

Beacon for Freedom of Expression Conference
May 19th 2003, Library of Alexandria.

Session 6:

The continued development of Beacon for Freedom of Expression.

Mette Newth, project administrator

It is with the greatest pleasure and pride I – on behalf of the Norwegian team that have dedicated years to the production of *Beacon for Freedom of Expression* - now place this brain child of ours into the competent future care of the staff at Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Now is also the occasion for recalling the background for this unique memory bank.

When signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the members of the newly established United Nations pledged to remember the millions of people murdered in Nazi Germany: *Not to forget and never let it happen again.*

But Man's inhumanity to Man has repeated itself, also in full view of the international media-saturated community, as in Rwanda in 1994 and in the Yugoslav dominions in the 1990s. And yet, most member countries of the UN has signed the declaration, and a substantial number of countries across the world have made legislative adjustments in accordance with the principles of Article 19, even in sensitive areas such as the official secrets acts. In spite of improvements, freedom of expression and free access to information is still being violated in a great many countries, more often than not the target is the press.

All through its 400 years history, the press has been the first hostage to be taken in war, either by occupying forces or by military dictators when overthrowing governments. As a rule, the press has been faced with the choices of gagging or closure, and many a respectable newspaper has simply been taken over by, or had to submit to becoming the mouthpiece of the new rulers. In the years prior to the outbreak of World War II, the press in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal suffered rigid Fascist censorship, no less strict than that practised by the enemy – the USSR.

During World War II the press in allied countries were subject to strict control of news coverage, as was also the case during World War I. The British and American press, often submitting voluntarily to self-censorship, were targets of a steady flow of official news and propaganda issued by The British Ministry of Information and the U.S. Office of War Information. In USA, a "Code of Wartime Practices for the American Press" was also issued by the Office of Censorship.

There are striking similarities between the attitudes of governments and press during both the World Wars and those of the recent British and US led war on Iraq. After the bloody terrorist attack on US on September 11 2001, the similarities are even more chilling; the massive electronic surveillance, the voluntary practice of self censorship or the enthusiastic imbedding of the world press with the US and GB army.

Beacon for Freedom of Expression cannot resolve the painful paradox of history's worst crimes repeating themselves, but the database may provide tools of change; an ever growing memory bank, and a source for human rights education and critical debate.

Thanks to the generous contribution by numerous university and national libraries, institutions and freedom of expression organisations across the world, this memory bank now contains guides to the accumulated documentation and knowledge of the world status on censorship and freedom of expression through history, as well as thousands of books and newspapers that fell subject to banning through most of the last millennium.

The ultimate aim being to register, as fully as sources will allow, all censored literary and artistic expressions *before* 1900, and - through the 20th century and beyond - as comprehensively as possible all censored material including Internet and artistic expressions such as drama, film and visual arts.

A key factor in achieving this aim is the willingness of governments to make their information on censored items such as books, newspapers, films publicly available.

Equally important is to establish co-operation with countries that lack the resources to make their archives of forbidden literature electronically accessible through Internet.

Thus **“Documenting Russia’s heritage of censorship”**, consisting of more than 300.000 items, is an important high priority project for the Beacon. Censorship in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics remains the longest lasting and most comprehensive censorship in the 20th century. In the 19th century Imperial Russia, censorship was also extensive. Russia’s long history of censorship has been well documented in numerous publications both by Russian and Western experts. However, the actual records of the vast number of books and newspapers that were subjected to strict censorship in Imperial Russia and the USSR are mainly still only accessible in special collections and lists deposited in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg (pre-revolution period) and the Russian State Library in Moscow (the USSR period), both libraries ready to co-operate on this important project.

Documenting all significant periods in the world history of censorship is a major aim; **documenting the Arabic Heritage** of censorship ranking as a near future important project.

In the *Beacon for Freedom of Expression* network of expert advisors and sources of information, *International Federation of Library Associations - IFLA/FAIFE - Committee on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information* and *International Freedom of Expression eXchange Clearing House – IFEX*, represent the very cornerstones of expertise.

Both organisations are members of the International Steering Committee that will continue the professional development of the data-base in conjunction with the library of Alexandria, aiming to keep the project management model as flexible and cost-efficient as possible, in order to secure an un-bureaucratic and affordable continued management.

The extensive and time-consuming practical production of the “Beacon for Freedom of Expression” was made possible thanks to the assistance of tutors and more than 20 students of the Faculty of Journalism, Library and Information Science at the Oslo University College, the students working for more than 16 months on the database under the guidance of their tutors, and in collaboration with the Beacon project management.

The importance of investing today in the expert care of the database tomorrow cannot be over-estimated. Co-operative projects such as the one with the Oslo University College will be important to establish, preferably on a multilateral level and hopefully involving also the close neighbour of Bibliotheca Alexandrina – the University of Alexandria. Thus the Beacon project may give valuable impulses to the education of librarians and media-workers, and hopefully serve to encourage institutions of higher education to actively participate in furthering international protection of free access to information and freedom of expression.

Each entry of title and author’s name represents a minute but significant monument to memory, the entire collection of titles in the database still representing but a small section of the books and newspapers that have been censored in the history of the world. Yet the “Beacon for Freedom of Expression” is an electronic monument under construction that will be steadily growing through the continued joint efforts of all the very competent partners.

Thank you, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, on behalf of the future of freedom of expression.