

# OLAQ

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Volume 24 , Number 4 *Digital Repositories and Data Harvests* | Pages 13 - 20

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8-1-2019

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Dahl, M., & Selley, Z. (2019). DPLA in the Pacific Northwest: The Orbis Cascade Alliance Case. *OLA Quarterly*, 24(4), 13-20.  
<https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1959>

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*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

# DPLA in the Pacific Northwest:

## The Orbis Cascade Alliance Case

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*The Orbis Cascade Alliance's journey to becoming a Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Service Hub illustrates some important challenges and opportunities in the world of digital cultural heritage work. Released in 2013, DPLA brings together cultural heritage content on a national digital platform. Since 2014 the Alliance has moved towards DPLA membership as part of a broader strategy to aggregate its members' digital cultural heritage collections and make them more discoverable. Competing strategies for making content discoverable, limited financial resources, and differences in missions between institutions have been obstacles as the Alliance has worked towards aggregated collections and DPLA membership. The DPLA has experienced recent growing pains as evidenced by a staff downsizing in November 2018 and the closing of a major Service Hub shortly thereafter. Though the Alliance membership has made extensive progress in metadata standardization and aggregation in preparation for a DPLA ingest, as of June 2019, Alliance DPLA activity is on hold until a new Program Manager for Unique and Local Content comes on board.*



The Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) came about at a time when it was clear that the modern Internet had coalesced around a number of major web players. By 2010, Google firmly controlled search, Amazon dwarfed competitors in online retail, and Facebook was well on its way to leading in social media. Any sense of decentralization there may have been in the early web seemed diminished. Online activity was, as is the case today, typically initiated from one of a few destinations controlled by big Internet players.

Meanwhile, libraries across the United States had been busy digitizing historical photos, manuscripts, and other digital objects throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, mounting them online on their own websites for their patrons and audiences beyond to access. The relationship between these locally controlled collections and Google was a symbiotic one, in that the search engine could drive traffic across the globe to these objects in a way that local library website search functions could not.

DPLA was conceived around the realization that people started their Internet journeys at central places like Google and the conviction that libraries and other cultural institutions needed to have one of these destinations to call their own. By 2010, European national libraries were developing their own centralized digital libraries and the European Union had recently launched the Europeana meta-aggregator and digital platform. In 2010, a group of library and foundation leaders gathered at Harvard University conceived of DPLA as “an open, distributed network of comprehensive online resources that would draw on the nation’s living heritage from libraries, universities, archives, and museums in order to educate, inform, and empower everyone in the current and future generations.” (Darnton, 2013).

DPLA launched to the world in 2013 as a platform for discovering digital cultural heritage content at the nation’s libraries and museums. DPLA is based on a distributed model in which Hubs push content to the central DPLA index; Content Hubs link institutions with a large enough content base to justify their own pipeline to DPLA and Service Hubs aggregate content from multiple smaller institutions in a geographic area. As of September 2018, DPLA provided access to over 30 million digital records from 28 direct member hubs, representing over 1300 institutions (DPLA, 2017).

The Orbis Cascade Alliance is a library consortium of 38 colleges and universities in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Shortly before DPLA came into existence, the Alliance’s Northwest Digital Archive program (NWDA) had been developing a tool to facilitate discovery of digitized cultural heritage content. Funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant from 2011–2013, the Demonstration Project, Cross-Search and Context Utility (XCU), later renamed Archive Engine West (AEW), brought together digital objects (scanned photographs, manuscripts, etc.) with the detailed metadata and context provided by archival finding aids. During the course of the AEW project, DPLA emerged as a alternative option to aggregate digitized cultural heritage content.

Notwithstanding favorable reviews of the AEW demonstration site, in March 2014 the Alliance Council of library directors decided to wind down the AEW project. With an eye toward possible DPLA participation, the Alliance Content Creation and Dissemination Team (CCD) did, however, move forward on an AEW-related initiative to establish digital content metadata standards, which would be useful in the case of Alliance DPLA participation (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2014).

As DPLA got up and running in 2013, DPLA leadership sought to sign on Service Hubs that would cover the entirety of the United States. In 2013, the Pacific Northwest was a blank area on DPLA’s map (though the University of Washington was an early Content



Hub). The question of what organization(s) could potentially fulfill the Service Hub role in the Pacific Northwest quickly became the subject for discussion in the Northwest library and archival community.

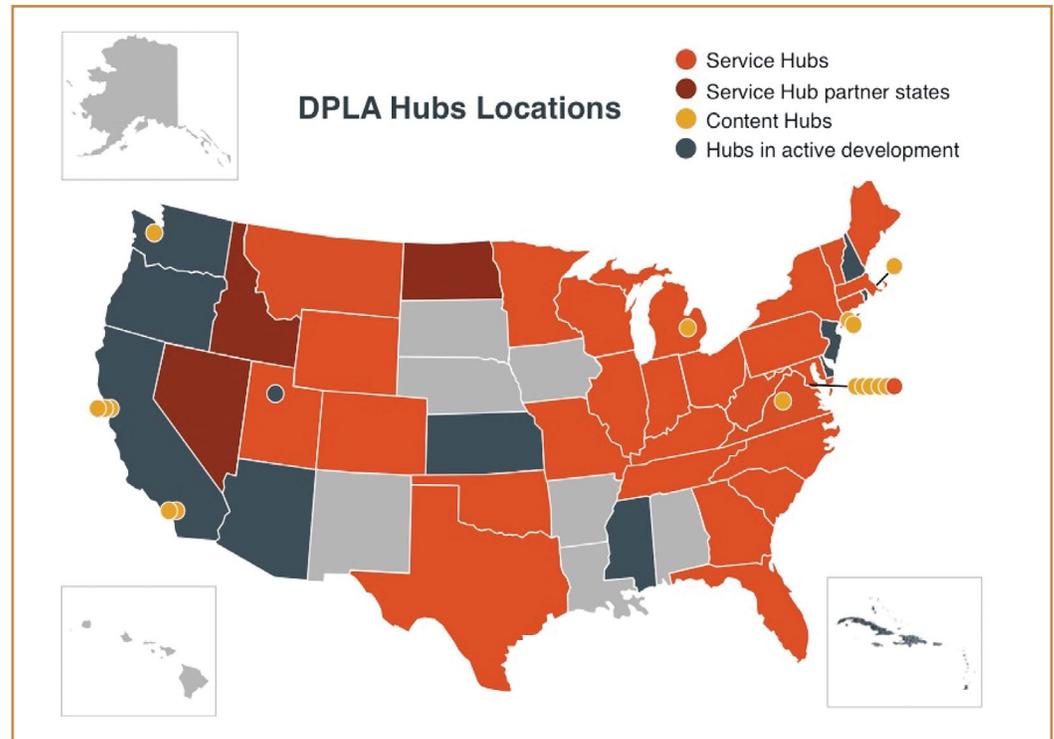


Fig. 1. Digital Public Library of America: Our Hubs. (2019)

In the Summer of 2014, DPLA, Oregon State University, and the University of Oregon sponsored a “metadatathon” to help organizations understand and better prepare their metadata for eventual inclusion in the DPLA. DPLA inclusion depended on standardization in the following fields: rights statement, date, creator, and language. At this time many institutions within the Alliance had records with inconsistent or missing data in these and other fields and to further complicate things, these issues were present in multiple record types including MARC, Dublin Core, and MODS (Content Space DPLA: Orbis Cascade Alliance Dashboard, n.d.).

In Spring of 2015, the Washington and Oregon State Libraries hosted the Northwest Digital Collections Summit in Salem, Oregon. Representatives from public and academic libraries as well as historical societies attended the event. Finding a collective way forward for Pacific Northwest DPLA participation was an underlying theme of the event. The recommendations that emerged from the Summit included: shared digital content metadata standards, collaborative projects in Washington and Oregon that would lead to eventual DPLA participation, and support for the Alliance CCD program and its aspirations for eventual DPLA participation (Plumer, 2015).



DPLA was a perennial topic at Alliance Board and Council Meetings from November 2014 through March 2016. Representatives from the CCD repeatedly advanced the case that an Alliance DPLA Service Hub would hold benefits for all Alliance member institutions. In a presentation to the Alliance Board of Directors in June 2015, Trevor Bond, chair of the CCD, highlighted the platform's ability to bring together digital objects on a common topic. He used the case of a student or scholar researching Japanese internment camps during World War II as an example, specifically the instance of the Heart Mountain Relocation Center. There are images and texts pertaining to the Center scattered across a number of digital repositories in the United States. DPLA held the potential of pulling them together for the convenience of the researcher, especially once Pacific Northwest content was part of DPLA's index. Bond also emphasized the platform's strengths in providing clear rights statements, better subject descriptions, and support for advanced digital humanities inquiry (Bond & Allison-Bunnell, 2015).

These arguments did not immediately convince Alliance Council members to move on DPLA. There was skepticism regarding DPLA's benefit to institutions without significant digital collections content. Cost and sustainability were also concerns given that DPLA was heavily funded with time-limited grants. The Alliance had joined the Western Regional Storage Trust a few years before only to pull out because of increasing membership costs once initial grant funding ceased ("Shared Content Program Update," 2015). There was also discussion about whether the DPLA effort should be an "opt-in" program in which only some Alliance member institutions would participate or an "all-in" program in which all Alliance member institutions would participate and bear costs. Because the DPLA Hub model was conceived so that Hubs would bring content into DPLA from a variety of libraries and museums in a given region, some Alliance Council members were concerned that an Alliance DPLA Hub would commit the Alliance to providing DPLA services to non-Alliance libraries and that this would stretch the Alliance's organizational capacity.

The Alliance Council adopted a proposal entitled "Aggregate Alliance Digital Content" at its March 2016 meeting. The proposal situated DPLA membership in the wider project of aggregating Alliance digital collections content. It called for the adaptation of the previously developed AEW digital object harvester to pull together remediated Alliance digital object metadata. The proposal included application for Oregon Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant funding to support the preparation of the 50,000 digital objects that DPLA required for initial ingest (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2016). Furthermore, the proposal indicated the intention of developing a "pipeline" of digital collections metadata into Primo, the Alliance's discovery tool. The proposal was "all-in" rather than "opt-in" and skirted the question of service to non-Alliance institutions by setting the expectation for "future consideration of service to non-members with a sustainable business plan" (Orbis Cascade Alliance, 2016, p. 2).

In June 2016, the Alliance announced the award of the LSTA grant, which focused on preparing Alliance metadata for the DPLA as well as creating openly accessible documentation and training modules on metadata creation and cleanup that would be available to institutions working with digital objects beyond the Alliance ("Alliance Receives Oregon LSTA Grant," 2016). From 2016–2017, the Alliance, in collaboration with the Oregon State Library and Washington State Library, implemented the grant project.



The question of how to pipeline digital content from individual repositories to DPLA was of foremost importance and integral to the metadata creation and cleanup initiative. In collaboration with DPLA staff, consultant Ethan Gruber adapted and expanded the AEW project metadata harvester. Consultant Anneliese Dehner further improved its functionality and interface design (“Alliance Harvester Beta Testing Opens,” 2017). The harvester allows Alliance members who have digital collections described in Dublin Core the ability to contribute those collections for aggregation in DPLA or other aggregated discovery tools.

Following the extensive efforts in metadata creation and cleanup directed by the CCD’s Digital Collections working group, on May 1, 2017, the new harvester was released and began to pull submitted OAI sets of digital objects for DPLA ingest. Initial contributions included content from 16 Alliance institutions with a total ingest of over 67,000 digital objects (“Alliance Harvester Contributions July 2017,” 2017), exceeding the primary goal of 50,000 items. These objects were harvested from Digital Asset Management Systems, Institutional Repositories, and content management systems in use by Alliance members that including ContentDM, Digital Commons, Hydra, DSpace, Omeka, and other homegrown systems (“Content Space DPLA: Orbis Cascade Alliance Dashboard,” n.d.).

During the Alliance’s LSTA grant, the CCD’s Digital Collections Working Group and Dublin Core Best Practices Standing Group did a remarkable amount of work to ensure this success. This included creating documentation and holding 20 web-based workshops and forums focused on metadata preparation and best practices (“LSTA Grant 2016-2017: What We Accomplished!,” 2018). In July 2017, the Alliance received a second grant from Oregon State Library to support continued digital collections metadata remediation. Meanwhile, Alliance staff worked to complete the DPLA Hub application process. In early 2018 the DPLA accepted the Alliance Service Hub application, and the first test data ingest occurred that spring. By late 2018 the Alliance harvester included over 120,000 digital objects from 24 member institutions with hopes of an accepted DPLA ingest and a live date by early 2019 (Orbis Cascade Harvester, n.d.).

In November 2018, DPLA’s executive director announced a strategic shift that involved the layoff of six staff members. The official announcements about the change assured the public that DPLA was still committed to cultural heritage content aggregation and the hub network that makes that function possible (DPLA Update Q&A, 2018). The abrupt downsizing, however, was a sobering moment for the project. Shortly following the DPLA announcement, in January 2019, the Metropolitan New York Library Council, which runs New York State’s DPLA Service Hub announced that it was shutting down the Hub due to a lack of a stable revenue source. Since 2013 the Hub has facilitated the addition of 443,200 records from about 200 organizations in the state of New York (METRO Library Council, 2019). The difficulty of sustaining a Service Hub in a state with a relatively dense and well-funded grouping of educational and cultural organizations was another major sign of stress on DPLA’s system for aggregating cultural heritage content.

Following DPLA’s shift in strategy in November 2018 and in the midst of its own leadership and staffing transitions, the Alliance Board of Directors decided in December 2018 to put DPLA activities on hold. The Alliance expects to restart work as a DPLA Service Hub once a new Program Manager for Unique and Local Content is in place sometime in the latter half of 2019.



When asked about the state of the Alliance DPLA effort in January 2019, the interim Alliance executive director Maija Anderson recalled that the Alliance has struggled with the challenge of aggregating digital collections in a few instances in the past including the aforementioned Archives Engine West project and a previous project to launch a shared institutional repository. Regardless of the fate of DPLA, Anderson said she believes the ultimate goal is to improve the discoverability of digital collections, and aggregation is one means to that end.

DPLA's challenges reflect some of the broader hurdles facing nonprofit organizations that provide services on top of other nonprofits. These organizations include more established ones such as the global OCLC cooperative and regional consortia like the Orbis Cascade Alliance as well as newer, start-up type organizations like DPLA, the Western Regional Storage Trust, the Digital Preservation Network, and publishers dedicated to open access such as the Public Library of Science (PLOS) and Lever Press. These organizations use scale to provide twenty-first-century information services whose impact is not constrained by the borders of a single institution.

While the beneficial effects of these organizations may be widely diffused in the form of long term preservation of knowledge and dissemination of scholarly or cultural content, their revenue models often demand that the cost of their operation be borne by membership fees from libraries. Sometimes libraries just do not see a high enough local return on investment to justify paying those fees. Though DPLA does not have high membership fees for Service Hubs, the New York State case demonstrates that operating the Hubs themselves is a significant cost. To be sustainable going forward, DPLA and its Service Hubs will need to develop structures that control costs and provide tangible value to participants.

The screenshot shows the DPLA website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and the DPLA logo. Below the search bar, the 'Primary Source Sets' section is highlighted. It includes a description: 'Primary source collections exploring topics in history, literature, and culture developed by educators — complete with teaching guides for class use.' Below this, there are filter options for 'Subject' (US History), 'Time Period' (All Time Periods), and 'Sort by' (Recently Added). The main content area displays six source set cards, each with an image and a title:

- California Gold Rush**: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861), US History, Migration
- Treaty of Versailles and the End of World War I**: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930), US History, World History, Law and Government
- Cotton Gin and the Expansion of Slavery**: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s), Expansion and Reform (1801-1861), US History, Science and Technology, African Americans
- Victorian Era**: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861), The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900), US History, World History, Arts
- Immigration through Angel Island**: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930), US History, Asian Americans, Migration
- Beginnings of the American Red Cross**: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900), The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930), US History, Women

Fig. 2. Digital Public Library of America: Primary Source Sets. (2019).



Regardless of the financial and organizational challenges of running DPLA, the project has been an important experiment in the ways that libraries can add value to the unique content that they provide in the digital environment. The process of metadata standardization needed for data ingest has pushed organizations to make their metadata consistent, making images and manuscripts easier to parse and sort by researchers and other information seekers.

DPLA's aggregated platform is a web scale place to search and find open content, bringing together related material that would otherwise be siloed in separate digital libraries. Its ability for community members to create primary source sets and exhibitions with manuscripts, letters, maps, and images allows scholars and educators to discover content through context. There are many examples of digital library projects that make creative use of design and technology to educate and inform. DPLA is important because it has created a platform to do this at a national scale with a national content base. When it eventually goes live, the Pacific Northwest centered content provided to DPLA by the Alliance should bolster the coverage of DPLA overall and make DPLA more useful for students and scholars in Pacific Northwest-situated Alliance member institutions and beyond. 

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