

## **Executive Summary: Report on the Minnesota Digital Library Conference**

September 2001

### **Mission & Definition:**

At the invitation of MAGNOLIA, the Minnesota Academic Group for New Opportunities in Library and Information Access, and with the support of an LSTA grant, twenty-five librarians, archivists, and technologists representing a broad spectrum of cultural heritage and “memory” institutions, came together 14-16 August in Monticello, Minnesota, to discuss the possibility of creating and to initiate planning for a coordinated collaborative digital library project.

At the conclusion the conference, participants agreed upon the following mission statement:

**The archives, historical societies, libraries, and museums of Minnesota will collaboratively build a coordinated access to Minnesota’s unique resources and special collections in digital format for use by the people of Minnesota and, through the Internet, the people of the world.**

From the beginning, participants decided to distinguish the MDL initiative as a digitization project distinct from the Electronic Library for Minnesota (ELM) and as an access project distinct from but linked to MnLINK.

### **Participation, Policy and Planning:**

Conference participants envision the MDL as a collaboration among “memory” or “cultural heritage” institutions, with potential participation from every archive, library, museum, and historical society in Minnesota. To encourage broad participation, they suggested there should be minimal impediments and maximum benefits to participation. In addition to participation by collections with resources to digitize, there was some agreement that representatives from various user communities, including scholars, genealogists, and elementary-secondary instructors, could add substance to discussions of some working groups.

Every discussion group spoke of the need to conduct user analysis and needs assessment from the beginning and as an ongoing process. A needs assessment should be conducted as soon as feasible to determine user awareness of current digital resources in Minnesota and user expectations from a collaborative project.

Funding a project of this scope will be complex. Federal grants from IMLS may assist in developing initial collaborative projects, as well as developing unique applications that could be adopted by other digitization projects. Private foundation grants are also available, and there was discussion of corporate sponsorship. There is the possibility that minimal membership fees could support a portion of the project.

### **Standards and Digitization:**

Adopting a single existing metadata scheme, such as the widely used Dublin Core Metadata Initiative scheme, would be best for interoperability and data exchange. Local development of a more complex, integrated descriptive metadata scheme that feeds into the simpler scheme is a possible approach. Obviously, the less metadata required, the simpler the search and retrieval; more complex metadata can result in robust search capabilities. Conference participants recognized that further discussion is necessary to resolve the metadata issue.

As another means of encouraging participation, MDL could provide a template or multiple templates for creating metadata or adding locations (holdings) to existing metadata in a shared catalog database. This central catalog would complement rather than replace existing metadata repositories, with individual collection metadata residing in both locations

Conference participants could not have been stronger in their support for adhering to national standards for capture and storage of digital images that maintain fidelity to the original, especially photographs, prints and artwork, or images of text.

Digitization involves several challenges beyond metadata implementation, including:

- ?? Adopting and adapting widely accepted digital content creation principles and standards.
- ?? Acquiring the appropriate hardware to capture or create digital objects and to store and disseminate those objects.
- ?? Identifying appropriate resources to digitize.
- ?? Sustaining digital objects and access to them over time.

In the absence of firmly established standards for all formats of media, compiling and disseminating a set of “best practices” provides a viable solution. These practices should be documented and readily accessible via the Web or other media to all potential participants in the MDL.

Inherent in the all discussions is the need for education and training, especially for metadata standards and digitizing processes. Early on participants discussed the need for a forum to inform librarians, archivists, historians, educators, and others about digitization. A forum would also provide a springboard for other training programs for metadata and document type definitions, for digitization processes, for resource enhancement, and for copyright and intellectual property.

### **Collections**

Minnesota’s libraries, archives, historical societies and museums contain millions of items, among which are numerous unique and valuable resources, that collectively represent the memory and cultural heritage of the state and its people. The MDL is conceived as a means of providing broad access through digitization to many of these resources while promoting preservation for the most fragile objects or those most subject to mutilation.

While the conference participants deferred discussion of selection criteria, they did identify several factors to consider:

- ?? Value (e.g., rare or unique content, useful to multiple audiences, enhancement of collaborative collections, etc.),
- ?? Demand (e.g., by active multiple audiences, potential for new audiences, etc.),
- ?? Preservation (e.g., reduce handling of fragile materials, reduce risk of theft or mutilation, etc.), and
- ?? Feasibility (e.g., quality of digital object and fidelity with original, ease of access, potential for sustainability, etc.).

Any initial digitization effort by MDL will need to be based on selection criteria that address these issues. Planners will establish a structured collection development process during the next stage of development that will guide digitizing projects.

### **Audiences and Presence**

Central to the vision of the MDL is establishing a central collective database of metadata describing and providing public access to distributed digital objects representing the cultural heritage of Minnesota. This single gateway would simplify access and provide entry points for users to all digital resources and functionality of the MDL and participating institutions. MDL is intended to meet the needs of multiple user communities; the need to understand and support local and distant users of the MDL and the usability of MDL resources is critical to its success. An audience analysis will provide the MDL with an understanding of current and potential users, their content interests, concerns and applications, as well as their access needs and expectations.

### **Next Steps**

Next steps include: establishing and prioritizing project goals; developing a plan of actions and realistic deliverables; writing second LSTA planning grant; and initiating a project Web site.