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The Embattled UN Depository

Jim Church

Introduction

Last year I wrote a *DttP* column about the United Nations Depository Library System (UNDL), but much has changed since, unfortunately for the worse. The situation has become so serious and the UN Department of Public Information's (DPI) handling of the issue so confusing, I have almost lost faith in UN Publishing. While several advocacy efforts are underway, including a letter-writing campaign from UN Depositories around the world, an ALA Resolution,¹ and collaborative efforts with other nongovernmental organizations, the DPI seems chiefly focused on its short-term financial interests rather than access to UN information. The communications released by the DPI have also been fraught with complexity and inconsistencies. If we support open access to information, we need to rebuff decisions made by the DPI and UN Publications to effectively disband the UN Depository Library System. This article is both a challenge and a plea to the UN to alter course and reinstate a robust UN depository program, to embrace open access, and to foster digital redundancy.

Background

The UNDL dates back to 1947: for a brief history please see my previous column.² The UNDL had been under duress for years, but things began to seriously unravel when in July, 2013, Depository Libraries (DLs) received an email from the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library (DHL) on behalf of the DPI stating that the printing and distribution of material from the United Nations Publications Office in New York would cease. The message also stated that “at the earliest possible opportunity we will provide Depository Libraries with online access to their *standard range of publications* via the UN eCollection, once it is launched. This access will be on the *same fee basis* in 2014 as applied to Depository Libraries in 2012.”³ (author's emphasis).

Nine months later, a “Consultation Paper” entitled *A New Strategic Direction for UN Depository Libraries* was distributed to depositories about the future of the Depository Program.⁴ The paper outlined various options for re-engineering the UNDL and asked Depositories for honest feedback. Librarians responded with their views, which they assumed would be reflected in future UNDL policy. The results were published, in part, in an executive summary.⁵ Of primary interest in the

paper was elaboration about the proposed United Nations E-Collection.⁶

The pricing for the E-Collection, which will not go live before 2015, is not yet set. The current projection, which is not guaranteed and could go up or down, is that the price will be around \$10,000 for a standard annual subscription. The annual registration fee for UNDL status is also provisional. It will include an E-Collection subscription and is currently projected at \$5,000 for libraries in Higher Income states (as defined by the World Bank); \$2,500 in Upper Middle-Income states; \$500 in Lower Middle Income states; and \$250 in Low Income states. This rate will be further discounted by 40% for Depository Libraries registered on 1 January 2014 which pay their 2015 registration fee within three months of launch of the E-Collection. The E-Collection will cover all UN paid publications, initially from 2009 onwards and eventually including pre-2009 publications as they become available in the E-Collection format. The UNDL registration fee will also give access to all other UNDL services—DHL training, assessment and support; branding materials to advertise UNDL status; access to any special UNDL services with the Digital Repository, when available.⁷

From the outset, pricing for the E-Collection and its successor products has been nebulous. But before elaborating further one needs to understand what is meant by a “UN paid publication.” Paid publications include the research output and scholarly communication of the United Nations: examples include statistical annuals like the *Demographic Yearbook*, journals, and scholarly monographs. These titles have long been sold to libraries and researchers and are currently under copyright. Most were distributed to Depositories for years. Publications also differ from UN “documents” which are the official records and working papers the UN produces in the course of its business. UN documents are primarily discoverable via two online platforms: UNBISNet, the catalog of UN documents indexed by the UN Libraries in New York and Geneva; and the ODS, the Official Documents System of the United Nations.

It seemed that the E-Collection could be the Digital Publications Library we had been hoping for. But the issue was complicated because *another* information system, the “UN Digital Repository” was introduced in the Consultation Paper. Using this system, DLs would reportedly have “Access to UN documents and free publications on the UN Libraries Digital Repository, with downloadable files and cataloguing data.” The

other DL privileges and features mentioned seemed unremarkable.⁸ We were also concerned about the limitation for “free publications” which typically implies pamphlets and ephemera (not paid publications). Further detail was provided at the 2015 ALA annual meeting in San Francisco, in a presentation given by Maritina Paniagua, then head of DHL Outreach and Professional Development. Among the highlights included:

- Focus on UN official documents and publications that are part of the deposit. Aim is to provide DLs with digital access to materials received in print.
- The Library aim is to give free access to UN publications to the widest audience possible.
- DLs will be granted access to the full UN publication collection by IP or password.
- Access to Oral History and Maps.
- Metadata downloadable in Marc and Dublin Core.⁹

It thus seemed DLs might be offered a full range of traditional UNcontent on the Digital Repository (documents and publications) as well as new features such as Oral Histories, Maps, Marc Records, and training. We were grateful to see them acknowledge in the presentation that “the value of UN Depository Librarians was critical.” Unfortunately, none of this has yet happened, and since the presentation things seem to have changed, again.

The UN iLibrary and the UN Digital Library

It should be noted that the UN had been working on a (lower case) “digital library” for years, but for various reasons, lacked the capacity to launch one: libraries were given roll-out dates that never materialized, accompanied by advertisements to place orders for it in *DttP*.¹⁰ But the real surprise came when we learned in the Spring of 2015 that the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) would partner with the UN to release the long-awaited product, now called the *UN iLibrary*. Then came the announcement about the price. In an email dated February 17, 2016 from the OECD, we read that “In response to the great interest in pricing for this new platform the details have been posted today on the site, the annual list price has been set at 12,500 USD.”¹¹ Later we were informed that DLs would be given a 10% discount to depositories, for the first year.

People were naturally confused and disturbed about this: DLs were initially quoted a price of \$3000 for the E-Collection, which purportedly offered essentially the same features. Librarians sent messages to the UN and the OECD asking for an explanation. On March 9, 2016 the DPI sent another letter¹²

offering token concessions: “discounts on print publications”; an “annual DVD provided as of early 2016 with selection of sales publications” (yet to be received) and ambiguous language about iLibrary discounts, based, it became clear, on institutional willingness to pay. DVDs are among the least optimal formats for libraries (what is a “selection” of sales publications?); “print discounts” seems ironic, given that DLs previously received this content on deposit. All this demonstrates a lack of clear communication about the DPI’s information dissemination plans and policies.

I serve as chair of the Government Information and Official Publications Section (GIOPS) of IFLA. As this matter seemed of great concern I invited the new DHL Coordinator of Outreach and Professional Development, Ramona Kohrs, to write a paper about the issue for the 2016 IFLA World Library and Information Congress. Sherri Aldis (Head of UN Publication) and Ms. Kohrs subsequently submitted *Access to UN Information in the Digital Era: Reengineering the UN Depository Libraries Programme*.¹³ In the paper, the DHL product is no longer called the Digital Repository. It is called *The UN Digital Library*. The mandate for the system is ambitious: it will “serve as a web portal for accessing UN official documents, publications, maps and audiovisual content, as well as specialized databases, such as speech and voting records, via browseable collections and a state-of-the-art search engine.” In addition, “each collection, metadata record, digital object and search result will have a PURL for stable linking and embedding.” The broad vision is to “deliver the envisaged digital deposit to participating libraries.”¹⁴ Depository librarians will reportedly be able to create custom collections and generate usage statistics.

This sounds wonderful and we hope the DHL will deliver on this. However, it still seems that “paid publications” will not be available on this platform to DLs. Please note this has not been officially communicated to Depository Libraries via the usual mechanisms. And while there was some discussion about the possibility the UN might participate in the LOCKSS Alliance (based on the premise that a distributed network of libraries is best suited to digitally archive content), UN plans about this are still very preliminary. It also seems the feedback DLs submitted to the DHL in response to the consultation paper was not fully implemented. While some results were published in an executive summary, we have yet to see the survey responses. The DPI should release the full anonymized results.

Advocacy

In response to this, a group of international documents librarians at Stanford University, the University of British Columbia, Florida International University, the University of Iowa, and

the University of California Berkeley began an advocacy campaign on behalf of the UNDL. We sent a protest letter to UN Depositories around the world, urging them to send personalized versions to the DPI, and a significant number of libraries did so. As a member of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) I approached the ACUNS leadership during their June 2016 meeting, where they agreed to publicize the issue. The American Library Association, upon the recommendation of its International Relations Committee, passed a Resolution at the June 2016 Annual Conference urging a reinstatement of the UN Depository. In my capacity as the chair of the IFLA Government Information and Official Publications Section (GIOPS) I have brought the issue to the attention of the IFLA President and the Deputy Secretary General of Policy & Advocacy.

But at the end of the day this much is clear. Advocacy may have an effect, but the UN and OECD are looking at their bottom lines. If the current plans proceed the UNDL may end as we know it. Which raises the final question—so what?

Why UN Depositories?

The assumption the UN may be making is they no longer need to finance the UNDL in a digital world. We need to disavow them of this thinking. And many libraries, with an eye on their budgets, might reply they don't need the UN iLibrary, either. Most of the content is available elsewhere on the web: it's just disorganized. The cost of high priced so-called "freemium systems" may not justify the expense. And it is notable that usage data for subscription discovery services has dropped since free versions were introduced.

This is a difficult argument to counter for institutions with budget constraints. My personal opinion is many libraries will not invest in the UN iLibrary, although I stop short in calling them to not do so. The optimal thing would be for the United Nations to unequivocally support open access and fully liberate their content, without all this confusion. The World Bank does this: most World Bank publications are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution License *CC BY 3.0 IGO*. UNESCO also has an open access policy. There is in fact a special IGO creative commons license (see above) with the usual share-alike, attribution and non-commercial options for International Government Organizations.

If the UN fully adopted open access, more users would find this information, to the benefit of their mission. And for the UN there is a clear normative mandate: member governments fund United Nations operations, and global citizens have the right to UN information. United Nations publications support higher education, peace, human rights, culture, and the

environment, among other things. The UN should unambiguously support open access to their content (including "paid publications") or risk becoming an IGO Information Diplodocus. But with or without OA, information does not organize itself. UN Depositories have a role to play. They should receive affordable discovery services with enhanced metadata and search functionality, and participate with the UN in digital preservation alliances such as LOCKSS to advance digital redundancy.

The main reason the League of Nations began its depository program in the 1920's was to spread its message and make their information findable—some actual words were "the depository library provides the means for a dignified propaganda."¹⁵ By working with Depository Libraries as partners (not customers) the UN fosters good will in institutions of higher learning, and by extension the public at large. And taking back what was previously affordable and charging a high price for premium access is a public relations disaster. There are many reasons the program should continue, but rather than elaborate further, here is what the DHL said about the matter in the Consultation Paper: a well-written piece the DPI should re-read and consider.

- The UNDL system remains a relatively cost-effective method for the UN Secretariat to interact with people in the member states.
- The UNDL help fulfil the UN's commitments to transparency to all the world's citizens. Content that is available digitally may still be non-transparent due to the complexity of UN information. The USP (Unique Selling Point) of the Depository Library is its specialist knowledge to help clients connect with UN content despite this complexity.
- UNDL members serve vibrant specialist research communities which make use of UN content, normally as part of much wider research activity.
- The UNDL system has value in terms of prestige and authority, both for the Depository Library (in terms of its collection and status as a UN partner) and for the UN (the association with some of the most prestigious libraries worldwide).
- The UNDL system provides the benefit of "redundancy" in the preservation of UN documents and publications. These duplicates are also a control on the authenticity of documents preserved at UN Headquarters. This role remains relevant even with digital documents.

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8. Features such as "creating links to content that is stored and organised on the DR" as well as "virtual files and cataloging data" were mentioned, but little additional detail was provided.
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