Review: Digital Library of the Caribbean

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Project
Digital Library of the Caribbean

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Taylor held roles as Operations Host Lead (2022-2023), Digital Scholarship Director (2015-2023), and dLOC Technical Director (2008-2015) while at the University of Florida.

Project URL
www.dLOC.com

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Project Overview

Laurie Taylor

Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is a collaborative digital library, built by partner institutions, to: 1) make accessible and preserve materials from, and about, the Caribbean; and, 2) to enable Caribbean library work and connected fields and communities. dLOC was intended to be a cornerstone and an enabling infrastructure that is socio-technical (people, policies, communities, technologies). dLOC seeks to support various publics, communities, scholars, teachers, and students worldwide, to share from, about, and with the Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora. With over 70 partners, more than 3.6 million pages of historical and current materials of all types (maps, letters, books, audio and video files, artworks, newspapers, etc.), as well as over 2 million views each month, dLOC is sufficiently stable and mature to serve as a shared house for collecting materials, connecting partners, amplifying other projects and work, and growing capacity and community.

Partners created dLOC in 2004 to retain all rights to their materials, continue to hold and maintain their materials (a post-custodial approach), and participate in shared governance. In forming dLOC, partners identified core humanistic needs, including the need for the library to be open access and free, to meet goals for access and preservation as a foundation for future work. Partners also identified the need to utilize appropriate technologies of the least possible complexity to function, a goal aligned with what we now describe as minimal computing.

Partners defined specific needs (e.g., support for all material types, multiple languages, tools for searching and browsing, tools for digitization and digital curation) as well as the processes for meeting these needs through shared governance and local control. For technologies, dLOC’s requirements resulted in partners developing
the SobekCM Open Source software. Now dated and with a limited interface, new development is underway for the interface and underlying a micro-service based system. In all technologies and processes, the goals remain to support dLOC as a safe repository that empowers others. This includes knowledge exchange and mutual support among partners for writing grants for specific projects, writing grant support letters for others, facilitating conversations and technical training, contextualizing collections as educational or scholarly resources, and other collaborations.

dLOC has enabled many new grants simply by fostering shared work that sustains communication among partners. Funding opportunities from the British Library Endangered Archives Programme, and National Endowment for the Humanities, among others, have positioned dLOC partners as grant writers and collaborators to further community-identified needs, including digital humanities training and data intensive research. By providing access to materials, dLOC supports scholars and teachers in work about and with the Caribbean.

Judith Rogers, then-Director of the University of the Virgin Islands Libraries, envisioned and led dLOC’s creation. She explicitly planned dLOC as a vehicle for training within the Caribbean, to develop local workforces and to strengthen the community of practice, and to do so while enabling greater worldwide access to materials from and about the Caribbean. Rogers collaborated with others in the Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) to grow the vision. dLOC’s team is large and complex, like an extended family network. The team continues to evolve with new members on the Executive and Scholarly Advisory Boards, and specific people in different project roles, such as the dLOC Director, formerly Brooke Wooldridge and now Miguel Asencio, and dLOC’s first copyright liaison, Perry Collins. Because dLOC is a multifaceted infrastructure for supporting projects and growing capacity, there are many separate projects with project team members and many collaborators at each partner institution. For example, two recent dLOC team members have been CLIR Postdoctoral Fellows (Crystal Felima and Hadassah St. Hubert). Additionally, ACURIL remains part of dLOC’s core community.

Project Review

DaNia Childress

Created in 2004, the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) is a digital archive comprised of the Caribbean-focused repositories of its member institutions. Since its inception, led by Judith Rogers (then Director of the University of the Virgin Islands Libraries) and eight founding entities, dLOC has grown to include over seventy institutions, with one of the most recent members being Biblioteca Nacional Ernesto J. Castillero R. Panamá in 2022. dLOC uses standard technologies and practices including Python, APIs, ElasticSearch, ReactJS, PostgreSQL, and other technologies common to digital library systems.
Members retain ownership of their collections hosted on dLOC, and they can take advantage of a personalized host page highlighting their collections within the larger dLOC library. For example, one of the partners, the University of Central Florida Libraries, gives an interactive view of its collections by linking archived exhibits. Digitized materials include maps, letters, books, newspapers, and finding aids. For member institutions, exposing their collections on dLOC connects their materials with related information for further investigation.

A section dedicated to the Caribbean Newspapers demonstrates one of dLOC's core tenets of collaboration and how dLOC supports training and the growth of Caribbean cultural heritage. The Mellon Foundation, for example, funded the Caribbean Newspapers as part of their "Data: Part to Whole" initiative, which encouraged the digitization and utilization of newspapers within the archive. The downloaded works provide the viewer access to crucial material that may not have come up in a regular search. Currently, there are 268,972 newspapers from the hosting organizations. Staff is in the process of creating a "pilot thematic tool kit focused on hurricanes and tropical cyclones." In producing the tool kit, one of the objectives is to focus on the resilience of the Caribbean peoples’ response across different eras and locations, including Belize, Cuba, and Haiti. The collection can be searched in English, French, and Spanish.

To make its collections more accessible and impactful, dLOC provides workshops such as "Metadata Creation for dLOC" and "Introduction to Web Archiving" that benefit both members and those new to the field. Funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, "Migration, Mobility, Sustainability: Caribbean Studies" was an institutional course that guides researchers interested in merging Caribbean Studies and digital humanities. Applicants did not have to be associated with a member organization. For those needing help on where to begin, tools and topics provide an introductory overview of getting started, including information on grants, oral histories, mapping, and timelines. Once viewing the tools section, the project and courses give insight into putting the tools into action. One project, My Nola, My Story (reviewed in this journal’s first issue), incorporates StoryMaps, revealing where Caribbean migrants settled in New Orleans, along with an oral history project that layers oral histories over images to reveal more about the location. A related projects feature shows connections between projects with similar themes or tools.

dLOC’s approach to archival work is a collaborative process with its partners. The success of its outcome shows itself in the reach of the member institutions. There is no hierarchy apparent in members, allowing for autonomy in the site pages and collaboration in working on the metadata for the researcher to have further access to a topic. Its value and reach are reflected in the over 4 million people who have visited the site.

Moving forward, dLOC can work to expand its reach to interested scholars through outreach with organizations that have a similar interest in the Caribbean, including the Museum Association of the Caribbean. Panel discussions and workshops held at the conference would guide navigating the repositories and tools dLOC offers. In working with the members, a feature section on the home page would be helpful to introduce new repositories and highlight collections. The feature section should be updated quarterly to
showcase the different partners. In the feature section, the organizations can prepare articles spotlighting the material or its use in a research project.