

The Middle East Digital Library: Issues of Access

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The impact of a digital library is proportionate to the volume of users, so it is important to address issues that would limit access to MEDL. Three important variables that should be considered are: available digital resources, the users' IT experience, and the potential for censorship. Although the internet is growing in popularity, many people in the Middle East do not currently have access to the most basic computers and even fewer can access bandwidth that will allow for efficient data transfer. Whereas scholars and professionals access digital libraries frequently, local users, if they have digital access at all, are generally inexperienced. Finally, once the first two factors have been addressed, the library still faces the problem that users may be confronted by local censorship.

The most immediate obstacle is the limited availability of computers, so that familiarity with their potential is greatest among members of higher socioeconomic strata. In Morocco, for example, which has one of the highest internet connection rates in Africa, only 8% of households were estimated to have computers in 2002.¹ The growth rate projected at that time was some ten percent per year, but we could reasonably anticipate that this number could have doubled. This level of computer use is unsatisfactory if there is to be widespread access to a digital library. Even regions that have computers don't necessarily have the bandwidth to support document and image downloads. The Alexandria conference speculated on the use of Internet 2, which is currently of limited availability even in the US. Access to MEDL clearly relies on making computers, software, and bandwidth available to users. Although the infrastructure of the data repository is important, the available data will be inaccessible unless MEDL also prioritizes the dissemination of digital resources. Funding limitations make it impractical to suggest that MEDL provide computers for its affiliated libraries, but it could nevertheless form local partnerships to promote computer access. There could be benefit to partnerships with local educational systems where these provide computers in schools. Greater user volume will give the library a wider global presence, and also provide more potential contributors to the library.

Presuming that every potential user has access to the library, the second challenge is to make the interface intuitive for the inexperienced. Search experiences need to be rewarding so that users are encouraged to extend their questioning and to learn to research. The MEDL would need to emphasize user education through clear directions, online support, and discoverability. Discoverability in particular will be useful for return users who find that the library itself makes them more adept researchers. Additionally, an intuitive interface would require area settings allowing each user to search the library in his native language. This could be achieved via localization, which would circumvent differences in script, dialect, and idiom.

¹ www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_1/bahrine/index/html

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Once users are digitally connected and provided with an interface that they can use, the final barrier to access is local censorship. At this level, MEDL must face the larger issue of freedom of information, an issue that is currently extremely sensitive in the Middle East. Governments or other institutions that have a share in data curation may wish to block access to certain information, and could refuse to digitalize in the first place. Denying access to information runs directly counter to one of the primary goals of the library: unrestricted access. If MEDL decides that it would like to avoid censorship, perhaps even at the cost of initial reluctance by some institutions to digitalize their collections, it has two levels on which to work. First, the library's organizers could attempt to persuade member libraries and affiliated institutions to sign anti-censorship contracts along with other shared standards. Alternately, the library could opt to implement censorship resistance technologies that would foil attempts at blocking information. This last barrier to access is particularly important because it would be useless to accomplish the first two objectives only to have users unable to retrieve information. All three of the above-listed problems would undermine the efficacy of MEDL, so the library should consider addressing barriers to access simultaneously to creating the data repository.