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The Beacon for Freedom of Expression of Bibliotheca Alexandrina

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ABSTRACT

**THE DATABASE AND WEB-SITE "BEACON FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION"
A GIFT FROM NORWAY DEDICATED TO THE NEW BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA**

BEACON FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION is a unique global reference catalogue containing bibliographic data on censored books and newspapers past and present as well as data on literature on censorship and freedom of expression. The database is designed to facilitate the open dialogue between the world's cultures on the significance of Article 19 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights. The database is also a contribution to the UN Decade of human rights education (1995-2005). The main objective is to enhance a comprehensive and balanced view of the phenomena of censorship; see today's conditions for freedom of expression in a broader time perspective, and to elucidate that censorship appears in very different societies, crossing all cultural borders.

On 19 May 2003, the Beacon for Freedom of Expression was presented to the new library in Alexandria by the Norwegian Minister of Culture and Church Affairs in celebration of the revival of this once unique world forum of knowledge. The *Beacon*, a web-based global reference catalogue containing bibliographic data on censored books and newspapers past and

present, as well as data on literature on censorship and freedom of expression, is a gift from Norway financed by the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs, was initiated and produced by the former Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression in conjunction with international institutions, government bodies, human rights organizations, national libraries and research institutions.

The name, “Beacon for Freedom of Expression”, naturally refers to the ancient giant lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the world’s seven wonders, once keeping the waters of Alexandria safe for seafarers. The Beacon for Freedom of Expression has been designed to give a comprehensive, balanced view of the phenomenon of censorship, to see the situation of freedom of expression today in a broader historical perspective, occurring in very different societies and transcending all cultural borders, and to keep an unwavering light on the status of the invaluable human right of free expression and free access to information.

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 history 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.

Reality, alas, contradicts the theory. In 1998 alone, the year of international celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, independent human rights and freedom of expression organisations reported violations of freedom of expression in almost 120 countries; 118 journalists were imprisoned in 25 countries and 24 journalists were murdered. Numerous newspapers, publishers and broadcasters were subject to banning, closure or violent attacks such as bombings. Currently, most of the serious attacks on freedom of expression are committed in countries in the Southern Hemisphere or former East Block countries, and even today, more than half the world's population still lacks an independent press.

However, while Western governments and human rights defenders justly criticise the abuses committed in countries of the Southern Hemisphere or former East Block countries, we should in all fairness not forget the dark history of censorship in Europe and the colonised countries, or our cruel suppression of indigenous cultures, languages and non-written literature. After all, no amount of past crimes can ever justify present crimes. It is a crucial mistake, made by too many Western defenders of human rights, not to acknowledge our past, and fail to criticise our allies for their current abuses of human rights. The non-existent European criticism in the UN of the systematic purging of libraries in Southern France by Front National, gives perpetrating governments such as those of China or Burma a welcome opportunity to accuse the Western countries of being one-sided in their criticisms. If Western countries, when protesting violations committed in the Southern Hemisphere, more readily admitted their past and the violations of their allies, the climate of the vital dialogues might improve.

Looking back at the history of censorship, one could almost suspect that totalitarian rulers of different ages studied the methods of their predecessors. The denouncement of "heretic" books as employed by the Inquisition of Medieval Europe, bears striking resemblance to the denouncement of "anti-communism" in Soviet, of "Semitism" in Nazi-Germany, the denouncement of "communism and anti-American activities" in USA in the 50s and 60s, and not least in modern day Iran. As common through history are the forced renouncement of the "False Faith" and the embracement of the "True Faith". Thus have fanatical rulers always attempted to ensure complete control, not only by purging libraries, but also by purging peoples minds, through implanting the mechanisms of self censorship This is the most destructive form of censorship; like a virus it attacks the integrity and moral of writers, causing shame and loss of self respect, belief in one's abilities and one's responsibilities. The ideas and thoughts censored in the minds of the writers can never be reconstructed. Self-censorship can only be prevented through relentless struggle for freedom of expression.

"Truth is the first victim in a war" - the press in times of war.

All through its 400 years history, the media has been the first hostage to be taken, 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 was simply taken over by or submitted 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 was subject to rigid Fascist censorship, no less strict than that practised by the enemy – the USSR.

The stranglehold on the press tightened considerably during World War II, not least in countries like Japan. In the United States and Britain there was an expected clampdown on news coverage, as was the case during World War I. The British and American press and media, often submitting voluntarily to self-censorship, was also the 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, the Office of Censorship also issued a "Code of Wartime Practices for the American Press".

There are striking similarities between the attitudes of governments and press during the two World Wars and those of the recent British and US led war on Iraq. Looking back at events 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, the enthusiastic imbedding of the world press with the US and GB army, all illustrating that history truly does repeat itself.

The war of words is less lethal, but no less dirty than the war of weapons. The combination of demonising the enemy and whitewashing one's own cruel deeds, while blindfolding the people through rigid censorship, have been favoured strategies of many a warlord and dictator throughout history.

Some of the worst examples of rigid press censorship induced by military dictators in the 20th century were those of Spain (Spanish Civil War 1936-39 - the regime lasted from 1936-1975), Greece 1967 -1974, Chile 1973-1990 and Nigeria 1966-1999. Also Turkey, under the pretext of ensuring national security against "the enemy within" – the Kurd minority - still upholds strict

ensorship through the Anti-Terror Act of 1991, in spite of countless pleas from the international society.

Considering the vital importance of the written media in the process of democratisation and transparency in any society, and the no less important contribution of the written word to the growth of literacy in numerous countries, this is indeed a tragic state of affairs.

Obviously, the “Beacon for Freedom of Expression” will not resolve the painful paradox of history's worst crimes continuing to repeat themselves. But this bibliographic database will provide yet another tool for enlightenment and actions by people, thus hopefully contributing to end the violations.

And of no less importance in the originator’s opinion is the aspect of access to closed, forbidden and sometimes forgotten collections. Thus 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 concerned.

Development is a continuous process of cooperation.

Thanks to the generous contribution by numerous libraries, institutions and freedom of expression organisations across the world, this memory bank now contains references to the accumulated documentation and knowledge of the world status on censorship and freedom of expression for more than 2000 years, as well as many thousands of books and newspapers that fell subject to banning through most of the last millennium.

The ultimate aim is to register, as fully as sources will allow, all censored literary and artistic expressions *before* 1900, and - through the 20th century - as comprehensively as possible all censored material including the Internet. Recognising the magnitude of this task and the fact that this database is a pioneering project, it has been important for the project Steering Committee to establish the database as a *model*, dynamic in form and concept, designed to be developed through a network of international organisations and institutions, human rights organisations and research-education- and culture institutions

In a number of cases the data is available in special libraries, but consists of paper archives, in some cases simply as collections of banned books.

Libraries worldwide are struggling with less recourse to complete more tasks. The electronic age, wonderful as it may be, has its price. For libraries then to undertake the task of transferring paper archives of forbidden literature to electronically available databases seems a far-off cry for many. Hence the positive response, often from libraries in countries emerging from heavy censorship such as that of the former Soviet Union, to our heroic effort and the offer of doing the work free of charge.

“Documenting Russia’s heritage of censorship” is an important high priority project for the Beacon, consisting of more than 300.000 items. 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, Russian language manual catalogue card archive and printed lists deposited in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg (pre-revolution period) and the Russian State Library in Moscow (the USSR period).

Along with other significant periods in the world history of censorship, documenting **Arabic heritage of censorship** will represent another high priority project for *Beacon for Freedom of Expression*. In this project the library of Alexandria naturally will have a key role to play.

Thus *Beacon for Freedom of Expression* has been designed as an ever-growing memory bank and a tool for human rights education. Although we have been met with overwhelming enthusiasm in our quest for bibliographic information – relevant state agencies and departments not always counted among the *most* helpful. In future it will be important to continue to encourage governments to make information on censored literature publicly available.

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 College, the students working for more than 16 months manually loading the database, under the guidance of their tutors, and in collaboration with the Beacon project management.

It is important to invest today in the global co-operation and expert care of the database tomorrow. Ensuring future expertise is a major goal, and constituted one of the reasons for the engagement of students at the Oslo College in the first place. Co-operative projects such as this may give valuable impulses to the education of librarians and media workers, and will serve to encourage institutions of higher education to actively participate in furthering international protection of free access to information and freedom of expression.

In this growing network of government bodies, human rights organisations, national libraries and institutions of research, education and culture, acting as 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*, will 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.

People make changes through determined actions. This we know. We also know that public opinion, so eagerly courted by totalitarian and democratic authorities alike, when provided with

the right and useful kind of information, will change, thus hopefully also one day preventing repetitions.

«The Bibliotheca Alexandrina will stand as a testimony to a decisive moment in the history of human thought - the attempt to constitute a summum of knowledge, to assemble the writings of the peoples.

It will bear witness to an original undertaking that, in embracing the totality and diversity of human experience, became the matrix for a new spirit of critical inquiry, for a heightened perception of knowledge as a tool and the quest for knowledge as a collaborative process.»

The Aswan declaration on the revival of the library of Alexandria (1990)

These high ambitions expressed by UNESCO's *International Commission for the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*'s in the Aswan declaration constituted the initial inspiration for the "*Beacon for Freedom of Expression*" dedicated to the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina. These ambitions will continue to serve as a beacon for the joint work of the Norwegian and the International Steering Committee and the staff of Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

One important development in the true spirit of freedom of expression – is making the database available in other world languages such as Arabic, French and Spanish.