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Author

Church, James

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The Once and Future United Nations Depository

In order to make the documents and publications of the United Nations freely available throughout the world there shall be maintained a system of depository libraries to which documents and publications will be sent without charge under the conditions outlined below.

—Principles Governing United Nations Depository Libraries, December 20, 1955. U.N. Doc. ST/PB/4.

The United Nations Depository is in a state of flux unprecedented in its long history. In July of 2013, UN Depository Libraries received an email from the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library on behalf of the United Nations Department of Public Information, stating that due to a “confluence of circumstances” following damage caused by Hurricane Sandy, the printing and distribution of material from the United Nations Publications Office in New York would cease.¹ Soon afterwards, it became clear that the future of the UN Depository Library System itself was in question. In April 2014, a “consultation paper,” (or survey accompanied by an analysis of the system and options for its future) was distributed to depositories by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. The paper identified “sources of enduring value” of the depository library system, acknowledging the “UN receives a considerable service” through the system’s “specialist knowledge”; its “targeting of specialist researchers”; its “preservation of authentic documents”; and other benefits.² At the same time, options for terminating, continuing, or re-engineering the system were presented. UN depository librarians were asked to respond.

They did respond. A dedicated group of government information librarians lobbied to support the program through GODORT and the American Library Association, and notified the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). One hundred ninety UN Depository Libraries worldwide also responded to the survey, the majority of whom favored re-engineering the program.³ The future of a strong UN digital depository now seems hopeful, although (to this author’s mind) not completely assured. And it struck me, while advocating on behalf of this, that the history and achievements of the UN Depository System are little known, even to international documents specialists. What was the origin of the UN Depository,

and what were its intended aims? How has it evolved over time? And how might this history shed light upon, and help to assure, its strong future?

The League of Nations Depository

To answer this question we need to go back to the League of Nations—a much maligned yet remarkably progressive institution. The pioneering work of the League, its organization, and its publications paved the way for the current United Nations system. The League also had a global depository library program. Its origins and development are obscure, but thanks to the generous assistance of the staff at the Institutional Memory Section at the League of Nations Archives in Geneva, I have been able to reconstruct a brief history.

Several documents from the Archives shed light on this. One dates from May 18, 1923, and states the policy of League Depositories was “inaugurated over three years ago,” which dates the program back to at least 1920.⁴ As of December 1926, there were 76 League of Nations Depositories. The second document, dated June 14, 1935, contains a list of names, addresses, and the extent of material sent to depositories and exchange partners. By then, the number of depositories had grown to 93 “complete” ones worldwide, in addition to others receiving limited categories of publications.⁵

It is clear from the list that League of Nations Depository Libraries only existed in member states. The United States was not a member, and thus had no depositories. All depositories were required to provide public access, although exchanges partners were not. Exchanges received League content in return for publications of equivalent value, but only a handful of US Libraries, including the Library of Congress, Yale University, the University of Chicago, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace had comprehensive exchanges. As of June 1935 there were only six such exchanges in the United States (most were partial, and some only received the *Official Journal* or *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*). Publications from the League were commonly procured via the World Peace Foundation, the authorized US sales agent, until 1936, when the responsibility was undertaken by Columbia University Press.⁷

The League dissolved in April 1946, but the United Nations Library in Geneva, where the League of Nations was headquartered, is the largest in the UN system. And one of its librarians, Sigurd Rasmussen, who worked at the League’s Economic, Financial, and Transit Department (headquartered at the Institute of Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey, during the Second World War), became the first Librarian of the United Nations.⁸

Origin and Development of the United Nations Depository

Sigurd Rasmussen was by all accounts an accomplished and courageous individual. While serving as head of the geographical department at the League of Nations in the 1930s, he provided cartographic information to Danish and British intelligence agencies to thwart the Nazis. He also traveled in secret from Geneva to occupied Denmark to work with a resistance group that “on occasion strung wire, neck-high, across roads frequented by Nazi soldiers on motorcycles.”⁹ He spoke or read about a dozen languages. Fleeing Europe to avoid arrest, from 1941 to 1946 he served as a librarian for the League of Nations Mission at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. In 1946 he became the first United Nations librarian. He lived to be 99 years of age.

Rasmussen was also among the first to advocate for a UN Depository system. In Doris Cruger Dale’s book, *The United Nations Library: Its Origin and Development*, he is credited as supporting this based on his experience at the League.¹⁰ In 1947 Rasmussen announced the inauguration of the Depository System to the *New York Times*, which reported on a plan to build a network of “recognized national and university libraries” that would make access to UN documents and publications free of charge and “act as local research centers.”¹¹ The American Library Association, which attended the United Nations Conference of International Organizations in San Francisco in 1945 was also involved. In May 1947, *Library Journal* issued an announcement stating that “arrangements were made with the American Library Association for twenty-five leading university and public libraries to function as depositories for United Nations documents.”¹²

The original goals of the UN Depository System were ambitious. Early UN documents proposed that depository libraries receive “all unrestricted material printed and mimeographed in the official language requested.”¹³ In the United Nations meeting of the International Advisory Committee of Library Experts in 1948, the committee recommended that “the range of materials distributed be as inclusive as possible including the internal papers of the Secretariat,” further noting that “the libraries of the world constitute an effective channel for the dissemination of information about the United Nations and the specialized agencies.”¹⁴ The first United Nations “Principles Governing United Nations Depository Libraries” (a UN document specifying rules, procedures, and types of content received on deposit) specified that depository libraries “shall receive... all generally distributed printed and mimeographed documents and publications of the United Nations.”¹⁵ In 1964, in the first “Instructions for Depository Libraries Receiving United Nations Material” (ST/LIB/13), there is little mention of content limits.¹⁶ There

are rules for claiming, languages, and deadlines, but few restrictions on the material supplied (exceptions included press releases, confidential or “restricted” documents, provisional speeches, field documents, and other ephemera). As far back as 1972, the “Principles Governing United Nations Depository Libraries” has read “All depositories shall receive automatically, and according to their needs, all publications offered for sale.”¹⁷ The current “Principles,” published in 1995, still specify this.¹⁸ Depository Libraries were thus intended to receive all generally distributed material in the language of their choice (with a few exceptions) and to keep it (again with a few exceptions, for example, superseded material).

Fees and Exclusions

One of the first significant changes to the system occurred when Natalis Tyulina, director of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library, sent a letter to Depository Libraries in 1974. The letter announced a reduction in the number of depositories receiving free and comprehensive collections. Only parliamentary libraries open to the public, libraries providing publications on exchange to the United Nations, and one library in each country continued to freely receive all depository materials. Existing depositories were permitted to “subscribe for an annual fee” (or contribution) to either partial or full depository services. Partial deposit, which included UN Official Records and publications, cost \$500. Full deposit, which included Official Records, mimeographed documents and publications, cost \$800 (developing countries received a discount).¹⁹ When the system was temporarily suspended in 2013, the developed country contributions were \$1,000 and \$1,750 for partial and full depositories, respectively.

Subsequent changes to the system were gradual, but over the years a growing number of UN publications were not included on deposit. In 1973, as noted in the second revision of “Instructions for Depository Libraries Receiving United Nations Material” (ST/LIB/13/Rev.2) UNICEF publications were excluded from deposit. In the third revision (ST/LIB/13/Rev.3) issued in 1977, a growing list of publications, including those from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) were excluded from partial depositories. In the fourth revision (ST/LIB/13/Rev.4) issued in 1981, additional categories were excluded, this time for all depositories.

By the time the fifth (and final) version of the *Instructions* was issued (ST/LIB/13/Rev.5) in 1995, the list of exclusions had grown to over twenty categories, generally classified under UN Sales Publication Numbers III, XX, and O.²⁰ Primarily these were publications from UN Programs, Funds, and Institutes, which have their own sources of voluntary funding and budgets.

The rationale for excluding this content thus makes some sense. Yet I wonder what Mr. Rasmussen and the International Advisory Committee of Library Experts would have thought of this. The United Nations sells many of these publications. What happened to “all depositories shall receive automatically, and according to their needs, all publications offered for sale?” In addition, I also recall (the details are in discarded emails from the 1990s) when selected United Nations Regional Commissions began to cut back on distributing publications to depositories outside their regions. By 2005, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) had limited its distribution to four statistical titles for depositories outside the Asia and the Pacific region.²¹

Current and Future Landscapes

In recent years the shift from print to digital publishing has been inexorable, and the United Nations has been no exception. In 2012 Hurricane Sandy occurred, and since then UN depositories have received almost no content from the United Nations office in New York (a notable exception has been The United Nations Yearbook), although depositories have continued to receive selected publications from the UN regional commissions. There is no doubt that the environment in which we find ourselves is the beginning of a new era. But we still have a role to play. Librarians at ALA and at the United Nations were instrumental in starting this system, and it is part of our responsibility to ensure it continues.

The majority of respondents to the survey in the “Consultation Paper” voted to reengineer the system, transforming the historic print depository into a digital one, and this author agrees. Many of us also welcomed the email dated May 29, 2015, from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library (DHL) stating that “Depository Libraries will receive a comprehensive and integrated service from DHL including distribution of relevant paid/unpaid publications and documents through the Digital Repository”; that “Depository Libraries will have full access to all relevant publications” and that Depositories will receive significant discounts for print as well as a discount on the subscription to the United Nations new “e-Collection.”²² Many of us were also pleased to learn, at a presentation given by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library at the GODORT International Documents Task Force meeting on June 29, 2015, that the Dag Hammarskjöld Library will explore joining the LOCKSS alliance at Stanford University to ensure lasting distributed preservation of its digital content. The new depository (or repository) has just been launched and is in beta. It is named the “Dag Digital Library” (<http://repository.un.org/>). It has a great look, and a nice ring.

But much of what is planned has not happened yet, and I remain concerned about the lack of UN staff dedicated to the depository program: at the time of this writing there were only two people responsible for this, who also have other duties. I also have concerns about the plan for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to provide the platform for the new e-Collection, a subscription service that will be launched separately from the Dag Digital Library. While the OECD has provided invaluable content to libraries for years, they have a different history and mission from the United Nations, and it remains to be seen to what extent this partnership will benefit UN depositories.

It is vitally important that the information of the world’s most important international organization be preserved and accessible. A distributed and redundant network of Depository Libraries offers an effective mechanism to assist the United Nations in making its output accessible through bibliographic control and expert intermediation. It is essential for the UN to recognize the enormous good will this system has generated, and how useful its information has become, because of it.

I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the staff of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library in New York, and the Institutional Memory Section of the United Nations Office at Geneva Library. This article could not have been written without their help.

Jim Church (jchurch@library.berkeley.edu) is the International Documents Librarian at the University of California Berkeley.

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5. United Nations Archives at Geneva. S1682-2. League of Nations Secretariat Fonds. Library Section, Section Files. Lists of League Depository Libraries, 1929–1944, and undated "Liste des échanges", June 14, 1935.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Hans Aufricht. *Guide to League of Nations Publications: A Bibliographical Survey of the Work of the League*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 16.
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 20. United Nations Secretariat. "Instructions for Depository Libraries Receiving United Nations Material." March 5, 1995. U.N. Doc. ST/LIB/13/Rev.5. <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N95/069/74/IMG/N9506974.pdf>.
 21. At the time, one could request ESCAP publications not supplied on deposit be sent, if the depository library paid for the postage. The policy was not widely understood, even by the chief outreach officer at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, and was explained to the both of us over email by an ESCAP librarian.
 22. "Depository Libraries Update." Email message to UN Depository Libraries, May 29, 2015, from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library.