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The Alabama Digital Preservation Network (ADPNet)

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The Alabama Digital Preservation Network (ADPNet) is a geographically distributed digital preservation network for the state of Alabama — the first working statewide Private LOCKSS Network (PLN) in the United States. Inspired by Auburn University’s experience with another LOCKSS-based initiative, the MetaArchive Cooperative, ADPNet was designed from the outset to be a low-cost, low-maintenance digital preservation solution for libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions in the state. It was also designed to be a model for other states and consortia that are interested in exploring a distributed digital preservation solution.

Work on ADPNet began in late 2006 under a two-year National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). That grant ended in September 2008, and ADPNet is now a self-sustaining, member-managed program operating under the umbrella of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL), a department of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education in Montgomery. ADPNet currently has seven member institutions: the Alabama Department of Archives & History (ADAH), Auburn University in Auburn, Spring Hill College, Troy University, the University of Alabama, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and the University of North Alabama. The network hopes to recruit new member institutions this year.

Why Alabama?

Alabama is an attractive candidate for a geographically distributed digital preservation network for several reasons. The first is the frequency of natural disasters, especially on and around Alabama’s Gulf coast. In the past ten years, Alabama has been hit by at least four major hurricanes and many more tropical storms. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the coastal communities of Bayou la Batre and Coden and flooded downtown Mobile. The coastal communities are not the only parts of the state that have suffered from natural disasters, however. The interior of the state is vulnerable to tornadoes. In March 2007 a tornado swept through Enterprise, Alabama, destroying a high school and causing ten deaths. The second factor is Alabama’s financial situation. Alabama is a relatively poor state, ranking 44th out of 50 in per capita real GDP in 2007. There isn’t a lot of money to throw around, which means that technical solutions have to be simple, robust, and above all inexpensive to implement and maintain. Finally, Alabama is home to a rich and growing array of digital collections at libraries, archives, and museums. Many of these collections can be found in AlabamaMosaic, a statewide repository of digital materials on all aspects of Alabama’s history, geography, and cultures. AlabamaMosaic currently contains over 20,000 digital objects from fifteen institutions around the state, and the number continues to grow. This combination of circumstances — extreme weather, weak state financial resources, and rich digital collections — made Alabama an ideal test-case for a simple, inexpensive, but effective digital-preservation solution like LOCKSS.

Although ADPNet was originally inspired by and has some similarities with the MetaArchive Cooperative, there are important differences between the two initiatives. First and most importantly, the Alabama network is a single-state solution. This has simplified governance and allowed the network to be absorbed into an existing legal and administrative entity, one with a bylaw and a committee structure already in place. Second, the Alabama network was designed to be a practical solution to a pressing statewide problem, not a research-and-development project. In order to attract participants, ADPNet had to be simple, robust, and above all inexpensive. This, and the fact that only one or two institutions in Alabama had had any prior experience with LOCKSS, meant that the members opted for the simplest, least expensive hardware and software solutions available, in the hope that these would be easier to deploy and manage and more attractive to other institutions in the state. (It should be pointed out, however, that although ADPNet’s focus is not research and development, it has contributed at least one important addition to the LOCKSS toolbox: a generic LOCKSS plugin for harvesting CONTENTdm collections). Finally, unlike the MetaArchive, ADPNet is not a fee-based service organization. Rather, the preservation network is intended to complement AlabamaMosaic, another statewide initiative that has been kept going in-kind contributions from its participating institutions. In other words, ADPNet was designed to run on relatively small expenditures and sweat equity, not on recurring infusions of grant money or annual membership fees. To some degree these differences reflect Alabama’s expense-averse institutional culture. They also reflect a preference for self-sufficiency and informality where administrative arrangements are concerned.

Why LOCKSS?

LOCKSS was originally designed to harvest and archive e-journals. The MetaArchive project demonstrated that LOCKSS technology could also be used to harvest, archive, and preserve locally-created digital content. Our experience with MetaArchive showed us that LOCKSS was simple, robust, and easy to maintain. It also ran on inexpensive hardware — a crucial consideration in Alabama. And we were impressed with the level of technical support provided by the LOCKSS staff. In a series of conversations in late 2005, Auburn and six other Alabama institutions agreed to pool resources to build a LOCKSS-based preservation network for the state if external start-up funding could be obtained. NAAL Director Sue Medina and I drafted and submitted a funding proposal to the IMLS in January 2006. The proposal was funded in September 2006; it provided support for equipment and travel to the seven participating institutions through September 2008. Crucially, it also covered those institutions’ annual membership fees in the LOCKSS Alliance for the same period. For their part, the institutions split the equipment costs with IMLS and contributed staff time and other in-house resources to the project.

Accomplishments

At its inception, ADPNet identified four specific tasks. The first was to highlight the importance of preserving digital content among libraries, academic institutions, state agencies, and other cultural heritage institutions in Alabama. The second, to demonstrate the feasibility of state-based, low-cost models for digital preservation by creating a working example of such a network in Alabama. Third, to create an administrative structure to manage the network and assure its long-term sustainability. And fourth, to demonstrate that the network can support digital content from different types of institutions, from public libraries and small colleges to large state agencies.

The network has achieved or is in the process of achieving all four tasks. On the technical side, ADPNet has been up and running since 2007. The network currently consists of seven LOCKSS nodes, each with a terabyte and a half of storage capacity. ADPNet member institutions have contributed content to the network, and almost 40 digital collections (“archival units,” in LOCKSS-speak) have been harvested to date. They contain image, text, audio, and video files and include the 1867 Alabama voter registration volumes at AABH; historical photographs from the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service collection at Auburn University; images of book bindings published in the Confederate States of America at the University of Alabama; and audio files of oral history interviews with civic leaders in Birmingham at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (for a partial list of the member institutions and digitally harvested content, see “Collections” at http://adpn.org/). More digital content is on the way.

On the administrative side, the network drafted a governance policy that was adopted by NAAL at its annual business meeting in October 2008 (the policy is available on the ADPNet Website, under “Resources”). ADPNet has a lightweight governance structure consisting of two committees: the Steering Committee and the Technical Policy Committee. Every participating institution has the right to appoint a member to the Steering Committee, which in turn solicits nominations for the Technical Committee.  

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Policy Committee. Together, the two committees are responsible for the day-to-day management of ADPNet. In keeping with the network’s guiding principles, the requirements for membership are as simple and affordable as we could make them. Participating institutions must agree to install and run a LOCKSS server in the network; contribute content to the network; and join the LOCKSS Alliance for an annual fee. There is no ADPNet membership fee.

Surveys have shown that ADPNet has succeeded in raising awareness of the importance of digital preservation among Alabama libraries, archives, and state agencies. The task now is to translate this increased awareness into participation in ADPNet.

Going Forward

ADPNet’s main mission is to build and sustain a robust, inexpensive distributed digital preservation network for Alabama, but it also hopes to serve as a model for similar networks in other states and other countries who may think they can’t afford to preserve their local digital heritage. Private LOCKSS Networks offer communities a low-cost, highly customizable alternative to more expensive digital preservation solutions. If ADPNet had a motto, it might be “keep it simple and keep it cheap.” This basic approach appears to be working well for Alabama. It remains to be seen whether it will work for other states and consortia, but the signs so far are encouraging.

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You Gotta Go to School for “This?” — A Rave Review

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Oh, for the days when the word “rave” merely referred to speaking or writing enthusiastically (or incoherently) about something. Yet, linguistic evolution marches on. The term “rave” now describes a wild dance party. Certainly this is not news to those among you (you know who you are) who are connoisseurs of modern party culture. But, the thought of such an event occurring in a library (one with real books in it) sends the mind reeling, especially if one’s mind tends toward reeling as mine does. A rave in an academic library? Who knew?

I was introduced to this rave library thing when our staff recently received an urgent all points bulletin of a student rave which was to occur at 11 pm in the green just outside the library. Learning that this would involve hundreds, if not thousands, of (potentially riot prone) students who would actually move into the library for the main event, I realized I had served my public dutifully for the previous eight hours. I thus selflessly considered that my presence would be unnecessary.

So, though I was not physically present during the event, by piecing together eyewitness accounts, police reports, pieces of shredded textbooks, and the extensive YouTube record of the event, I was able to conclude that my decision to leave on time after work was a wise one. Even so, it was a literally earthshaking and exciting event for the library.

Apparently it is a common thing these days for students to blow off steam during final exams. Why one would find it necessary to “blow off steam” during this time is beyond me, since during my student days I found exam times conducive to quiet reflection and relaxation. Of course, besides the fact that I may not be indicative of the norm, my memory is failing a bit, and I sometimes lie outright for dramatic effect especially when it involves my youth. In any case, this library rave thing is a growing phenomenon on campuses in which students are given access to turn the university library into a rocking, screaming, pounding, music thumping rave arena. Students fill the open spaces within the library and dance and scream (with total disregard for the unynchronized noise) for ten minutes without pause.

For those used to the library as a place of study and sedate information exchange, it is surreal to see the main floor packed with a seething mass of screaming, dancing, exhilarated students. I think the sight of students crowd surfing across the rotunda amid a blizzard of shredded textbooks (being precipitated from the second and third floors) was particularly memorable and striking. For those ancient ones among us who have never experienced such a thing (or don’t remember it) the rave has all the noise, chaos, and mayhem of a street riot, but with much less tear gas and much happier people. It is also over as quickly as it begins, which tends to calm the police/security who just stand to the side and grin a lot.

Across the country there are also so-called “silent raves” in which everyone listens to music on their iPods. It’s sort of a synchronized, chaotic, silent dance thing. This removes the continued on page 49

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