SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - An alliance including Microsoft and Yahoo says it is fast gaining backers to challenge Google in digitizing many of the world's great books.

The grouping -- the Open Content Alliance (OCA) -- is making its pitch even as Google Inc. and the publishing industry lock horns over Google's ambitious plan to create a digital library.

The OCA, unveiled earlier this month by a group of digital archivists and backed by Yahoo, H-P and Adobe, says it has also signed up Microsoft Corp. and more than a dozen major libraries in North America, Britain and Europe.

Danielle Tiedt, general manager of Microsoft's MSN Search, said the world's largest software maker would fund the digital duplication of 150,000 old books over the next year.

"This is just the start," Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive and the organizing force behind the OCA. "One hundred and fifty thousand books is just an initial test for Microsoft," he said.

Backers say the dream of creating a digital library of the world's greatest books is an homage to the Library of Alexandria, the great repository of books in ancient times.

"It's interesting to see everyone jumping on the digital library bandwagon," said Doron Weber, a program director at the Sloan Foundation in New York, which provides funding for the Internet Archive, the original organizers of the OCA.

Many university libraries have had separate projects to digitize out-of-print works, but progress has been slow.

That changed when Web powerhouse Google unveiled plans last year to work with publishers and five major libraries on dual projects to make many of the world's great books searchable on the Web.
"Google's push has galvanized everyone else," Doron said.

At the OCA's first public meeting, Kahle spelled out his vision for joining libraries, publishers, printers and hi-tech suppliers to create a universally available digital library.

"If we go and bring universal access to all human knowledge it will be remembered as one of the great things humankind has ever done," Kahle said, comparing the potential of the project to the Gutenberg printing press or putting a man on the moon.

COMMON FRAMEWORK

Leaders of the OCA said a host of academic libraries had declared their support for the three-week-old project to create a common framework for digitizing and storing books, photos and video. The new libraries join founding member libraries from the University of California and the University of Toronto.

Canadian libraries pledging support for the OCA include McMaster, Memorial University of Newfoundland, the University of Ottawa, University of British Columbia and York University.

U.S. libraries joining the OCA include Columbia University, Emory University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Virginia, Rice University and the University of Pittsburgh.

"This is really hard. There are reasons why people have never done it. It will take all of the energies of the companies assembled here and many more who have yet to join," said project supporter Gart Davis, president of Lulu Inc., a publisher of out-of-print books that is working with OCA.

Kahle said the project was looking to ensure that the decades-old project to digitize the collections of the world's great libraries does not fall victim to the legal debate between publishers and Google.

Last week five major book publishers filed a U.S. lawsuit that aims to block Google's plan to scan books from five of the world's greatest libraries -- Oxford, Harvard, Stanford and Michigan and the New York Public Library.

Opponents argue that Google's plan to scan books is a massive infringement of copyright, something the Web search company denies, saying its plans are similar to a huge electronic card catalog that can be searched on the Web.

"Google welcomes efforts to make information accessible to the world," Google spokesman Nate Tyler said in a statement. "We're proud that our own Google Print offers people access to a growing diversity of full text public domain books and portions of copyright works at http://print.google.com."

Backers of the Google Print project have expressed their disappointment that the two groups are not working together. But leaders on both sides say it is only a matter of time before the two library projects find common ground.

"I think it's only a matter of time before we reach agreement," said Rick Prellinger, board president of the Internet Archive and the director of the newly formed OCA.
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