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Teaching Emirati History Through British Newspapers: Historical Newspaper Collections at a United Arab Emirates Federal University.

David M. Oldenkamp

Assistant Professor, Reference & Instruction Librarian, Zayed University Library & Learning Commons, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Email Address: david.oldenkamp@zu.ac.ae



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Abstract:

Zayed University, with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, is a young university. The university was founded in 1998 and the librarians at the ZU Library and Learning Commons have faced the challenge of building collections to meet a growing faculty and student body. One particular challenge has been to support faculty and students who require historical primary resources, or really anything pre-dating 1998. Seeing this problem, in 2013 the ZU librarians developed a sustained effort to identify relevant primary source databases—particularly historical newspaper databases—and to create a strategic and prioritized collections strategy to acquire these resources as funding became available. These databases are costly, but have since proven to be essential to meet the needs of a growing university that aspires to raise its rankings and research capacity.

This paper examines the process of identifying the research and teaching needs of the ZU community, and the creation of a plan to meet these needs with a strategy of end of year budget requests to acquire the most impactful historical newspaper databases for this community. Also discussed are the post-acquisition promotion and training of these resources. Once acquired, the liaison librarians have promoted these new historical newspaper databases directly to faculty, collaborated with interested faculty in assignment creation, and conducted workshops to ensure that the newly acquired historical newspaper collections were used. Finally, teaching these databases have enhanced and reinforced information literacy skills in keyword creation (problems of Arabic to English transliteration) and the bias implicit in British newspapers documenting pieces of Emirati history.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, Historical Newspapers, Collection Development, Primary Sources, Information Literacy

I arrived at the Zayed University Library & Learning Commons (ZU LLC) in Abu Dhabi in the fall of 2011 and I immediately began learning and assessing the library collections. ZU was formed in 1998 and the LLC collections are young and underdeveloped, including the electronic journal databases and primary source collections. There are no microfilm nor microfiche to be found in the collections, and the LLC does not own a microfilm/fiche reader. It soon became clear that I was going to face serious challenges in supporting historical research or anything that might require older primary sources. Where we might be able to use digitized primary sources from the National Archives, many of these sources have not been digitized or otherwise made available for library acquisition.

The need for primary historical sources became apparent from interactions with faculty and students from our College of Communication and Media Sciences and our College of Humanities and Social Sciences (formerly the College of Sustainability Sciences and Humanities). Students of media history lacked tools beyond YouTube and LexisNexis (which does not have page images, nor does it go very far back historically) for older media, and the growing Emirati Studies program needed to be able to assign their students a wider variety of primary source dependent historical research projects. It became clear that the strategic addition of historical newspaper databases could go a long way to address the needs of these students, faculty, and researchers.

Fully digitized historical newspaper collections have been developed and offered for purchase and subscription since the early 2000s (Brynko, 2012). While many established university libraries have subscribed to newspapers in microfilm for decades, a benefit of being a younger institution means that we can skip this generation of media in favor of the searchability and full text page images provided by newly digitized historical newspaper.

The growing availability of fulltext historical newspaper databases has offered opportunities for school librarians to influence their social studies curriculum (Safford, 2008), university students studying history, media, and advertising (Mouhot, 2010), and lexicographers researching the history of language (Popik, 2004). I had used these historical newspapers extensively in the United States academic library context, particularly with classes researching historical speeches and teaching primary source research methods to undergraduate students. These products proved invaluable in the American context, but I was most interested in finding non-American historical newspaper products that would be relevant to my Emirati students and global ZU faculty. I soon discovered that finding locally-produced historical sources would be problematic, but that I could turn to the British newspapers for historical coverage of the UAE. Most of the major British newspapers have been digitized and available for purchase—though at a fairly high price (Ashling, 2008).

Britain in the United Arab Emirates

Why turn to British newspapers for research on the UAE? The United Arab Emirates was founded in 1971 when the nation officially formed after about one hundred and fifty years of British presence. The land was once called the Pirate Coast, Trucial Oman, and the Trucial States before statehood in 1971. As a young country, many of its institutions are correspondingly young. The oldest university in the country is United Arab Emirates University (located in Al Ain, Abu Dhabi Emirate), and was founded in 1976 (United Arab Emirates University). The Higher Colleges of Technology were founded in 1985 and now

have seventeen campuses across the country (Higher Colleges of Technology), and Zayed University was founded in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in 1998 (Zayed University). While the country and institutions of the United Arab Emirates are quite young, the history of what are now called Emiratis extends back thousands of years.

Going back to the days before the British and the Portuguese and other European involvement in the region, the Bedouin tribal culture of the time was primarily an oral, storytelling culture where an educated person was one who had memorized the Koran. No formal schooling existed in the region until 1953 when the British created the first modern school in the emirate of Sharjah (Heard-Bey, 2004). The British may have first come to the region in 1820, but their presence was more related to providing a security presence and managing external relations rather than a massive and active imperial presence that was found in countries like India (Rabi, 2008).

The lack of education in the region for most of its history meant that illiteracy was endemic throughout the Arab world. According to Ami Ayalon (1995), “all (available) assessments point to only a tiny, almost infinitesimal minority that was able to read. The percentage of literacy throughout the region was measurable in single-digit figures with only small variations between them, the situation being slightly better in Lebanon and Egypt and worst of all in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula” (p. 140). Between the lack of formal schooling and a predominantly oral Bedouin culture, by the mid-twentieth century illiteracy was the still the norm. A 1960 survey by UNESCO showed the illiteracy in the region to be around 75 percent (Ayalon, 1995).

With so few literate residents and so much poverty in its pre-oil years, it is quite understandable why there was little development of a local Emirati press before the oil boom of the 1960s (Al Majaida, 2002). There is evidence of a few short-lived local publications cropping up before the oil boom, as well as the presence of Egyptian newspapers coming through the UAE ports, but it was not until 1969 that the first issue of *Al Ittihad* newspaper was printed. *Al Ittihad* is the UAE’s first official newspaper and it started as a weekly and then became the country’s first daily newspaper in 1971 (Al Majaida, 2002). This same lack of development of the local newspapers carries over into the development of libraries in the region (Slincy, 1990) and other forms of cultural production. The oil discoveries of the 1950s and particularly the 1960s finally gave the UAE funds to begin its move from poverty to an aggressive development and building agenda that has affected every aspect of life. This includes the development of the nation’s press, educational system, and libraries.

Students and researchers who want to examine life in the UAE before the 1970s when the country began documenting its own story through its own press are left at a bit of a loss. Becoming an independent country in 1971, the UAE’s youth has a significant impact on how the educational system and library infrastructure has developed, and this in turn has a large impact on how students, faculty, and researchers approach studying and teaching Emirati history. The challenge for the student, faculty, and researcher in 2017 is how to go about researching the pre-1971 Emirati history and life. There are active oral history programs in the country, but the reality is that to study their own history, the Emirati researcher has to consult western sources to document their own history (Boumarafi, 331). It is this reason why Western sources, particularly British historical newspapers and government documents are some of the best available sources for Emiratis who are wanting to research their own history. The question for the UAE librarian then becomes which sources are the most relevant and will have the greatest impact for their students and faculty.

The First Round of Collection Development (2011-2014)

As a library faculty, we saw the need to build our collections, and online collections in particular, to support the ever-expanding curriculum and research ambitions of our young university. We were most keen to expand our JSTOR holdings to address research needs across the entire curriculum because our overall historical journal coverage was so limited. In addition to this expanded journal coverage, I pushed for the addition of *The Times (London) Digital Archive, 1785-2006* from Gale and the *Historical New York Times (1851-2013) with Index (1851-1993)* from ProQuest to address the needs of my programs. My top priority was for *The Times (London)*, though many faculty expressed interest in the *New York Times*. The process of acquiring new databases did not seem promising at first because the library's budget had been flat for several years. As chair of the library's Collection Development Council (CDC), I led an effort to identify and priority rank a list of possible new database acquisitions.

The initial efforts began in 2012 and went through 2013. We made several end of fiscal year proposals for new databases at the end of 2013 in hopes of acquiring these databases outside of the regular budget cycle. As a part of our various proposals, we trialed *The Times (London) Digital Archive* and the *Historical New York Times*. Faculty feedback was enthusiastic and we harvested their feedback for our proposals:

"The Times Digital Archive is an essential resource for our growing Emirati Studies program. This database will be key to support any student or researcher working on the history of the UAE and all of the Gulf States. It also is a key component in our push for mobile learning, as it is invaluable for student research in the class and out as the archive is digitized and accessible."

Jane Bristol-Rhys, Associate Professor, College of Sustainability Sciences and Humanities (Personal communication, 8 October 2013)

"I am writing a book on Abraham Lincoln and the press. One chapter on Times of London coverage of the American Civil War. My next book will be about Gandhi. How the Times of London covered him will be major. WE NEED THIS BADLY!"

-David Bulla, Associate Professor, College of Communication & Media Sciences (Personal communication, 3 October 2013)

"It would be wonderful if you could acquire The Times Digital Archive, 1785-2006 (aka The Times of London). I am an Ottomanist currently working on concepts of Turkish nationalism and how it was viewed abroad. This would make an excellent resource for me both in my research and for the courses I teach."

-David Mason, Assistant Professor, College of Sustainability Sciences and Humanities (Personal communication, 3 October 2013)

With this feedback included into our proposals, we pushed forward with multiple collection building requests. Fortunately, we were able to get some of the databases through the purchasing process before year's end, but the historical newspaper databases did not come online until May 2014. The overall process began with initial investigations in 2012, to getting price quotations, library CDC discussions, database trials, collection of faculty feedback, writing up acquisition proposals, and purchasing in 2014. From start to finish, this first process took a few years, but the reward was soon realized as faculty began integrating

the databases into their assignments, particularly in the History of the United Arab Emirates courses.

Round Two: Dream Big

Once fully online, librarians began promoting the new databases to faculty and students. These efforts began in earnest in the fall 2014 semester and continued into 2015. I began offering workshops on the databases for faculty and brainstormed various assignment ideas that faculty could assign that would require use of the historical newspapers. With the successes of the first round fresh in our minds the liaison librarians on the CDC were asked to come up with another prioritized list of resources for our regular budget request and a possible end of year request. With one-time purchases always easier to implement than ongoing database subscriptions, the committee members looked at a wide array of options. I spent my time consulting vendor websites, communicating with faculty regarding their wish-list items, reviewing benchmark institution's database offerings, and trying to come up with as many relevant one-time purchases as possible. We then collated these lists and re-ranked them in priority order. These efforts were rewarded spectacularly, as we were given a larger amount of end of year spending than we had anticipated. The only problem with this end of year request for fiscal year 2015 was that some vendors could not provide us with enough information in time to push the orders through our purchasing system in time to execute the transactions.

By focusing on so many one-time purchases, we were able to acquire the following historical newspaper databases at the end of fiscal year 2015:

- Gale: Daily Mail Historical Archive, 1896-2004
- Gale: Financial Times Historical Archive, 1888-2006
- Gale: Sunday Times Digital Archive, 1822-2006
- Gale: The Economist Historical Archive, 1843-2007
- ProQuest: The Guardian (1821-2003) & The Observer—(1791-2003)
- ProQuest: The Times of India—1838-2002
- ProQuest: Wall Street Journal—1889-1994

In addition to these newspaper databases, we were able to acquire a large number of archival, manuscript, government document, and journal databases. This list of historical newspapers, when added to our previous two historical newspaper acquisitions (Gale: The Times Digital Archive, 1785–2006; and ProQuest: The New York Times (1851-2013) with Index (1851-1993)) has proven to be a windfall for ZU's students and faculty.

Teaching Emirati History Through British Newspapers

Once purchased and integrated into the ZU LLC's database offerings, it came time to get students and faculty working with these new, expensive products. I began by introducing research methods students to the databases during our discussion of primary sources. I would have the students find the newspaper from the day they were born (teaching them how to limit searches by date), articles covering the Buraimi Dispute (a major dispute that occurred in 1950-61 in the region), articles covering the death of His Excellency Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (the first president of the country and major founding figure of the nation), and articles surrounding the transition to independence (1971) when the country went from being called the Trucial States to the United Arab Emirates.

As an information literacy exercise, searching for Emirati keywords throughout history can prove to be quite challenging. First one must think about how the British might have referred to a given person or place. Sheikh Zayed might be called “Sheik Zaid” in earlier newspapers because the Arabic to English translations had not become standardized. The examples that I have found for the names of the seven emirates are:

Dubai: Debaye, Dubayy, Debay, Dibai, Dihabi, Debai

Abu Dhabi: Abu Zaby, Aboothabi, Abu-Dhabbi, Abu Thabi, Aboothabee, Abu Dthabi, Abothubbee

Ras al-Khaimah: Ras-el-Khaima, Ras-el-Khiemah, Ras-ool-Khiemah, Ras-el-Khaimah

Umm al-Qaiwain: Umm al Quwain, Umm-el-Kawain, Umm-ool-Keiweyn, Umulkawain

Ajman: Ejman

Sharjah: Shargah, Shāriqah, Sharga, Sharja

Fujairah: Fujarah

All of these spelling variants depend upon the author of the article and whatever grasp they had on Arabic to English transliteration.

Going beyond the issue of transliterated Arabic, there are terms used in the British newspapers that can cause offence to Emiratis. Emiratis, as well as the majority of the Arabs that I have met, call it the “Arabian Gulf” and not the “Persian Gulf,” and this is can be matter of passionate dispute. However, since the British (and the vast majority of the English speaking world) refer to the body of water as the Persian Gulf, this is a term that students need to use in their searches. I teach my students to become proficient with the use of the OR Boolean operator and to brainstorm alternate spellings of a place. Most students understand these issues quite well, as I have met some who spell their names in English differently than what is found on their student identification cards.

Comparing the same search of a UAE topic between *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London), students can see how much more coverage the British give to the UAE than the Americans. David Bulla, a ZU journalism professor, said that “One student was startled at how much *The Times* of London had about Sheikh Zayed compared to the *New York Times*, and this showed her that the British were much closer to the UAE and much more concerned historically about what goes on here.” The students recognize that the British wrote their stories from their Western perspective, but there are varying levels of response to this. Some are offended by the condescending and insulting tone of the British journalists, while others are more willing to frame this as the usual western bias against the region. As David Bulla replied: “My students sometimes don’t think the British newspapers totally get this place or Sheikh Zayed....However, they are not offended, and it helps them see how journalism is often limited by local, national, and regional prejudices.” The use of these primary sources is fostering a great discussion of core concepts of information literacy and source evaluation, and my Emirati students engaging with these questions on a fairly deep level.

There are some courses, such as Media History and the History of the UAE, where these historical newspaper databases are a natural fit. I have been working to promote these expensive resources more widely across the curriculum through hosting faculty workshops and brainstorming assignment ideas that might make use of these resources. As the semesters roll on and the curriculum evolves, I hope to make wider and more intensive use of these key resources with my students and faculty.

Conclusion

The experience of building the historical newspaper database collections at Zayed University has entailed a lot of hard work, collaboration, and a fair bit of budgetary luck. While ZU is a young institution, it has ambitions to climb in the region's and world's university rankings. As such, the university is maturing to support a more developed research agenda and this includes building research capacity in the Library and Learning Commons collections. There are few available locally-produced sources for students and faculty who are researching the pre-1971 United Arab Emirates, the growing digitized collections of British newspapers can provide an excellent, fulltext searchable resource for these researchers. Searching the newspapers for transliterated Arabic terms can be a challenge. Information literacy lessons are easily developed when Emirati students read their own history through the British lens, engaging their critical thinking skills as they read these primary sources. The purchase and promotion of historical newspaper databases at ZU has provided critical support for students and faculty in many disciplines.

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