

# Spotlight: Open Media and Information Lab



The Open University's Open Media and Information Lab (OMILab) was officially launched in 2015-2016. OMILab provides a platform for multidisciplinary digital projects, enabling cooperation between researchers in disciplines such as communication, sociology, psychology, computer science, management, and education. The laboratory's projects are directed by senior faculty members, together with research assistants, programmers, and designers. Prof. Oren Soffer and Dr. Anat Ben-David of the Department of Sociology, Political Science and Communication; Dr. Anat Lerner and Dr. Reut Tsarfaty of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science; Prof. Yoram Kalman of the Department of Management and Economics, and Dr. Vered Silber-Varod have all been instrumental in setting up OMILab.

Over the past year, OMILab researchers have examined a range of subjects, including communication, political and human-computer communication, machine learning, linguistics, and natural language processing.

OMILab focuses on research and operates according to a toolbox model. In cases where no suitable technological solution to a problem can be found, the lab develops new solutions. Once research has been completed and published, the professional team works towards adapting the newly developed tool for use by other researchers and assimilating it into various aspects of OUI courses. Research tools developed by OMILab are then made available online to researchers, students, and the general public via [www.openu.ac.il/en/omilab](http://www.openu.ac.il/en/omilab).

During the past year, OMILab launched Polibook ([www.polibook.online](http://www.polibook.online)), a research tool for the analysis of political discourse on Facebook. Polibook is the first designated search engine of its kind that enables readers to map statements made on social media by members of the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset over a period of two years.

OMILab is unique on the Israeli academic scene in the way it combines research and instructional elements, while maintaining an open approach. This can be seen in the general availability of research tools developed by the lab in cooperation with public entities, as well as in monthly seminars which are open to the general public.

During the past year, OMILab won a three-year grant supporting research cooperation between the OUI and the National Library of Israel, which gave a boost to OMILab research and public awareness. This cooperation makes it possible for senior faculty members to make use of the digital archives of the National Library and promote research in fields such as computer science, linguistics, management, and communications. The goal was to develop research tools and make the library's archives accessible to both researchers and the general public.

OMILab also entered a cooperative venture with the *Haaretz* newspaper that resulted in the publication of several investigative articles on the use of social media by politicians, using analytical tools recently developed by OMILab. This cooperation also led to a platform for the presentation of the lab's research capabilities at the Israel Conference on Peace. *Haaretz*'s weekly Captain Internet column, which features articles written by Open University researchers on topics such as social aspects of the Internet and technology, ensures that OMILab achievements will continue to be highlighted.

The scope of OMILab and the number of staff increased in 2016-2017. The lab also began to build a Cloud infrastructure and a virtual lab adapted to big data and its assimilation into Open University instruction.