

Creation and Access to a Regional Library

Richard M. Leventhal

The Williams Director

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

The creation of a Digital Library for the Middle East is an exciting project, large in scale and large in its potential impact upon the dissemination of information. I am also somewhat cautious about such a project as expectations can sometimes be too large and competing interests can often cause problems. However, if a successful model for such a large, regional library can be developed, it can then be replicated in other parts of the world – including the area within which I work – Middle and Central America.

My own perspective on these issues comes from many years of archaeological work in Latin America – specifically within the countries of Central America (Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador). This work included programs with the local and federal governments of these countries along with extensive programs of collaboration and work with indigenous groups of both Central America and North America.

One of the first questions that needs to be asked and discussed is what is meant by the word ‘library,’ or by the words, ‘digital library.’ What is the role of the library? Is a library a repository of material, papers, and things? Does a library facilitate the examination and use of these materials and things?

With a digital library, who are the expected users? Is the library one that exists to create the spread of knowledge and ideas to a wider set of people? Or is a library to be controlled by a small, specialized group.

As will be clear as the reader moves through this presentation, I strongly believe that the creation of a digital library is a moment for inclusion. Groups of people who might feel put off by a Museum or by a repository of papers can be included within a digital library. This is the moment when openness and inclusion must be built into the structure of the library.

Therefore, I would like to discuss some issues that I find critical and are related to the following topics:

1. the creation of and access to such a library;
2. the nature of information and data related to archaeological, anthropological and museological frameworks;
3. intellectual property.

Creation of and Access to a Digital Library

There tends to be three constituencies associated with the creation and use of a regional digital library such as the one being discussed for the Middle East (not including the broad general public that might also be interested).

1. Foreign researchers within the region – generally from North America, Europe, and parts of Asia
2. Local researchers within the region
3. Local groups and indigenous peoples who might be seen as future users and creators of future data sets.

I would argue that a primary purpose and function of such a library is to create greater access and availability to primary data and resources for all of the constituent groups identified above and more. However, a fault line tends to exist between foreign researchers and others within the region related to both the creation of and access to such a library.

Let me present a few examples that might illustrate the existence of such a fault line. With the creation of a large-scale library, I have found in Latin America that many of the foreign scholars and computer specialists focus on the structure and nature of the data-set and focus their energies on the creation of a library that will survive into the future with new technologies and is powerful in terms of structure (metadata) and in terms of search capabilities. These are important goals that these foreign scholars and specialists bring to the table.

However, local scholars and administrators of regional and even national databases have often been trained on off-the-shelf hardware (File Maker Pro, Access, Excel, etc) and have oftentimes created extremely complex database structures that serve their current needs. The conversation between the foreign researchers and database administrators and the local researchers, administrators, and users is often stilted with groups talking past one another at different levels. I have even seen a museum administrator of a national museum in Latin America walk out of such a discussion that would have led to the purchase a major museum catalogue program for his national collection. His disgust and frustration with such a conversation led him to build an Access catalogue system based upon the fields that were part of his old paper catalogue system. It fit his needs, it fit the level of technology available, and, when asked about longevity, he stated, “Microsoft will be around for a long time.” (It is interesting to note that many researchers from North America or Europe often have the same difficult and stilted conversation with their own institution database administrators.)

My comments here are not to emphasize this divide nor to indicate that one or other of the sides is correct but rather to acknowledge the differences and to force us to think

through the process by which these divisions can be bridged. All of these constituents must be part of the final library in its creation as well as in its future growth and use.

Therefore the library must be:

1. based upon structure and principles that relate to long-term usage and survivability into the future;
2. extremely easy to use by many unsophisticated computer users;
3. easily usable via the internet on connections that might not always have the fastest level of connectivity;
4. and must allow the easy creation of new databases or sections of the library that can be developed by local and foreign researchers and users without a huge expense of time or money.

Contrasting Data: Archaeology, Anthropology and Museums

I have recently become head of one of the largest anthropological and archaeological museums in the United States – the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. One of the most things that needed to be examined was the purchase of a new catalogue system for our collection. As we have moved towards the identification of a new on-line catalogue system, we have also found an extremely important and wide contrast between the way data are collected in the field by archaeologists and anthropologists, the way Museums represent data, and the way users might want to use these data.

The objects in the Penn Museum have mostly come from excavations throughout the world and therefore were collected by many different archaeologists, anthropologists and field researchers with different collecting systems, strategies, and research questions. Therefore, as we have moved towards the purchase of a software system, we have needed to look for the system that offers the greatest flexibility in the nature of data, in the representation of object, and in the relationship between objects, data and context.

Museum catalogue systems are often object based with all or part of the information connected to individual objects. Archaeological and anthropological gathering systems relate more to context and the clustering of a few, of several hundred, or of several thousand objects and pieces of information. In addition, three-dimensional database systems, such as GIS, are becoming more and more common within the archaeological and anthropological world.

Therefore, flexibility in the nature of databases and information systems will be critical for this and any library. As stated above, it is critical to connect this library to the users in all parts of the world with high-end computing facilities as well as with low-end desktop computers.

Intellectual Property

I am a firm believer in open-access of information across the web and across the world. At the same time, I work with Native American indigenous groups in North and Central America who would prefer that access to certain types of information be restricted in some way and form. These restrictions exist at a variety of levels and information. For example, some Native American groups would prefer that any uninitiated individual not be allowed to see certain religious icons (similar to the current restriction in the British Museum of the Ethiopian Tabots).

In addition, some issues of access will relate not just to objects but also to knowledge. For example, the knowledge of how some ceremonies are conducted or how particular things are created might be identified by certain groups as sacred information which is not for general dissemination.

A library such as the one under discussion will have to grapple with many of these questions of access. This is not simply a discussion of political correctness in the 21st century. Rather it is really asking the question about the nature of control and the role of the constituents in the creation, use and access to the library.

Final Comments

The strand that runs through this short presentation is the nature of access and the nature of the user for this digital library of the Middle East or any such library. More and more, throughout the world, it is no longer viable to create centers of knowledge and information with limited access. It is essential to think about not only the obvious users and researchers but also to find active ways to include many of the communities and constituencies that often have not been part of such a center of knowledge in the past.

Inclusion of these varied groups is not always easy but if the flow of information is to create wider and deeper communities, it is essential that such a library begin with part of its mission to bring researchers, scholars and groups, normally on the outside, into the core of its creation and use.