

## Open Access and the Digital Divide: An Overview in CIS Libraries



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**The Commonwealth of** Independent States (CIS) is a union of 11 countries that used to be Soviet republics within the USSR. After a long period of transition, these independent states are now catching up with Western countries in the use of the Internet and the application of high technology. The former Soviet countries have already stepped over the 20% mark in Internet use by the population, and most state-funded organizations have built websites. This article will examine the current library landscape in CIS countries with a primary focus on digital libraries and the implementation of open access initiatives.

### Background

During Soviet times, the development of libraries was one of the Communist Party's priorities, as libraries were assigned a mission of spreading socialist ideas to the masses. Hence, CIS countries have inherited a well-developed library infrastructure. Russia alone has over 130,000 libraries. The largest library network is made up of public libraries supervised by the ministries of culture; then there are the smaller but much better computerized and technologically equipped networks: university and college libraries, scientific and technical libraries, medical libraries and many other subject-specific special library networks.

Not all of them have equal support. Many CIS libraries lack

funds to increase their collections, exchange outdated equipment, and train or retain staff. Moreover, the world financial crisis has translated into a reduction in government financing, sometimes turning into a total cut of funding. Libraries have been forced to cancel a number of conferences and put collection development activities on hold.

Nevertheless, resourceful and devoted library staff have found ways to deal with the situation and move libraries forward. As a result of their efforts, libraries continue to thrive and to be in the forefront of applying new technologies. Digital initiatives help to maintain an informed citizenry by providing essential tools required to access trustworthy and diverse information.

### Electronic libraries

There is a trend towards creating electronic libraries that are digital representations of physical libraries with a variety of resources in electronic form. This broadens the scope of library activities and facilitates user access to library materials, providing 24/7 service outside the library walls. However, besides the financial challenges, there are other obstacles to creating e-libraries. A major one is of a legal nature. Changes to the copyright law in Russia in January 2008 significantly limited the rights of Russian libraries to make and use digital copies. In particular, libraries

can no longer scan documents without the permission of the rights holder. "This law is much stricter in controlling the activity of libraries as far as copying for user service is concerned than its counterparts in Europe and America. Even for the sake of scholarship and education, it is prohibited to make a copy for individual purposes without the author's permission" (Shrayberg 2009b).

### Google initiatives

In these conditions, open access initiatives receive greater consideration. Google has deployed some interesting digital projects worthy of attention. So far Google is not the primary search engine in CIS countries. The most popular search engines, and Google's local competitors, are Yandex.ru and Rambler.ru. As a result, Google is making multifaceted efforts to catch up.

Two Russian national libraries became Google partners in the Google Book Search project. Through the Russian search interface of Google Books <http://books.google.ru/>, users now have access to full-text editions of books provided through either library projects or partnerships with authors and publishers. Another project, Google Scholar, is indexing full-text articles from Russian electronic libraries. It will provide users with direct links to documents in the archives of the libraries they are affiliated to.