

Digital libraries in the service of peace building:
Reflections following WIPO meeting, July 2008.

Memories of nations or groups of people have often been held by their opponent parties, rivals and enemies; even when the battles have long ended, it is often still difficult for researchers and the general public to access their written heritage kept in their opponents' archives. There are ample examples to demonstrate this phenomenon, it is enough to mention the recent discovery of archives in Paraguay (1992), containing vast documentation concerning political actions in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile etc.¹ Naturally, the catalogues of most national archives contain lists of files, books and documentation that are valuable to other nations.

Digitisation of such archival material is one way of preserving this heritage and memories in a way that can be immediately shared across the physical and cultural divides. This is one of the very limited actions that the archivists, guardians of such valuable material can do to contribute to peace efforts and to bring nations closer to each other.

The international community, peace organisations and specialists in the fields of libraries, archives and copyright, must step in and provide help and guidance in supporting such activities and help the construction of digital libraries and archives that promote the exchange of knowledge, ideas and literature and ultimately encourage dialogue. It would be particularly useful to build models of such digital peace libraries that could be later implemented throughout the world.

The collections of millions of pages of newspapers at the Dayan Centre (Tel Aviv University) and Givat Haviva Peace Archive are an example that can be helpful to archives in other conflict areas. The two Israeli archives contain historical newsprints: daily newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines from throughout the Middle East. The collection at Givat Haviva is a smaller yet older one, specifically dedicated to local Palestinian newsprints from Israel and Palestine since the beginning of the 20th century. The Dayan Centre has over 23 million pages of newsprints from throughout the Middle East, diligently collected by the archivists from civil and military sources since 1948. The collection continues to grow daily and demands greater storage areas, cataloguing and archiving; the old papers continue to decay and will not last for many more years.

These treasures are unique in their size and comprehensiveness, a gate to understanding the Middle East in its tormented past one-hundred years. The institutes that initiated the project are keen to see wide use of the material and not have it left in the sole domain of the research community and it is equally important to them that users will be able to access their written heritage freely.

The responsibility of being the guardians of such fragile world-heritage is taken very seriously by the owners, who continue to invest funds in the storage and maintenance of the physical collections. However, it is an international responsibility to provide the

¹ See the website of the Centro de documentación y archivo para la defensa de los derechos humanos (CDyA): <http://www.pj.gov.py/cdya>

measures to turn them from remote libraries, which are not accessible to most of their potential users, into online, freely accessible libraries. It is tremendously important to identify the legal framework to resolve any outstanding copyright issues in order to make this vision possible and help to secure the seed funding to preserve and share this treasure with the world.