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Digital cultural heritage – the new LIBER Forum

Since our conference last year the LIBER board went quite a long way to give life to the strategic plan presented in Tartu taking into account wishes and recommendations expressed by the membership. “Cultural heritage” was one of the issues, and so I am very happy to present today both (1) what I see as a good result of discussions and reflections and (2) the issues to be taken forward by the new forum “digital cultural heritage”.

The very concept of “cultural heritage” seems to go against the mainstream of a Steering Committee “Reshaping the research library”. Cultural heritage is about the traditional library, embodies the very reason why we have libraries, how they function in a long continuity of sometimes 4 or 5 centuries. In today’s fundamentally changing environment care must therefore be taken that cultural heritage does not itself disappear together with other traditional library functions. This may be a theoretical risk: we can see that cultural heritage is valued nowadays, makes the pride of the research library, proving its uniqueness, distinctiveness and identity. And even looking to the past, we would be blind if only seeing continuity: there have been numerous reshapings, some of them vital - cultural heritage subsisted up to now.

LIBER has also decided to keep cultural heritage on its agenda, to cooperate in this area closely with CERL, the Consortium of European Research Libraries. CERL has its organisational focus on cultural heritage material and provides numerous services for hand printed books and manuscripts. LIBER continues caring for “cultural heritage” with a focus on “digital cultural heritage” – well in line with the remit of its strategic plan “Re-inventing the library of the future”. LIBER decided to do so no longer in the context of a Steering Committee operating within the three years lifetime of the Strategic plan, but within a new organisational entity, called a forum. The forum has a longer lifespan and a wider remit. Fora will exist in parallel to the SCs and will – no doubt - closely cooperate with them. One of the fora is devoted to “digital cultural heritage”. This concept has for sure different implications – let’s look at them now..

One may be described “ex negativo” – The forum will not focus on the basic needs of the originals, preservation, conservation, restoration, storage. These aspects are internationally well cared for e.g. by IFLA and its strategic programme on Preservation and Conservation – and by CERL’s upcoming conference in 2013 in Warsaw. Within the forum there is certainly the awareness that a lot of digital cultural heritage cannot exist without the originals. Their value as special material, their demands in handling for digitization, and after digitization cannot be fully excluded. Assuring and monitoring the transition from original to digital also means new responsibilities and attitudes to the physical collections. It is not putting them on a throne of holiness, but considering overlaps, maintenance, access and even deacquisition in a shared responsibility among research libraries of different profiles.

The focus of digital is not in the opposition to original, but in the coherence and in its own right and value.

“Digital cultural heritage” is about caring for the past’s cultural heritage, the traditional material, to make it meaningful for the world of today and tomorrow in an online environment.

“Cultural heritage” does not mean only “old out-dated things” or “precious illuminated medieval manuscripts”.

Cultural heritage in the remit for the forum comprises all material traditionally and consciously collected, acquired, described and cared for by a library in order to allow and support research in a wide number of areas. It is the fundamental asset, the *raison d’être* and the heart of the traditional library, the reason why our predecessors established all kind of services. It is our legacy today, our “gold reserve”, constituting a collective memory, an extensive knowledge base, a proved research infrastructure. Cultural heritage material is a focus of today’s research libraries as their unique and distinctive assets. It is made available today in a much better – the digital - form, both through digitization of originals and digital descriptions. This allows for a wealth of cooperative research, new approaches, deeper insights. The modern research library is the place to turn this material beneficial for today’s research environments and educational services.

Presentation is a key factor and an evolving business: from trends to standardisation, various web presentations, to apps with particular features.

Digitized objects are there to be shared – within national digital libraries, Europeana, the World digital library, in a number of individual projects. Digitized objects – thus sent into the world – shout even louder than the originals for description and metadata. The possibilities of contextualisation open a wide range of interest in various aspects. They all need to be described and standardized to be available in different semantic contexts. The possibilities of full (machine readable) text (as opposed to images only) are a challenge to be faced by international cooperation involving new, creative technologies. The hidden assets of cultural heritage – which we tried to describe in the poster of the former SC in Tartu last year – now come to “digital” light. They offer new approaches for research. Digital cultural heritage thus continues in a new environment to bring primary research data mainly for humanities, continues to invite for and support research.

Cultural heritage also reminds us that we are building on research of at least the last two hundred years, sometimes much longer, ever since libraries were brought together out of a special individual collection for the benefit of a general public, cared for professionally by librarians, being learnt professors for centuries, working with the collections, describing them ... thus providing a wealth of primary research material. We must be eager not to lose this information because of a simple technology change. It is all too frequently still hidden away in inaccessible filing cabinets. It is up to the modern research library to keep track of this material, evaluate it, transform and transmit it – making it usable, interesting and accessible for our times, reinserting it into the research process.

For me it is an open question whether the research library will continue providing services for research – as it excelled and refined doing since the end of Second World War – or whether it will once again change its focus, integrate itself into the world of research and learning as it had done in the past. The research library would be no longer a service provider – but a partner on the same level of knowledge and acceptance. If there is an area - or let’s better say: a niche - where this feature of a learned librarian, a researcher, has sometimes survived within the research library, this is care for cultural heritage. So maybe the fundamental change here is a retour to what we already had: re-inventing ...

“Digital cultural heritage” is not only research oriented – an important lesson to be learnt and which may also fundamentally reshape the research library. Digitization has a fundamental democratic value. Digital objects, digital content are for everybody. Digitization opens up cultural heritage testimonies for the general interested public, in a way unconceivable before.

This presents new challenges, asks for new (more educational) skills and allows involving new parties. Our audience is enlarged – and it is a demanding audience, easily fleeting, quickly moving to other topics, looking for fashionable things relating to them. This public stimulates our care, concern and interest in cultural heritage – it needs other metadata, other platforms to be easily met “on the way”. And again – as for modern services provided for scholars – the library has to go out to meet this public. Again, this is a sector where cooperation is vital, because our audience is no longer limited to the local university, – it is – let us be generous - the world.

“Cultural heritage” undergoes – in itself – a fundamental transformation: (1) out of the hands of one collection keeping and thus research monitoring institution into the Web environment, (2) gaining a new role in the constitution of a cultural memory, thus somehow also transforming into a museal object with new methods of display (e.g. apps) and new questions for research (e.g. materiality questions) for the “traditional items”, and (3) continuing its existence, transforming its ongoing creation in a born digital form.

And here I arrive at the second meaning of “digital cultural heritage” – also in the remit of the forum. This is the new “stuff”, digitally born, online by nature, today’s cultural heritage for tomorrow. Some mails of today are the learned correspondence of tomorrow, online editions replace the thick volumes of yesterday’s Academies’ work, some portals and some websites replace the research monographs we use to keep in our libraries. It is the concern for this kind of material which comes as complete novelty and new challenge into the focus of libraries. A strong coalition has to be sought here with the forum on digital collections.

The administration of this kind of material (acquisition, selection, description, access), the burning question of long term preservation (including maintenance of functionality, even more unsolved today as preservation makes progress) and on a number of juridical issues challenge the research library and reshape it fundamentally. It is in the spirit of this new area that the “digital cultural heritage” group continues looking after LIBER’s bi-annual digital curation workshop, already well planned and scheduled for May 2014 in Vienna with a focus on data management plans.

LIBER is an excellent place to keep this wide field of discussions alive among research libraries for the sake of our widened and shared user community, to learn from each other in best practice, in excellent ideas, to encourage each other in the daily concerns, to support each other in common approaches, intelligent networks, meaningful cooperations. Today all is about contextualisation – the Forum on digital cultural heritage - a joint undertaking of LIBER and the Consortium of European Research Libraries - will try to be one of these nodes, fully dedicated and motivated by what cultural heritage has been in the past and will remain for the future, an important aspect in building our human, individual and general cultural identity, the endeavour of today, the memory of yesterday for the world of tomorrow, a future full of possibilities.

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