



The World Digital Library and the Social Sciences

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Abstract:

The World Digital Library, launched in April 2009, has the potential to benefit social scientists by: (1) providing researchers access to content that otherwise would not be available; (2) offering new tools to search, browse, and view content on line; and (3) facilitating the sharing of content in ways that promote interdisciplinary work and collaboration among researchers and their students. Social scientists can contribute to the WDL by (1) assisting with the selection of content; (2) contributing to the description and interpretation of content; and (3) suggesting new ways to catalog and classify materials on the WDL.

Introduction

The purpose of this panel, as described by the conveners, is to “present the preservation of cultural heritage from the lens of the social sciences and social science library collections, focusing on: a) the role of social science knowledge created by fields from anthropology to urban planning in the process of selecting, preserving, and understanding cultural heritage; and b) the manner in which digital cultural heritage collections facilitate social science research by making primary source materials more widely available.”

This paper will explore the relationship of the World Digital Library (www.wdl.org) to both of these topics. It begins by providing general background about the WDL. It then addresses how the WDL might be used to facilitate social science research. It concludes with a discussion of how the social sciences might contribute to the WDL by, for example, participating in the work of selecting, preserving, and understanding cultural heritage.

Background

The proposal for a world digital library first was made by Librarian of Congress James H. Billington in a speech to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO at Georgetown University in June 2005. Billington suggested that the Library of Congress join with other libraries under the auspices of UNESCO to digitize and place on line significant primary source documents from the world's cultures. The stated objective of the project was to enhance international understanding by enabling people around the world to access and thereby appreciate the cultural achievements of other countries. In making this proposal, Billington drew upon LC's experience since the early 1990s in building cultural heritage digital libraries, beginning with the United States (*American Memory*), and subsequently in a series of bilateral partnerships with libraries in Europe, the Middle East, and South America (*Global Gateway*).

The proposal was discussed at an Experts Meeting at UNESCO in December 2006. As follow-up to this meeting, several working groups were established to develop standards and explore other aspects of the proposal. LC also began to develop the prototype of a future WDL, which was presented at the UNESCO General Conference in October 2007. In addition to LC, five partner institutions -- from Brazil, Egypt, and Russia -- contributed content to the prototype. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt contributed both content and technical expertise.

The public version of the site was launched at UNESCO headquarters in Paris on April 21, 2009. Twenty-five partner institutions from 18 countries contributed the first set of content, which included approximately 1,200 library items: books, journals, manuscripts, maps, prints and photographs, sound recordings, and films. The site functions in seven languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish – and includes content in more than forty languages. Some content about every UNESCO member country is included.

International reaction to the launch was favorable. A press conference at UNESCO with the directors of partner institutions on the day of the launch generated more than 1,700 print, radio, and television stories from around the world. Some 605,000 users visited the site on the day of the launch, accounting for more than 7.1 million page views. By the end of May, the site had logged some 3.2 million visitors, accounting for 29.6 million page views. Traffic has come from every country, with the top-ten countries being China, France, the United States, Spain, the Russian Federation, Brazil, Ukraine, Canada, Argentina, and Germany.

On the margins of the launch events, the WDL partners met and discussed five areas for future work: (1) addition of content; (2) addition of new partners; (3) development of new tools to scale up the creation, processing, and ingest of content; (4) development of new features on the site; and (5) adoption of a multilateral charter and permanent governance structures to ensure technical and financial sustainability.

The Potential Contribution of the WDL to Social Science Research

As specified in the October 2007 UNESCO-LC MOU relating to the development of the WDL, the objectives of the WDL are to “promote international and intercultural understanding and awareness, expand multilingual and culturally diverse content on the Internet, provide resources to educators, contribute to scholarly research, and build knowledge and capacity in the developing world in order to narrow the ‘digital divide’.” Of these five objectives, one relates directly to research; several others do so indirectly.

The WDL can contribute to social science research in three ways:

(1) by providing researchers access to content that otherwise would not be available;

(2) by offering new tools to search, browse, and view content on line; and

(3) by facilitating the sharing of content in ways that promote interdisciplinary work and collaboration among researchers and their students.

Content creation. The volume of content included in the WDL is as yet modest, and will never compare, in terms of sheer numbers of pages, with some other resources widely used by academic researchers (e.g., JSTOR, Google Book Search). But the WDL will facilitate access to some primary source content that otherwise would be difficult for researchers to know about, much less access.

The Library of Congress has been assisting partner libraries to digitize their content since 1999, when it began working with a consortium of Russian libraries in the *Meeting of Frontiers* project. In addition to the major libraries in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, LC worked with some two dozen provincial libraries, archives, and historical societies in Siberia and the Russian Far East to identify, catalog, and digitize collections of interest both to scholars and the general public. The project provided the equipment, training, staff, and travel funds that allowed smaller institutions to participate. Examples of collections digitized that are of particular interest to social scientists include ethnographic and archeological collections, patent records, and several collections of maps.

With its emphasis on being a true world digital library containing content from and about all countries, the WDL intends to assist libraries around the world to digitize parts of their collections in a way that should benefit social science research. As part of the initial start-up phase of the WDL, LC provided digitization equipment and training to the National Library and Archives of Egypt and to the Iraqi National Library and Archives. In early 2009, LC received a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to establish a digital conversion center at the National Library of Uganda. Such assistance is provided on a non-exclusive basis, and all of these partners are free to use the digital content created for the WDL to develop their own institutional Web sites and to participate in other digital library projects at national and regional levels.

The extent to which the WDL is able to assist libraries in other developing countries to digitize their collections for on line access will depend upon additional efforts to generate resources, both financial and in-kind, to support this effort. Feedback from social scientists on the kinds of materials they would like to see digitized and made available for the purposes of their own research would be welcome.

Search, browse, and display. Improved search, browse, and display features are a central focus of the WDL. These features are intended primarily to attract and appeal to general users, but they also will benefit researchers. Each item in the WDL is described by a consistent set of bibliographic information relating to its geographical, temporal, and topical coverage. Consistent metadata will improve search results within the WDL, help reveal connections between items, and facilitate exposure to external search engines.

The WDL metadata also include item-level, paragraph-length descriptions that explain the significance of each item. Written by curators and scholars, these descriptions contain information useful to scholars that may help to stimulate research, particularly collaborative and interdisciplinary research. The descriptions are likely to be especially useful in providing context and in drawing connections that may be obvious to users from one discipline but that, given the high degree of specialization in the various academic fields, might be unknown to scholars in other disciplines. The WDL description of an 1876 map of the western Sahara by the British geographer Ernest George Ravenstein, for example, (<http://www.wdl.org/en/item/479/>) notes that Ravenstein is best known not for his maps, but for his pioneering work *Laws of Migration* (1885), an association that would not be included in a standard bibliographic record.

In addition to its search and browse capabilities, the WDL features an advanced viewer (also used as a page-turner for books, manuscripts, and other multi-page items) that facilitates examination of the details of maps, prints and photographs, and other materials, including fold-outs within books. Exactly how improved capabilities for viewing images will lead to new insights or improve scholarly productivity is difficult to predict, but the benefits could be substantial. One need only compare, for example, how the “ground plan” of the Langford Brooke estate on Antigua (<http://www.wdl.org/en/item/648/>) appears on the WDL with how it is shown on an older LC site to see how researchers in economic history, anthropology, and other fields are likely to benefit from the improved viewing technology.

Facilitating content sharing and collaboration. The WDL offers a number of user-friendly features that will help to facilitate collaborative research and teaching in the social sciences and other fields. All items on the WDL can be downloaded and printed. Books can be saved as PDFs. These and numerous Web 2.0 features should make the WDL a useful tool for collaborative work, particularly as the volume of content on the site increases.

The WDL would welcome and benefit from having academics incorporate materials from the WDL into their courses. This could easily be done by inserting URLs at appropriate places in course syllabi that would link directly to items in the WDL.

The Potential Contribution of Social Science Research to the WDL

Identifying the way in which the WDL might contribute to social science research is a fairly straightforward exercise. It is more difficult to identify how social science research might contribute to the development of the WDL and what form contributions to the project by social scientists might take. Three broad areas suggest themselves: (1) selection of content; (2) description and interpretation of content; and (3) assistance with cataloging and the development of taxonomies.

Content selection. In the initial stages of the project, selection for the WDL has involved mainly curators and other library professionals, with some assistance from historians. A number of external imperatives (e.g., the need to include in the launch version of the WDL at least some content about every country in the world) also influenced the early selection process. As the project develops and the volume and diversity of the content grows, there will be greater scope for participation of social scientists in aspects of the selection process. It might even be desirable to have social scientists from the various disciplines participate in meetings of the WDL Content Selection Working Group or various content sub-groups being formed or under discussion.

One area in which social scientists can play a key role in selection is with regard to social science itself. In the broad, anthropological sense in which the term is used in the WDL, culture includes the social sciences. Important documents relating to the history of the social sciences therefore should be included in the site. While librarians and curators can readily identify key historic figures in the various fields (Adam Smith in economics or political theorists such as Locke, Hobbes, and Montesquieu), more specialized expertise will be needed to identify second-tier figures or to identify important works of social science from smaller and from non-Western countries.

Another area in which social scientists – anthropologists in particular – can play a role is in regard to the selection and use of ethnographic photographs and other materials relating to indigenous peoples. The Society of Visual Anthropology and the Council for Museum Anthropology in the United States have been exploring such issues as the ethnographic uses of photography, how cultural artifacts such as photographs are shaped by the interactions between the communities depicted in the artifacts and the outsiders (researchers, journalists, etc.) who created these artifacts, and related issues. Input from anthropologists and other social scientists will be essential if these considerations are to be factored into WDL selection procedures and criteria.

Content description and interpretation. Social scientists also can play a role in describing and interpreting the content on the WDL. This could involve writing or providing input into the descriptions that the WDL features for each item shown, or even providing a curator video that might illuminate an item or a collection from a social science perspective.

The WDL team has used a number of academics – mostly historians – to assist with metadata creation and in writing descriptions that place WDL items in context. Many books, maps, and other items in the WDL can only be explained with regard to prevailing social science or proto-social science theories of the day. The WDL includes a work by the French ethnographer Pierre Trémaux, for example (*Journey to Ethiopia, Eastern Sudan, and Nigritia*, 1862-63; <http://www.wdl.org/en/item/2550/>), that is important mainly for its geographic, linguistic, and ethnographic content. But Trémaux was also the author of a theory – which Karl Marx at one point embraced – that held that the nature of the soil in any given country determined the national characteristics of that country and that higher civilizations tended to arise in regions with complex soils. In cases such as this, academic contributors to the WDL project, including social scientists, could help to provide a fuller understanding of social theories and their place in the intellectual life of their day. This is important not only for works that presage or fall within the mainstream of the contemporary social sciences, but also for the intellectual detours and dead ends (such as Trémaux's) that are likely to surface in any large body of historical content.

Social scientists are also well-placed to explain why particular items or a particular collections of items are important with regard to a broader social phenomenon, e.g., migration, industrialization, transportation, political mobilization. While history as an academic discipline tends to trace developments over time, usually within a single country or geographic unit, the social sciences are more inherently comparative and more attuned to identifying commonalities and differences among developments in widely different places at a given period of time.

Cataloging, classification, and display of information. Finally, social scientists can help to develop new ways to catalog, classify, and display information on the WDL and on other digital library projects. The future of metadata and traditional cataloging are the subjects of intense debate, and social scientists should be joining in this debate. Experiments with tagging by social scientists and their students could be carried out by the WDL and other digital library projects. The resulting tags are likely to reflect categories that are relevant for contemporary research and theory rather than traditional library cataloging hierarchies.

Social scientists also may have useful ideas, derived from their research, about how to display certain kinds of content in ways that make them more intelligible to users. Examples that come to mind include the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) by geographers, and tools developed by urban planners that help to situate photographs or drawings of individual buildings in a broader setting.

Conclusions

The WDL is still in its infancy. In this early stage, its development has been very much dominated by library professionals and developers and information technology professionals. As the project grows, there should be increased scope for individuals from other disciplines, including the social sciences, to benefit from and contribute to the WDL. The WDL team at the Library of Congress, in cooperation with colleagues at other WDL partner institutions, looks forward to expanding its cooperation with social scientists as the project develops.