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The Allure of ALAIR: The American Library Association Digital Repository

By Cara Bertram, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The American Library Association (ALA) Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is the official repository of the American Library Association, including its offices, divisions, committees, round tables, and members. In 2013, the ALA Archives started a pilot project to launch a digital repository to manage and preserve born-digital records. This article provides background on the project including an overview of the repository structure and its approach for depositing records.

ALA Archives History

For the past 40 years, the University of Illinois has managed the American Library Association's archives. In the 1970s, the ALA recognized the value of its records as the approaching ALA centennial in 1976 piqued scholarly interest. At that time, the archives of the ALA were housed in a warehouse in Chicago and were not easily accessible. With a need to better access and care for its records, the ALA sought out an institution to house and manage its archives.

University Archivist Maynard Brichford made a case for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Even though the Chicago campus would have been closer to ALA headquarters, Urbana-Champaign's Graduate School of Library Science (now the Graduate School of Information and Library Science) and the University Library made it a more desirable location. In 1973 the first shipment of ALA records arrived at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the American Library Association Archives was established.¹

Project Background

Part of the ALA Archives mission is to collect and preserve records of the ALA that have continuing administrative, legal, or research value, regardless of format. This has created a variety of record types in the ALA Archives holdings amounting to approximately 3,000 cubic feet. Materials include paper documents, scrapbooks, photographs, glass slides, posters, and a wide range of audiovisual materials. However, electronic records present the usual challenges to ALA and the ALA Archives. While the ALA has actively collected electronic records from depositors for the past several years, there has been no easy way for ALA staff and members to deposit them, nor is there a clear understanding of the ALA Archives' abilities to support such materials.

The Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), an ALA division, began exploring options for a commercial service to manage the electronic-born publications of ALCTS and its members, particularly those who did not have access to other institutional repositories. The university approached ALCTS, offering to help develop the digital repository as a more cost-effective option and to build upon the existing partnership between the ALA and the university.

The University of Illinois has since collaborated with ALCTS to develop a digital repository for the ALA as a whole, focusing on a means to preserve publications and other textual documents. ALA provided seed money to launch the project. The funds allowed for the initial setup of the repository, its storage, and the hiring of a digital archives assistant to help configure the site, process digital records, and help create workflow and training documentation.

The repository is called the American Library Association Institutional Repository (ALAIR), and it collects, permanently stores, and provides open access to the publications and born-digital records of the ALA. The repository is an extension of the services already provided by the ALA Archives.

The Development of ALAIR

The ALA Archives worked with DuraSpace to create ALAIR using its DSpace Direct service.² Initial project considerations looked at establishing a locally hosted DSpace repository, based on the University of Illinois's institutional repository (ideals.illinois.edu). Further review of repository options found that the DSpace Direct service would be more efficient in terms of cost and staff hours. DSpace Direct also eliminated the need to hire staff to develop the site and provide ongoing support.

DSpace Direct provides a technical platform, including technical support, updates, site maintenance, and preservation services via DuraCloud. All content is mirrored in two separate Amazon services: S3 and Glacier. These preservation services will allow for the retrieval of records even if they have been deleted from the repository. Currently the repository has assigned it one terabyte of storage space, with ability to add more as needed.

DSpace Direct allows the ALA Archives to customize the colors and logo of the site to better reflect the ALA's

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main website. It provides a simple interface that includes multiple search options to access records. Further customization allowed the ALA to retain its domain name in the address of the repository (alair.ala.org).

ALAIR is organized into individual communities and subcommunities that reflect the structure of the committees, divisions, offices, and round tables as represented on ALA's main page and in ALA itself, rather than using the ALA Archives record series structure. This decision was made so that ALA staff and members who are more familiar with the ALA website could find the repository content more easily. Each community and subcommunity page is customized with a description and logo of each ALA unit to reflect its individuality and mission. ALA members can deposit their records into collections that are nested in each community and subcommunity. These collections must be created by a designated administrative user. This kind of restriction helps prevent duplication of collections within the same community.

Many of the back-end functions of the repository are accessible to ALA Archives staff, who will manage the site in partnership with DSpace Direct. ALAIR uses a Shibboleth authentication that will recognize ALA accounts to allow users to deposit records. Right now only ALA and ALA Archives staff can log into the repository, but the end goal is to make access available to all ALA members so that they can deposit records according to their respective committees, round tables, and sections. Back-end access to ALA staff and members is limited to depositing.

Depositing the Records

The initial concept of the repository was to preserve and provide access to publications. Further discussions with ALCTS and other ALA units made clear the need for a place to deposit other kinds of electronic records, which expanded the collection scope of ALAIR. Of particular interest are records stored on unit websites that had previously not been considered for preservation measures. These records include annual reports, minutes, agendas, presentation slides, photographs, and newsletters. Multimedia records, such as videos and audio recordings, can also be deposited into ALAIR. There are no streaming capabilities, but the records will be preserved, and the content is available for download.

To keep the process simple, the software uses a Dublin Core metadata schema, and the user is only required to enter two fields of metadata: title and date issued. The software will assign provenance information, date deposited, and

an identification number in addition to the two metadata fields. It is recommended that the user also provide creator and format information. The upload process allows for additional descriptive fields, such as abstracts and subject terms. These additional fields can be especially useful for lengthy and complex records as the search capabilities of the repository do not include reading the text of the uploaded item.

ALA staff and members must be sure that they or their units have the rights to records they upload. Deposit requires signing a short license agreement confirming the depositor's right to upload the record. Considering the open access characteristic of the repository, a need to restrict access to certain content such as articles having another institution's copyright is important. For this reason, the option to embargo publications that should not be made immediately accessible is available.

An Ongoing Project

The ALA Archives staff have been actively collecting feedback and answering questions in regard to ALAIR, visiting ALA headquarters to meet with ALA staff. A project update presentation was made at the ALA 2014 midwinter meeting, and meetings were held with members of the executive boards of the ALA divisions to address questions, receive feedback, and distribute a report on ALAIR.³ Additional meetings and discussions are planned for the future to continue to keep the ALA updated and receive its input in the ongoing development of ALAIR.

While the repository is functional, testing the depositing procedures is ongoing. Next steps include the development of clear and simple workflows, procedures, and training materials that will be crucial to the success of ALAIR. A repository for preserving electronic records will do the ALA little good if its staff and members do not know how to access and use it.

Notes

1. Reports on the beginnings of the ALA Archives can be found in Library Advisory Committee Minutes and Correspondence, 1967–1980, Record Series 18/1/1, Box 1, American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
2. For more information on DSpace Direct, visit dspace-direct.org.
3. Both the presentation and report can be accessed at ALAIR, alair.ala.org/handle/11213/111.