

# Digitization of Near East Materials from curatorial point of view

The goal of the Arabic and Middle East Electronic Library project (AMEEL) was to build an electronic database of Middle Eastern journals, essential for scholarship and international in scope. Because most of the relevant materials were Middle Eastern in origin, the project had to seek cooperation and support within the region.

## Kinds of Materials Selected

1. Material in the AMEEL data base is governed by copyright, with the rights owned by various entities, sometimes academic, sometimes not.

By academic I mean universities—which regularly publish materials in this field. In the case of the AMEEL project, the journals selected were issued by universities in the following countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. Among the notable academic journals are:

- Journal for the History of Arabic Science* (University of Aleppo),
- International Studies* (Tunis).
- *Journal of King Abdulaziz University. Arts and humanities*
- Language and Literature* (University of Algiers)

For inclusion, the journals needed be in the humanities and social sciences and available in good measure at the Yale Near East Collection.

Communications were conducted with university personnel who are in charge of the publications and who have the authority to grant the copyright permission. In some cases I had to meet with them in person during my acquisition trips to the Middle East and North Africa. The curator in a project like this, thus, becomes not only a selector but also a persuader, calling on editors, deans, and even presidents of universities to address their concerns and to urge their cooperation.

Private non-profit organizations also publish important materials. For AMEEL, materials were selected from publications by:

- Mu'assasat al-Mar'ah wa-al-Dhakhirah, (Women & Memory Forum) Cairo.
- Institut des hautes études (Institute of Higher Studies) Tunis.
- Études internationales (Association des études internationales) Tunis

These three non-profit organizations were selected because they specialize in gender, historical and international studies. They cooperated with us because they understood the intellectual objectives of the Project and also because we took into consideration their interests and concerns—we requested permission to digitize their publications only from the first issue until the year 2000. I explained to them that their publications would thus reach a wider audience, free of charge, potentially attracting new subscribers for issues published after the year 2000.

My strategy was always to have an alternative list from the targeted universities and organizations in case I wasn't able to obtain the copyright permission directly. In most cases, this strategy worked and the copyright permission was secured from the universities and from private non-profit organizations. **It is our hope that when AMEEL has become well established and the advantages of inclusion apparent, even more holders of copyright will want their journals to be included.**

## Some benefits of digitization (a reminder)

1. Digitizing the selected materials will make them readily accessible and available free of charge for scholars and researchers in the United States and worldwide via the Internet.
2. Some of these materials are out of print and can not be obtained by libraries that want to add them to their collections. When digitized, these materials will be available to these libraries and their users.
3. The digitized materials will be preserved in an accessible medium. In some cases there will be no need for de-acidification and other preservation and conservation processes. In many publications the paper used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was acidic. But the paper copies of the digitized materials will be maintained and housed in special locations for consultation purposes.

## A further project

Because many older materials in American libraries are available without copyright restrictions, pre 1923 publications related to Middle East Studies should be considered for possible digitization projects.

From a curatorial point of view, materials published before 1923 need to be considered because, in addition to being readily accessible, they are in the public domain. Permission to digitize them—a complicated and time-consuming process to obtain—is not needed. Such materials, however, should still be in demand by scholars and researchers for their intellectual value, and their content should constitute a coherent core. Important examples would include:

- Medieval bibliographical and biblio-biographical sources,
- Medieval Arabic literary encyclopedias
- Treatises on Arabic language, grammar, and rhetoric,
- Arabic lexicons,
- Historical texts etc.
- Historical maps.

**My own institution, Yale University Library, hopes to become a leader in digitizing such older material.**