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Statement of James H. Billington  
The Librarian of Congress  
on  
Libraries and Their Role in the Information Infrastructure  
before the Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities  
Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
United States Senate  

April 19, 1994

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss libraries and their role in the information infrastructure.

Let me start by saying that, if our unique array of libraries of all kinds did not now exist, they would have to be invented. As we head into this new technological age, no other institutions exist to provide the great majority of Americans — businessmen, public servants, students, teachers, researchers, professionals, ordinary citizens — with access to the highest quality and broadest array of information resources. Professional librarians know how to acquire, organize, preserve, and deliver the information that Americans seek in all walks of life. Thus, librarians must be key players as the leadership in both the public and private sectors develops the information infrastructure of the future.

So long as our national goals for this infrastructure include insuring the broadest public access to information, the nation must recognize and sustain its unique library system. At the same time, we in the library community must work together in new ways. We must participate fully in the design, construction, and maintenance of America’s new information infrastructure. Information technology, properly organized and supported, can have enormous positive results, just as Andrew Carnegie’s public library movement of a century ago gave the general public unprecedented access to knowledge and self-improvement. Today’s opportunity is no less grand. The Library of Congress is moving in this direction in four important ways:

(1) by enriching and energizing the existing network;
(2) by creating core content for a new National Digital Library;

(3) by defining the Library’s own strategic digital plan; and

(4) by helping lay the groundwork for the network of the future: the National
Information Infrastructure.

Let me discuss each of these briefly.

First, the Library of Congress is enriching the existing network by becoming, in recent
months, a major presence on the Internet. We now provide free into the Internet more than
26 million records including the entire LC card catalog, summaries and status of federal legislation,
copyright registration records, and abstracts and citations to foreign laws.

Over 7,000 people log on to the Library of Congress files over the Internet each day; the
Library’s staff has designed an easy-to-use menu system (LC MARVEL) accessing LC information
and connecting to other resources on the Internet; and the Library is continuing to build new tools to
improve access to our resources over the Internet and to make additional materials available.

The Library of Congress is the only institution to make available electronically the images and
accompanying texts from all its major exhibits so that they can have a continuing educational impact:
Secrets of the Russian Archives, Columbus 1492 Quincentennial -- Meeting of Old and New Worlds,
Vatican Library Treasures, Dead Sea Scrolls, and African-American Mosaic. Almost 400,000 visits,
for instance, have been made to the electronic Russian exhibit in the commercial network, America
Online, alone.

Second, and perhaps most critical to the future of libraries, is our plan to create the core
content of a new National Digital Library. We are nearing completion of a five-year pilot program in
our American Memory Project, for which we have digitized two dozen Americana collections
including prints and photographs, manuscripts, sound recordings, and motion pictures -- a true
multimedial database. You will see some examples of this effort in our demonstration.
American Memory is designed to bring the values of our older book culture into the new electronic culture. It will provide a vitamin enrichment for hard-pressed schools and libraries. Teachers will mediate the materials, and young people will get motivated to delve into books in order to answer the questions they themselves ask of the multimedial, interactive material they call up on the screen. Our tests have found that American Memory works well with children even in the 4th and 5th grades — activating their intellects by stimulating the kinds of open questions that the hitherto inaccessible primary materials of our history inevitably raise, exposing them simultaneously to new technology and old values, memory and imagination. American Memory provides the electronic equivalent of browsing and of making choices.

In delivering our unique collections by electronic means to libraries and schools, our goal is to reinforce local communities of learning. Our role, as we see it, is to be a benevolent wholesaler to the local institutions which, in turn, will be efficient retailers of knowledge and information to students, teachers, and the public.

The National Digital Library will be built in collaboration with the private sector and with materials from other major depositories. The Library’s vast existing collections, which are largely based on copyright deposits and include some 104 million items, will provide a base on which to build the National Information Infrastructure. Core material for the National Digital Library will be taken from Library of Congress collections that include most papers of most Presidents up to Hoover, cartoons, photographs, posters, television tapes, almanacs, recorded sound, sheet music, unpublished American plays, in addition to the largest book and periodical, map and movie collections in the world.

The third way the Library is moving into the digital age is by defining a strategic plan covering our future as well as current collections. The Library is attempting to build its capacity to acquire, catalog, preserve, and provide access to a future collection that will be increasingly digital in
format; to convert other portions of the current core collection into digital formats; and to integrate both digital and non-digital materials. The Library intends to play a leadership role by developing new approaches to organizing, managing, and preserving digital materials; creating necessary procedures for protection of intellectual property; and acquiring resources to convert current collections to digital formats.

Finally, the Library of Congress hopes to contribute to the electronic future by being an exemplary catalyst for the library community more broadly in building the National Information Infrastructure.

As we and others see it, "content" and "access" are no less important than "technology." Our basic belief is that if the new electronic highways are to serve America, they must do more than simply provide entertainment and high-priced information on demand to the well-to-do at home or in the office. There is a critical need for non-entertainment material that is inexpensive and accessible to the American public. The Library of Congress' collections are part of the nation's "strategic information reserve" that will provide the intellectual cargo on the information superhighways. Local libraries will be the key "information nodes" where people can access a vast variety of information services; librarians will increasingly serve as "knowledge navigators" guiding users to the information they are seeking.

The Library will contribute to the discussion of critical public policy questions, such as support for libraries during this time of transition, protecting intellectual property rights and developing bibliographical standards for the electronic age.

Even as the discussion proceeds, we are ever mindful that far beyond all the data, information, and even knowledge that we can accumulate and disseminate electronically lie the true peaks of human accomplishment on which the future of our civilization largely depends: wisdom and creativity.
The business of libraries is the pursuit of truth, the highest form of Jefferson’s pursuit of happiness, the surest way to protect us from the pursuit of each other, and the only pursuit in a time of growing physical limits where the horizons for our cherished ideal of freedom can still safely remain infinite.

Libraries are base camps for the pursuit of truth and for the discovery of new truths in the Information Age. They need electronic additions but not electrocution. For librarians are the guardians of institutions central to the American dream where knowledge can slowly ripen into wisdom and occasionally break through to new creation. A better life will come in America, not just from more data and a modem but from a better understanding of one another that comes from books — and from seeking access to content from others rather than just contentment with ourselves.

Our challenge is to meet the multi-media age head-on, to construct a digital delivery system that promotes the value of ideas, that sends people to books, and that stimulates the active mind.