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## **The United Nations Depository Libraries System as an “open community”**

### **The ongoing evolution from a knowledge base to a knowledge network**

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#### **Abstract**

Transition to open access is changing how United Nations Depository Libraries are working to serve local communities (researchers and citizens) in accessing United Nations documents and publications. This transition, in course since 2015, is gradually changing the System of Depository Libraries into a knowledge network. Already during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was possible to see the first signs of this evolution into what can be called a *de facto* ‘open community’, gathered around open access instruments like the United Nations Digital Library and the sharing of best practices. Librarians at Depository libraries, who built their own knowledge in spending years in keeping in due order and cataloguing their collection on paper, are now called to improve their skills, to give users new ways to access to documents and publications. The challenge is to keep the paper collection and giving it greater accessibility and discoverability online. In this article we present some projects aiming at making local special collection on paper more “visible” online and more accessible in terms of formats and languages. Following up to seventy-years of accumulated experience Depository Librarians are now not only owners of a cultural heritage, but promoters of it by the advocacy work they are doing inside and on account of the United Nations System of Depository Libraries.

La transizione all'accesso aperto sta cambiando il modo in cui le biblioteche depositarie delle Nazioni Unite operano per coadiuvare le comunità locali (ricercatori e cittadini) nell'accedere ai documenti e alle pubblicazioni delle Nazioni Unite. Tale transizione, in corso dal 2015, sta gradualmente cambiando il sistema delle biblioteche depositarie in una rete della conoscenza. Già durante la crisi causata dall'epidemia di Covid-19 è stato possibile vedere i primi segni di quest'evoluzione in quello che può essere chiamata una “comunità aperta” *de facto*, riunita attorno a strumenti ad accesso aperto, come la Biblioteca digitale delle Nazioni Unite e alla condivisione di buone pratiche. I bibliotecari presso le biblioteche depositarie, che hanno costruito le proprie competenze in anni di conservazione in debito ordine e di catalogazione della loro collezione cartacea, sono adesso chiamati a migliorare le loro competenze per offrire agli utenti nuove modalità di accesso e di scoperta online. In questo articolo presentiamo alcuni progetti volti a rendere la collezione speciale locale su carta più “visibile” online e più accessibile

in termini di formati e lingua. Di seguito a fino a settantacinque anni di esperienza accumulata, i bibliotecari delle biblioteche depositarie sono ora, non solo detentori di una eredità culturale, ma promotori di questa attraverso l'attività di patrocinio da loro effettuata all'interno e per conto del sistema delle biblioteche depositarie delle Nazioni Unite.

## 1. The System of United Nations depository libraries

The United Nations Depository Libraries System was founded in 1946 and formally inaugurated in 1947 by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library at the United Nations headquarters in New York, nowadays the Library belongs to the Department of Global Communications and coordinates the Depository Programme by means of the Outreach Division.<sup>1</sup>

In the past, as nowadays, the System's purpose has been to distribute United Nations documents and publications around the world to local Depository Libraries, which agreed to participate in the Program. So far there are 351 libraries in 135 countries and one territory (Palestine).

Depository Libraries' duties are to receive, catalogue and keep in good order official documents (called "Official records") and periodicals both copyrighted by authors working for the United Nations System (called "Sales publications"), and open access publications (or United Nations' copyrighted publications). Periodicals contain the Organization's scholarly communication products, to which Depository Libraries grant public access for consultation, by means of their daily activities.

Today, a further duty adds to previous ones, as «depository librarians are encouraged to provide access to online and research tools for UN material and information, and to provide support to researchers in the use of those tools and resources» ([5]).

Since 2015, considering comments gathered after the submission of a questionnaire to Depository Libraries, the System is evolving gradually, moving from the paper collection to online one, always keeping the paper one in due order and at disposal.

The library at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano has been part to the System since 1969. The local special collection of United Nations documents and publications was founded by an International Law professor, Professor Giuseppe Biscottini, who asked the library to take part into the System, to collect United Nations documents and publications and put them at the disposal to students and researchers. At the beginning of the Seventies, a reference room was dedicated to the consultation of the collection and was located at the Political Science Department.<sup>2</sup>

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1 The United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library [website](#).

2 The reference room was created after an agreement reached among three professors belonging to the Schools of Political Science and Law: Professor Giuseppe Biscottini, Professor Gianfranco Miglio and Professor Luigi Mengoni. For an history of the local special collection see [10].

### ***1.1 Main reforms and developments***

Already in the early Seventies, the Depository Program was submitted to a first reform aiming at reducing the number of documents sent to Depository Libraries. Some publications of United Nations funds and programs and in particular the United Nations University periodical were removed from the shipping list.

In 1974 because of the greater number of Depository Libraries participating to the System, it was further transformed from a collaborative one, based on publications' exchanges, into a contributively one. Except for one library per country, normally the national central library, all other libraries in the same country and belonging to the System, had to pay an annual contribution to participate in printing and shipping expenses.

Gradually, since 1992, documents were put at disposal also online, the process started with the first database hosting official documents: the United Nations Official Documents System ([ODS](#)).

After being a prototype for some years, the database became effective in 2005. At the beginning it contained only digital-born documents, or documents published after 1993, by means of some digitization projects, in 2016 the database was updated with some digitized documents published before 1993.

Two more databases were launched in 2007 and 2008, the [United Nations Treaty Series database](#) and the [United Nations Data web-based data service](#). The “Treaty Series”, as the “Statistical Yearbook”, were two of the Sales periodicals (with a Sale number, so at costs) distributed on paper inside the Depository Libraries System till 2013.

In 2013, the United Nations Publications Board announced that due to Hurricane Sandy's damages and budget constraints, no more print documents or publications would be published on paper and be sent from the New York headquarters and that a transition to a “primary” electronic deposit would soon be implemented.<sup>3</sup>

Following this decision, an official “consultation paper” was issued in April 2014 on the new strategic direction for United Nations Depository Libraries (see [4]). From 2015 on, a gradual evolution to digital collections was pursued using several digitization projects covering specific contents.

In June 2016 the Publications Board declared that public access to information would be improved by the two new digital repositories: the United Nations Digital Library and the United Nations-iLibrary.

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3 The Hurricane Sandy hit New York City between the end of October and beginning November 2012 destroying the United Nations printing facility at New York headquarters. For an historical reconstruction of Depository Libraries Programs see [1], [2] and [3].

It was the [UN-iLibrary](#) who came first in February 2016. Depository Libraries were invited to subscribe to the new Institutional Repository online at cost (with a discount), in addition to the already existing contribution, which wasn't dismissed but only reduced.<sup>4</sup>

This communication created a vivid debate inside the Depository Libraries community, as when the news was first announced, it suggested, in some ways, the idea that the UN-iLibrary would be “the” chosen instrument for the electronic transition of the System and this had to be done by paying a further subscription to sales publications, when, at the time publications were sent on paper, their subscription was comprised into the annual contribution to the program.

Finally, in May 2017, the second repository was launched, the [United Nations Digital Library](#), where both official documents and open access publications were put at disposal on electronic version for free. Since, the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library has continuously promoted the improvement of digital tools and services around what proved to be more than a repository but a full Catalogue. The United Nations Digital Library substituted the previous United Nations online Catalogue UNBISnet.

As a direct consequence nowadays, Depository Libraries are also asked

to direct and advice researchers, policymakers, civil society groups, and the public on where to find UN information and data, and how to use numerous print and online resources, research tools, and databases. ([6])

During Covid-time the Program developed in a *de facto* ‘Open Community’, aiming to use more online instruments, transforming the System from paper to digital collections and related online services, this because at that time ongoing pandemic lockdowns were spread around the world. All this without dismissing the historical paper collection, as still useful for enabling the study of materials non yet digitized (see [6]).

The cooperation took place under the leading role of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library which provided information on United Nations celebrations days, on Sustainable Development Goals, webinars for continuing education and training, research guides on specific topics and updates on digitisation projects. The community participants cooperated showcasing in a dedicated

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4 For copyrighted publications (or “Sales publications”) online access is offered by the UN-iLibrary, created in partnership with the OECD. Usually, sales publications are published in the dedicated webpages on institutions’ websites, the repository offers, as one could read on the website in 2016, the service of being «the first comprehensive, global search, discovery and dissemination platform for digital publications and journals published by the UN Secretariat, its funds, and its programs. It also offers additional services such as a new citation tool, D.O.I., multilingual content, and the capability to make content searchable through chapter level indexing». The time-series coverage is the big limit of the repository, as many historical volumes are not covered, unless having been made the object of a digitization project. Also, current issues take time to be published as they must be processed first (indexing). The website was updated in December 2020 giving more visualization tools and incorporating a new feature: an interface in all six official United Nations languages and a search feature by Sustainable Development Goals. Cf. [Un-iLibrary website](#).

depository libraries website their activities for an active best practice sharing and mutual suggestions and influence.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nations Depository Library system as global framework helped also to implement further bilateral cooperation projects, as for instance the exchange of documents to complete each other collections. This happened to our Library that received from UNOG Library at Geneva a League of Nations periodicals collection published in Italian language useful not only to complete the local collection but offering also to a local Archive with which a cooperation was in course.<sup>6</sup>

### *1.2 Ongoing challenges*

Since the introduction of the United Nations Digital Library a double change in accessibility must be registered inside the System: not only from paper to online, but also from subscription-based to open access to publications.

However, introducing at first a repository for sales publications at cost as a tool to move online resulted misleading, moreover that Depository Libraries in Europe were still receiving some publications (both official records or documents and periodicals) on paper, sent by the Distribution Division at UNOG (United Nations Office in Geneva).<sup>7</sup> Electronic versions of sales publications were, and are also nowadays, at disposal for free online at the official websites of the institutions publishing them (mainly current issues, but also some archives, for instance for publications hosted in the ECLAC repository).<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, instead of subscribing the UN-iLibrary repository, our local library with a project lasting from 2015 to 2016, updated local bibliographic records of United Nations periodicals and connected the collection on paper to the electronic version at disposal in open access on the publication pages of each institution. A visualization of metadata was produced to enable navigation from paper to online by a “virtual shelf” reproducing the users’ experience in consulting the shelves online outside the dedicated reference room containing the paper collection (called “Sala ONU”), at the only condition to be in campus.<sup>9</sup>

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5 The Depository Libraries Activities website at that time was hosted on [Findery](#), the free social media was used as a pilot project for its visual map format. Previously published contents are now at disposal in the Depository Libraries monthly newsletter.

6 See [10] for a description of the above-mentioned cooperation project.

7 Up to the Covid crisis, we were still receiving some of those documents on paper, the shipping stopped with the crisis.

8 The ECLAC is the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which created an open access repository for periodicals, the repository [official website](#).

9 See the [webpage](#) of this electronic resource in OPAC called “Sala ONU”. Some information, as for instance visualizations and table, are retrievable only in campus, others, or periodicals titles and web address are at disposal of anybody.

The virtual representation of the collection, as put on the shelves, enables users to reconstruct journal evolution over time, consenting the experience of perusing issues chronologically on the shelves and enabling to directly go to the bibliographic record to make a consultation request.

The linkage between the two versions (paper and online) was done using the UNOG instrument “Global search”. As a Depository Library settled in Europe, our Library received a greater part of documents and publications from Geneva and Geneva Library’s Catalogue was adopted as the main reference for this work. Moreover, accessing the open access version of these publications was possible because publications produced in Geneva were copyrighted by Genevan institutions.

For publications issued in New York and previously received on paper, we had to wait for the development of the second repository: the United Nations Digital Library. For Sales publications retrievable only at the Un-iLibrary, we asked to users to consider the “e-read” version at disposal for free on this repository, or eventually ask for the paper copy retrievable from deposits.

During the Covid 19 crisis, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has continuously promoted the improvement of digital tools and services. Offering them more online (i.e training webinars, virtual events, electronic communications, etc.), but also making the United Nations Digital Library central to a bunch of new services as: informational and promotional materials, research guides, *ad hoc* consulting on how to use the Digital Library and dedicated webinars.

All these materials were shared using a series of email alerts containing information as: United Nations days celebrations, updates of digitisation projects, availability of new publications. All contents reusable against simple citation. Nowadays a monthly communication has substituted the emails exchange.

During the lockdown time, the United Nations Digital Library resulted precious both in enabling access to documents and publications, but also in terms of availability to users worldwide, increasing by this way open access offer. Moreover, in the case of publications, if periodicals are at disposal in open access, a link called “UNPAY wall” leads directly from the bibliographic record to the open-access version at disposal online.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, in 2021, the United Nations Digital Library was awarded the “*Jus Gentium* Research Award”, by the American Society of International Law as a

«one-stop shopping» for primary documents crucial to most areas of international law.<sup>11</sup>

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10 For further information on the Unpaywall visit the United Nations Digital Library News [website](#).

11 The news on the prize, visit the United Nations Digital Library News [website](#).

## **2. Making cultural and intellectual heritage accessible and transmissible**

GLAM are cultural heritage institutions dealing with cultural heritage transmission, they are, as stated in the acronym, Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums. In the last decades, they were engaged in using digital means and create

digital surrogates of their artefacts or holdings, ([12]: 14)

to make them more easily available to researchers and the public.

In the meantime, also research libraries have made their special collections on paper more discoverable using services linked to those collections, a recent analysis states that for instance there is

an increasing interest in collecting ephemeral and grey literature,

so

that many additions to library collections look much more like special collections. ([17]: 10)

Those special collections contribute to knowledge creation using their potential in terms of data (metadata) and or primary sources to be used eventually, also for teaching purposes.

Moreover, working on paper collection, as to make them more discoverable online through completing metadata cataloguing or linking the paper version to the free online version, it has the undoubted advantage of valorising periodicals already subscribed in the past or official documents received under a cooperation project, adding the information of their availability also online *via*: open access resources or because documents falling under the public domain, avoiding by this means the costs of subscribing commercial repositories (as the Un-iLibrary, but there are also others as Hein online), nor paying for duty management rights, when choosing as in this case to valorise official documents at disposal under the public domain.

This is what our Library did first with the project above mentioned retrieving the link to the online open access version of the local special collection of ephemera, or United Nations periodicals and with the following project held in 2018 aimed at cataloguing a special collection of United Nations official records received from Geneva, parliamentary documents (covering different periods, but mainly 1982-1994), with the main purpose of using this special collection for teaching purposes, to show to students how documents were printed and disseminated in the past during trainings on United Nations resources.<sup>12</sup> This project reflects one of the purposes of the depository libraries, namely that «UN depository libraries maintain historical collections of

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<sup>12</sup> For more details on the project see [10].

UN materials and make these materials available to all users. This resolution makes easier the study of materials that are not yet digital» ([6]).

In the above-mentioned document, we also read that

Multiple collections of UN materials in locations around the world also help to preserve the UN's intellectual heritage and historical record of its work. ([6])

Since 2019 the receiving of the printed version of those parliamentary documents from Geneva was discontinued by our library in agreement with the Printing Department at UNOG and in accordance with the Statue weeding rules. Since 2021, the Printing Department in Geneva discontinued the shipping of open access periodicals issued by institutions and Commissions actives in Geneva.

### ***2.1 A huge and heterogenous cultural heritage***

Up to seventy-five years of cultural heritage (official documents and periodicals' paper collection) is a huge responsibility for a library as the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, or any other of the depository libraries, to this nowadays it adds the digital-born or digitized heritage as well, as all the contents of the United Nations Digital Library.

The United Nations Digital Library collects a catalogue of bibliographic records related to Official documents. It is also an access point to open access periodicals (texts included), also using the Un-paywall. It offers data collections: a database of voting records collected during General Assembly sessions, and a collection of texts of speeches held during General Assembly sessions, and finally maps enclosed to International Agreements between the United Nations States.

In the case of the UNOG, the United Nations Office in Geneva, the library heritage counts in terms of library collections for more than 100 years, as the library was created at the time of the League of Nations. Local cultural heritage also covers the Archives of the League of Nations, International Peace Movements' Archives and private papers, a Catalogue of Archival Funds and collections and the ongoing project called LONTAD, the "Total Digital Access to the League of Nations Archives Project" aiming at ensuring free online access and digital and physical preservation of League of Nations documents from 1920 to 1946.<sup>13</sup>

Since 1947, in the UNOG premises there is a museum, nowadays called the United Nations Museum Geneva and numerous art collections spread around different buildings, which now have been collected in their Catalogue: the "Artworks Collection" Catalogue.<sup>14</sup>

The access to this complexity in terms of typology has been resolved in Geneva by the "New Global search", or the

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13 The LONTAD project [webpage](#).

14 As the museum has been renamed in 2015, it hosts League of Nations' documents and artefacts regularly showcased during exhibitions. See the United Nations Museum Geneva [website](#).

single point of access to the UN Library at Geneva’s print and electronic collections,

whose search results are produced by a multi-layer (Primo) browsing in different sources and creating a “global” index accessing to the “federated research”, or research on different catalogues as the artworks Catalogue above-mentioned.<sup>15</sup> This search approach is called an “exploratory one”.

To this instrument it has been added, as classical index search is still possible, or search by the “exact match” approach, a new filter to find out and select resources curated by librarians called “Featured Topics”. As sometimes search can be difficult without having previous information, those “curated lists” enable to search for resources by keywords suggesting users the appropriate one leading to some results.

The idea behind the GLAM approach is to put things in context using digitalization, but also by giving more contextual information, for instance, research guides or search suggestions as lists of results organized by subjects, or by aggregating specific keywords as above mentioned. The more metadata are put at disposal to describe special collections, the easier becomes making information discoverable and available, moreover in the

new digital workflows and environments.<sup>16</sup>

This is the reason why in commercial databases it is recently spreading the practice to offer to users ways to browse results using “text analysis” instruments tackling the database as a *corpus* or research guides organized according to stated results and assorted with explanations and bibliographies to give a further context.<sup>17</sup>

According to this, we will present in the following paragraph an ongoing project of resuming from deposits our local historical special collection of United Nations Official documents (1969-1994), belonging to the first twenty-five years of participation to the Statute of Depository Libraries.

## ***2.2 The methodology: finding and sharing data***

Our local collection consists of official documents and periodicals received in more than fifty years of participation to the Program. To celebrate the above-mentioned anniversary, we decided to revamp the collection working on the two main elements: periodicals and documents, to give

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15 See the “New Global Search” [webpage](#). Another search instrument put at disposal to users by the Library and Archives at Geneva are research guides organized by subject, [website](#).

16 In a recent blog, Lorcan Dempsey explains how metadata should improve in the future to enable to make more connections between entities and creating new knowledge. See [8]. See also the ALLEA Report 2021 when at page 18, it is said that the richer are metadata the better the dataset is contextualized and so easier to be discovered and reused. See [12]. This is true not only for datasets but for all forms knowledge may have.

17 In the scientific area of international law some examples of this commercial databases are Lexis Uni, Vlex and Lex Mundi.

our users by means of different projects, more and new forms of accessibility, also online. In paragraph 1.2 we have already briefly mentioned the first project concerning periodicals, to which followed another project aiming at retrieving a peculiar special collection of parliamentary documents (see paragraph 2).

In this paragraph, we present the further ongoing project: retrieving our historical documents collection of United Nations Official documents (1969-1994) connecting metadata found in the ancient cardboard catalogue, or in documents on paper, to digital metadata as accessible in the United Nations Digital Library.

First, we searched data in the United Nations Digital Library catalogue using the MARC 21 encoding system to do the retrieval. The MARC standard or Machine-Readable Cataloguing is an interoperable metadata standard commonly used by libraries, and the one used both at our library and the United Nations Digital Library. Because it is a well-spread metadata standard, there are nowadays new ways to use this standard, not only for classic cataloguing purposes, but also for information retrieval. Those new usages are possible thanks to the MARC standard diffusion and interoperability (see [16]).

One of the dedicated trainings of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, to enhance the use of the United Nations Digital Library, is to do search and download metadata in the catalogue building queries using MARC 21 fields and sub-fields, as an information retrieval instrument. MARC 21 fields are descriptive fields of the contents of the metadata describing them by units, f.i. author, title, call number. They work attributing a label (the heading) to each field (the corresponding data).<sup>18</sup>

This information organisation enables to recur to information retrieval techniques to build one's database of references (metadata) and to do on it further analysis, for instance, qualitative analysis doing text analysis on titles (content analysis), or other quantitative analysis, as: how many preparatory documents have been produced on a specific topic, which Member States voted, which type of documents have been adopted and how many final official documents have been adopted.

The underlying retrieving logic to this text and data-mining technique is based on organized information familiar to librarians. In Cataloguing agencies back-offices, cataloguers have always been using this standard to organise information with the aim to create indexed lists of aggregated results to collect common contents, both for information retrieval purposes, but also to find out errors and to ensure by cleaning data an internal consistency, considering the catalogue as a comprehensive database.

In some ways librarians have always been (meta)data curators with the difference that instead of working in batch, as nowadays data curators do, they have been working mainly on singular records or selected lists of limited records.<sup>19</sup>

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18 The Digital Library allows to export metadata both in the MARC 21 and MARC XML format.

19 We own this straightforward distinction between cataloguing librarians and data curators to Luis Martínez-Uribe, Data Scientist at [DataLab](#), Library-Research Support Center, Fundación Juan

Opening these techniques to the public allows everyone to discover data using MARC 21 fields, or, in other words, to start to do some ‘metadata literacy’ which is part of the broader ‘data literacy’, or instructions to make users more acquainted with using data.

This is also a way to revamp the use of online catalogues as information retrieval tools, even more important in an era in which online catalogues are “discovered” by multi-layers, or searched by search engines and algorithms enabling users to search easily by keywords (this is made more powerful by accessing to more sources and electronic full texts), but preventing them to know how catalogues are organized (by indexes) and making them fully autonomous in doing search.

Once found the corresponding record in the United Nations Digital Library we linked it (as an eventual reference), with the local catalogue record. The link is done by a pivotal local record that connects the paper version (in French) to the online bibliographic record (in English) which gives access to all the available language versions (up to the six United Nations official languages).<sup>20</sup> The pivotal local record is created manually, record by record and it is crafted from the starting point: the presence of the record in the local special collection on paper.

For “presence in the local paper collection”, we mean both in the cardboard catalogues as a bibliographic record and in the local deposits as a document on paper.

The reference made in the local record to the United Nations Digital Library has been done according to the United Nations Library Data terms of use

The Dag Hammarskjöld Library [...] creates content, data and metadata related to UN information, resources, publications, and documents [...] ».

The library is

«committed to making its content, data and metadata available through open access to support information and knowledge sharing, learning and research, and to foster international cooperation [...] against appropriate acknowledgement.<sup>21</sup>

In local records, acknowledgement is clearly stated and there is a reminder of terms and conditions of the United Nations Digital Library. The aim is to refer to an eventual open access online version available through United Nations Digital Library metadata.

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March, as he explained in a discussion during an [INCONECSS](#) community meeting, on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

20 United Nations official languages were five in 1946 (Chinese, French, English, Russian and Spanish), they became six in 1982 with Arabic. As for working languages, they have a different adoption timeline depending also on the body accepting to use them as a working language. Roughly English and French were used since the beginning, Spanish and Russian were added between 1948 and 1969, Chinese and Arabic were further added between 1973-1980. See [7]. However not all documents are issued in all official languages because this depends on the rules of procedure of each organ determining documents typology and in which language the documents have to be issued.

21 See the United Nations Digital Library’s terms of use [webpage](#).

What is not allowed by the United Nations Digital Library [terms of use](#) is web scraping and/or automated downloads of content from the United Nations Digital Library.

But this is not the case, as the retrieval was done by hand and not in an automatic way, no data download in batch has been applied, nor any Z39 protocol to exchange data has been used.

Local pivoting records have been created manually record by record with the aim to curate them in a classic cataloguing way to do a “stewardship” work on metadata, aiming at giving further accessibility and discoverability to the special local collection.<sup>22</sup>

### *2.3 first results*

When it is the matter of special collections, f.i. archival materials or similar ones, as for instance our local collection of United Nations official records published as masthead documents, most of the time it happens to deal with uncatalogued material, or material that has not been converted in the new online formats.

United Nations documents and periodicals collected in the Seventies up to the Nineties in our library belonged to this case, they were catalogued with the ancient cardboard system and only partially converted in the new cataloguing online formats. The online cataloguing was done considering only information present in the cardboard record and not on the document on paper. This implied that most of the time the lack of metadata filled in the online record jeopardized the discovering of the information on the online catalogue.

The project aims to reconstruct the official documents collection as it was at its very beginning to answer to some questions as: what effectively was received at that time, when shipping was made by mail inside Europe (mainly from Geneva and Vienna), but also overseas (from New York), how this material was treated locally: which kind of cataloguing rules applied, how classification by call numbers was organized, how materials were put at disposal to the public for access.

We had already an idea about what a depository library settled in Europe received in terms of periodicals (the previous project), but not exactly in terms of official documents (the second project interesting only a limited time coverage: middle Eighties-middle Nineties). In the Depository Library Statute, it is said that depository libraries receive materials from regional commissions working in the same geographic area as the one in which the depository libraries are settled, but what did it mean in terms of a local collection evolution?

We chose the very first period of our collection, also because it is the one that hadn't still been converted in our OPAC, nor has a full coverage online by the United Nations digitisation projects. United Nations digital-born documents are available since 1993 and digitisation projects are made according to specific needs, moreover they are still in course, and they are done

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<sup>22</sup> A definition of data stewardship says that it is the process engaging different actors aiming at offering: data management, data preservation, data publication for sharing purposes, in compliance with local policies, legal requirements, and ethical standards. See [15]. Although, this is what has always been done by OPAC, or online public access catalogues, that offers managing, preservation, publishing and sharing of metadata according to libraries' organisation and policies.

periodically on specific bases. Bibliographic records too are not complete in terms of metadata, because the UNBISnet, the first Dag Hammarskjöld Library’s online Catalogue, was created only in 1979.

The project should have as aim to fill in the gap in metadata availability online, from the starting point of the local paper collection and by this way making it more accessible and discoverable. The project is an ongoing one, but some preliminary results are already at disposal.

For instance, to answer to the question how documents were organized, we can say that local classification of documents was done according to issuing bodies (organs), and by session/year, respecting the Statue rules for cataloguing documents.

Call numbers were created accordingly to the organ (for instance the call number ONU-A-1 stands for General Assembly documents), sub-classification inside the call number reflected documents typology (for instance: parliamentary meetings, reports, resolutions, ...).<sup>23</sup>

According to the United Nations Depository Statue, United Nations document symbol was quoted in the cardboard record and local call number was partially reflecting it (for instance letter A stands for General Assembly). Finally, documents were gathered chronologically into folders and those folders were put at disposal for consultations to the public in the reference room dedicated to the collection.

Having collected documents in folders, transformed in some ways the nature of our library holdings into an archive, this was done to make consultation easier. Nowadays, for preservation purposes, folders have been substituted by boxes and ancient call numbers, no more in use, were substituted by United Nations document symbols. In the bibliographic record, in the item section, a metadata (technically called *olim*, from Latin ‘once’) keeps track of the former call number.

At the time we are writing this article we completed the first local call number’s documents and began the second one. We were able to retrieve almost all the documents in the United Nations Digital Library, but as we imagined some online full texts were missing, as some cataloguing metadata too. In those cases, if eventually the text could be retrieved outside the United Nations Digital Library, but always inside the United Nations System, we retrieved a paper version (normally on United Nations organs or bodies webpages dedicated to publications or sources), in the case of metadata the main loss was the loss of the metadata in the French language version.<sup>24</sup>

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23 For the whole range of United Nations documents symbol please see the official document “[United Nations Document Series Symbol](#)”.

24 Some examples of missing metadata are the official documents having as United Nations document symbol: A/BUR/SR. (...), titled in French as “Comptes rendus analytiques des séances [...]”, in English “Summary records [...]”. They are documents issued by the United Nations General Assembly, General Committee, whose document type is summary record of meetings. They are absent for the years 1968-1975 in the United Nations Digital Library. A case of missing text is the one of UNCITRAL’s “Legal guide on drawing up international contracts for the construction of

In 1969 when our local collection was constituted and it was possible to choose between French and English as the language for the deposit, our collection founder Professor Biscottini chose French, instead United Nations Digital Library metadata are only in English.

One of the main aims of this project is to connect our paper special collection in French to the Digital Library record in English, to enable users to retrieve the document online in any of the United Nations official languages nowadays at disposal and making them more accessible.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. From a knowledge base to a knowledge network

A special collection, like the one we described in this article, consisting of documents and periodicals, part archive, part library collections, deserves knowledge management to deal with. Most of the time it is a matter of uncatalogued and unprocessed material, which has to be, not only preserved, but also described, shared and made accessible. This is not new, as normally, special collection stewardship asks for specific ongoing activities which usually are: cataloguing, processing and description, preservation, and conservation, eventually digitalisation and reformatting, finally storage and maintenance (see [14]).

The stewardship has to be done by a knowledgeable staff, not only a qualified staff, as stated in the Depository Libraries Statue, because nowadays the staff has to be able to deal with the complexity of the material (archives and library), always being updated on accessibility sources according to their evolution (from paper to online), being able to filter reliable information (underling differences between sources and indicating authoritative ones), being eager to properly curate the information putting it into a context to make it: comprehensible, intelligible, retrievable and reusable, and by this interoperable (see [16]).

During the time, the collection has become a cultural heritage to be transmitted to next generations, holding a potential multiplying effect, consisting in all the intellectual property contained (produced by United Nations institutions, organs and authors writing about it), which could produce more knowledge and more intellectual property by means of further publications produced (scholarly communication), or a research value.

As stated in an already quoted document:

Many UN Depository Libraries are located at a major research institution [...] can ensure that UN-generate knowledge reaches researchers, [...] to be studied, [...] analysed, and integrated into scholarly work. ([6])

This is possible using the advocacy activities that Depository Libraries do on behalf of the United Nations locally, because a collection is truly valuable, both for research and for social

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industrial works”, metadata are at disposal, but the pdf is missing in the Digital Library, however the pdf can be found and freely downloaded in the UNCITRAL official website.

25 For an idea about the project (still ongoing), cf. the OPAC page “Raccolta storica 1969-1994” [website](#).

information, only when it is available. As it is said in the Depository Library Statute, depository libraries

make the material received accessible to the general public, free of charge, at reasonable hours,

or

[m]ake the material received available through interlibrary loan, document delivery, photocopying or other means to users who cannot easily visit the depositories concerned.  
(5)

The research value in the case of a United Nations documents and publications collection is also a social value, as by the System of Depository Libraries all this knowledge is put at disposal of local citizenship. But nowadays ensuring a social value consists also in engaging the user/viewer with good communications activities transforming the cultural artefacts (books, papers, pieces of archive) into further knowledge.

The research value is possible if there is a former communication answering to specific information needs (information retrieval) on a complex knowledge base, consisting of repositories (containing data and/or publications), archives, libraries catalogues, making contents discoverable putting them into a context and transforming a cultural object into knowledge. For a knowledge base to become a knowledge network, or a «distributed knowledge network» as the Depository Library Programme is, it is necessary to

incorporat[...]e] capacity building and diverse education and outreach programmes.<sup>26</sup>

Or, in other terms continuing the trend already started consisting in what we called a *de facto* “open community” sharing good practices made of training, exchanging, consulting.

An example of those further developments is the monthly letter of depository libraries published since July 2021, that took the place of the former email alerts received during the Covid crises. Significantly, the newsletter last rubric is called: “Test and share your knowledge”, where information retrieval suggestions on the United Nations Digital Library are provided and exchanged to build more skills inside the System.

This is possible because Depository Libraries have already “knowledge commons” consisting of the United Nations institutional knowledge, intellectual property, and historical records.

In UNOG website this idea is already a reality as the Library and the League of Nations Archives in Geneva are already under a unique heading: “knowledge”, in fact the UNOG in Geneva is already an active knowledge base made of the Library, Archives collections, cultural activities,

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26 Quotations have been taken from the “[Job Opening](#)” description for the Information Management Officer at the Dag Hammarskjöld United Nations Library in New York.

and a museum.<sup>27</sup> This is an evolution of the “knowledge and learning commons” developed by the UNOG Library in Geneva in 2018, an idea stating that knowledge implies sharing and active participation (see [13]).

It is only by sharing its institutional knowledge that the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and the United Nations Depository Library System can hope to integrate and complete all the different sources of information and knowledge that have been developed by the United Nations over the years. This also enhances and supports the System of United Nations Depository Libraries, or a “distributed knowledge network”, where users will find nowadays not only keepers, but also collections stewards, information retrieval discoverers, and in the next future data curators and responsible of the preservation of United Nations information, both on print and different and evolving electronic formats.

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All errors and omissions are mine and opinions expressed do not engage the United Nations.

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27 The Geneva Library website page named “[Knowledge](#)”.

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