

# Compiling the *International Directory of National Archives: A Collaborative Effort*

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**Abstract:** National archives have long been regarded as the memory of the nation. Under the direction of Dr. Patricia C. Franks, primary editor, and Dr. Anthony Bernier, associate editor, a team of 46 students and alumni of the School of Information at San José State University embarked upon a fifteen-month journey to answer the overarching research question: “What is the status of national archives today?” A decision was made to limit the scope of the study to the national archives of the 195 countries recognized by the United Nations. During the research process, three countries were added. For each of the 198 countries, three sub-questions were answered: 1) “What is the history of the national archives of each country?” 2) “How does the institution responsible for the national archives operate in terms of organizational structure, responsibilities, and physical and digital infrastructures?” and 3) “What is its current focus, including means by which the public can access archival holdings?” The research revealed that not all countries have an institution designated as a “National Archives” or the equivalent. Of those that do, there emerged both differences and commonalities in the environment, governing laws, and resources allocated. The one constant, however, was the archivist’s attitude toward their work: the desire to acquire and preserve documents that reflect the past while visualizing a future—one that will increasingly incorporate digital technology—to provide access to historical artifacts and, in many instances, contemporary government records. The methods used to promote a team approach to gathering the information are described, and the results of both the approach and the project are shared

## Introduction

National archives have long been termed “the memory of the nation” (Wilson, 2018). The “memory” housed within the archives of nations documents the rights of governments and citizens, establishes national borders and boundaries, and provides a view into the past that can be used by current and future generations to forge their own histories. Recognizing their responsibilities to preserve their holdings and provide access to all citizens, many archives have been investing in purpose-built buildings and digitizing records to share online through websites and social media. Fragile archives, once only available within archives reading rooms, are now becoming available in digital manifestations across geographical borders. Documents, once reflecting only the privileged few, are beginning to reflect the entirety of society. If National archives can be considered the memory of a nation, the holdings of the national archives of all nations, can be considered “the memory of the World.” Compiling a Directory documenting the national archives of 198 nations at any point in time is no easy task, so the editors devised a team approach which would serve to strengthen the research skills and expand the horizons of those who volunteered to work on the project.

## Problem Statement

While the purpose of acquiring, protecting, and preserving archival materials that document the cultural heritage of a nation is a universal goal, there was, until the publication of the *International Directory of National Archives*, no one source that could be referred to in order to understand the progress made by all nations recognized by the United Nations. Most published works focus on a timeline of the rise of the National Archives across multiple countries from a historical perspective or on the National Archives of



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one particular nation. Some provide a directory listing of numerous archives but with limited data, such as name of institution, location, and contact information. The goal of developing the *International Directory of National Archives* was clear: to provide a ready-reference of reliable information about National Archives around the globe. But the challenge—to accomplish this formidable task within a reasonable length of time—required a unique approach to the research process.

## Literature Review

Because this was not a purely academic research project, but a venture that would lead to the release of a completed work by a publishing house, the literature review was of necessity conducted in two phases.

### Literature Review when preparing the project proposal

During the first phase, publications on the state of national archives were investigated when developing the proposal to support the need for such a comprehensive work. Works, such as H. G Jones' *The Records of a Nation* (1969), provided examples of in depth studies of specific national archives. Publications, such as the *International Directory of Archives* (1992) compiled by the International Council on Archives, provided examples of publications that conveyed listings of archives with location and contact information.

Due to common expectations that all information is available online, an examination of online directories was also conducted. Some online resources provide links to the websites of National Archives. One, the *Directory of National Archives* published as a research guide by USC Libraries (2018), does an admirable job of updating the links frequently. However, that listing provides links to only 73 of the 198 entries included in our work. We learned not all countries have national archives, and not all national archives have websites.

The literature review conducted during this phase supported the need for the *International Directory of National Archives*.

### Literature Review while conducting research on the project

During the second phase, students and alumni working as part of the research team conducted their own literature reviews in order to identify sources of information for each of the 198 entries. They consulted online resources, journal articles, books, reports, and television broadcasts. They also conducted personal interviews of other researchers and the staff of numerous national archives. Among the 618 references cited in the completed document are “The Rape of Kuwait’s National Memory” published in the *International Journal of Cultural Property* (Montgomery, 2015), “Digitization in the Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Progress Report (Alibasic, 2011), and electronic communications with Sergio Pagano, prefect, and Dr. Marco Grilli, secretary of the prefecture, of the Vatican Secret Archives (Sergio Pagano, Email message to editor, November 7, 2017; Dr. Marco Grilli, Email message to author, November 27, 2017).

## Methodology

Three major elements comprised the project: the Proposal, the People, and the Process.

### The Proposal

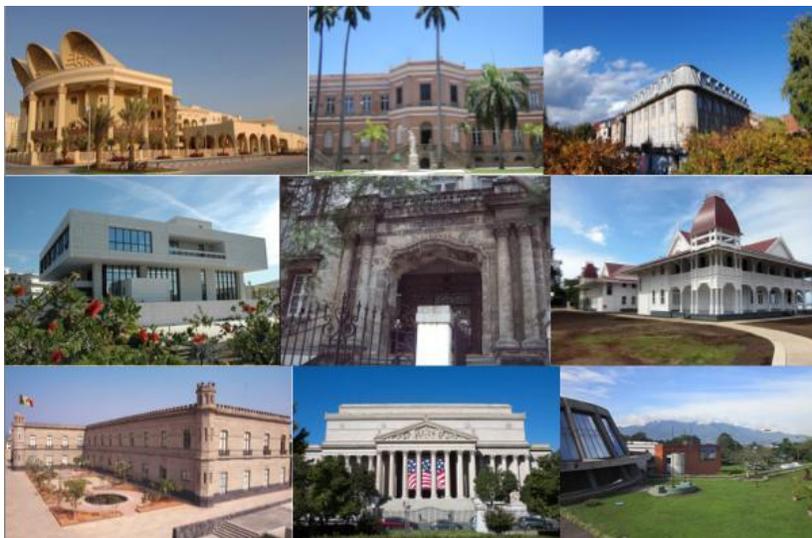
Based on the initial literature review, a successful proposal was submitted to the publisher, Rowman & Littlefield, to produce the *International Directory of National Archives*. The United Nations’ membership

was used to set boundaries. Taiwan was added upon the request of one of the reviewers of the proposal, and Scotland and Northern Ireland were added upon the recommendation of the researcher assigned the United Kingdom with the approval of the Chief Executive and Keeper of the National Archives of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

## The People

The individuals involved in this project included the editors, project coordinators, student and alumni researchers, and archival professionals—some employed by the archives under review and some who shared the results of their own experiences conducting research in various archives.

A total of 78 of the 198 archives (or equivalent institutions) collaborated in the writing of the entry for their own institution. Forty-five images were provided to illustrate either the archives buildings or to spotlight events or artifacts. Entries written about the other 120 institutions were also included in the *Directory*—albeit without institutional input.



*Figure 1:* Select images provided for inclusion in the Directory, from Left to Right, Top to Bottom—the National Archives of Bahrain, Brazil, Montenegro, Greece, Cuba, Tonga, Mexico, United States, and Costa Rica.

This collaborative effort took advantage of the social power of the Internet; individuals located in various regions of the globe communicated and conducted all work online. Over the course of fifteen months, sixty alumni and students applied and were approved to participate in the project either as volunteers or as students enrolled in an internship or a special studies courses. Those enrolled in classes could earn from one to four units of credit depending on the number of hours they devoted to the project. Although only 46 of the 60 researchers successfully brought at least one entry to completion, some of the 46 completed multiple entries. The most productive student conducted research during the entire fifteen months and completed seventeen entries. Another student completed twelve entries, and ten additional students completed between seven and ten entries each.



### Team Work

Communication and Collaboration among team members took place via email, bi-weekly web conferences, and a Google Site with an integrated Google Group Discussion Forum. Work in progress was posted in a Google Drive with individual folders for each student. Draft entries uploaded to the Google Drive were reviewed by one of the two project coordinators and the primary editor and returned for additional editing as many times as necessary until each was deemed satisfactory. In some cases, researchers had exhausted their ability to gather additional information or reached the end of their allotted time on the project. Their work was reassigned and when completed, both the original and the second researcher were attributed with contributing to the entry. In many instances, the researcher introduced a representative of the archive to the primary editor for completion of the entry. Once efforts to locate information were exhausted, the primary editor declared them semifinal and moved them to a folder for the publisher.

### Online Presence

To lend credibility to the project and help students explain project goals to staff of the archives they contacted, the *International Directory of National Archives* website (<https://idnaproject.org/>) was created. This public face of the project included a description of the project, information about the editors, names of students and alumni working on the project, names of the 198 countries profiled, and eventually a list of the 78 institutions who had approved their entries.

A blog was added to describe activities that took place from the launch of the project in 2016. Due to interest in the topic long after the project has been completed, the site remains and the blog is active.

## The National Archives of Japan

While recently traveling in Tokyo, I had the opportunity to visit the **National Archives of Japan**. Having assisted with the International Directory of National Archives (IDNA) project last year, it was exciting to have a chance to visit one of the institutions that our team had been researching. While at the archive, I was able to see two



Author – Nicolette Hall



The National Archives of Japan, Tokyo, Japan.

Japan's Modern History.

exhibitions that were on view, each covering transitional periods in the government, society, and culture of Japan entitled *Edo shogunate, the final fight – "Bunmutsu" reform at the end of the Edo period* and

Figure 3: A Recent Blog Post describing one IDNA researcher's visit to The National Archives of Japan.

## Results

The primary objective of completing the *International Directory of National Archives* was accomplished. The collaborative effort described lead to the submission of a draft manuscript in December 2017 and publication of the completed work in July 2018. The names of all 46 students and alumni who contributed and the countries for which they conducted research are included in the Directory. The institutions that contributed to their own entries were acknowledged by a Logo stating “Institution Approved” at the start of the entry and a statement acknowledging the assistance of specific archival professionals at the end of the entry.

The secondary objective of developing a process that involved the efforts of almost 50 individuals (faculty, students, and alumni) working remotely over the course of fifteen months was achieved. The fact that the manuscript was submitted on time is testament to that.

The following quotes from project participants convey the diverse but meaningful lessons they learned while conducting research:

- I learned about the history of the Ukrainian archives, the core functions of the national archives government agency, its physical and digital makeup, and the services it provides to the public and the government of Ukraine.
- I learned changing weather is an issue for all nations and cultural heritage institutions worldwide and should be addressed in disaster plans to ensure that we preserve those documents and artifacts that are most important to our countries.
- I enjoyed collaborating with the IDNA group, and I especially enjoyed contacting and communicating with the staff of the national archives, such as the wonderful staff from Taiwan (RDC).

## Conclusion

Numerous challenges presented themselves to the editors and researchers, such as:

- Unrealistic expectations as far as the time required to complete each entry.
- Untested processes developed to gather data, which required modification while the project was in progress.
- Short timeframe in which to complete the draft manuscript.
- Inability to contact the primary person responsible for the archives of all countries under review.
- Difficulty persuading some of those contacted to contribute to entries about their institutions or, if they did contribute, to do so following the template for the entries.

However, a number of positive outcomes resulted, including:

- Names of those who contributed to the first International Directory of National Archives are acknowledged in the Directory. Students and alumni have begun citing the experience on their resumes.
- Researchers became motivated to learn more about the situation of national archives around the globe. They continue to keep in touch even after the Directory has been published.

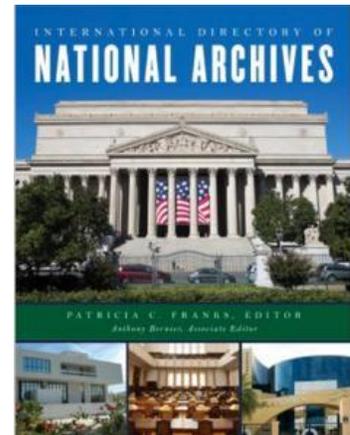


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- Archival professionals had the opportunity to inform readers of the publication about the status of the national archives—some proudly highlighted new buildings and innovative programs and others documented the need for assistance to recover lost documents and upgrade or acquire archival facilities.
- Researchers took advantage of unexpected opportunities to participate beyond conducting research. A number shared their experiences on the IDNA blog, two attended the ALA/ICA Conference in Mexico City, and six participated in panel presentations for International Archives Day June 9, 2017, and June 9, 2018.



*Figure 5:* Students Pam Lutzker and Kate Eminhizer meet with Dr. Ian Wilson, former Head of the Library and Archives Canada and currently advisor to the National Archives of the United Arab Emirates, while attending the ALA/ICA conference and FAN Meeting in Mexico City, November 2017.

Unfortunately our goal of obtaining the assistance of someone responsible for the archives of all 198 nations was not met, as only 78 of the 198 countries (39 percent) participated in the completion of their entries. However, we consider the project a success in that a profile was developed for all 198 countries that can be considered a snapshot of the status of national archives at this moment in time.

There are two projects that should be pursued in order to build upon the foundation this Directory provides. In both instances, contributions of a number of individuals would be required. The first is the development of a five-year plan to update the Directory, enlisting the collaboration of representatives from as many of the 198 nations as possible. The first edition could be used as a benchmark against which to measure progress made during the five-year period. The second is the development of a streamlined, sustainable, online version of the Directory and funding solicited. A method similar to that used to create the International Directory of National Archives could be employed to develop, populate, and maintain this online directory.

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