

**FY22 IMLS National Leadership Grants For Libraries  
The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations**

The New York Public Library (NYPL) requests \$500,000 in IMLS funding for a two-year implementation grant, to be matched with 1:1 cost-share, as seed support for the development of a Virtual Reading Room (henceforth VRR)—a controlled online research environment which will provide library patrons with mediated, secure remote access to otherwise restricted material collections. The VRR will advance the progress of knowledge by filling a critical gap in access to research collections not well-suited for open access models. As the need for equitable remote accessibility intensifies due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors worldwide, the proposed VRR will serve as an adaptable model for responsible mediated access to library collections on a broad scale.

**Project Justification:** This proposal grew from ideas that were identified and developed as part of the IMLS-funded *Lighting the Way* project (LG-35-19-0012-19). *Lighting the Way* brought together archives, library, and technology stakeholders to build consensus around strategic and technical directions to improve user experience, access, and interoperability for tools used by archives and special collections. The need for expanded remote access to library collections has been significantly heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, as libraries and other cultural heritage institutions have been forced to shutter their onsite operations, severely impacting in-person patron access. Although the return to on-site service models has somewhat mitigated these issues, a growing number of cultural heritage institutions are exploring sustainable means of providing secure remote access to their digital collections, with increased consideration for materials that may only be physically viewable on-location. For example, NYPL's unparalleled audio and moving image collections, covering all formats and myriad topics, are sought by patrons worldwide to advance their research, study culture, and seek greater understanding of their world. Although most of these collections are available to view at the Library, NYPL is not able to enable broader viewing of these collections online because they remain, for the most part, protected by copyright, and are the types of items the law excludes from the delivery of digital copies by libraries and archives. For patrons seeking access to restricted collections like these, their only option is to travel to an NYPL location and view them on-site.

The Virtual Reading Room is an innovative resource that can help to address the complicated issue of providing remote access to restricted collections. Through the use of the exceptions and limitations to the exclusive rights of rightsholders in copyright law, VRRs provide access to restricted collections without permitting further redistribution or copying of those items by patrons by creating a secure viewing environment in which a patron may watch or listen to a piece of media without receiving or easily being able to make a copy of that item for later use. Though there is significant potential for VRRs to effectively fill this gap in access, VRRs that have been developed to-date have been highly customized and siloed systems informed by ad-hoc, hyper-local requirements, and there has not been a list of requirements or considerations to help inform the development or sustainability of VRRs in the professional literature. For a profession struggling with precarious labor and funding, coupled with the evolution of user behavior and expectations, the availability of open-source VRR technology, as well as well-defined legal justifications for broader VRR implementation and use, can provide a tremendous benefit to the cultural heritage field.

Through the proposed project, NYPL seeks to develop and implement key components of open-source VRR technology and legal policy that will both support the creation of a VRR at the Library, and be widely shared with the broader library and overarching cultural heritage communities. Findings and products stemming from these efforts will serve as valuable guiding resources for institutions exploring VRRs as a service model, and will help to facilitate more widespread adoption of VRRs as a sustainable solution to mediated remote access. This project will fulfill the IMLS agency-level goal of advancing collections stewardship and access and the objective of promoting access to museum and library collections, as well as the National Leadership Grants for Libraries program goal of improving the ability of libraries and archives to provide broad access to and use of information and collections with emphasis on collaboration to avoid duplication and maximize reach.

**Project Work Plan:** Project activities will be conducted through concurrent workflows to 1) define the legal policies and framework supporting the VRR and 2) design and implement a key VRR technical component: user authorization. Technical project activities during Year 1 and Year 2 will focus on the development, testing, and refinement of the authorization layer of the VRR architecture; initial stages of authorization development will include determining authorization scope parameters and user profiles. NYPL will hire two part-time contract positions, a Senior Developer and an IT Product Manager, for a period of 18 months to help conduct this work. Both positions will have experience in authorization development and provide vital expertise for building the VRR authorization technology. This work will also

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draw on the existing capacity of NYPL's digital asset management team, including roles across the Library's Digital and Information Technology departments and Research Libraries.

The Principal Investigator for this project will be Greg Cram, NYPL's Director of Copyright, Permissions, and Information Policy, who will oversee legal policy development. Project activities will be overseen by NYPL's digital asset management team members, including a Project Manager, Product Manager, and Program Manager, who will be responsible for the oversight of technical development and meeting project deadlines. Regular check-ins will be conducted with the development team, and key performance indicators will be set and monitored throughout the project. The Library will incorporate stakeholder feedback to inform project design and activities, including VRR-related results from *Lightning the Way* stakeholder meetings, as well as conversations and forums with rights leaders at peer institutions.

In Year 2, NYPL will widely promote the VRR project results through a comprehensive white paper, conference presentations, peer meetings, and webinars. Staff will present legal and technical project results at several national conferences, including annual conferences held by the Digital Library Federation, BitCurator, the Coalition for Networked Information, and the University Information Policy Officers. Additionally, NYPL will conduct outreach targeting peer institutions, with a goal to deliver presentations to approximately 10 peer groups and institutions, including further convening with *Lightning the Way* stakeholders.

**Diversity Plan:** NYPL conducts all program planning through a DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Accessibility) lens. Current models for collections access can present a number of barriers for library patrons looking to conduct research. The requirement to be on-site at a particular location during open hours is a significant and documented barrier to access for those who are resource-challenged, live in areas where research libraries are not located, or who do not have traditional research experience. VRR implementation reduces or eliminates these barriers and promotes more equitable digital access to library collections among a diverse audience. For the next generation of researchers, many of whom are digital natives, this type of digital access will be especially important as the field further shifts towards digital forms of research and production.

**Project Results:** NYPL will develop both the authorization technology and legal framework required of a fully realized VRR capable of providing secure, mediated digital access for library patrons. This proposed project will bring NYPL one step closer towards implementing an operational VRR, a multi-phase goal that will extend beyond the project grant period. By developing a VRR, NYPL will greatly expand digital access to its extensive collections, particularly those that are currently only viewable on-site because of copyright or other restrictions. Overall, the number of collections that would become digitally accessible through the VRR will increase by hundreds of thousands, making these materials within the reach of millions of patrons nationwide.

Moreover, by advancing the legal and technical underpinnings of the VRR, NYPL hopes to facilitate broader development and implementation of VRRs at libraries and other institutions across the country. At the project's conclusion, NYPL will produce a white paper detailing the finalized VRR legal policy, which will be made freely accessible on the Library's website and shared with any library or other institution interested in VRR development. This paper will serve as a valuable informational resource for VRR legal policy and framework that can be easily adapted by other institutions seeking to develop and implement their own VRR. The Library will also release the open-source VRR technology it produces through a GitHub repository, where it can be freely accessed and utilized. While overall adoption of the VRR technology will depend on institution-specific platforms and infrastructure, the open-source model and components developed by NYPL will serve as a meaningful technical roadmap. Ultimately, providing wider access to otherwise restricted library collections will enable a greater amount of research to be conducted by a broader, more diverse audience.

**Budget Summary:** NYPL requests \$500,000 in IMLS funding over two years to support contract costs for the Senior Developer (\$248,750) and IT Product Manager (\$248,750), and indirect costs (\$2,500) at a de minimis rate of 10 percent and exclusive of subcontract costs in excess of \$25,000. Cost share will be met with personnel effort from the Library's digital asset management team, fringe benefits, and travel expenses related to the dissemination of project results.