

Brief Bios

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The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC): Creating a Shared Research Foundation

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Abstract

This article explains the history and development of the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) as a research foundation for reading, writing, and researching the Caribbean and thus as part of the scholarly cyberinfrastructure for Caribbean Studies. As a research foundation, dLOC includes technical, social, governmental, and procedural supports including open source tools, executive and scholarly advisory boards for governance, permissions-based rights model to support intellectual property as well as cultural and moral rights, and a core support team. As a research foundation, dLOC supports new forms of research as well as new ways of reading and writing Caribbean Studies.

Keywords:

Digital libraries, digital humanities, scholarly cyberinfrastructure, Digital Library of the Caribbean, dLOC, scholarly communications, peer review

Introduction

The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is a research foundation for reading, writing, and researching the Caribbean and thus is part of the scholarly cyberinfrastructure for Caribbean Studies. dLOC is a cooperative digital library for resources from and about the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, which provides access to digitized and curated digital versions of Caribbean cultural, historical and research materials held in archives, museums, libraries, academic institutions, and private collections (2012, “About dLOC”). dLOC follows the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) in defining the Caribbean as “the area of the Caribbean archipelago, the mainland countries (including the Guianas), and the states of the United States of America which border on the Caribbean Sea or Gulf of Mexico” (2012, “What is ACURIL”). As a research foundation, dLOC includes technical, social, governmental, and procedural supports including open source tools, executive and scholarly advisory boards for governance, permissions-based rights model to support intellectual property as well as cultural and moral rights, and a core support team.

dLOC emerged from a long history of collaborative resource sharing for access and preservation using print and microfilm. While access and preservation remain primary concerns, dLOC is concerned not only with content but also with context. Many of the materials in dLOC are unique and, while well-known for their importance within a specific country or discipline, the

materials lack antecedents in prior research and representation and placement within scholarly discourse. In order for these materials to be read, written, and researched by scholars, citizens of the country of origin, and the global public, curation in terms of context-creation is necessary. Using several examples from dLOC partners and scholars—including the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí and an online, curated exhibit—this article will show new practices and concerns for understanding research foundations in the digital age.

About dLOC: Leveraging Supports for Preservation and Access

dLOC developed out of long-standing partnerships across the Caribbean for preservation and access. In order to continue to grow and develop, dLOC leveraged the socio-technical scholarly cyberinfrastructure developed to support preservation and access to leverage that infrastructure to also serve the needs of scholars, students, and the global public. In prior incarnations of print collaborations, Morse wrote in 1964 about the valuable contributions of librarians and archivists for Latin American and Caribbean Studies: “I venture that till now the most important American contribution to Latin American historiography has been in the realm of ‘services’: bibliographic compilation, devising of research aids, and enhancement of library collections” (1964, p. 109). Library and archival work, as research and service, has created the foundation for area studies and continues to do so in the digital age. In both print and digital versions, the work of librarians and archivists served the core needs for preservation and access and building new supports—as with conducting research to create bibliographies and finding aids—that enabled new types of research, reading, and writing. So, too, in the digital age is the work for preservation and access once again further developed and utilized in service of enabling new forms of research, reading, and writing.

As the *Final Report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access* states, “Without preservation, there is no access” (2010, p. 9). The reverse is also true for digital libraries: without access, there is no preservation. For digital libraries, preservation concerns must also be access concerns because the preservation work itself requires repeated access to validate the preservation processes and because the intended goals of preservation cannot be supported without also supporting access. Digital preservation work demands access to files as a necessary part of that testing and validation. Access is thus an ever-present workflow requirement. Access is required to support digital preservation as an ongoing process for the lifecycle of digital information and materials. Even for a relatively small set of materials, the work to support digital preservation is a perpetual process within the information lifecycle. The Committee for Film Preservation and Public Access before The National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress notes this in speaking about film preservation, entitling their statement: “Preservation without access is pointless” (1993, p. 1).

Digital libraries perform ongoing and changing work in order to support digital preservation. Because digital libraries must continually adapt technologies and conduct ongoing work to support digital preservation processes, digital libraries face challenges that require a community for support. In developing the community for support, digital libraries are socio-technical systems that can be leveraged and expanded for larger scholarly communications needs.

In addition to the ongoing processing and technical requirements for digital libraries to support preservation and access, Borgman reminds: “As we debate the complex technical issues associated with information, such as managing trust, identity, location, and intellectual property, we must remember that these are social issues first and technical issues second” (2007, p. 265).

Borgman correctly identifies that technologies should be in service to and structured in response to the social needs. An additional corollary to this is that the technologies developed, as informed by the social issues, can then be leveraged to also serve additional socio-technical needs.

For dLOC, the socio-technical development cycle meant first developing the core preservation and access supports: governance model by partner institutions; scholarly advisory board; permissions-based rights model where all partners, scholars, and contributors retain their rights to their materials and simply grant permissions for the materials to be made accessible online and to be preserved; and the dLOC community in which all changes and concerns could be addressed and supported. For instance, Renwick writes in her evaluation of Caribbean digital library initiatives: “Within dLOC, partners retain ownership of the material they provide. This works towards building trust and increased cooperation and contribution” (2011, p. 10). Renwick continues on to explain:

Of the various digital initiatives that have arisen over the last decade, dLOC is the one that is first, if not the only one, identified by many librarians and academics in various countries of the Caribbean. It is not a household name but other initiatives are less well known and mostly popular among niche groups of scholars and researchers and, often, within a single language group. The dLOC has persevered thus far whilst other equally ambitious projects have either lapsed or reduced to a much narrower scope. For the dLOC the political, cultural and language issues affect not only the type of material provided but all of the mechanisms to do so: the coordination, collaboration, presentation and access issues. The dLOC has been described as thriving for a number of reasons: it has proven to be trustworthy, flexible, responsive, adaptable, accommodating, willing to evolve, proactive, dynamic, empowering and has demonstrated goodwill to its partners by initiating humanitarian efforts. (2011, p. 9)

From this strong foundation, dLOC continues to develop the community and scholarly cyberinfrastructure to place dLOC into the core of scholarly communications to enable new research, reading, and writing practices.

Understanding Research Foundations in the Digital Age: New Practices and Concerns

In Renwick’s analysis of dLOC, she notes that dLOC’s strength is not only in its technologies, community, and contents, but also in the context-creation: “In order to make materials meaningful, topical collections have been developed within a subject area, so that users can find related materials easily” (2011, p. 12). This also follows from Borgman’s argument that: “Scholarly data and documents are of most value when they are interconnected rather than independent” (2007, p. 10). dLOC provides context through facilitating the creation by partners and scholars of topical collections for specific areas and online, curated exhibits, as well as by ensuring all materials are attributed to and represented within the online presence for the partners that contributed the materials. This context is critically necessary for the materials themselves to be useful and used as part of the research foundation that allows for reading to occur.

Many of the materials in dLOC are of critical importance for specific research areas. However, because so many of the materials in dLOC are unique, access to the materials has been restricted with the unique items often in remote archives and often needing additional restrictions on access to ensure the materials are protected for preservation. These restrictions create a fundamental lack of access that, in turn, restricts the research possibilities for these materials. Placing the materials online removes the first of those fundamental obstacles to access. However, the materials do not exist within the realm of scholarly communications and discourse until they

are connected to scholars and those communities and networks. In order for these sorts of unique materials to be part of the research foundations, curation in terms of context-creation is necessary.

From the initial planning discussions, dLOC was concerned with presenting and representing context as a socio-technical requirement to support moral and cultural heritage rights for full attribution. Full attribution for moral and cultural heritages rights are related to copyright, which is a property right, and add responsibilities and rights in terms of representation with full attribution and for the wholeness of the work. The dLOC partners agreed that full attribution is needed for both the content creators and the partners who have preserved and provided access to the content. Thus, a single-author book would include attribution for the author and for the institution that holds and is providing access to the book. The dLOC “Partners” page lists all of the dLOC partners and links to the individual collection pages for each of the partners. For instance, one of the dLOC partners is the Universidad de Oriente in Venezuela. In 2011, the Universidad de Oriente contributed a series of books and oral histories to dLOC, sharing their research with the world and to lay the foundation for future research and collaboration by promoting and defining the place and research being done by the Universidad de Oriente. Sharing these materials clearly enriches and supports the world’s access to research as well as dLOC and the Universidad de Oriente because of the full attribution and representational model. In a similar manner to the new research works created and published by the Universidad de Oriente, the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí has recreated extremely rare and hard to find books from their collection as digital books, contributed them to dLOC for the world to access and to ensure worldwide preservation. In doing so, the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí has changed access, transmission, reading, and understanding books in the digital age by creating a research foundation that did not previously exist because of limitations to access. Through dLOC, the books are now accessible and they are accessible with a direct relationship to the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí. The books, alone and as presented in relation to the holding institution, contribute to the foundation for research on Cuba.

In addition to specific partners presenting their materials together in relation to the partner institutions, scholars are also collaborating with the dLOC community to create new scholarly book-equivalent works using materials in dLOC. As Judith Rogers and Brooke Wooldridge note:

The true test of value of the dLOC content is demonstrated by growing relationships with researchers and educators that create an environment conducive to new digital humanities collaborations. As more content becomes available online, the opportunities for collaboration and innovation in scholarship expand. dLOC in effect serves as a virtual digital humanities center. (2011, p. 5)

For example, Silvia is curating *Haiti: An Island Luminous*, which is an online exhibit or edited collection with over 170 pages of content created by various scholars with the content linked to the primary materials in dLOC (2012). dLOC serves as the infrastructure supporting *Haiti: An Island Luminous*. Silvia has paired historical documents with expert guest commentary from top scholars, and designed it to function like a slideshow and timeline to allow navigation through history, providing links to primary and secondary sources and introducing readers to leading scholars, past and present. *Haiti: An Island Luminous* is a showcase for scholarly research and primary materials. Silvia decided to begin this ambitious project because of the rich materials in dLOC and the need to place them in context so that people could read these materials and could

read Haitian history in new ways with the foundation from these materials and context provided by scholars.

Another related example is the *About Face: Revisiting Jamaica's First Exhibition in Europe* online exhibit (2012). The *About Face* exhibit is the collaboration of two scholars working with the dLOC Exhibits Coordinator to develop a scholarly curated online exhibit representing the historical *Face of Jamaica* exhibit. The *Face of Jamaica* exhibit was created one year after Jamaica celebrated its independence and the exhibit toured Europe from 1963-1964, but was never shown in Jamaica. The *About Face* online exhibit includes materials from the original exhibit as well as contemporary documents showing the reception of the original exhibit. The new exhibit also includes scholar commentary and analysis on the contents and historical importance of the exhibit. Where *Haiti: An Island Luminous* emerged from the recognition of the need to place materials in dLOC in context order to enrich the materials, scholarly field, and public ability to access and understand the materials, the *About Face* exhibit began with the scholar-curators having already identified the need for this project, and looking for a venue which could support the scholarly and public access to the primary materials and the new exhibit as a work of scholarship. The scholarly community connected the scholar-curators to dLOC as the place and foundation for the scholar-curators' work.

Other examples include how dLOC supports context-creation through teaching materials and guides as with Rosenberg's "List of Anglophone Caribbean Novels published before 1950" which provides context for teachers and students using dLOC for access to, context for, and information about Caribbean literature. As Wooldridge, Taylor, and Sullivan explain: "In addition, dLOC works with scholars and K-12 educators to incorporate these materials into research and teaching, providing greater context for contributed resources and further promoting new teaching and research based on the unique resources found in dLOC" (2009, p. 2). Additional supports are also being added for digital scholarship, with dLOC currently developing several initiatives to ensure peer review of *Haiti: An Island Luminous*, *About Face*, and other scholarly works, again providing the socio-technical research foundations for these works to be read.

Conclusion

The Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is a research foundation for Caribbean Studies. As such, it also forms part of the scholarly cyberinfrastructure enabling new modes reading, writing, and researching. In doing so, dLOC enables new forms of scholarship and new ways of doing scholarly work, including supporting greater public engagement that can, in turn, again further vitalize scholarly research. As Borgman argues:

Humanists [...] have a greater number of audiences for their data and the products of their research. [...] As readers, humanists have access to the smallest proportion of their literature online of any discipline. [...] So far, they are the discipline most poorly served by the publications component of the content layer. (2007, p. 214-215)

dLOC presents one example of how to create scholarly cyberinfrastructure from a full socio-technical perspective that leverages capacity created from library and archival preservation and access projects to engage with and empower the scholarly community in order to collaboratively develop a full research foundation. dLOC and the dLOC Model based on equity, access, representation, attribution, community, and communication offer new ways of thinking about research foundations and reading and writing in the digital age.

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