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Surveying the Prairie State: Preserving Historical Newspapers through Partnerships, Public Engagement, Best Practices, and Institutional Realities

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Abstract:

This paper considers how public institutions can develop a survey to guide collaborative efforts to reach common goals in newspaper digitization. By hosting a nomination opportunity, institutions can survey the landscape of newspaper digitization needs and priorities. The lessons learned during this grant-funded proposal process provide institutions with a structure to host their own nomination opportunities or assessment surveys in order to further digitization efforts. This paper will provide an informed framework to support data-driven decisions about newspaper digitization and preservation in geographic regions with an array of institutional resources and limitations.

Keywords: newspapers; newspaper digitization; newspaper preservation; preservation outreach; preservation

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preservation Risks and Limitations of Access

Due to their chemical makeup, print newspapers inherently pose preservation risks, and it does not take long for them to turn yellow, fade, and become brittle. Newspapers were not produced to last, but rather to convey daily information for readers to consume quickly and discard. In the 20th century, libraries around the world understood the risks of losing historical information and

print heritage and began preserving newspapers on microfilm. Microfilm as a format is more stable and, given the right environmental conditions, can last for several hundred years.

Although microfilm extends the life of news information, it poses another problem. Information contained on microfilm is not easily accessible, cannot be keyword searched, and is entirely dependent on a machine to be read. Using microfilm is often a difficult and time-consuming method of conducting historical research, as it relies upon physical location, correct bibliographic information, and a researcher's ability to sloop through articles and issues to browse for information. For many institutions that do maintain microfilm collections, the cost of reader equipment and maintenance is increasingly challenging, especially in light of the need for many programs to look for budget cuts.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a focus on providing digital access to historical newspapers previously preserved on microfilm. Although digital newspapers can enhance a user's ability to conduct research through keyword searching, digital newspapers pose new risks, including lossy file formats and unsustainable digital storage and access softwares. Newspaper digitization is not a one-time project, but rather, institutions must now devote resources and staff to the long-term preservation of digital newspaper surrogates and their metadata files as well as the maintenance of platforms to ensure long-term access to digitized newspapers. Digitization projects can be costly and often require vendors, on-site staff, machines (microfilm readers), technical knowledge, digital infrastructures, and hosting platforms. If conducted, newspaper digitization projects are often done at the repository-level, rather than through state or national consortiums or partnerships, and it is up to the individual institution to determine feasible projects based on their existing resources.

1.2 Introduction to the INP

The Illinois Newspaper Project is jointly administered by the History, Philosophy, and Newspaper Library (HPNL) and the Preservation Services Unit of the University of Illinois Library. Since its inception, the INP has had three host institutions, including the Chicago Historical Society (CHS, now the Chicago History Museum) and the Illinois State Historical Library (ISHL, now the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, or ALPLM). In 1995, the INP relocated its offices to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), where it remains today. Efforts of the INP can be broken down into three phases—identification, preservation, and digitization.

1.3 Early Efforts: The United States Newspaper Program (USNP) and Preservation Microfilming

The Illinois Newspaper Project (INP) began as a project funded by the [United States Newspaper Program](#) (USNP), an initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) established in 1982 to identify, catalog, and preserve on microfilm historical newspapers published in the United States.

In 1987, the INP, then hosted by the Illinois State Historical Library (ISHL), received a planning grant to assess the state's newspaper collections by surveying Illinois libraries, historical societies, genealogical societies, and newspaper publishers to identify newspapers throughout the

state. After identification was completed in 1989, the INP collaborated with the Chicago Historical Society (CHS) to catalog newspapers. To undertake this massive project, the state was divided into seven regions and work was split amongst CHS, UIUC, and ISHL in order to create catalog records for the identified newspapers. Cataloging was completed in 2007 and after nearly two decades of field work, over 20,500 bibliographic records were created for newspapers held in cultural heritage institutions and newspaper publishers across Illinois.

In 2005, the INP began microfilming newspapers, starting with unique titles held at the University of Illinois Library. The INP then microfilmed newspapers from other repositories throughout the state. Titles were selected based on several metrics, ranging from titles of record to those titles that were found to be last copies. During this phase, the INP microfilmed 2,019,419 pages of 471 newspapers. Microfilming efforts dwindled around 2009 as efforts shifted toward digitization. Currently, microfilm digitization efforts outside of grant projects are piecemeal, and primarily informed by curator interest balanced with budgetary constraints. Beyond a bibliographic understanding of each of the titles, staff, prior to the implementation of the survey described below, were unsure if titles would be of interest to users across the state of Illinois.

1.4 Current Efforts: The National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP) and Newspaper Digitization

The [National Digital Newspaper Program](#) (NDNP), a joint effort of the Library of Congress (LC) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), has driven national newspaper digitization efforts in the United States since 2005. Under the program, the NEH selects around 10-12 awardees each grant cycle, held annually, through a grant process; only one awardee from each state is selected in a cycle. NDNP Awardees have two years to deliver the expectations of the grant, which is 100,000 pages of digitized historical newspapers.

Digitization efforts of the Illinois Newspaper Project are primarily conducted on a project-basis and are often dependent on securement of a grant or donor funding. Early efforts began in 2006 using a combination of state and donor funding to film and digitize specific titles. These early projects led to the launch of the Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections (IDNC), a digital newspaper database created by the History, Philosophy, and Newspaper Library (HPNL)¹. Since 2009, the INP has focused on, in keeping with the standards put forth by NDNP, the digitization of microfilmed newspapers. The INP has contributed to six NDNP cycles and has received state grants, including an Illinois State Library grant. Occasionally, the INP receives donor funding that advances the digitization of titles held at the University of Illinois. Titles digitized through an INP project are added to the IDNC for freely available online access, and the digital newspaper files are preserved in the University of Illinois Library's home-grown digital repository, [Medusa](#), to ensure long-term preservation.

¹ The Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections initially used Olive ActivePaper Archive software. However, in September 2012 the Library formed the Newspaper Delivery and Preservation Working Group to discuss the sustainability of the Library's repository architecture and software and its inability to manage access to the growing digitized newspaper collections. After much consideration, the group determined that the Library should adopt DL Consulting's [Veridian software](#). For more information see: Rimkus, Kyle R., and Kirk Hess. *Providing Access to Digitized Newspapers: A Case Study From the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library*. 2014, www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/110676.

More recently, the INP occasionally works with public libraries, academic libraries, and historical societies who contact us with a newspaper digitization project they've already completed or want to undertake. The INP works with these institutions to explore the feasibility of ingesting externally-digitized newspaper files in Medusa and hosting the title(s) on the IDNC.

2 ISSUES AND ROADBLOCKS TO NEWSPAPER PRESERVATION AND PARTNERSHIPS: ILLINOIS AS A MICROCOSM OF WIDER PROBLEMS WITH NEWSPAPER DIGITIZATION EFFORTS

Digitization efforts rarely trickle down to the regional or state level. Newspaper digitization as an industry is steered by for-profit companies who, albeit passionate about newspaper preservation, impose limitations on who and how digitized newspapers are accessed.

Although newspaper preservation in Illinois began as a collaborative effort between three of the state's major cultural heritage institutions, collaboration ultimately fizzled after completion of the initial identification and cataloging phases of the United States Newspaper Program. Since the USNP, any efforts to preserve and provide access to the state's newspapers has been left to the onus of the institution that houses a specific newspaper.

2.1 State and Regional Landscape: Current Efforts

Current newspaper digitization efforts of cultural heritage institutions rely primarily on an institution's ability to fundraise, apply for and administer grants, or allot a portion of its annual budget toward funding digitization projects. Digitization also requires physical and staff resources, such as a microfilm reader for staff to conduct pre-digitization collation. For institutions that lack staffing and technical resources, digitization is often an unattainable goal. If digitization is undertaken, it is typically a one-time project for selected titles rather than a comprehensive, long-term digitization plan. Beyond the aforementioned resources, libraries also need to consider digital access and preservation platforms, which require significant staff and budget buy-in. Unless an institution has the digital infrastructure, digitization is not actively embedded in an institution's daily operations or institutional goals.

Some libraries work with large for-profit companies to digitize their newspapers, usually at a cost both of finances and accessibility. The University of Illinois has cut deals with commercial digitization vendors, such as Newspapers.com, which require embargo periods before the Library can receive digital newspaper files. For our specific deal, embargo periods are typically three years, and after the embargo has ended, we can add the digitized newspapers to the IDNC. For institutions without a hosting platform, newspapers digitized by commercial vendors remain accessible only through the vendor, to which the library is subscribed and the library's patrons can access onsite with a library computer. The majority of access remains limited and inaccessible to remote patrons or researchers.

Smaller digitization companies who partner specifically with public libraries and historical societies have cropped up over the past few decades, and many public libraries in Illinois have worked with these vendors to digitize and provide digital access to newspapers in their collections. Although these companies provide a budget-friendlier option and freely available

digital access, digitization is viewed as a means of enhancing access to information, not as a means of providing long-term preservation. Similarly, these access platforms are not able to provide user features that IDNC has, such as crowd-sourced text correction which enhances keyword searching and information accessibility.

Libraries may also work with smaller companies to digitize newspapers identified as physically at-risk in order to limit handling. In these cases, digital newspaper surrogates are typically only accessible onsite. Additionally, most institutions do not have a trusted digital repository and thus, are unable to provide digital preservation for their files. In these situations, libraries may reach out to the INP requesting that newspapers be hosted in the IDNC for wider accessibility and digital files be stored in our digital repository.

Some institutions, such as historical societies or local history rooms driven by a devoted staff or volunteer base, may seek to purchase a consumer-level digital camera or oversize document scanner to create newspaper images to then run OCR software on in order to digitize print newspapers held in their collections. Other institutions working with microfilm may purchase consumer-grade microfilm readers with bundled software that allows for digital scanning. While the digital images and their OCR are far from ideal, our team occasionally agrees to host these newspapers in the IDNC.

In all these cases, digitization is done with a local access point in mind, and any sort of technical considerations regarding the file deliverables are typically not discussed with INP staff prior to contacting us for file donation and hosting on IDNC. As a result, many of the files received are of questionable quality and structure.

Regardless of how a newspaper is digitized and access is provided, the onus is on the holding institution to prioritize and plan digitization efforts. Digitization efforts are directly dependent upon an institution's financial, technical, and staffing resources and abilities. It is also important to note that preservation does not end after digitization, rather, institutions must also consider how to provide long-term preservation of their digital files to ensure long-term accessibility to their patrons.

2.2 Lack of unified digitization efforts

There is a lack of unified digitization efforts on a state-level, which the Illinois Newspaper Project sought to rectify starting with its most immediate of resources: the National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP). In 2021, the Illinois Newspaper Project applied for its sixth NDNP grant which conveyed the project's intention to solicit nominations from cultural heritage institutions across the state in order to select digitization titles for this grant cycle. In its application, the INP suggested that, "By tapping into the 'on the ground' knowledge of extant newspapers and newspaper publishing history possessed by local institutions, this process will result in the identification of important new content for the NDNP." This nomination opportunity would pave the way for sharing information and resources and for developing statewide, symbiotic partnerships.

3 2022 NDNP GRANT

In the fall of 2022, the Illinois Newspaper Project received its sixth NDNP grant. Unlike in previous grant cycles in which the INP team and advisory board selected titles for digitization from newspapers located at the University of Illinois, the INP sought to simultaneously break with their inward-facing model and encourage state cultural heritage societies to actively participate in newspaper preservation by nominating newspapers for digitization. The reasoning behind this proposal is multifaceted, as this process would encourage participation and engagement with institutions that the INP has hitherto not engaged with; give the INP a better understanding of which newspapers are important to the historians, genealogists, librarians, and patrons of our state; assist institutions by funding, hosting and preserving digital newspaper surrogates; and also provide a level of preservation outreach to institutions to illustrate the current best practice for [newspaper digitization](#).

The following sections lay out the preparations and materials created by the INP to facilitate a successful statewide nomination process. This section will also look at outreach efforts made by the INP to garner statewide interest and participation in the nomination opportunity.

3.1 Advisory Board

To prepare for the nomination opportunity, the Illinois Newspaper Project created an advisory board of four external members with expertise covering the fields of genealogy, Illinois history, newspapers, and libraries and archives, and representing private and public institutions across Illinois. Past INP advisory boards were often composed of UIUC faculty and staff and, more often than not, engaged only for the title selection period. For this cycle of the project, INP rejuvenated the advisory board to include a greater representation of scholars from across the state and continues to work to ensure that they are involved in the project even after the completion of the title selection process.

To prepare for the nomination process, the advisory board members met with the INP to finalize nomination criteria and the official Call for Nominations. The advisory board met with the INP shortly before the end of the nomination window to finalize an evaluation rubric for the upcoming review period. Once the nomination period had closed, the advisory board was given one month to evaluate the nominations, and the board met once to select winning newspapers. With this new approach, the advisory board is more critical than ever to weigh in on the various nominations. As a result, it is our hope that this engagement will in turn provide a more active advisory board model to replicate in the future.

3.2 Creating a nomination form

The INP kept in mind the range of technical knowledge held by nominating institutions, and thus intended to create a nomination form that was easy to understand and complete. The nomination form was broken into sections, including:

- **General Information:** contact information of the nominator and nominating institution; basic information about the nominated title
- **Eligibility:** copyright status, format, and current online availability

- **Technical Information:** number or reels, film type, reel location(s), and a brief film condition assessment
- **Nominated Newspaper:** language(s) of paper, geographic coverage, publication frequency, page count, and an assessment of missing issues or gaps in availability
- **Nomination Essay:** nominator conveys the historical significance of the newspaper; essays can contribute to “title essays” on newspaper access platforms

3.2.1 Section: General Information

The General Information section provided the INP with contact information for nominating institutions as well as basic information about the nominated newspaper, including title, place of publication, and the nominated dates. (Note: initially, the nominated dates section was titled “Dates available on microfilm,” which caused confusion and was not clearly understood by nominators. In the future, the INP advises rephrasing as “Nominated dates of newspaper.”)

This section also inquired about a newspaper’s inclusion in the [Illinois Newspaper Directory](#) (IND), a directory of newspaper bibliographic and holding information created by the INP after the identification and cataloging phases conducted under the United States Newspaper Program (USNP), and the national [US Newspaper Directory](#). This question allowed the INP to flag any nominations that did not have existing bibliographic information.

In addition, this section provided the INP with contact information of staff at cultural heritage institutions throughout Illinois, which will be kept on hand for future partnership opportunities.

3.2.2 Section: Eligibility

The Eligibility section was used to screen nominations to ensure they were eligible for digitization under NDNP. Areas of NDNP eligibility include copyright status (must be free of copyright); newspaper format (must be microfilmed); and online availability (must not already be freely available elsewhere). We did not want to turn away the opportunity to receive information about newspapers that did not meet NDNP eligibility, so we made a note underneath this section stating that “nominations of exceptional merit that do not meet these criteria may be considered.”

This section is only necessary if a digitization project follows strict eligibility requirements or the project seeks to digitize newspapers with specific criteria. We recommend providing a supplement with resources on conducting copyright research, as we received several inquiries about this, and aided many institutions with their own research. (Because many nominators were unsure of a newspaper’s copyright status, the INP staff verified the copyright status of all nominated titles.)

3.2.3 Section: Technical Information

The Technical Information section served as the basis for determining film condition and availability. Given that we did not secure a loan agreement for master film held by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) until after the nomination opportunity had ended, our team was prepared to work with service copy films and undergo an additional

assessment of reels prior to title acceptance. Securing master film is an important aspect of any digitization project and this is one step we would not recommend overlooking.

This section inquired about a newspaper's microfilm locations (using holding information found in the [Illinois Newspaper Directory](#)), as well as the total number of nominated microfilm reels and film type. This section also included a short condition assessment of reels, including environmental storage conditions. Radio buttons allowed nominators to convey the amount of scratches, tears, and warping of the film. Nominators selected either None (0), A bit (1-2), Some (3-4), and Many/Much (5). In hindsight, utilizing a numerical scale was not necessary, and it may have been helpful to provide concrete examples (either textual or photographic) of what would be considered "a bit" versus "some."

We recommend providing a supplementary resource on determining film type, as many institutions did not know on what type of microfilm their newspapers were filmed.

3.2.4 Section: Nominated Newspaper

The Nominated Newspaper section provided the INP with additional information about the nominated newspaper, including language(s), geographic coverage, publication frequency, dates of publication, and an approximate page count of nominated content. We also used this section to assess the amount of missing content within the nominated date range. We recommend providing a metric for assessing overall page count, as nominators had trouble answering this question, and many left this question blank.

3.2.5 Nomination Essay

The Nomination Essay required nominators to, in 500 words or fewer, explain the historical significance of the newspaper they were nominating. Nominators could either write their nomination essay in the box provided in the form or upload their essay as an attachment. To help nominators with their essay, we provided them with a few prompts.

Nomination Essay

26. Please explain the historical significance (either locally, regionally, or statewide) of this newspaper.

In 600 words (or fewer), please explain the historical significance of this newspaper.

Is the newspaper a special type of publication (labor newspaper, farming newspaper, etc.)? Is there something unusual or interesting about the publishers or the readers? Was the newspaper created and used by a specific ethnic, religious, political, or occupational community in Illinois? For what type of research would future researchers use this newspaper? What might future users find especially interesting or unique about the newspaper? Are regional, statewide, national, or global historical events covered in this newspaper in a way that might benefit future researchers, students, or teachers? You do not need to address all of these questions. However, please use this essay to talk more broadly about the history of the newspaper and why you think it should be made widely available for research.

Think about:

- Geographic coverage
- Temporal coverage
- Coverage of specific statewide and national historic events
- Diversity of creator/reader communities
- Unique scope of content (labor, agricultural, industrial, etc.)

Please keep your nomination essay under 600 words. You may attach a handwritten or typed page.

Nomination Essay section of the NDNP Digitization Opportunity Nomination Form

Nomination essays were the most helpful in assessing a newspaper's intellectual content and research value, which was a major component of the advisory board's discussion to select a specific title. Moving forward, we will use these essays as a starting point for creating a title essay for each digitized newspaper, a component required for the NDNP grant. Title essays give researchers contextual and biographical information about the newspaper in which they are researching.

3.3 Nomination Review and Evaluations

To prepare for the review of nominations, the INP created a master spreadsheet (deemed the "Enhanced Data Spreadsheet") that collated information from all nominations including nominating information (nominating institution and holding locations); nomination eligibility (including copyright status); and title information (name, dates, publication city and county, publication frequency, geographic coverage, approximate page and reel counts). Additional data included cataloging information (including number of LCCNs encompassing the nominated dates); information assessing the digitization need (including number of holding locations, existing digital availability, master film availability, and whether a title was under an existing Newspapers.com embargo); and a title's demonstrated interest (whether it received multiple nominations, was nominated on behalf of an individual, or if there was previous digitization interest).

Extent of nominated content		Nominated newspaper							Cataloging	
Approximate page count	# of reels	Nominated Dates [modified as needed by Jessie--MM/DD/YYYY]	Copyright status	Publication city	Publication county (green = not in IDNC)	Region (estimated by Jessie)	Publication Frequency	Geographic coverage	No. of OCLC records (in IND) that encompass nominated content	No. of LLCN(s) that encompass nominated content
		[Assess]	through 1963?	2/11/1858-[1963]	restrictions	Greenville	Bond	Southern		
41,700	34	12/27/1897-10/28/1919	public domain	Charleston	Coles	East central	Daily except Saturday or Sunday	Regional	1	1
[30,000?]	88 (28 reels for 1910-1928, ~60 reels for 1941-1963)	1910-1928, 1941-[1963]	public domain, no copyright restrictions	Cairo	Alexander	Southern	Semi-weekly	Regional	3	4
2500	3	1894-December 1896, July 1897-December 1897, July 1898-December 1898	public domain	Wheaton	DuPage	Northeastern	Weekly	County	1	1

Excerpt of the Enhanced Data Spreadsheet used to collate information for all nominated newspapers

Working in a shared drive, we created a folder for each advisory board member (to which only they had access) which included all nomination forms; evaluation forms; a copy of the Enhanced Data spreadsheet (containing collated information for all nominations); and a copy of the rubric.

The rubric consisted of three sections, including eligibility, technical preference, and non-technical criteria (intellectual content). The eligibility section scored NDNP eligibility criteria, including newspaper format, dates of nominated content, copyright status, and existing online availability. The technical preference section scored the film availability and condition, which would also contribute to a nomination’s eligibility for digitization. These sections essentially screened nominations before they went to the advisory board for review. Of the 61 nominations, 3 nominations were invalid, and 1 nomination was withdrawn, so the advisory board received 58 eligible nominations to score.

The INP scored the first two sections, leaving the advisory board responsible for scoring the non-technical criteria. The INP met prior to the advisory board’s evaluation period in order to score the first two sections of the rubric for each nomination and update the advisory board’s evaluation copies to reflect scoring of the top two sections.

Criteria						Score
Eligibility [INP Staff]	[5]	[4]	[3]	[2]	[1]	[20]
Format of newspaper	Nominated content is on microfilm.				Nominated content is not on microfilm but meets all other eligibility.	
Publication dates	Nominated newspaper has content published prior to 1964.					
Copyright status	Nominated content is in the public domain.		Copyright status of nominated content has been researched and no evidence of copyright exists.			
Current online availability [of majority of content]	Nominated content has not been digitized.		Nominated content has been digitized but is behind a paywall. (Includes embargo list.)	Nominated content has been poorly digitized and is freely available.	Nominated content has been digitized but is only available onsite.	
Technical Preference [INP Staff]	[5]	[4]	[3]	[2]	[1]	[5]
Availability of film	Master film available.	Mostly available as master film.	Mostly available as service film.	Only service film available.	Some of nominated content not microfilmed.	
Concerns about condition	Minimal to no concerns.		Some concerns.		Significant concerns.	

Sections one and two of the nomination review rubric

Note that the gray cells of the rubric signify non-applicable scores for a specific criterion. For example, “Format of Newspaper” could only receive 5 points or 1 point, as there were only two possible options for this category (microfilmed or not microfilmed).

Categories that factored into the non-technical assessment (for which the advisory board was responsible) included the significance and breadth of temporal coverage; geographic representation; diversity and representation; digitization need and demonstrated interest; publication type, creator, or readership; and overall research value. Some factors carried more weight than others.

Non-technical criteria [Advisory Board]	[5]	[4]	[3]	[2]	[1]	[total possible 28]
Significance of temporal coverage			Nominated content covers a unique or under-represented period of, or events in, Illinois history.			
Breadth of temporal coverage		Nominated content spans multiple years of publication AND has minimal gaps in availability.		Nominated content spans multiple years of publication but has significant gaps (for example, entire years missing) in availability.	Nominated content has only one year available for digitization BUT it covers important event(s).	
Geographic representation		Nominated content is published in a county not yet represented in the IDNC.		Nominated content is published in a town not yet represented in the IDNC (though county is).		
Diversity and representation		Nominated content is published by or for an under-represented cultural, racial, ethnic, political, religious, or economic community.				
Digitization need		Hidden title – Nominated content was not previously cataloged or identified by INP/USNP.	Hidden title – Nominated content was not previously cataloged or identified by INP/USNP.	Rare newspaper – Previously identified, but holding institution has the only recorded microfilm copy.		
Demonstrated interest					Nomination has been encouraged by an individual or external institution.	

Section three of the nomination review rubric

Once all evaluation forms were completed, the INP created a spreadsheet with tabs for each reviewer (identified only as Reviewer A, Reviewer B, Reviewer C, and Review D) and added their scores for each nomination as well as a ranking of newspapers from highest to lowest scores. Then, that data was used to create a spreadsheet to analyze the overall ranking of newspapers factoring in the scores from each advisory board member. This spreadsheet served as the basis for the advisory board’s discussion, as they were able to focus on the top titles and narrow their selections down using notes they’d created during their assessment.

3.4 Nomination Outreach

The Illinois Newspaper Project began outreach efforts for the NDNP nomination opportunity in May 2023, two months before the nomination period opened. Our approach to outreach was comprehensive, and we took this opportunity to ramp up our web presence (by updating our website and contributing more on social media) and identify potential contacts and partners both for this grant and for future digitization projects.

3.4.1 Mass emails

The INP created an email group to distribute news to a large number of contacts. To do this, we utilized the University of Illinois Web Tools, which are applications that provide communication and marketing tools for the University. The INP email group included contacts from state libraries and cultural heritage institutions. To gather contacts, we collected contact information

of non-library cultural heritage institutions, such as historical societies and genealogical societies, from the Illinois Newspaper Directory. To collect contact information of public and academic libraries throughout the state, we reached out to the Illinois State Library, which maintains a contact list of libraries across the state. We added 1,100 recipients to an INP email group and, from May 30 to September 25, sent a total of seven mass emails about the NDNP nomination opportunity. Recipients were always given the option to opt-out of receiving future INP emails, and thirteen recipients opted-out.

The Illinois Newspaper Project Seeks Your Help

Contribute to the Preservation of Newspaper Heritage



Do you know of a historically significant newspaper that you think should be digitized and made freely available? The Illinois Newspaper Project (INP) invites libraries, museums, historical societies, genealogical societies, and other cultural heritage institutions to help select the next batch of historical newspapers for digitization as part of the [National Digital Newspaper Program \(NDNP\)](#). All selected newspapers will be included in the national digital newspaper collection, [Chronicling America](#), as well as the [Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections](#). These collections are available online and anyone in the world can use them at no cost.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has awarded the Illinois Newspaper Project a grant that will fund the digitization of up to 100,000 pages of historical Illinois newspapers. We are eager for Illinois institutions to participate in the title selection process by nominating newspapers for digitization. To be eligible for consideration, a newspaper must be available on microfilm, represented in the [Illinois Newspaper Project Directory](#), and either held at the nominating institution or the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Newspapers of exceptional merit that do not meet these criteria may also be considered. Individuals or institutions wishing to nominate a newspaper title on microfilm held at a cultural heritage institution other than their own can do so with permission from the holding institution. Individuals are encouraged to reach out to holding institutions to advocate for a newspaper they'd like to see digitized. Similarly, institutions are encouraged to seek recommendations from their patrons.

Excerpt from first mass email sent about the NDNP Nomination Opportunity hosted by the Illinois Newspaper Project

3.4.2 Targeted emails to identified institutions

The INP identified areas of high interest, including newspapers published in geographically and economically diverse areas and in communities currently underrepresented in digital newspaper

databases, including the IDNC and NDNP's Chronicling America. Targeted emails were primarily sent to cultural heritage institutions in counties not yet represented in the IDNC, which we assessed using the map feature of the IDNC and the Illinois Newspaper Directory. As of early 2023, fifty-two of Illinois's 102 counties did not have a single title digitized and accessible in the IDNC, with many counties in Southern Illinois not yet represented.

To organize outreach efforts, we created a master document listing Illinois counties not yet represented in the IDNC, as well as libraries that had microfilmed newspapers from that county. We used this document to guide our targeted outreach and engagement efforts and sent 128 personal emails to libraries in underrepresented or diverse areas. We received fifteen nominations from institutions targeted during this effort.

3.4.3 Additional efforts

The INP also created a [webpage](#) for the nomination opportunity which contained news, eligibility, FAQs, links to register for information sessions, and the nomination form (a link to the nomination webform and a printable PDF form were both provided). The INP hosted two virtual information sessions to review eligibility requirements and walk through the nomination form. Between these two sessions, about 20 people attended, and many attendees submitted a newspaper for nomination.

To cast a wider net, we also reached out to statewide organizations, such as the Illinois State Genealogical Society and the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI), to share the Call for Nominations with their members.

3.5 Nomination Period and Results

Nominations were accepted from July 1 through September 30, 2023. Cultural heritage institutions could nominate newspapers held within their collections or newspapers held in other collections with permission from the holding institution. A permission form was created and made available on our nomination opportunity webpage. Individuals not connected to a cultural heritage institution who were interested in nominating a newspaper were encouraged to contact the holding institution and advocate for the newspaper to be nominated. The INP offered to contact institutions on an individual's behalf and did so for two newspapers. Nominations were accepted both online, using a form designed with the University's Webtools, and by mail.

The Illinois Newspaper Project received 61 nominations from 43 institutions across the state. Of the 61 nominations, 60 were completed online and one was mailed to the Library. The advisory board selected nine titles for digitization, and the INP elected to file the remaining titles as candidates for future digitization opportunities. (Since then, the INP has chosen to digitize an additional two titles using donor funding, and a title using joint funding from the INP and the Illinois History and Lincoln Collections, a special collections library at the University of Illinois invested in the preservation of state history.)

4 POST-NOMINATION OUTCOMES

Not only did the nomination opportunity directly inform the title selection for our NDNP grant, but it increased engagement in other INP areas, including enhancing bibliographic access and generating interest in newspaper digitization projects and hosting digitized newspapers in the IDNC.

Additionally, the nomination opportunity demonstrated the needs of smaller cultural heritage institutions and organizations regarding newspaper preservation and access. Some nominating institutions do not have sustainable ways of providing access to microfilmed newspapers, as their microfilm readers are no longer working and they do not have sufficient funds to fix or replace them. Other institutions are able to fund one-off digitization projects but do not have a hosting platform to provide freely available and long-term digital access to offsite patrons.

Overall, the nomination opportunity placed the INP on the radar of cultural heritage institutions across the state, many of which had not heard of us before or were unfamiliar with the services we provide. Since the nomination opportunity, we've received nearly ten inquiries about providing resources and best practices to libraries who are considering undergoing their own newspaper digitization projects. The number of recent inquiries led the INP to create a [general inquiry form](#), available on our website, which allows institutions to request assistance in these areas and more.

4.1 Increased awareness of newspaper access points

The nomination opportunity led to an increase in updates to the [Illinois Newspaper Directory](#) (IND), a database of bibliographic and holding records created by the INP after their USNP identification and cataloging phases, including adding previously overlooked holding locations to a newspaper record and updating contact information of holding institutions. We received several requests to update or add new holding locations for newspapers and received comprehensive lists of newspaper collections from two public libraries in order to update our records. Updates to the IND will increase the overall accessibility of Illinois newspapers and will continue to help researchers find which libraries hold what newspapers.

4.2 Renewed interest in newspaper digitization and awareness of the Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections (IDNC) as a hosting platform

The NDNP nomination opportunity also served as a catalyst for facilitating digitization projects. Similarly, it increased overall awareness of the IDNC, the digital newspaper database administered by the INP, which includes newspapers digitized through NDNP grants as well as those digitized through other means, such as other grants, state budget allotment, and donor funding.

After learning that their nominations were not selected, four institutions (that we know of) explored alternate means to digitize their nominated title and reached out to the INP at various stages of their planning, including to provide information about digitization vendors. Often, such inquiries progressed to the feasibility of the INP hosting the digital surrogates in the IDNC. By connecting smaller institutions to trusted digitization vendors familiar with the technical

specifications of NDNP, we can ensure that scans will be high quality and OCR will render best possible search success. Connecting institutions to vendors we've worked closely with ensures that we can trustfully add these files in the IDNC and that our users can easily research and retrieve successful keyword and phrase searches.

Newspapers digitized by other institutions are approved for inclusion in the IDNC on a case-by-case basis. The INP occasionally accepts newspapers of lower quality in favor of their intellectual content, access need, and research value. If an institution approaches us with a low-quality digitized newspaper from a geographic area not yet represented within the IDNC, we typically opt to include it despite technical concerns. An example of this is [The Ava Citizen](#), from Ava, Illinois, a town of about 500 people located in the southwestern part of the state. During our outreach efforts, Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) was identified as an institution that held several microfilmed newspapers from Southern papers not yet preserved or accessible in the IDNC. We reached out to SIUC directly with information about the nomination opportunity and encouraged them to nominate a newspaper. The email sparked interest in the nomination opportunity, but also opened the door for SIUC to inquire about including *The Ava Citizen* in the IDNC. The Jackson County Historical Society had digitized *The Ava Citizen* in-house (using what we believe to have been a document scanner) and sent the files to SIUC, who then provided samples of the digitized newspaper files to us. We determined that the digital images, although they did not meet best practices, were worth ingesting into the IDNC to provide access to a newspaper from a town and county not yet represented in the IDNC.

Another nominating institution secured funding with a generous local donor to undergo a large-scale newspaper digitization project. This institution contacted the INP seeking assistance, and the INP trained their volunteers on collating microfilm for digitization (moving forward, the INP will continue to assist the institution on collation and quality review). In all instances, the INP has agreed to preserve digital newspaper surrogates in Medusa, the Library's digital repository, and host the digitized newspapers in the IDNC.

5 CONCLUSION: CURRENT COLLABORATIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

After years of operating as an inward-facing project powered primarily by grants, the Illinois Newspaper Project (INP) hosted a statewide nomination opportunity that encouraged cultural heritage institutions throughout the state to nominate newspapers for digitization as part of the INP's 2022 NDNP grant. To reinvigorate our title selection process, we sought to engage statewide cultural heritage institutions in our project by inviting them to tell us what newspapers they wanted digitized. Throughout the nomination process, the INP developed a closer working relationship with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM), as a staff member was on our advisory board. After the nomination opportunity, the INP reached an agreement with ALPLM to loan master film copies of selected titles to the INP and our vendors to complete NDNP digitization.

The NDNP nomination opportunity laid the groundwork for future newspaper digitization projects and partnerships, connecting the INP to smaller, less-resourced institutions throughout the state in order to disseminate resources on a state-level. In response to growing requests, the INP created a [general inquiry form](#) for institutions seeking best practices, digitization vendors, long-term preservation of digital files, and website hosting of digitized newspapers. This general

inquiry form will provide the INP with a better understanding of how we can contribute resources to facilitate ongoing newspaper preservation projects throughout the state.

In early 2024, Illinois Newspaper Project staff met with staff at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM), the institution mandated by the state to preserve Illinois newspapers, to begin to identify opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing. The University of Illinois has the infrastructure to provide long-term digital preservation of newspaper surrogates and their metadata files through its homegrown digital repository, Medusa. However, we do not have the wealth of newspaper titles and master microfilm held by the ALPLM. Similarly, we do not have the knowledge of which titles are most used by researchers and genealogists across the state—this information is better understood by ALPLM’s Newspaper Librarian, as well as librarians and genealogists throughout the state. Additionally, UIUC is positioned well to sustain long-term and freely-available access to digitized newspapers through the IDNC, powered by [Veridian](#) software, whereas the ALPLM does not have the capacity to provide long-term preservation or digital access to digitized newspapers.

Combining ALPLM’s master film with UIUC’s preservation and access platforms, the two institutions can ensure the preservation and access to the state’s cultural and print heritage without duplicating efforts. Moving forward, the INP and the ALPLM will develop a statewide survey to further assess existing newspaper preservation efforts and identify the newspaper-related needs of cultural heritage institutions throughout the state. Working together, the INP and ALPLM will return to the INP’s early collaborative roots. By pooling resources with other institutions within the state, the INP can ensure that Illinois newspapers will be preserved and accessible for future researchers across the state and beyond.

References

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