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Heard on the Net: Highlight on the Digital Public Library of America

Jill Emery

Portland State University, jemery@pdx.edu

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ADVISOR REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Heard on the Net

Highlight of the Digital Public Library of America

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By Jill Emery (*Collection Development Librarian, Portland State University*)

<jemery@pdx.edu>

The Digital Public Library of America launched in April 2013 amid much fanfare and excitement over the possibility of what a shared collection of American digital cultural artifacts could be. DPLA grew from a desire to have a single platform/entry point into our cultural heritage within the United States of America. The rubric and rhetoric presented at the time of the launch regarding what the DPLA would be was baffling to many within the library/librarian community. This led to criticism that the intent was “vague,” the founding would have negative impact on the funding and support of local public libraries throughout the USA, and there was concern that a digital library was not a suitable replacement for local literacy training. In the two years since launch, DPLA has grown to be a valuable resource recognized by organizations and publications for becoming a resource of value within the United States. The DPLA is an enterprise committed to the development of a platform and an open portal that provides ready and seamless access to our shared digitized cultural heritage. Today, there is a well-articulated strategic plan on their Web site, and well defined policies for operations, data application, and end-users. There are multiple partnerships with key funding agencies that are leading to broadening digital skills training, profound educational uses and the open availability of e-books. In a relatively short period of time, DPLA now represents rather impressive achievements. As a community, libraries/librarians have come to recognize that the development of DPLA and its success is due to the hard work and achievements of the community-at-large.

First and foremost, DPLA has flourished from a tremendous number of content hubs and service hubs over the past two years. Content hubs are comprised of large libraries, museums, archives, and other digital repositories that provide unique metadata records that resolve to digital objects. In addition, the content hubs are also providing access to over 2 million books and periodicals through a single interface. Service hubs work to bring together digital objects from libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions within a given state or region. Service hubs offer their partners professional development opportunities, digitization training, metadata creation, and enhancement. One of the most forward-thinking aspects of DPLA has been the accessibility of resources created from the application programming interface. The open API allows for the independent development of applications and tools by anyone. The APP Library provided by DPLA allows for libraries and institutions throughout the world to discover content via the DPLA platform through the tools that have been shared. Developers can grab sample code for development using the DPLA API and likewise share code back with DPLA through an online form. Metadata application maps are also readily provided to developers for fully understanding the metadata structure in use. In this regard, DPLA has been successful in the advancement of the portal and platform development outlined in the strategic plan.

More recently, DPLA as a public option for reading and research has been developing. Primary source sets have been created and reviewed by teachers who make up the Education Advisory Committee. It could be said that DPLA never promised us a rose garden but one has been delivered via the Open e-books partnership between New York Public Library (NYPL), DPLA and the First Book Initiative. President Obama announced the program last April. This project is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and is also made possible by the generosity of various publishers. This collaboration is aimed at making award winning e-books available to low income students in an unlimited fashion without checkouts or incurring any costs. Librarians are involved in the curation of the titles available to insure the collection is diverse and compelling. The project is linked to the teacher/caregiver and not to individual readers. All of the material selected will be available for use with Readium’s rendering engine for anyone who is print-disabled. DPLA also participates in National History Day through the creation of hub specific student research guides and State-based sponsorships. The material in DPLA is the perfect complement to the series of contests a student may engage in with these activities. One of the best educational opportunities provided via DPLA is through their engagement with the Public Library Partnerships Project (PLPP) to provide digital skill training for public librarians to help continue to grow the state and regional resources made available. These project workshops help develop best practices and introduce public librarians to the digitization process. From this work, DPLA has developed a self-guided version intended for beginners from any cultural heritage

One reason, DPLA has been able to be so successful so quickly, is in part through their partnerships and funding development with key organizations. In addition to their work with the organizations listed above, DPLA has key associations and support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Over the past year, DPLA has enabled individual donation funding as well as a sponsorship program. Not many organizations are able to accomplish in their initial start-up phases what DPLA has. From the extensive profile developed by DPLA, libraries throughout the country have gained recognition and support. Libraries/librarians are able to provide a single platform entry point to content from throughout the country. DPLA has worked very hard to maintain a position of engagement within the library/librarian community as their programs and platforms have grown. Given the level of interaction maintained within the library/librarian community, it is time for us as a community to champion this initiative more directly. Our support is integral to the future success of the Digital Public Library of America. ■