

Opening Remarks for the Yes We Scan Teleconference - AOTUS

Good afternoon. Thanks for joining us today in this web chat about the "Yes We Scan" petition for a national effort to digitize federal records. The White House's "We the People" site is an exciting initiative to encourage and facilitate citizens' right to petition their government. And I want to thank the White House staff for making "We the People" available and for organizing this web chat today.

On his first full day in office, President Obama discussed with his senior staff the importance of open government. He said "Our commitment ... means recognizing that Government does not have all the answers, and that public officials need to draw on what citizens know...And that's why, as of today, I'm directing members of my administration to find new ways of tapping the knowledge and experience of ordinary Americans."

At the National Archives, we've taken that message seriously in applying it to our mission of making the nation's historical records more accessible to the public. Only a small fraction of our billions of pages of documents are online, and the "to do" list is, to say the least, daunting. We cannot tackle this by ourselves. We simply don't have the budgetary or staff resources to attack something of this magnitude.

That's why we have worked with digitization partners and are encouraging the work of citizen archivists and volunteers. The more people we can get involved, the closer we'll come to the goal of full access.

That's why the Yes We Scan petition submitted by Carl Malamud and John Podesta resonated with me. They envision a world where the riches contained in the National Archives and other federal government research institutions are "...made available, becoming a core of a national effort to make access to knowledge a right for all Americans." At the National Archives, we are doing our part to make this happen. We've worked with Carl Malamud on access projects. He's a dedicated citizen archivist who has worked tirelessly over the years to put public information in the public domain. I welcomed Carl and his volunteers of the International Amateur Scanning League when they came to scan the thousands of photographs in our College Park facility a year and a half ago.

Our Wikipedian in Residence, Dominic McDevitt-Parks, organized a National Archives ExtravaSCANza last month, following up on scanathons last August and October. As Dominic said, "We're doing our part to put a small dent in the enormous backlog of materials to be digitized."

And on our own website, we have launched the Citizen Archivist Dashboard, where we call on the power of crowdsourcing to transcribe documents, tag them, and share digital images of Archives documents.

My blog post about "Yes We Scan" in January attracted the most number of comments of any post I've written. And they were thoughtful, insightful comments from people who care deeply about preserving and making available our historical records.

We agree on the need to digitize more, but we have to do it the right way, to create the most valuable products for the users—good quality images, good metadata,

good cataloging for efficient retrieval. I'm looking forward to our discussion about these and more critical issues that will be part of a national digitization strategy.

Sitting in with me on this call are three Archives staffers with a lot to say about digitization and access: Mike Wash, our Chief Information Officer; Pam Wright, our Chief Digital Access Strategist; and Jill James, our Manager of Social Media. Now let's start the conversation.