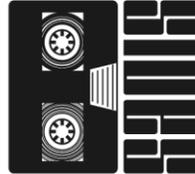


# B Sides

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## **World Digital Library: Bringing together best practices and superb content**

Angela Murillo



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<http://ir.uiowa.edu/bsides/09>

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## Abstract:

The unparalleled World Digital Library (WDL) was conceptualized by James H. Billington who proposed his idea to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO in 2005. Mr. Billington has been the Librarian of Congress since 1989 and has been a catalyst for many visionary projects including the American Memory Historical Collections and the National Digital Library Program. He has consistently been extraordinarily forward thinking particularly in regard to technology; since “the 1990s he recognized the potential of the Internet as a tool for peace by bringing together nations’ primary documents that tell the stories of the world’s people and their cultures” (Fineberg 154). His vision for how librarians and technology can come together to provide high-quality and accessible content for the world through the WDL is an inspiration that we all as librarians should strive for, whether it is on a local or global scale. This project, the World Digital Library, provides an excellent prototype to see how unique content, excellent design, and consistent metadata can come together to create a truly invaluable and forward thinking project for our world patrons that keeps consistent with our values as library professionals.

**Keywords:**

Digital Libraries | Website Design | Global Information Dissemination

**Comments:**

Adapted from assignment, Digital Information Critique, Fall 2009, course Digital Environments

The unparalleled World Digital Library (WDL)<sup>1</sup> was conceptualized by James H. Billington who proposed his idea to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO in 2005. Mr. Billington has been the Librarian of Congress since 1989 and has been a catalyst for many visionary projects including the American Memory Historical Collections and the National Digital Library Program. He has consistently been extraordinarily forward thinking particularly in regard to technology; since “the 1990s he recognized the potential of the Internet as a tool for peace by bringing together nations’ primary documents that tell the stories of the world’s people and their cultures” (Fineberg 154). His vision for how librarians and technology can come together to provide high-quality and accessible content for the world through the WDL is an inspiration that we all as librarians should strive for, whether it is on a local or global scale. This project, the World Digital Library, provides an excellent prototype to see how unique content, excellent design, and consistent metadata can come together to create a truly invaluable and forward thinking project for our world patrons that keeps consistent with our values as library professionals.

The World Digital Library contains 1,208 items whose dates range between 8000 BC through 2009 AD. These items are unique primary materials that include manuscripts, maps, rare books, musical scores, recordings, films, prints, photographs, and architectural drawings, as well as many other items. All 193 UNESCO countries are represented in these collections, even if it is just one or two items. Each item contains a full and thorough description, links to similar items that are within the collection, and links to external resources. Most items can be downloaded, these downloads are typically tiffs for the images, pdfs for manuscripts and books, mpegs and mp3s for video and audio. Lastly, the metadata, navigation, and supporting content are all translated into seven languages; Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

The metadata, navigation and support content are all well placed in a superbly crafted website that utilizes best practices when it comes to website design and

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A

usability. The homepage is an excellent example of new design techniques in that it can be viewed completely on one page, meaning that the user does not have to scroll up or down to view all items. The site also employs the technique of “limiting groups of similar choices to between five and nine items” (Powell 33) in there are nine regions available, eight time spans available, and five browse options. This makes it clearer and easier for the user to understand their choices. Another technique that this website utilizes is the “depth of three clicks to get users to the content they are looking for” (Powell 192) rule, so that users do not get frustrated or lost within the website. As far as accessibility, one problem that can be seen with the site is that it uses JavaScript. However, if JavaScript is not available on the computer, the user can still use the site and navigate more or less in a similar fashion, although it is not as aesthetically pleasing. Lastly, the site is compliant with W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to assist with accessibility and has a contact form asking that if anyone has problems with accessibility that they contact the Library of Congress. This well-designed site enables the user to access the unique content that is available on the site; this content was provided for the project through the cooperation of thirty-four partners from libraries and organizations around the world.

One of the goals of the library is to have unique content from a variety of world sources and the various partners involved in the project help provide not only the content, but support for the content. The National Archives and Records administrator “contributed digital resources from its collections” (Fineberg 154) providing important and historical U.S. content. The Library of Congress also partnered with the National Library of China to “form an advisory committee of leading scholars and curators to recommend important collections about culture and history of China” (Library of Congress “National Library of China Sign World Digital Library Agreement” 1). This collaboration allowed for the inclusion of content important to Chinese culture and history. There are also items are from Africa in the collections, including “the oldest item, an 8,000 year old painting of bleeding antelopes” (BBC 1). The National Library of Israel contributed “rare versions of writings from a 12-century philosopher...and items from 14<sup>th</sup> century Spain” (Fineberg 155). These are just a few of the many examples of

unique content that is available to the user. Some of the support for the collections include curators' videos, where users can listen to curators explain the importance of the certain items and discuss these materials in a scholarly fashion. Some of the collections also have external links that provide additional resources for the user. The items in the collections, the supporting documents, and the additional resources all provide an excellent example of how digital collections can give users a truly unique experience. Many of the items in this collection cannot be found anywhere else online and cannot be found with the attention to detail of the metadata and description that the site provides.

The consistent metadata makes this site an excellent prototype for other digital libraries. Each item contains a description and thirteen metadata tags; creator, date created, language, title in original language, place, time, topic, type of item, physical description, collection, institution, and external resource. The consistent metadata was "a key to the success of the site...it ensures searchability and browsability, and has to be consistent for the site's interoperability" (Fineberg 155). IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations, "played a role in this aspect by recommending best practices for digital libraries as well as international standards for creating metadata" (155). In addition to this metadata being consistent and thorough, it is also translated into the seven languages available on the site. This translation required the cooperation of the many libraries. The National Library of China signed an agreement for to "cooperate in such areas as the development and maintenance of the Chinese-language interface, the convening of international work groups" (Library of Congress "National Library of China Sign World Digital Library Agreement" 1). Language translation is vital to the site; if the goal is to have a world audience then the site needs to be in multiple languages. Furthermore, by providing the content in multiple languages, this helps "promote international and intercultural understanding, to expand non-English and non-Western content on the internet, and to expand scholarly research" (Ashling 24). Both metadata consistency and language availability of this project which helps foster the big picture of the site which is to assist in the promotion of global digital initiatives.

As library professionals some of our core values are to strive to provide access to materials, opportunities for lifelong learning, and intellectual freedom. The WDL keeps with these values as it provides information to library patrons around the world. The WDL empowers developing countries by creating digital conversion centers which “strengthens individual cultures, promotes diversity and reduces the dominance of English in the global information infrastructure” (Witten 8). The creation of these centers “allows developing countries to participate actively in our information society rather than observing it from the outside” (Witten 11); this promotes not only lifelong learning but intellectual freedom, as well as encourages the greater understanding of our world. By looking at the GDP<sup>2</sup> and literacy maps<sup>3</sup>, much of the world populations is impoverished and with low literacy rates, it is clear that the “knowledge gap between the rich and poor is widening” (Witten 7). A critique of this site is that many of the people in these areas may not have access to the Internet, fortunately, many programs are currently in place to relieve this and many developing countries and slowly gaining Internet access. Once these countries gain Internet access, they will be able to see information about the world around them, including their own culture. The visionary of the site, James Billington clearly wanted this site to be used as a way to bridge cultural gaps and with his statement,

As a historian, I know that “world history” is not just the sum of our separate national and regional histories. Rather, it is a subdiscipline in its own right, focused on offering comparative, cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives- at its best helping people ask the big questions about what civilizations share in common and what makes them distinct (Fineberg 55),

demonstrates how he sees this site as a way to promote international cultural understanding. Our professional goals in keeping with our core values should also strive

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<sup>2</sup> GDP: Gross Domestic Product is the measure of a country's overall economic output.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A

for this type of inter-cultural understanding no matter where we are located, a small rural library or an international library.

The World Digital Library set out to “promote international and intercultural understanding, increase quality and diversity of cultural content on the internet, and contribute to education and scholarship” (UNESCO 1). By creating a well constructed site, with excellent content, consistent metadata, and view that view that keeps consistent with the values of librarianship, it has successfully done exactly what it set out to do. The 1208 items of this site and the many more to come should serve as a prototype for well constructed digital libraries that not only provide high quality materials, but also provide scholarship within those collections for scholars and users around the world. Through the multilingual capabilities of the site reinforce the need for digital collections that can reach a higher number of users in their own language. By setting up digitization centers in developing countries this program also establishes new ways for developing countries to contribute to the information society when they have previously not been able to. Ultimately this site provides a place for inter-cultural learning which is a critical part of our world today as globalization increases international learning can assist in cross cultural communication and understanding. As library professionals we can look to this site as a place of best practices and inspiring content.

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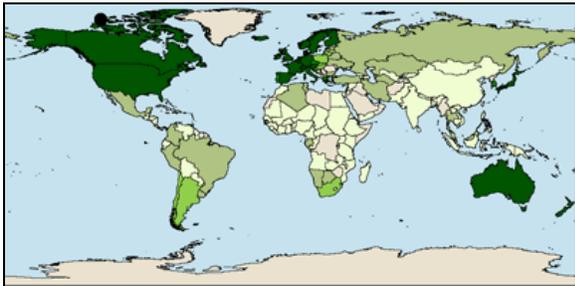
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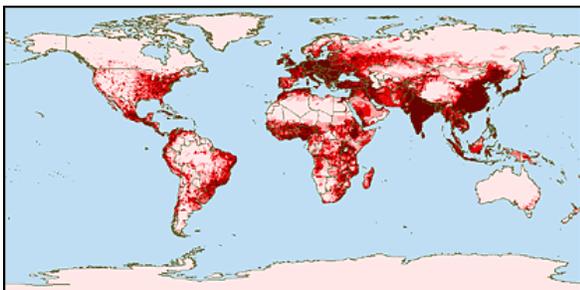
Appendix A



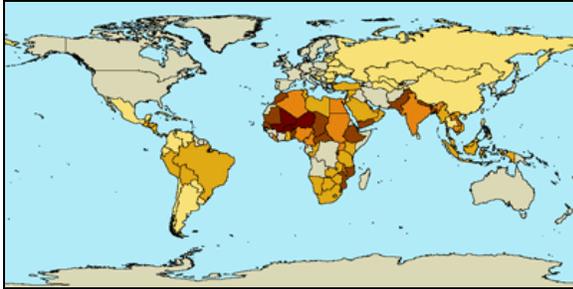
World Digital Library



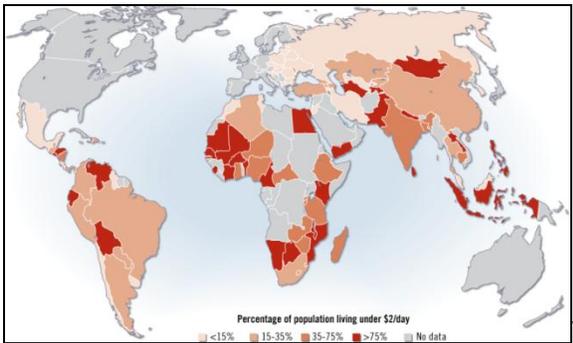
Gross Domestic Product 2006



World Population Density 2006



World Literacy Density 2006



World Poverty Density 2006

Source: World Resource Institute