Digital Library Capacity Building: The INLA, as a Case Study

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Introduction

This paper will focus on several issues, firstly, the state of the INLA prior to its participation in the World Digital Library Project (WDL) as well as the various challenges it has been encountering since the 2003 invasion. These challenges are of technical, financial, cultural and political nature. Secondly, light will be shed on the limits of the INLA's theoretical knowledge and practical expertise in relation to the use of modern technology in cultural institutions, notably digitalization systems. Thirdly, the paper will explain how the INLA joined the WDL and how it made the most of the assistance it received from the Library of Congress. Last but not least, a short survey will be made of the INLA's continuing capacity building efforts, including the implementation of a digital preservation plan and a number of small-scale digital library projects.

Background

The INLA emerged from the chaotic period of April 2003 as the most damaged cultural institution in the country. Its building sustained considerable structural damages. Almost all of its equipment, machines and furniture were either destroyed or looted. Most important, the INLA lost 60% of its archival collections (including historical documents, maps and photographs), 25% of its book collections, (including rare books). The substantial cultural and material losses were a devastating blow to an institution that had already been much affected by years of neglect under Saddam Hussein. A number of substantial reports on the state of the INLA were released. The important ones were commissioned by organizations such as the UNESCO and Library of Congress.

The devastating invasion was immediately followed by endless terrorist attacks organized by al-Qaeda and the followers of Saddam, directed mainly against innocent civilians as well as cultural and education institutions. Two years later, senseless communal violence broke out, especially in the Capital that lasted two years, as a result of which tens of thousands of people were either displaced or killed.

In the midst of a society gripped by ethnic and sectarian conflicts, the INLA's staff worked hard not only to renovate their damaged building or resume all library and archive services but also to modernize their institution technically and organizationally, so that it could serve the true intellectual needs of the Iraqis during highly critical period. The INLA never halted its modernization efforts; even when it was shelled, attacked,

threatened and occupied by the warring sides: the Americans and Iraqi security forces, on the one side, and the followers of Saddam and al-Qaeda on the other side.

It was not easy to maintain the process of regenerating the INLA under such depressing conditions, especially when the INLA lacked the necessary funds and technical expertise and had to deal with indifferent attitudes adopted by successive Iraqi governments.

The long isolation of Iraq under the Saddam rule was responsible for the INLA's librarians and archivists' unawareness of the advances in information and communication technologies that led to the emerging of modern digital systems, which facilitate access to, sharing and preservation of information. Digitalization, as a process of converting physical or analogue materials into an electronic form, was not known by those who served at cultural and academic organizations, before 2003. Only the IT specialists of the repressive security organizations of the former regime had the knowledge to digitalize sensitive security records. The digitalized information was used as a tool to increase suppression and tighten the regime's control over people's lives.

During 2006, the INLA began to pay special attention to digitalization, seeing it as a means to preserve the contents of the microfiche copies of its lost archival collections. The microfiches were in danger of disappearance, due to the damages caused by the fires of April 2003. With the assistance of the UNESCO and the Italian NGO, Un Ponte Per, the INLA was able to obtain two specific scanners, and thus the digitalization works have started as a means of preservation, not as a means of making information available easily to scholars and university students.

Soon after, the INLA began to think seriously about the establishment of an on-line digital library. In October 2006, the Director General of the INLA was invited to visit the LoC, where he was first introduced to the WDL project. The INLA's staff was extremely enthusiastic about this important project. But, the IT department lacked the necessary equipment, theoretical knowledge and the technical expertise. The Library of Congress offered to help the INLA in these two fields. A partner agreement was signed by both of the institutions. In line with the terms of the agreement, on 14th July 2008, we sent four of our staff to the LoC, where they participated in an extensive ten-day training course focused on creating metadata and how to use the Super Scan machine. Almost ten weeks later, the INLA received and installed the equipment and the digitalization works have started immediately and earnestly.

The first item the INLA digitalized and created its metadata for was all 20 issues of *'Majallat Laila'*. It was the first Iraqi feminist journal, edited by an Iraqi journalist, Boulina Hasson, and published between 1923 and 1925. In their efforts to transforming ideas into concrete reality, the IT staff faced new challenges, which required more outside technical assistance. In early April of this year, two IT specialists from the Library of Congress paid a visit to INLA, where they offered their advice on the spot and answered endless technical questions.

INLA's Extension of its Capacity Building Efforts

In the course of dealing with the growing quantity of digital works, our IT staff has confronted some technical challenges insofar as the long-term management of large scale digitalized materials was concerned. It was logical that the INLA would look for practical solutions to these challenges, as the digital materials were in need of processing, storing, preservation and delivery.

To build its capacity and enrich its technical expertise, the INLA has adopted several measures:
1. The INLA has established direct contacts with Iraqi IT specialists, living in exile. These specialists, who work at British universities, have agreed to offer their expertise free of charge to the INLA's IT staff. For instance, direct contacts have now been established between the INLA IT staff and the head and the researchers of the Applied Computing Department at the University of Buckingham in the UK. Both parties have been assessing INLA's technical needs insofar as its digital library and archive projects are concerned. The emphasis has been placed on digitalization systems tools and software as well as database systems.

2. INLA has also attached special importance to the creation of partnerships with foreign organizations to maintain its digital capacity. In 2009, INLA and the Italian NGO, Un Ponte Per, have entered into a partnership to implement a project funded by the EU. The project will reinforce INLA's capacity to speed up its digitalization works and to provide trainings to ten different academic and provincial libraries in Iraq. The trainings will cover digitalization, digital preservation, IT library services and web-site management. As part of the project, the INLA will acquire new digital equipment.

3. At an internal level, the INLA has established good practical relations with Kashef al-Gheta, a private religious-cultural centre in the holy city of Najaf, south of Baghdad. The centre has provided the INLA with two high quality digital cameras and technical advice. Moreover, the Centre has been helping the INLA with the process of transforming the content of its film collections of documents into digital forms.

4. The next step was to pay attention to digital preservation. This was dictated by the growing quantity of digital works. To fill this clear gap in its knowledge, the INLA sent two of its IT staff to London, where they participated in an extensive training course. The two trainees shared their experiences with their British colleagues, and benefited from their knowledge. Immediately after their return, the two IT staff developed a strategy for the preservation and long-term storage of digital content. Thus, digital preservation has been integrated into INLA's library and archival systems.

Other Progress Made over the Last Two Years

Scholars have free access to some of the INLA's online resources through a joint project with the National Information Centre. Forty-seven old periodicals and thousands of

archival materials have been digitalized and made available on-line to the public and scholars alike.

The INLA has set up an off-line (internal) digital archive and a special digital library for 5,000 Islamic manuscripts. The digitalized historical documents constitute 1% of INLA's old archival collection. Monthly, new digital content is being added to the digital library and archive, which scholars and university students can access on-site. The IT staff keeps increasing the rate of the digitalization of new materials, as soon as they acquire new equipment.

At the same time, the INLA has been acting as a catalyst for other Iraqi libraries by raising the level awareness of the importance of digitalization for the tangible cultural heritage of the country and by providing some basic training on digital libraries. INLA has cooperated and worked closely with some important private libraries. As a result, the pace of digitalization has increased.

Challenges

The challenges the INLA has been facing are as follows:
1. The non-existence of any type of cooperation and coordination among Iraq academic organizations. No IT expertise or technical information is shared among Iraqi librarians and archivists.

2. The teaching of library science at the university level is still out of date. The new graduates lack practical trainings on digitalization and on how to make metadata.

3. The continuation of budgetary restrictions.

4. The lack of digital equipment at the local market. Importing this equipment from abroad is not only expensive but also extremely difficult to do, due to outdated government regulations.

5. Terrorist attacks and unfavorable security conditions have made it very difficult for the INLA to bring foreign IT specialists to train its IT staff. Many of the INLA's friends in the West expressed their willingness to come to Baghdad to help the INLA with their practical and theoretical knowledge. The INLA has declined their offers, as it fears for their lives.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it can be said that INLA has made some progress insofar as its capacity building is concerned. We are fully aware that creating digital resources from Iraq is not keeping pace with what is taking place in the rest of the world. We are also aware that we need much more time and efforts to reduce the gap between us and the others.

INLA is still in need of more technical assistance to build an on-line digital library of scholarly resources and to incorporate a wide variety of digital content, including archival collections, periodicals, old and modern books and manuscripts.

In a country that is torn by political and religious divisions, digitalization of different communal cultures offers a way to create one national cultural identity that transcends all boundaries. In other words, we are fully aware that the process of selecting content for digitalization is also a big social responsibility.