

**AmericanSouth.org**  
**A Collaborative Project to Improve Access to Digital Resources**  
**on Southern History and Culture**

**Proposal to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**  
(excerpts)

URL to this document: [metascholar.org/about/americansouth/AmericanSouth.pdf](http://metascholar.org/about/americansouth/AmericanSouth.pdf)

AmericanSouth.org seeks to make crucial material for the understanding of the Southern experience accessible to all citizens through the creation of a collaborative digital collection of Southern history and culture. During the proposed feasibility study, Emory University will set up a central metadata server to function as a portal to selected digital resources at cooperating libraries. Scholars will provide intellectual organization for AmericanSouth.org, designing an interactive structure to promote and facilitate research, teaching, and communication.

The vision for AmericanSouth.org is the result of a yearlong planning effort involving librarians and scholars throughout the region. The site seeks to benefit educational institutions, libraries, scholars, and students (although access to AmericanSouth.org will be available freely to all Internet users), and will be constructed from freely available, open source software components. It will provide useful and reliable resources for research, teaching, curriculum development, and learning at all levels. AmericanSouth.org will significantly improve cultural literacy and enhance library services and scholarly communication by expanding opportunities for sharing information and removing geographic and other barriers to collections.

The goals for AmericanSouth.org are to:

1. *Select* resources appropriate for inclusion within the distributed repository, developing and applying intellectual controls over content and format.
2. *Publish* the digital resources and/or their metadata at library sites participating in the distributed repository.
3. *Harvest and integrate* the distributed metadata into the central server for access.
4. *Interpret and analyze*, online, the meaning and significance of individual items or collections, using tools and methods developed by scholars and other users to provide contextualization.
5. *Discover relevant items* and their locations to be included within the scholarly body of work, utilizing tools and selection criteria developed within the scope of the project.
6. *Facilitate electronic, structured discourse* among scholars and users through AmericanSouth.org, promoting dialogue and the development of new, interdisciplinary communities of interest around specific topics.

The demonstration project proposed here will focus primarily on Goal 3, although some activity will support other goals since all are interdependent.

Scholars, as a primary audience for AmericanSouth.org, will be involved in the organization, design, and testing of the site. Their participation is critical in establishing and maintaining the site's integrity and authority. Scholars contributing to the project will come from both participating (data providing) and non-participating institutions. The team will include members from a variety of disciplines.

## **Justification**

AmericanSouth.org provides an opportunity to apply the OAI protocols in a humanities environment. The OAI has been applied in the sciences, but not in situations where it can support the research and teaching needs of humanities scholars. The organization of content, contextual support, and access options are expected to test the OAI's capabilities for serving a humanities audience. The central benefits of the demonstration phase of AmericanSouth.org, as proposed here, will be the harvesting and integrating of metadata and the provision of

scholarly annotations, all linked to digital objects at various libraries. These benefits will serve libraries, scholars, and students directly and will also provide the foundation for the development of other services in the future.

### Needs and Opportunities for Scholarship

The Internet and World Wide Web provide opportunities for libraries to expand access to the primary resources held in their collections. Access to the originals is often restricted because of the unique nature of these resources, with most being accessible to scholars only onsite at the holding institution. Such special collection materials are rarely, if ever, loaned to other institutions. The production of digital surrogates, however, enables scholars and libraries to overcome geographic and time barriers. Unfortunately, these electronic information resources are sometimes difficult to find and use. Readily available Internet search engines often retrieve either far too many responses to a query, or too few if the search service has behind-the-scenes restrictions that limit responses to predetermined sites. Usually a researcher has to know that a specific collection on a specific subject has been made available in electronic format at a specific institution.

Research can be improved by linking information about electronic collections at one institution to that at others and by providing a means for researchers to retrieve digital surrogates in context. Coordinated access to distributed collections, as proposed through AmericanSouth.org, can benefit scholarship by leading to the development of more comprehensive electronic collections for research and the construction of “virtual” collections of physically separated materials. AmericanSouth.org will provide the means for scholars to search and retrieve both the content and the context of electronic resources held at multiple institutions and to compare these resources conveniently with other related materials. Young scholars (who have earned their degrees in the on-line, electronic age) will be encouraged to make fuller use of primary research materials and to discover new ways of interpreting them. International as well as local scholars will have coordinated access to digital resources on the American South held at multiple institutions.

Although the demonstration project is focused primarily on coordinating access to metadata, AmericanSouth.org will eventually create new opportunities for scholars to research, examine, and annotate materials in the distributed repository in a broader, more interdisciplinary, and more interactive context than ever before. The technology supporting AmericanSouth.org will give scholars virtually simultaneous access to a wide array of manuscripts, journals, letters, photographs, records, recordings, and statistics. This access can alter and improve methods of research by helping scholars see significance, parallels, differences, and commonalities across various collections and fields of study that earlier were difficult, if not impossible, to identify. As a result, AmericanSouth.org can assist in the development of new comparative analyses and expand interdisciplinary studies.

### Needs and Opportunities for Teaching

AmericanSouth.org will provide a readily available source of coordinated access to primary resources important to teaching traditional archival research and methods of assessing and analyzing the content of different media. AmericanSouth.org will be a valuable teaching tool that allows primary materials to be accessible directly in the classroom for professorial instruction and student discussion. Parts of digital collections can become assigned reading and research that can be brought into the classroom for discussion and review, perhaps in association with student products based on the materials. In addition, teachers will have the opportunity through AmericanSouth.org to create and share their own annotation tools in support of various curricula.

### Requirements of Partner Libraries

The model for partner libraries in AmericanSouth.org is that of *data provider* as presented in the Open Archives protocol description, which is that “*Data Providers* administer systems that support the OAI protocol as a means of exposing metadata about the content in their systems.” SOLINET will be a *service provider* that issues “OAI protocol requests to the systems of data providers and use(s) the returned metadata as a basis for building

value-added services.” The participating data providers, to continue the OAI usage, each maintain a *repository*, which “is a network accessible server to which OAI protocol requests, embedded in HTTP, can be submitted.”<sup>1</sup>

Data providers to AmericanSouth.org will maintain and make accessible to SOLINET an OAI-compliant repository of metadata for their publicly accessible digital resources on Southern history and culture. This may take the form of a native Open Archives repository, or access to the metadata via an OAI-compliant gateway. SOLINET, in cooperation with the VPI, will provide technical assistance for the establishment of the repository or gateway. It will be the data providers’ responsibility to maintain the repository or gateway and to ensure that the metadata meets AmericanSouth.org and Open Archives standards. Library partners will also participate in initial and ongoing communication regarding the creation, maintenance, and change of procedures and standards for AmericanSouth.org repositories and metadata standards.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.openarchives.org/OAI/openarchivesprotocol.htm](http://www.openarchives.org/OAI/openarchivesprotocol.htm) for more detail about the protocol.