

“Free to All” Made Possible by an Academic/Public Library Collaboration

by **Barbara G. Preece** (Executive Director, Boston Library Consortium, Inc., 700 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02117; Phone: 617-262-6244) <bprece@blc.org>



The **Boston Library Consortium** is an academic and research library consortium that bridges successfully the gap between academic and public libraries in both directions — since its very beginnings in 1970 the resources of the **Boston Public Library** have been available to the consortium’s constituency throughout New England.

And now, with its **Open Content Alliance (OCA)** project — it will be working in the other direction — as the first large library consortium to announce a self-funded partnership with a major digitalizing project, the **OCA**, the **Boston Library Consortium** is providing materials with none of the restrictions that apply to materials scanned by **Google** or **Microsoft**.

Boston Library Consortium

The **Boston Library Consortium, Inc. (BLC)** is an association of 19 academic and research libraries located throughout New England. Founded in 1970 at the behest of the graduate school deans, the **Consortium** is dedicated to sharing human and information resources to advance the research and learning of its constituency. The **Consortium** supports resource sharing and enhanced user services through programs in cooperative collecting, access to electronic resources and physical collections, and expedited interlibrary loan and document delivery. This year the **Consortium** entered a new partnership with the **Internet Archive (IA)** to digitize materials in its collections. Among the leaders of this project is the esteemed **Boston Public Library**, which quickly identified collections for the projects and also provided space to house the **Northeast Regional Scanning Center**.

Boston Public Library

Founded in 1848, the **Boston Public Library (BPL)** was the first large free municipal library in the United States. The present Copley Square location has been home to the library since 1895, when architect **Charles Follen McKim** completed his “palace for the people.” In 1972 the library expanded its Copley Square location with the opening of an addition designed by **Philip Johnson**. Today, the **McKim** building houses the **BPL’s** vast research collection and the **Johnson Building** holds the circulating collection of the general library and serves as headquarters for the **Boston Public Library’s** 26 branch libraries. Home to the library of **John Quincy Adams**, second president of the United States, the **BPL** is the only public library in the country that also serves as a **Presidential Library**.

The **BPL**, one of the first members of the **Consortium**, also serves as home to the

BLC offices, and provides the **Consortium’s** constituency through a variety of services including resource sharing, cooperative collection development and a consortium card program that allows students/faculty/staff from the member libraries to use the vast resources of the **BPL**.

BLC and BPL join OCA:

Most recently, the **Consortium** including the **Boston Public Library** joined together to work with the **Internet Archive’s Open Content Alliance**. The **Open Content Alliance** (<http://www.opencontentalliance.org/>) represents the collaborative efforts of a group of cultural, technology, nonprofit, and governmental organizations from around the world that will help build a permanent archive of multilingual digitized text and multimedia content. The **Internet Archive** is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that was founded in 1996 to build an Internet library, with the purpose of offering permanent access for researchers, historians, and scholars to historical collections that exist in digital format.

According to **Brewster Kahle**, digital librarian and founder of the **Internet Archive**, “Fortunately many great libraries are weighing the alternatives and choosing to go open instead of putting public domain material under perpetual restrictions.”

The **BLC** and its member libraries, including the **Boston Public Library**, have partnered with the **Open Content Alliance** to build a freely accessible library of digital materials from the 19 member libraries. The **Consortium** will provide high resolution, downloadable, reusable files of public domain materials. The digitization efforts, using scanning technology from the **Internet Archive**, are based in a scanning center housed at the **Boston Public Library**. The **Northeast Digital Scanning Center** was unveiled on September 20, 2007. **BPL** President **Bernard Margolis** said, “The **Boston Public Library** is pleased to host this innovative collaborative effort. It is exciting to see the application of the latest in digital scanning technology of the **Internet Archive** to the enormous task of converting the rich book collections of the **BLC** libraries for easy access by people around the world. We are, in the most basic and important meaning of the word, “enriching” the world. As we open these books we give opportunity for their use

in many new and expanding ways for new and expanding audiences. We are doing what libraries as supposed to do.”

The **Boston Library Consortium’s** project is self-funded. It pays ten cents a page to the **Internet Archive** and receives in return a variety of file formats that are stored by **IA** and available to the library to download. The center will serve as a northeast regional center; currently scanning materials from **BLC** members, including the **John Adams Library** funded by a grant from the **Alfred P. Sloan Foundation**, it is also scanning materials from the **Biodiversity Heritage Library Project** (<http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>). It is anticipated that other libraries in the region will join the scanning project in the near future.

“Free to All”

As inscribed on the outside of the **McKim** building, “free to all” remains a cornerstone of the **Boston Public Library** and through its and the **Consortium’s** efforts with the **OCA**, materials will remain free and available to everyone rather than imposing restrictions on material access through the use of required search engines. According to **Doron Weber**,

“Fortunately many great libraries are weighing the alternatives and choosing to go open instead of putting public domain material under perpetual restrictions.”

Program Director, **Universal Access to Recorded Knowledge**, at the **Alfred P. Sloan Foundation**, “The **Alfred P. Sloan Foundation**, which has supported the **Open Content Alliance** from its inception in 2005, salutes this bold move by the **BLC** and its 19 member libraries to step up to the plate and embrace the great potential of mass digitization in a truly open, non-profit and non-exclusive basis.

Unlike corporate backed efforts by **Google**, **Microsoft**, **Amazon** et al., which all impose different, albeit understandable, levels of restriction to protect their investment, the **BLC** has shown libraries all across the country the right way to take institutional responsibility and manage this historic transition to a universal digital archive that serves the needs of scholars, researchers and the general public without compromise. Bravo for the **BLC** and the **Open Content Alliance!** 🌱