# Celebrating the Institutional Century of the UIA (1907-2007)

## Senility, immortality or reincarnation ?

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*This text has been distributed as a press release on 1st June 2007, the occasion of the centenary of the creation of the UIA in its earlier form as as the Central Office of International Associations in Brussels. The document is structured so that paragraphs can be readily cut for particular uses and length requirements. Background information is able through the links and the end of the document.* [see also automatic (approximate) translations into French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish]

**Summary**: Discusses the original vision of a century-old "Union of International Associations" and the nature and challenges of institutional aging in general, using the UIA as model of many such international initiatives. Points to some of the "secrets" of UIA longevity and viability before raising questions as to its identity and how it can be understood to "exist". The challenges it faces -- common to many elderly bodies facing an institutional Apocalypse in a chaotic 21st century -- are highlighted in order to point to possibilities of its "reincarnation" through four complementary initiatives consistent with the original vision. These are also described separately as a Union of Imaginative Associations, a Cognitive Fusion Reactor (ITER-8), a University of Earth, and a Union of the Whys.

## Vision

A century ago, on 1st June 1907, three pioneers of international organization created the Central Office of International Associations in Brussels with some 20 international associations as members. This was transformed in 1910 into a Union of International Associations (UIA) -- extraordinarily daring imaginative acts at the early beginnings of what is now an international community of thousands of governmental and nongovernmental bodies. The Belgian co-founders were Paul Otlet (1868-1944), Henri La Fontaine (1854-1943) and Cyrille Van Overbergh. Otlet was closely associated with the international development of the bibliographical sciences of classification, notably the Universal Decimal Classification. La Fontaine was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1913, and was later to be closely associated with the development of the League of Nations and the precursor of UNESCO.

Otlet, subsequently described as the "man who wanted to classify the world," is now recognized by historians as having been an early visionary of what the world wide web was to become. In the pre-computer era, at the peak of his efforts prior to World War I, Otlet had been responsible for the accumulation and classification of 11 million library file cards (many hand-written). In that period the UIA profiled, with much substantive detail, all extant international organizations and their activities in a voluminous *Annuaire de la Vie Internationale*

As with any beloved relative -- and as a future prospect for many of us -- how is it appropriate to hail the capacity of an institution like the UIA to survive 100 years? It still exists. For decades it has notably produced a *Yearbook of International Organizations: guide to global civil society networks* whose contents are also made available over the web, together with the interlinked profiles of the *International Congress Calendar*, the *Who's Who in International Organizations,* and the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*. These now constitute an integrated set of 13 databases profiling entities such as organizations, meetings, biographies, problems, strategies, and values.

Otlet's vision was to bring a degree of order to the multifarious approaches to human and social development and their consequences for the planet -- a presumptuously optimistic contribution to the possibility of their "coordination". He indeed had a dream. In developing beyond its initial bibliographical and organizational focus, the UIA then continued to seek ways to recognize, honour and represent the full spectrum of human initiatives and preoccupations manifesting in an organized manner across national boundaries -- both in isolation and within the complex networks of relationships between them. Otlet himself addressed the challenge of the "problem of problems" -- as a precursor to the subsequent concerns of many futurists.

## Aging

Whatever one's belief, one can be enchanted by the improbable variety of such institutional endeavours -- many as seemingly ill-adapted, ridiculous and endangered as some animal species in nature. As containers for human aspirations, many may be caricatured as identity vehicles for egos -- wonderful (wo)men in their institutional flying machines -- to borrow from a famous caricature of the early development of aircraft. From such a perspective a body like the UIA may be seen as a model exemplifying the challenges of institutional aging, raising questions that might well be asked of much larger and better funded institutions that are becoming increasingly "long in the

tooth", perhaps even the United Nations -- itself negligent of massacres, past and ongoing, that it was specifically designed to prevent?

What are the symptoms of institutional aging and when do they tend to emerge? Do some age mentally whilst still apparently young? How does loss of collective memory tend to manifest? How does an institution cope with diminished vision, loss of hearing, or even impeded speech capacity -- if these challenges are even acknowledged? Should some be seen to need walking frames to ensure a degree of mobility? When is an institution a cause for concern as a danger to itself, if not to others? Beyond the progressive dependence on prosthetic devices, is it an organ transplant that may be necessary to survival -- a heart, a head, or even a whole body transplant -- especially after having been preserved "frozen" (cryogenically) or "moth-balled" during an extended period of hubris? Is a form of senile dementia to be recognized, especially when any coherence is a matter for pleasant surprise? When are what forms of therapy appropriate -- whether remedial medication, or happy pills -- and how are their advocates to be distinguished from purveyors of snake oil potions? And in the final phases what provision is it appropriate to make for hospice care or life support -- and how are the issues of dignity and euthanasia to be addressed?

From a larger, long-term perspective, how do those associated with the institution distinguish between the prospects of senility, immortality, reincarnation and nothingness? What happens to the living spirit that inspired the creation of the institution and the dedication of many to its operation over decades? How is it to be understood as "moving on", especially when many involved are focused desperately on "hanging on"? As with elephants in the jungle, where do old organizations go to die?

For the UIA, upheld by some as a model organization, how well does it model many worthy elderly institutions that are ill-adapted to the future? Tragically there is the case of the UIA's "elder sibling", the International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID), well-known to librarians, that reached its centenary in 1995 but now only "exists" in a comatose legal condition.

Over a chaotic century, marked by unique levels of conflict, bloodshed and mismanagement -- very probably to be replicated in the coming century -- how is the institutional and intellectual effectiveness deployed through international institutions to be assessed? In that respect, what might be the wider lessons of the successes and failures of a body like the UIA with its focus on knowledge management? Are complacency and optimism more appropriate attitudes rather than any expectation that younger institutions might act more appropriately than their elders?

## Survival

The UIA may indeed be said to have survived two world wars that notably devastated institutional structures in Belgium. Support from the Belgian government had however been withdrawn in 1934 leaving only an essentially skeletal secretariat, dependent significantly on volunteers.

The Nazis briefly attempted to use the UIA as a front. With the benefit of a legacy from La Fontaine, it was then reconstituted in 1948 as an institute -- thereafter achieving a measure of recognition from UN/ECOSOC with regard to its profiling of organizations. It also survived the subsequent interplay, notably in Europe, of the opposing socio-political ideologies of the Cold War and that of the largely hidden conflict between Catholics and "free thinkers" (freemasons). These were exemplified by their honourable henchmen and veterans duly represented in the UIA statutory bodies, presumably in some cases on behalf of the relevant intelligence agencies attentive to its allegiance as a strageically placed gatherer of intelligence. Formally it has benefitted from the special status accorded to international associations under Belgian law. But what significance is to be attached to the fact that its unpaid secretaries-general over many decades have been retired Belgian ambassadors?

Belgium is of course the country of choice for such mutually opposing shadowy forces to co-exist and flourish in surreal ambiguity -- protective over decades of a uniquely appropriate niche for an uncompromising information clearinghouse on international phenomena. The UIA also survived the familiar arrogance of intergovernmental officials and their destabilizing programmes -- some to be ironically solicited as members of the UIA following their retirement.

## Viability

Management theorists have long debated the secrets of organizational longevity. As asked of any relative of great age, what was the secret of the UIA's success over many decades marked by a multitude of other organizational failures and bankruptcies? In contrast to many bodies, the UIA has never been an ideal recipient of programme funding. Its focus has been too uncompromisingly international (rather than "field level"), interdisciplinary (rather than sector or issue specific), and long-term (rather than matching the deliverable requirements of short-term political budget cycles and fashions).

Perhaps the most obvious feature of its "secret" has been a high-degree of long-term discipline, a method dating from its early association with the sciences of classification and knowledge organization. Necessarily matching this was an ability to attract and inspire long-term staff, despite the working conditions that are laughable to career professionals in more conventional bodies. The attraction had much to do with the comprehensive international, interdisciplinary preoccupations of its subject matter -- impossible within the highly fragmented programmes of academic, commercial and intergovernmental bodies, especially when constrained by overt or covert ideological agendas and financial performance.

However, to ensure viability the UIA was able to generate high-quality reference tools that no other bodies could produce consistently at the price -- despite the occasional destabilizing efforts of politically-motivated projects. This professionalism has been marked by an unusual collaboration over decades with one of the world's most prominent publishers of reference books for the library market -- K G Saur Verlag (Munich), variously bought and sold by multinational corporations in the information business. The professionalism was achieved by an early, and unusually high degree of computerization to enhance the efforts of collaborators -- who never exceeded some 20 in number. This capacity to make early use of emerging technologies, from in-house networks to remote web servers, ensured a continuing competitive advantage and credibility, notably with respect to web based visualization of complex networks of organizations

and their preoccupations.

Also vital to the survival of the UIA was the ability to manage seemingly incommensurable priorities, whether those of scholars of international relations, market researchers (notably in the international conference industry), intergovernmental organizations challenged by international associations -- or those of nonprofit associations of volunteers. These interfaces, and the ability to "communicate in their languages", added to its long-term reputation in the information sciences, more recently reframed as knowledge management.

Symptomatic of these variegated competencies over the years has been: the early *Printing World Award* of Her Majesty's Stationery Office "for the most innovative application of computers to typesetting"; in-house development of automatic translation facilities to convert its English language organizations database into French under contract to the Agence de la Francophonie; involvement in the project on Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development of the United Nations University; evaluation of NGO relations with UNESCO on behalf of UNESCO; solicitation by the contracted manager of ICANN's .ORG web domain to partner in the bid for its future management; major project funding from the EU directorate for the information society to enhance the multi-media adaptation of UIA data for biodiversity in partnership with the World Conservation Monitoring Centre; and successful evaluation by the World Bank for adaptation of its databases to international development.

## Identity

Given its multifacetted nature, what exactly is the UIA? Given the problematic international legal status of nongovernmental organizations, to what existent does it even "exist"? Given some disrupted decades of nebulous existence, and the lack of any financial contributions from its eminent members, to what extent has it existed as more than a pattern of operations between individuals grouped in a secretariat -- about which issues of accountability and appropriate democratic management could be legitimately raised?

Clearly it is a "nonprofit" organization, or perhaps -- given its dependence on self-funding as a successful information "business" -- this should be reframed as "not-for-profit". The UN effectively defined it as a form of international registry on which its agencies and others have been dependent -- especially for long-term statistics. On the other hand, given its strategic position in an emerging knowledge society, perhaps it should be understood as more characteristic of the many virtual initiatives responding to opportunities on the web -- especially given its technical expertise and nimbleness. And of course, at least for scholars, it could be understood as a constituent of international civil society -- an NGO in the more generic sense of the term, especially given its continuing dependence on voluntary commitment of staff beyond any contractual obligations.

Unstated, as with many bodies dependent on the contributions of collaborators beyond the call of duty, the UIA might be said to have been an ecosystem of somewhat idiosyncratic individuals since its founding in 1907 as the Central Office of International Associations. It was they who made the impossible happen where more professional organizations prudently feared to tread. Curiously this ability was above all dependent on a capacity to focus on a high level of detail, recording patterns of thousands of relationships between organizations, problems, values, strategies and the like -- a process now well described as hyperlink editing.

## Challenges

Despite its notable achievements, and like many other organizations, the UIA is seriously challenged by the turbulent socio-economic environment of the emergent information society in which the focus has shifted from the hierarchies of the past, to networks, onto the virtual worlds of cyberspace and its dynamically gated communities. Many would argue that the web is proving to be of greater significance and future relevance than the United Nations -- characteristically slow in recognizing its potential, if not highly resistant to it. However, despite the nimbleness of the UIA, it has not been able to maintain its own strategic advantage. In the web world, the operational significance of each of the terms in the "Union of International Associations" of Otlet's century-old dream calls for radical reinterpretation.

To have any relevance, "union" needs to be understood dynamically as a verb relating to continually emerging coherence. Many understandings of "international" are now misleading or irrelevant when the challenge has more to do with what can be rendered "intelligible" across sectoral and other boundaries in the process of knowledge management. In a world of multi-media and virtual organization, increasingly reliant on image management, "associations" need to be understood in terms of connotations -- preferably marked by hyperlinks as learning pathways and feedback loops. It is in this sense that one effort at reframing the UIA saw it as a Union of Intelligible Associations -- appropriately responsive to the un-intelligibility of an increasingly complex world.

As with many institutions, the statutory bodies of the UIA have responded to the 21st century, like rabbits paralyzed on the highway at night -- their vision impaired by the glare of the onrushing future. Windows of opportunity have been systematically missed. Information luddites resist necessary innovation in communication for purposes of decision-making, which reverts defensively to dysfunctional directive patterns of the past -- unable to envisage more appropriate processes to elicit support and vital funding. Incompetence in the face of the complexity of the challenges engenders negligence. Structures implode as a consequence of unsustainable contradictions. Life threatening illness is tragically engendered in those obliged to internalize stress in "sick institutions". The parallels with human senility become ever more apparent.

What more appropriate forms of organization and action are younger bodies to take in a period increasingly challenged by terrorism -- perhaps as the shadowy early manifestation of new forms of organization and social change? An Australian member of the UIA staff, Anthony Judge, on his recent retirement after some 40 years of developing the strategic capacity of that body, sees the challenge as partly one of reclaiming the heritage of misappropriated collective endeavour -- misappropriated by those seeking to perpetuate neo-colonialist patterns of self-interested mismanagement in defiance of the potentials of open-source information initiatives. The much-publicized ethical inadequacies of major intergovernmental leadership are indicators of the challenge.

# Possibilities

Faced with analogues to senile dementia, how can the many aging institutions of the 20th century transform their dreams and inspirations into forms appropriate to the 21st century? In a world increasingly challenged by faith-based governance, unmanageable crises, policy "surprises", and the expectations of Apocalypse soon, what might be understood as the "four horsemen" of some international institutional Apocalypse? And what might be the appropriately remedial responses in the light of Otlet's dream?

- The predicted triumph of chaos over order (consecrated by physicists' Second Law of Thermodynamics) calls for shifting beyond the possibilities of the "intelligible" order to the "imaginative" -- if not to the "inspiration" of faith-based policy-making. Hence the need for a "Union of Imaginative Associations" to sustain new thinking and the excitement of shifting paradigms -- mitigating dependence on psychedelic and other surrogates to stave off boredom. This is an operational transformation of Otlet's original focus on hierarchical "classification" as the static key to what is now clearly a challenge of dynamic coherence in response to insights emerging and evolving rapidly within increasingly virtual networks.

- A second horseman is that identified by management cybernetician Stafford Beer (under the name Le Chatelier's Principle) whereby, like any competent hydra, the institutional system adapts to initiatives for remedial social change -- that it happily welcomes -- such as to completely nullify the desired effects of that change. Hence the need for a psychosocial analogue to the recently launched ITER mega-project to develop a nuclear fusion reactor -- an analogue that might be described as a "Cognitive Fusion Reactor" -- an imaginal transformation of energy resourcing (ITER-8). Where Otlet hoped for a necessary degree of operational focus through normalization and coordination of international programme initiatives, here the challenge is how to configure the pattern of collective initiatives such as to ensure sustainable benefits from psycho-social energy. Ironically research on cognitive fusion is currently primarily of relevance to the comprehensible integration of information required by fighter pilots in making split-second decisions.

- The third horseman might be that identified by psychiatrist Ross Ashby (and known to cyberneticians as Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety) whereby strategic failure is guaranteed through ensuring lack of requisite variety of insight in seeking to navigate or control a challenging turbulent environment. Typically this takes the form of eliminating consideration of possible alternatives -- tunnel vision or groupthink -- possibly under the recently exemplified banner of "binary logic". Where Otlet, through the UIA, successfully brought together the executives of international associations to focus the curriculum of an early "International University", here the transformed challenge is to enable a "University of Earth" to harness understanding of the variety of grounded patterns of nature that so successfully embody sustainable development -- a learning environment for ecosyntegrity (extending an insight of Stafford Beer).

- The final horseman might be that exemplified by the widely recognized consequences of Murphy's Law, but better articulated as "systemantics" (in John Gall's exploration of how and why institutional systems tend to fail). This is typically evidenced by the emergence of corruption and nepotism in international systems, and denial of it in any public discourse about it -- notably on the part of the relevant authorities and academic disciplines. Where the UIA played a key role in the early professionalization of international meetings through its International Congress on Congress Organization, here the transformed challenge might best be embodied in a "Union of the Whys" as a focus for critical insight on the challenges of dialogue processes amongst those with a claim to the wisdom vital to any coherent response to the future.

Is it such a set of complementary initiatives -- a Union of Imaginative Associations, a Cognitive Fusion Reactor, a University of the Earth, and a Union of the Whys -- that would constitute a reincarnation of the much-challenged Union of International Associations, as now proposed? Should the spirit of the UIA be seen as having "reincarnated" several times in the past century, as with the League of Nations' "reincarnation" as the United Nations? Given the complex challenges of the future, would such complementarity be more able to carry forward the essential flame of Otlet's original inspiration ?

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- Françoise Levie and Benoît Peeters. The Man Who Wanted to Classify the World / L'homme qui voulait classer le monde. Bruxelles, Sofidoc, 2002, 60min film, English and French versions [documentary details]
- Union of International Associations
  - What's New (including releases) [text]

Other resources: Windows on the Union of International Associations

Photographs: In addition to the documentary film (above), numerous photographs of Paul Otlet are available on the web.

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