

**Defining Parameters & Setting Standards: Concerns Related to the
Archival Content & Users of a Digital Library for the Maghreb Region**

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As someone who has worked as a records management analyst at a federal agency with significant funding for digital projects as well as an archivist at smaller, under-funded cultural institutions, I am particularly interested in the extent to which archival collections and like material will be represented and made available within the context of a Digital Library for the Maghreb Region. Determining the equitable administrative operations of this Library, in addition to the identification of its mission are certainly of paramount concern in these early stages. The following are some random issues that occur to me that will need to be addressed at some point in the implementation process.

Defining the Landscape: Access & Scope

For the purposes of this exercise, I will assume that this enterprise is being undertaken in a spirit of openness and with the overarching principle of providing intellectual access to as many individuals as possible to the most comprehensive range of material available documenting all aspects of the cultural history and life of the Maghreb Region. Care must be taken to avoid creating an unbalanced or incomplete collection. A Digital Library for the Maghreb Region needs to be one which somehow manages to observe whatever political and social realities and sensitivities that may exist but that nonetheless strives to showcase the contributions and views of underrepresented and minority populations. The alternative to this is to produce a less-authoritative, sanitized Library that fails to provide a comprehensive scope of its subject matter. To be sure, a number of current records will be restricted for legitimate reasons, but once the restriction period has expired, plans should be in place to include this material in the Library in due course.

Content Identification

More specifically (and assuming it hasn't been done already), I believe that one of the primary tasks for the participants in this venture is the identification and compilation of a comprehensive inventory of the archival material that is available for inclusion. Obviously, the subject specialists and participants from the various nations that make up the Maghreb Region will have the best grasp on this matter. However, it is important to stress the need to avoid the omission of collections held at smaller repositories, should these exist. There needs to be evidence that surveys have been conducted, and any such material duly appraised to determine whether it warrants inclusion. It may be necessary to create an oversight committee and to draft a set of content standards to provide guidance on this issue, perhaps even one committee per country and another with representatives from all as well as some additional members from outside the region.

It should also be noted that in instances where there is significant overlap of information among records – instances which in effect border on near duplication of content -- that sampling techniques should be employed.

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Copyright, Metadata & Technical Issues

As mentioned above, copyright issues need to be addressed, and provision must also be made for the timely addition of new material once copyright protections are lifted. On the technical side, consideration needs to be made of the extent to which collections have already been digitized – the Library needs to be able to support the existing platforms in addition to providing guidelines for the digitization of future collections. Since digitization is an expensive process, adhering to these guidelines will be essential for obtaining funding.

Even if/once the above determinations have been made, it may be necessary, depending on the levels of funding available, to develop a system by which collections are prioritized for inclusion. On a related note, provision also needs to be made for the inclusion of metadata for collections that for whatever reason cannot or will not be digitized in the near future, but for which metadata, such as finding aids, does exist in some form or another.

In addition to possible varying degrees of existing digitized content, consideration must be made of possible varying degrees of metadata standards. Once again, this is a technical issue that needs to be resolved in the same manner as the issues above. It is imperative, as well, to determine how many languages this system will support.

Standards for Funding of Digitization Projects

Wherever possible, whatever funding that is made available for digitization projects to be included in the Digital Library should be tied to ensuring the preservation of the physical records. In other words, it must be recognized that digitization does not render the long-term preservation of the physical record unnecessary.

User Expectations & Feedback

It may be advisable to assemble focus groups with identified users on a regular basis throughout the process so that they can provide feedback on various aspects of the development of the Library. It is important that the expectations of potential users are not set so high that the project is unable to deliver, and at the same time the system also needs to be flexible enough to adapt to future technological developments.

Delivery & Workflow Issues

Finally, the timing of the delivery of the content of the Digital Library needs to be assessed; how much work needs to be done before opening for business? To what extent can the Library be viable if it is a work in progress? Should it only go live once a certain percentage of the content is available? And how easily will it be for stakeholders to edit, refine, and make additions to the content that they submit? Even with an oversight body, participants will need to be involved in the process.

Conclusion

The prospect of a Digital Library for the Maghreb Region is an exciting one, and I am very much looking forward to being present at its creation and to having my concerns

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addressed by the collective wisdom of the experts that will be assembled for this worthy project. I expect to be challenged as this process unfolds and impressed by the framework that emerges.