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Thoughts on a Digital Library of the Middle East

I am honored to participate in this forum. The creation of a vision and mission statement for a digital library of the Middle East is a tremendously ambitious undertaking. It also raises many questions rather than suggesting an immediate framework. This essay offers some broad areas for discussion based on my experiences with museums, libraries, and international organizations.

In my experience with the Library of Congress' National Digital Library project, I had the opportunity to consider the legal and public policy issues raised by this national experiment with digital libraries. As a new and highly visible effort, we sought to provide and frame materials with appropriate context and struggled with presenting material in a manner that would be useful for scholars as well as general audiences. Until this time, the collections of scholarly environments were accessible to a general audience primarily through its print publications and facsimiles.

In the mid-1990's, the prospect of affordable digital technology opened the doors of buildings like the Library of Congress to a general public beyond scholars. This, in turn, raised questions about context and interpretation that were more typically the domain of the museum community. Scholars approach primary materials with disciplined cynicism: they know to question the veracity of primary materials and to consider them in a historical context. What would a general audience need to make use of the same material? These substantive questions affect technical infrastructure, interpretation, audience, and ultimately budgets. The quality of existing catalogue or descriptive information also makes a significant difference; to fund a digital library program in a meaningful way probably means funding scholars and scholarship to establish or enhance catalog records. Costs and strategy for long term preservation of the digital assets is now recognized as a critical factor in the planning process for digital library projects. All of these are issues that go to how to implement a vision rather than the vision itself.

In 1995 museum professionals still tended to think of 'digital libraries' as being about and from libraries. Today, museums and libraries take 'being digital' as a given. The question is how to accomplish this task. I now serve as the associate director for The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, a research facility with both a museum collection and a special collection library that focuses on design and propaganda from 1880 to 1945. We are housed on Miami Beach, but our audience is international. We have high aspirations for interest in our holdings and plan to make all of our materials available digitally as funding allows. The same attention that goes into care of the physical collections now must ultimately be extended to the generation, organization, stewardship and long-term preservation, of any digital assets. As we think about how to obtain funding to expand the scope of our electronic offerings, we and most other cultural institutions, find that the reality is that our resources stretch to meet the fundamental physical needs. There is recognition of the need to expand scope, yet the basic physical needs must come first. (www.wolfsonian.org)

As the result of this experience, I am now as interested in the 'how' as in the 'why' and the 'what.' These questions should be discussed to be sure that museums, libraries, or any desirable source of content is not deterred from proposing collections (subject matter) by limits on current resources. Some other areas for discussion include:

- Who is the audience for a digital library of the Middle East – and what might this encompass? Is the scope of the material to be derived from, created in or by people from or in the Middle East? A broad, flexible definition will provide some framework. Does the nature of the collecting entity matter (whether it is public or private, a museum, library, or an archive)? What is the focus of the content? Is the definition to be one of geographic source or subject matter?

- Every institution that contemplates digitizing its collections needs to consider its legal and ethical obligations to the works' creators. There are international and national intellectual property laws to comply with. For copyright, limiting offerings to materials from before, say, 1920 would increase the number of items available from the public domain. It is worth keeping in mind though that film and sound recordings are products of the 20th century and are in particular jeopardy given their physical fragility. Their unique ability to convey aspects of life, music, and oral tradition make these materials excellent candidates for a digital resource from both preservation and access perspectives despite the need to address copyright.

- Some collections may hold important intellectual or cultural value may have been removed from their source countries years ago in a manner that would no longer be considered legal or ethical. We need to deal somehow directly with this concern to minimize the risk that important and interesting materials are not offered or included because of concerns of provenance.

- How can this project best be structured to assure trust by users - this is the issue of substantive integrity – 'that the thing is what it purports to be.' There needs to be an understanding the breadth of audience so that the final product or products are trusted by those using them. How does a user know the digital image and information accompanying the image is authentic?

- Ideally this resource might provide something available to anyone with an internet connection at no cost. It is worth considering how and whether a more limited scope say to museums, libraries, archives, institutions of learning (higher or general) for educational purposes (noncommercial) may help proactively address possible legal or sensitivity questions. What are the hubs for information access and learning? Is there a way to tailor the content or framework for different environments to maximize the relevance and access in different locales? A framework for understanding cultural aspects is critical to the legal and intellectual framework.

This effort values and assumes the importance of perspectives from the region of the Middle East. Alexandria and Egypt's role as a repository of learning are a world resource, and this initiative recognizes the importance of bringing that intellectual tradition to scholars and students everywhere.