NCLIS News Release

U. S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science

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National Commission Applauds Digitized Libraries Program
NCLIS Chairman Praises Move to Increased Access

Washington, DC USA, January 5, 2005—The United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) today offered congratulations to Google and to the five major research libraries that have agreed to cooperate with Google in digitizing millions of books, as announced on December 14, 2004. While the Commission, as a Federal agency, cannot endorse any specific commercial activity, Commission members were quick to declare their support for the concept and to applaud the libraries at Harvard and Stanford Universities, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and the University of Oxford, as well as the New York Public Library.

"This is a milestone event in the history of reading, of research, and of libraries," said NCLIS Chairman Beth Fitzsimmons, of Ann Arbor, Michigan. "Seldom has there been an occasion that so clearly brings together the mutual interests of readers, researchers, and library managers. In fact, for most of us the very idea is almost overpowering, and we can't even begin to comprehend the power of this effort. This first step, the digitization of a combined collection of materials that numbers millions of volumes, is going to change the way we do research, to say nothing of the way we use libraries. Now we can find the book and simply read it or refer to it or even download it—or sections of it—directly from the Internet. And if the book is still in copyright, we can use the search to 'test' a citation or a reference before we go to the library or to the bookstore to purchase the book. Now, people can access the contents of the world's great libraries from their own computers. By enabling them to do so, the very idea of the library as the place to go for information is reinforced."

John Wilkin, Associate University Librarian for Information Technology and Technical and Access Services, headed up the project at the University of Michigan, and he links this effort to the basic role of libraries: "The most important thing libraries can do," Wilkin said, "is to connect people with information."

With digitized collections, that connection can now be made. Vast storehouses of information can be opened up, and information can become available to all people,

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available to them when they need it. At the same time, as more digitized libraries go online, the search for information will be made progressively easier for all people.

“This is that ‘information future’ we have been waiting for,” said Dr. Fitzsimmons, “and if we are not all the way there yet, we are certainly getting closer. And while it will be some time before this project is complete, there’s no question but that people will be asking for more and more digitized information while the project moves forward.”

“It’s all part of making libraries more relevant in the lives of American citizens,” Dr. Fitzsimmons continued. “As it happens, that is exactly what the Commission wants to do, so digitization projects like this one are very important to NCLIS. I can’t think of a better way to make libraries more relevant, and it appears to be the classic ‘win-win’ situation for all parties. Obviously, the library’s users benefit most, now that they can have access to a vast collection of materials. At the same time, though, digitized collections provide an unparalleled public relations opportunity for all libraries. Not only does the reader get to read the materials online, if the book is not available online for one reason or another, the reference to it will bring the user to the library, with the specific citation in hand.”

Fitzsimmons also envisions potential benefits for library managers and financially strapped funding authorities: “Aside from offering service levels that previously were simply unavailable, library managers will find tremendous cost savings in the digitization of information. When the private sector underwrites the costs of digitization (which can be as much as several hundred million dollars for some of the large research libraries), the affected libraries—many publicly supported—are not required to absorb those costs. Other cost savings are realized in reduced storage costs for collections, and in the preservation of the books themselves, since as books are accessed online, the original books are used less, resulting over time in their lasting longer.”

“It is an idea whose time has come,” concluded Dr. Fitzsimmons. “The members of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science are pleased to recognize this important step forward in the advancement of access to information.”

About NCLIS

The United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) is a permanent, independent agency of the Federal government charged by Public Law 91-345 to advise the President and Congress on national and international library and information policies, to appraise and assess the adequacies and deficiencies of library and information resources and services, and to develop overall plans for meeting national library and information needs.

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