Digital Library Project: Brief Review of The Library of Congress, American Memory

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Assignment#1

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The Library of Congress, American Memory

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This short paper will briefly explore and share information about the “American Memory,” historical collections project which is an internet-based archive for public-domain image resources, administered by the Library of Congress. This paper will address the following areas: the project background, content, impression and assessment of the project and collection. We will also address how this digital library is different from a traditional library and whether it is a real digital library as defined by the literature.

**Background:**

a. [Project started] The American Memory historical collections project, the flagship component of the National Digital Library Program, was initiated as a pilot program sponsored by the Library of Congress that ran from 1990 through 1994 (Library, 2013a). The pilot experimented with digitizing some of the Library of Congress’s unparalleled collections of historical documents, moving images, sound recordings, and print and photographic media, the "nation’s memory" (Library, 2013a).

It initially identified audiences for digital collections, established technical procedures, wrestled with intellectual property issues, explored options for distribution, and began institutionalizing a digital effort at the Library (Library, 2013a).

By 1994, advances in www technology enabled the Library to re-examine ways to share and distribute information (Library, 2013a). The Library took advantage of the opportunity and with $13 million in private sector donations, established the National Digital Library Program in 1995 (Library, 2013a).

In 1996, the Library of Congress sponsored a three-year competition to enable public and academic libraries to digitize American history collections and make them available on the Library’s American Memory website (Library, 2013a). The competition produced 23 digital collections that complement the American Memory collection, which now features more than 100 digital collections (Library, 2013a).

b. [sponsors] The administrator of this project is the Library of Congress. The American Memory project, a component of the National Digital Library Program, is managed by the Library of Congress (Library, 2013a). This project has been a collaborative national endeavor. A $15 million, 3-year grant from Congress, and a unique public-private partnership involving entrepreneurial and philanthropic leadership, led to more than $45 million in private sponsorship funding from 1994 through 2000 (Library, 2013a).

c. [people/institutions] The people and institutions behind this project include staff at the Library of Congress (LC), LC conservation and IT staff, and select academic, library, and corporate entities. In addition, when LC officials planned the creation of the National Digital Library, they met with 60 directors from member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries, seeking input and suggestions (Library, 2013d).

As Winston Tabb, the Library’s Librarian for Collection Services stated, "The Library of Congress is fully aware that the National Digital Library cannot be built by one institution. This huge task will require the cooperation of libraries across the nation, and indeed throughout the world" (Library, 2013d).

Tabb also commented that, "We look forward to working with members of the Association of Research Libraries and other institutions in making a major contribution to the National Information Infrastructure and ultimately the global information infrastructure" (Library, 2013d). Library of Congress officials noted that the ARL libraries have major research collections that must be part of the National Digital Library. In addition, a number of corporate and private contributors helped support the launching of the American Memory project.
d. [Purpose] The purpose of the project was to digitize some of the foremost historical treasures in the Library and other major research archives, and make them readily available on the web to Congress, scholars, educators, students, the general public, and the global internet community (Library, 2013a). This project was initiated as part of the Library of Congress’s commitment to harness new technology as part of its mission “to sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for future generations” (Library, 2013a).

The National Digital Library Program aims to “digitize and make available five million objects from a variety of LC collections” (Marchionini, 1998, n.p.). This project also supports the Library’s overall mission which is to “further the progress of knowledge and creativity for the benefit of the American people” (Library, 2013c). A practical reason for the digitalization project was to help address some ongoing library problems, such as space and preservation. The LC felt that digitizing collections would broaden access, even though the digitized format would not replace most original materials (Library, 2013c).

e. [intended users] Intended users of the digital collection include Congress, students, researchers, the general public, and the global internet community.

Content: a. [collections] The American Memory historical collections are digital collections that are part of the Library of Congress’s National Digital Library Program. The collections comprise more than 9 million digitized items that document U.S. history and culture (Library, 2013e). American Memory is organized into more than 100 themed collections based on their original format, their subject matter, or whom first created, assembled, or donated them to the Library (Library, 2013e). (Figure #1) Image source: http://tinyurl.com/m7wrjcy

b. [scope] The primary sources in these collections cover American history from early colonial settlements in 1763, up to the postwar US in 1968 (Library, 2013i). The American Memory collection includes digitized materials on a number of topics. The collections include digitized versions of manuscripts, journals, letters, photographs, maps, video, and audio recordings. The formats of the collection include digitized documents, photos, sound recordings, videos and text.

There are also maps, pamphlets, old documents and newspaper articles and books. The American Memory collections are arranged by theme, topic, and chronologically. The collections make use of LC cataloging and Library of Congress Subject headings (Library, 2013g; Keyes, n.d.).

b. [quality] I performed a few limited searches within the American Memory website. I examined a few collections, such as the “Baseball and Jackie Robinson” collection. Within this collection, many of the digitized still images were only available for download in one scanned digital resolution. For example, the image entitled, “Opening game” showing President Woodrow Wilson throwing out the first game ball in 1916. (Figure #2, above) http://tinyurl.com/mgfdrgrb
Other images were available in either a higher resolution JPEG or an uncompressed TIFF file. For example, at left, within the collection, “Presidential Inaugurations,” there is a photo of President John F. Kennedy, circa 1961. The image is available as either a JPEG or a TIFF download (Figure #3). [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652308/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652308/)

At right, “American Memory Digital Item Display” is a typical example of the options available for still images. As you can see, one can download a JPEG or TIFF image (Figure #4).

Within the American Memory collections, moving images were downloadable as Real Media, QuickTime, or MPEG format. I attribute this for space savings and for quality and compression reasons.

At right, an example of moving images from the American Memory, “American Variety Stage Collection,” Japanese acrobats, circa 1904 (Figure #5) [http://tinyurl.com/lznhmu](http://tinyurl.com/lznhmu)

c. [accessing collections] Access to the American Memory collections is via the homepage: [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html). The homepage appears to be well laid out, with sizable site navigation buttons on top and collection access in the website body. The homepage has several links which are dedicated to enabling the user to easily focus on navigating the website.

The primary link on the site is the “collections Browse.” The library has organized collections into 18 topics. Users can click one of the topical links and it will list all of the collections within that topic. If browsing is not desired, one can click the “list all collections” link. The American Memory collections are arranged by theme, topic, and chronologically. The collections make use of Library of Congress Subject headings (Library, 2013g).

Users begin their search on the homepage. [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html) At the top of the main page you will see 5 primary site navigation buttons and a search box. (Screenshot image: Library, 2013a; also see Figure #6)

The default homepage enables the user to “Browse Collections by Topic,” as per the screenshot at right (Library, 2013g). If you click the browse button, one has the option to browse by topic, time period, media type, and geographic location. (Screenshot image: Library, 2013a).
Near the bottom of the main page there are two links, per the screenshot at left. “More browse options” allows expanded searching and “List all collections” lists all of the collection titles. I chose the “List all collections” link as I wanted to see a master list of all available collections. As mentioned earlier, if you click the browse button near the top you will have the option to browse by topic, time period, media type, or geographic location. (screenshot image: Library, 2013a; also see Figure#6).

d. [external evaluation] A review by Seixas commented that the library, “…is an incredible resource” (Seixas (2004, n.p.). Robert commented that “…the American Memory is a great digital library” (Robert, 2010). Madden discussed technical challenges faced by the project (Madden, 2008, n.p.). And Schneider noted that, “…the site demonstrates the potential of the Internet to contribute to a democratic public culture” (Schneider, 1997, n.p.). The reviews confirmed my initial impression that the LC’s “American Memory” project contains historically valuable and unique materials and thus appears to be an impressive and content-rich digital library.

Impression: a. [my impression] The American Memory Collection is part of the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress is the nation's oldest federal cultural institution and serves as the research arm of Congress. It is also the largest library in the world. This digital library is rich in digitized images pertaining to people, and places in American history. It is an excellent source of primary images that can support historical research.

b. [unique] The American Memory Collection, part of the Library of Congress, is unique as it is supported by both private and Federal funds. It is also unique as most of the collections consist of primary source materials. Per the screenshot at right, there are several collections which highlight famous Americans, such as past presidents. Many of those materials are found only in the collections of the Library of Congress. (Screenshot image: Library, 2013a).

c. [negative issue] As part of my review process, I sought to identify specific collections or materials. Unfortunately, due to the Library’s current website format, page links to specific collections and materials appear to be dynamic, and in many cases cannot be linked. This will limit users, like myself, whom wish to create a URL link to specific items in the library’s collection as linked citations cannot be guaranteed.

Assessment: a. The LC’s “American Memory” digital library project is different from a traditional library in the following 5 areas: a1. [users] Digital libraries serve communities or constituencies, though the users are widely dispersed (Cleveland, 1998, n.p.). a2. [media types] The LC’s “American Memory” digital library, consists of collections which have mixed media formats. This includes fixed images, textual, moving images, and sound. Traditional libraries may be limited to textual media. In contrast, the LC’s digital library encompasses both electronic and paper materials. a3. [access]. The LC’s digital library provides the user with continual access to all of the data within the library. This differs from the traditional library where some materials may be in print or book form and access may be limited based on library hours (Cleveland, 1998, n.p.). a4. [Preservation] The LC’s digital library actively engages in preservation efforts as it continues to digitize collections and materials. By doing so, it “keeps digital information available in perpetuity” (Cleveland, 1998, n.p.). This differs from traditional libraries where old print materials may be discarded. a5. [metadata] The LC’s digital library uses structured and technical metadata to identify its collections (Library, 2013J). This is a major difference from traditional libraries, which use descriptive metadata as part of their traditional cataloging tools.
Assessment b. [how different vs. a website] The LC’s “American Memory” digital library differs from a typical library website due to the LC’s unique primary content, potential for long-term use, intellectual and cultural value, 24-hour free access, and availability of public domain material (Cleveland, 1998, n.p.).

Assessment c. [real digital library] There are a number of definitions of digital libraries. (1) “Digital libraries are a set of electronic resources and associated technical capabilities for creating, searching, and using information” (Borgman, 1999, p. 234). (2) “digital libraries are libraries with the same purposes, functions, and goals as traditional libraries, collection development and management, subject analysis, index creation, provision of access, reference work, and preservation” (Cleveland, 1998, n.p.).

(3) “A digital library is a managed collection of information, with associated services, where the information is stored in digital formats and accessible over a network” (Arms, 2000, p. 16). The National Science Foundation (NSF), cited by the authors, referred to digital libraries as: “Digital Libraries basically store materials in electronic format and manipulate large collections...effectively” (Seadle and Greifender, 2007, p. 169).

Based on available information found on the LC’s “American Memory” website, it appears that this digital library is actively engaged in creating, collecting, and organizing digitized materials in various electronic formats and making them available to users on an online network. (Library, 2013a; 2013J; 2013k). Therefore I would say that the LC’s “American Memory” digital project is a “real” digital library as defined in the literature.

Assessment d. [functions good/bad] In regard to the functions of the “American Memory” website, I was impressed by the website’s multi-search ability. This website allows one to search for a collection, as well as to search within a collection.

The “Browse by topic” example (at right) is for searching selected collections. (Screenshot image: Library, 2013g).

The example (at left) is for browsing the collections by time period, type of record, or geography. (Screenshot image: Library, 2013g).

Another impressive function (not shown) is the website’s option to enable the user to search using text or images. The text search box is at the top of the main page. Image searching is called “Gallery View.” This view allows for the user to see images of the records instead of textual listings of the holdings.
Lastly, there are two other advanced search functions available to users.

They include the “Search full text” (image at left), (Screenshot image: Library, 2013g) and the “Search descriptive information” (image at right). (Screenshot image: Library, 2013g).

These functions appear to be well implemented and offer the user the ability to match words in a full text search, or with a descriptive search. The website does lack in one function, Boolean search operators. According to the library FAQ, one should not put quotation marks around the phrase being searched (Library, 2013g). Aside from this search limitation, I felt the website was well laid out and easy to navigate for collection and descriptive search queries.
References:


Figures:

Figure#1: “American Memory” Digital Library Image

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/

Figure #2: President Woodrow Wilson throwing out the first ball, opening day, 1916. Photographic print, 1916. [Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction number: LC-USZ62-9981 (b&w)]

http://tinyurl.com/mgfdgrb

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/robinson/jrgmday.html

Figure#3: President-elect John F. Kennedy shakes hands with Father Richard J. Casey, the pastor, after attending Mass at Holy Trinity Church [...] prior to inauguration ceremonies. Library of Congress, American Memory,

[Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. CREATED: Jan, 20 1961.]

http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652308/

http://memory.loc.gov/service/pnp/ppmsc/02800/02884v.jpg


http://tinyurl.com/lzlnhmu

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vshome.html
Figure #5, Screenshot of downloadable digital file,
Library of Congress, American Memory,
[Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division]
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/det1994004451/PP/

Figure #6, American Memory Homepage.
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/about/index.html
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