Libraries to Preserve Web-based Human Rights Content

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Columbia is preserving online content that pertains to human rights struggles, such as this digital image of a Chinese-language poster produced by the Asian Human Rights Commission that reads, "Burma's democratic movement needs our support now." (Courtesy of Asian Human Rights Commission)

Columbia's libraries have received a three-year, $716,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to archive information about human rights abuses that is published online but is in danger of disappearing from the Web.

Many Web sites that post news and other reports about human rights abuses are administered by small groups with insufficient resources to maintain their sites properly, says Robert Wolven, associate university librarian for bibliographic services and collection development. These sites sometimes disappear when their funding dries up, he says, and they often are hacked or taken down by opposition groups.

Columbia's new archive will provide a resource to scholars as well as serve as a model for how to collect, preserve, manage, and provide access to digital information, according to Wolven. This presents serious challenges: How do you preserve Web content that is being modified constantly? One solution being considered by Columbia librarians is to periodically create digital copies of individual Web pages. The librarians plan eventually to launch new Web sites containing materials on human rights abuses in specific countries and other topics.

"We've been concerned for some time that there's a lot of information on the Web that is not really being collected in any real sense by libraries," says Wolven, who is the principal investigator for the project. "This project is about turning libraries into collectors of this material and building our research collections for the future."

Other Columbia entities participating in the project are the Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research, the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, the Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, and the Copyright Advisory Office.

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