

CALIFORNIA'S LIBRARY WITHOUT LIMITS

By Richard C. Atkinson

San Diego Union-Tribune, October 14, 1997

Desiderius Erasmus, the 16th century father of Western humanism, dreamed of "a library with no limits other than the world itself." His dream was prompted by the invention of the printing press.

Today, digital computer and Internet technologies are bringing his ambitious dream within reach. Instead of only seeking out knowledge in place-bound libraries, limited by what is locally available, we can range across the worldwide Internet to connect with digital versions of books or of other creative works. The rapid growth of the Worldwide Web has given us a foretaste of things to come: a future when our libraries, at the press of a button, can come to us, wherever we are, whenever we wish.

Profound implications

This has profound implications for the citizens of California, as we wrestle with how to educate our youth and provide continuous opportunities for lifelong learning. If we do it right, we can take an important step toward lowering the economic and other barriers to access that divide people of different backgrounds and provide opportunities for all, independent of geography and local condition.

In short, we must build the California Digital Library, echoing the call of Kevin Starr, the state librarian. This will be a "virtual" library that can be explored by all with access to the Internet. It will link together digital collections of knowledge and information distributed across the university, the state and beyond.

Our libraries, museums and archives -- public and those of academe -- house compelling collections that tell of California's heritage in all its richness and diversity and that are storehouses of accumulated knowledge about science, art, engineering, history and literature. Collectively, we are among the best in the nation. Creating digital texts and facsimiles of the most important of these collections -- and even enlivening them with multimedia technologies -- opens exciting new pathways to knowledge.

Important starts have already been made. Many of the University of California's libraries, museums and archives have digitized parts of their collections and made them available on the Web. UC Berkeley, for example, exhibits an extraordinary selection of digitized photographs from the Bancroft Library's extensive holdings documenting the history of California; UC Santa Barbara provides access to its collection of maps; and the California Museum of Photography at UC Riverside displays many of its rich store of photographs. And not just images, but full texts of important works are made available on-line.

On-Line Examples Abound

And beyond UC, examples abound: on-line images of paintings and other artifacts from the Getty Museum and excerpts from the Mount Shasta Collection at the College of the Siskiyous, including portions of John Muir's diaries.

But much more remains to be done. We must not only link these digitized collections into an integral whole, but find the means to expand them by several orders of magnitude.

There has been much focus on building the information superhighway reaching to every corner of the state. Projects such as Netday '96 have unleashed volunteer enthusiasm and corporate partnerships to wire up California's schoolhouses. Shortly, new technologies will be deployed that will speed access to every home. In less time than cynics think possible, Internet connections will be as ubiquitous as the telephone and television.

There are many difficulties to be overcome. There are critical problems of access, of delivery vehicles, of developing new forms of navigational aids to locate content and of content creation - making electronic facsimiles of our library holdings. There are problems of making the right licensing arrangements with copyright holders, although important segments of our holdings are out of copyright or are under our control.

We will need to create new works -- multimedia works -- that graphically bring alive our collections to audiences both new and old. And there are significant problems of how to fund this great undertaking.

These problems can be solved. California is the nexus of developments that pave the information superhighway, thanks to our research and development laboratories and the entrepreneurial energies of the private sector. We can join the talents and resources of our colleges and universities and our public libraries in a momentous partnership with corporate California. The University of California stands ready to help in any way.

Not for Just the Young

California's Digital Library can ignite young minds with the fires of discovery. And not only the young. The California Digital Library can unfold intellectual resources across the state to help all those who wish to seek new directions in their lives, expand their visions, or prepare themselves for unknown futures, or just kindle a love of learning.

The California Digital Library can help us think in new ways about how to share collections among the universities and campuses of the California State University, community colleges and University of California systems, to avoid wasteful duplication. It also will make our holdings digitally reachable by high school students and others studying to enter our institutions and by our alumni.

As we cross into a new millennium, our great libraries, museums, archives and industrial forces must join hands to complete California's part of Erasmus' dream -- five centuries later -- by creating the California Digital Library.

(This article originally appeared in the San Diego Union-Tribune on July 5, 1996. This version has been updated.)