



World Digital Library: Governance and Decision Making

The World Digital Library (WDL) is a project of the Library of Congress, established in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) in 2007. The project has engaged national libraries, archives, museums, universities, research institutes, and other organizations from over 100 countries.

Mission

The project's purpose was described on the World Digital Library website, "[About the World Digital Library](#)", as follows:

The WDL makes available on the Internet, free of charge and in multilingual format, significant primary materials from all countries and cultures. The principal objectives of the WDL are to:

- Promote international and intercultural understanding;
- Expand the volume and variety of cultural content on the Internet;
- Provide resources for educators, scholars, and general audiences;
- Build capacity in partner institutions to narrow the digital divide within and between countries.

The WDL was originally proposed in 2005 by then Librarian of Congress James H. Billington in [his opening plenary address](#) to the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO Annual Conference, at Georgetown University, Washington, DC.

The purpose of creating a special world digital library as a unitary project with diverse participants would be to attempt to provide a minimal, dependable online encyclopedia of the world's most important and interesting two-dimensional cultural objects, just as UNESCO has created an inventory of the world's most important three-dimensional historical monuments.

A 2007 Memorandum of Understanding between LC and UNESCO committed the two organizations to "cooperative efforts to build a World Digital Library Web site . . . [and to] digitize unique and rare materials from libraries and other cultural institutions around the world and make them available for free on the Internet."¹ UNESCO viewed the objectives of the WDL as consistent with its own mandate to "promot[e] the free flow of ideas including universal access to information, preservation of knowledge

¹ "Library of Congress and UNESCO Sign World Digital Library Agreement" Library of Congress press release, October 17, 2007, <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-07-196/world-digital-library-agreement-announced/2007-10-17/>

and promoting diversity of cultures including protection of cultural heritage”.² UNESCO’s [Memory of the World program](#) was established in 1992 to promote preservation of, and universal access to, the world’s important documentary heritage. UNESCO saw in the WDL a potential means of fostering awareness of the [Memory of the World Register](#) and of providing online access to archives and materials registered.

Recent changes in priorities at both UNESCO and the Library of Congress have rendered the future of the WDL uncertain. In 2017 the Library signaled its intention to discontinue service as WDL project manager, and in January of 2019 the United States withdrew from membership in UNESCO. At UNESCO, priorities have also changed, as initiatives related to peace, economic development and human rights have come to take precedence over cultural heritage.³

Funding

The total investment in WDL since its inception in 2005 has been approximately \$25 million. Over that time the Library of Congress, acting as the Project Manager, has been the major fundraiser. The LC team found support through a variety of sources including foundations, companies, contributors, U.S. government appropriations and private individuals. Annual costs to maintain WDL included LC staff time, travel expenses, and office and meeting costs. Another ongoing cost was the three digital conversion centers located in Egypt, Iraq and Uganda. Payments for work that was outsourced varied. It has included payments to companies who provided translation services, web hosting and editing of content.

Major WDL Contributors provided funding for various reasons, but generally with philanthropic intentions. Among the largest gifts was \$3 million from Google, Inc. for costs associated with the initial development of the WDL prototype and establishment of the WDL planning and governance structure. The Qatar Foundation provided an initial, three-year grant of \$3 million for general support, which was followed by annual contributions of \$500,000 from the Qatar National Library for specific projects relating to Arabic and Islamic content. Microsoft Inc. also gave WDL \$1 million in general support during the early phase of the project.

Roles and Responsibilities

While the WDL has been principally led by the Library of Congress and UNESCO, over two hundred partners are listed on the WDL website. The WDL is governed by a Charter approved by the original partner institutions in April 2010. [The text of the Charter](#) in seven languages is posted on the website, and defines the key WDL roles and accompanying responsibilities. These roles are: Contributors, Executive Council members, Committee members and Project Manager.

Contributors

The WDL Charter defines “Contributors” broadly, as “libraries, archives, museums, archives of audio-visual content, educational institutions, and other institutions whose missions include the collection and preservation of cultural and historical content” and that contribute digital content to the WDL, or “contribute in other significant ways to the development of the WDL”. Not all institutions signing the Charter subsequently contributed content. By 2015, for example, 159 institutions in 81 countries had

² Anna Paolini, “UNESCO & the World Digital Library,” presentation to the World Digital Library (WDL) Arab Peninsula Regional Group Meeting, May 2016. http://project.wdl.org/arab_peninsula/workshop2016/2016_paolini.pdf (Accessed 2/10/19).

³ UNESCO’s medium term strategic plan from 2014-2021 is focused on Peace and contributing to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. <https://en.unesco.org/strategic-planning/strategic-documents> (Accessed 2/20/19).

signed the Charter, while only 134 institutions in 51 countries had provided content. Appendix A lists the types of participating institutions.

Incentives for contributors varied, but included:

- Digital library training and hands-on technical experience
- A robust and highly visible web platform for making local cultural heritage materials available globally
- Affiliation with other important memory institutions.

Under the terms of the WDL Charter, the WDL Contributors have a general partner meeting at least once each year. Contributors elect the members of the Executive Council, who serve five-year terms. The annual partner meetings serve to update contributors on the progress of the WDL and on new initiatives within the project, as well as provide a forum at which contributors provide feedback and suggestions to the Project Manager and the Executive Council. Attendance at the meeting is generally low relative to the number of Contributors. The highest year of attendance was 2010 when 105 participants attended the meeting in Washington, DC. The lowest attendance was in year 2015 when only 28 participants attended the meeting in Alexandria, Egypt. The Chair of the Executive Council presides at the meetings of the Contributors.

Executive Council

The Executive Council provides leadership and direction to the WDL following the goals laid out in the Charter. The Council consists of seven members, five of whom are elected by the Contributors at an annual meeting. Elected members must be directors of WDL Contributor institutions, i.e., signatories of the WDL Charter, or their designees. The other two members of the Executive Council are the Director-General of UNESCO or his/her designee, and the director of the institution serving as Project Manager or his/her designee.

The Executive Council elects a Chairman from among its members, who serves for five years. Ismail Serageldin, Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), was the first chairman, elected in 2010 and again in 2015. In the makeup of the Council the project has achieved considerable breadth, with members from China, Qatar, Brazil, France, Germany, Egypt, and the United States.

The Executive Council is charged to hold at least one meeting per calendar year, at which the Council reviews WDL progress and makes decisions on behalf of the project. According to the Charter, “The Executive Council shall take decisions by consensus. Where consensus cannot be achieved, the Executive Council may take decisions by a simple majority of those present and voting.”

Committees

The Charter specifies three standing committees under the oversight of the Executive Council: Content Selection, Technical Architecture, and Translation and Language. The Executive Council assigns responsibilities to each standing committee. The committees may in turn establish subcommittees as needed for a stated period to advise on specific WDL matters.

Content Selection

The WDL Charter defines the scope of WDL content in extremely broad terms:

Digital versions of important cultural and historical primary materials and associated metadata. Such content will include books, other printed materials, manuscripts, maps, sound recordings, films, prints and photographs, and culturally and historically significant materials in other formats that are held in physical form by or otherwise available to Contributors.

Content selection is to be determined by “partners” in consultation with WDL staff.⁴ Contributors and others (“partners”) are invited to nominate materials via an online “Content Proposal Form,” which asks for only a very basic description of the proposed content.

A Content Selection Committee developed a philosophy and general guidelines for selection. The guidelines encourage partner institutions to nominate items for inclusion in WDL “that best present their respective national cultures.” Additionally, institutions are “encouraged to contribute to the WDL collections or items from their holdings that relate to the history and culture of other countries.” In 2009 selection guidelines were posted to the [WDL project site](#).

The Committee contemplated establishing “national committees” to inform selection, but concluded that the added layer of governance would create unnecessary work and complexity. The Committee opted instead to create specialized subcommittees to identify special “areas of concentration”, which were further defined in the 2011 WDL Business Plan. Subcommittees comprised of individuals with expertise in each area of concentration met separately at various times, and many produced meaningful results. Three thematic collections currently featured by WDL are:

[Arabic and Islamic Science and Its Influence on the Western Scientific Tradition](#)

[Chinese Books, Manuscripts, Maps, and Prints](#)

[Illuminated Manuscripts from Europe](#)

In some instances funder interests and political events led to other areas of concentration. In 2013 the Carnegie Corporation of New York, for example, provided funding to support a three-year project to digitize Library of Congress holdings relating to the culture and history of Afghanistan.

The Committee also agreed that user feedback would have a bearing on selection, although it is not immediately apparent how the project was to collect and measure the feedback.

Decisions on WDL content, however, do not seem to have been constrained by the Library’s ability to ingest and process new materials. As of 2018 the project had accumulated a backlog of 12,538 items not yet mounted on the WDL site.

Technical Decisions

The initial WDL web platform was developed by the Library of Congress, with assistance from UNESCO and five partner institutions: the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the National Library of Brazil, the National Library and Archives of Egypt, the National Library of Russia, and the Russian State Library. The design of the prototype evolved through a consultative process in 2006, involving UNESCO, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and participants from more than forty countries. A Technical Architecture Working Group was established that year to develop the

⁴ “Content Preparation,” <http://project.wdl.org/content/> (accessed 2/11/2019)

specifications for the platform, and working group members advise on architecture, workflow, standards, site functionality and technology transfer. The Library of Congress designated its own Office of Strategic Initiatives Repository Development Center to manage the prototype development work.

Project Manager

The Charter requires that a Project Manager be selected from among the Contributor institutions for a five-year term. The Project Manager is the institution responsible for managing and providing for the personnel, hardware, and software required for development and maintenance of www.wdl.org. The Project Manager consults closely with the Executive Council on matters relating to the scope and maintenance of the WDL.

To date, the Library of Congress has served as the only WDL Project Manager. The WDL Charter specified that the Library of Congress would serve as the Project Manager for the first five years the Charter was in effect, after which the Executive Council would select the Project Manager for subsequent five year terms. At its Alexandria, Egypt meeting in the 2015, the Executive Council asked the Library of Congress to continue its project management role for a second term.

John Van Oudenaren, senior advisor for the WDL initiative at the Library of Congress and subsequently WDL director, has led the program since its inception. As Project Manager, the Library of Congress has considerable responsibility for WDL activities and latitude for shaping its program. The Project Manager fields new digitization offers and requests, receives digitized content and metadata, normalizes metadata, supervises translation work and oversight of the WDL technical infrastructure, and monitors usage statistics, user feedback, and site performance.

The WDL Project Management office at the Library of Congress has varied somewhat in size, but generally has ranged from 10-12 full-time staff members, with additional part time contractors. Staff costs have been covered by externally-raised contributions from donors, with the exception of the costs of technical development, which were covered by the Library's Office of Strategic Initiatives.

Other Participants

Other institutions, foundations, and companies also participated by sharing technology, convening or co-sponsoring meetings of working groups, and/or contributing financially. A complete list of funders is available in Appendix B of this report.

The U.S. State Department has an informal role at WDL. The State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) has facilitated WDL dealings with countries such as Iraq. For example, in 2010 ECA enabled LC/WDL staff to train librarians and set up a scanning operation in the Iraqi National Library and Archives.

Conclusion

The leadership of the Library of Congress and UNESCO has been critical to the inception and development of the World Digital Library. The WDL Executive Council, consisting of members of several national libraries and institutes, provided broad guidance to the project throughout its initial phase (2006-2017). In addition, major funders, like the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Qatar Foundation, and the Library of Congress Madison Council, played formative roles in shaping the WDL platform and content.

The initiative succeeded in engaging a remarkably diverse and international population of individuals and institutions in a global effort to make cultural heritage widely accessible. The WDL is a “big tent”, providing incentives to institutions of different types and means, from libraries in the developing world and conflict zones to such well-resourced institutions as the National Library of China, the Qatar National Library, and the major national libraries of Europe.

The apparatus for making decisions on WDL content and technology, however, was insufficiently robust to accommodate the range of interests, needs and priorities that fall within the scope of the project’s exceedingly broad mandate. The result has been an undeniably rich collection of content but one that lacks cohesion and focus; and a platform that may be difficult to sustain as technology evolves and the funding environment changes.

Appendix A Participant Types

National Libraries	76
University Libraries	43
Special Libraries	16
Research Centers	12
Government Agencies	9

Museums	9
National Archives	7
State/Provincial Libraries	7
Public Libraries	5
Other Organizations	18

Appendix B Financial Contributors

(*indicates a member of the LC Madison Council)

\$4,000,000+

Carnegie Corporation of New York
The Qatar National Library of Qatar Foundation
for Education, Science and Community
Development

Buffy M. Cafritz*
William and Inger Ginsburg*
Beverly and Lyman Hamilton*
L. Dennis and Susan R. Shapiro
Tabizuru Foundation (Japanese philanthropic
foundation)

\$1,000,000-\$3,000,000

Google, Inc.
King Abdullah University of Science and
Technology, Saudi Arabia
The Library of Congress National Digital Library
Trust Fund
Microsoft, Inc.

\$500,000-\$999,999

The Library of Congress Third Century Fund,
Jeffersonian Fund

\$250,000-\$499,999

James Madison Council of the Library of
Congress
Glenn R. Jones*
Raja W. Sidawi*

\$50,000-\$249,999

Roger S. and Julie Baskes*
Consuelo Duroc-Danner*
Mikhail Khodorkovsky (former YUKOS Oil
Company Chairman and CEO)
H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest*
Susan Carmel Lehrman*
Philip Milstein*
Martha H. Morris*
Bernard Francis Saul II*
The Lawrence and Mary Ann Tucker Foundation

\$25,000-49,999