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## Playing Catch-Up in a Digital Library Race

By NATASHA SINGER

AMERICA stood at the forefront of the public library movement in 1731, when Benjamin Franklin founded the Library Company of Philadelphia, our first successful lending library.

Looking back on the project decades later, Franklin wrote in his autobiography that the growth of lending libraries had played a role not only in educating but also in democratizing American society.

"These Libraries," he wrote, "have improv'd the general Conversation of the Americans, made the common Tradesmen & Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed to some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in Defence of their Privileges."

Lending libraries may have been the newfangled democratizing factor of their day. Centuries later, though, the United States finds itself trailing Europe and Japan in creating the modern equivalent: a national digital library that would serve as an electronic repository for the nation's cultural heritage.

In other words, there's a real digital library divide.

In contrast to the United States, the National Library of Norway has been a global early adopter. In 2005, it announced a goal of digitizing its entire collection; by now it has scanned some 170,000 books, 250,000 newspapers, 610,000 hours of radio broadcasts, 200,000 hours of TV and 500,000 photographs. And, last year, the National Library of the Netherlands said it planned to scan all Dutch books, newspapers and periodicals from 1470 onward.

The libraries of the nearly 50 member states in the Council of Europe, meanwhile, have banded together in a single search engine, [theuropeanlibrary.org](http://theuropeanlibrary.org). And the European Commission has sponsored Europeana, a portal for digital copies of art, music film and books held by the cultural institutions of member countries. It currently contains scans of about 15 million artifacts.

Until recently, however, many American institutions and academic centers have concentrated on making scans of their own special treasures, or collaborating with one another on themed projects, rather than combining their electronic resources into a single online access point.

A national digital library is clearly a bigger challenge for the United States, with its vast and disparate library holdings, than for European countries with smaller populations and land masses. But the Library of Congress was already working on the effort in the 1990s when it created a digital collection called "American Memory"; it contains scans of 16 million books, maps, movies, manuscripts and pieces of music.

Even so, the library still has more than 100 million other artifacts that are not yet scanned, says James H. Billington, the librarian of Congress. And even though the American Memory project also carries the name “national digital library,” it is not formally connected, for example, to many of the country’s public libraries.

“There’s tremendous local activity and national collaboration around specific topics,” says David S. Ferriero, the archivist of the United States. “But there has been no national coordination of all the wonderful disparate projects around the country.”

Some of those individual efforts, however, are now beginning to dovetail.

Last month, the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard said it would coordinate a planning program for public and private groups interested in creating a “digital public library of America.”

The idea, says Robert Darnton, the director of the Harvard University Library and one of the project’s originators, is to link the electronic resources of participating university libraries and cultural institutions like the Library of Congress and make them accessible through a single portal. The hope is to create “a gigantic digital library that would make the cultural heritage of the country available to everyone,” he says.

The project would also widen the audience for the kind of historical out-of-print books, manuscripts, letters, images, films and audio clips that have typically been the province of scholars.

Of course, practical matters — like cost, copyright issues and technology — would need to be resolved first.

“The crucial question in many ways is, ‘How do you find a common technical infrastructure that yields interoperability for the scholar, the casual inquirer or the K-12 student?’” Dr. Billington says.

The idea for an American digital public library was prompted in part by the work of Google. In 2004, the company started a digitization project, Google Books, that has since scanned more than 15 million books. Many of these are out-of-print books lent by institutions like Harvard, Cornell and the University of Michigan. “Google came along and woke everyone up and showed the world what could be done in a short period of time,” says Maura Marx, a fellow at the Berkman Center.

People can read out-of-print items at no cost on Google Books, if those works are no longer subject to copyright protection. But if a judge approves a settlement between Google and copyright holders, subscription fees to access scans of out-of-print books still covered by copyright will have to be paid by universities and other institutions.

An American digital public library would serve as a nonprofit institutional alternative to Google Books, Professor Darnton says.

“There’s a conflict between the *raison d’être* of Google, which is to make money for its shareholders,” he says, “and libraries whose goal is to make books available to readers.”

But such a digital public library would have a better chance of success, he says, if it included out-of-copyright books owned by member libraries that Google had digitized.

That is already happening in Europe, where the national libraries of the Netherlands and Austria have signed agreements with Google in which their sites can host digital copies of out-of-copyright books in their own holdings that have been scanned by the company. The libraries also have the right to make those scans available on public educational sites like Europeana.

A SPOKESWOMAN for Google says the company would be happy to participate in the proposed American project.

“Making the world’s books accessible online is something that requires public and private initiatives,” says Annabella Weisl, a Google Book Search executive in Germany, “and so we welcome new efforts in this direction.”

But Jill Cousins, the executive director of Europeana, says that the great American research libraries could do much more than simply increase access to scans of scholarly material.

“What’s sort of missing is digitization of the accessible literature,” like the popular novels and biographies readers seek at brick-and-mortar public libraries, she says. A few institutions, like the National Library of Norway, are already venturing into this area, via novel arrangements with copyright holders.

“It would be nice to conceive of something bigger that has more to do with the public good than with the academic side of the equation,” Ms. Cousins

says.