

For Release on April 19, 2005

Contact:
Michael A. Keller
University Librarian
SULAIR
650-723-5553
makeller@stanford.edu

Contact:
Charles Eckman
Principal Government
Documents Librarian
SULAIR
650-723-2982
ceckman@stanford.edu

GATT Digital Library: 1947-1994 Released

STANFORD CA -- April 19, 2005 - Stanford University Libraries and Academic Information Resources (SULAIR), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), today announce the public release of the GATT Digital Library, <http://gatt.stanford.edu>. This online library, part of a cooperative effort between SULAIR and the WTO, provides access to documents of, and information about, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a treaty that preceded the WTO and which promoted international commerce and the reduction of trade barriers among its Contracting Parties from 1947-1994.

Built, hosted, and maintained by SULAIR, the GATT Digital Library is a unique collection of source material vital to the study of the economic, political and diplomatic history of the latter half of the 20th century. As such, it will be of interest to a broad range of communities, including scholars, non-governmental organizations, commercial entities, as well as national and intergovernmental agencies.

"This project shows the potential that exists for memory organizations like SULAIR to preserve the history of international organizations for future generations," said Chuck Eckman, Principal Government Documents Librarian at SULAIR.

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"The WTO has worked with SULAIR to make this historic collection accessible to the public as part of our on-going efforts to share information that contributes to a better understanding of the WTO and the multilateral trading system," said WTO Director-General Supachai Panitchpakdi. "The work carried out by SULAIR to scan these thousands of documents and make them available through the Internet will be especially important for academics, trade specialists and others with an interest in how the trading system evolved in the GATT era, from 1947 to 1994."

The web site contains over 30,000 documents and 300 publications that have been derestricted by the WTO and are currently publicly accessible online. The public documents include reports, studies, and meeting records covering a broad range of topics related to international trade in the post-war period.

In addition SULAIR has created digital versions of over two million pages of archival material at the WTO including its central registry files and photographic archive. At this time, all of this material is not currently publicly available. Over time, as further content is derestricted or otherwise made available, new material will be added to the public website.

The release of the GATT Digital Library is the culmination of a six-year project. Beginning in 1999, the project focused upon digital capture of paper-based content stored in the WTO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. The capture phase included scanning, metadata generation and file processing efforts related in large measure to the archival component of the collection. These efforts were funded entirely by Stanford.

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"SULAIR devoted itself to the GATT Archive digitization project for several reasons, said Stanford University Librarian Michael A. Keller. "First, we deemed the preservation of the archive in digital form to be of significance for scholarship as well as for the development of the techniques for capture, conversion, and presentation of these and similar digital documents. Second, we considered the possibility that the WTO would release for public access the digital versions of the GATT documents on the web to a global audience to be strong and made even stronger by Stanford's work in digitizing the documents and publications. Third, because of privileged access already available to Stanford faculty, we knew that providing them with digital versions of the GATT archive would improve their own research programs."

Recently, the project has focused on providing a web-based interface, with the support of a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), an independent US federal agency that supports innovation, best practices and professional development in several fields, including digital preservation and access projects.

"We worked hard to develop an online resource that offers a wide audience easy access to these important documents, and at the same time provides sophisticated tools to help researchers search and navigate the collection," said Stuart Snyderman, Digital Production Services Manager at SULAIR.

Stanford and WTO staff worked in close consultation with members of the project's Advisory Board to ensure that the public website provides effective access to public components of the GATT Digital Library consistent with the needs of users as well as the functionality available on the WTO's own established website.

Now that the GATT Digital Library is open to the public, plans are being made to further extent the available content. "We're hoping our collaboration will lead to including French- and Spanish-language versions of the English-language documents currently available on the web site, along with multilingual interfaces," said Mr. Eckman. "We're also looking forward to the possibility that the WTO will soon derestrict significant runs of the early documents and archival records of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade from the 1940's for inclusion within the website."

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