
Convergence of Archives, Libraries and Museums: A European Perspective

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My purpose today is not to tell you anything new but to iterate an idea, a message, which some of you may well have already had or have perceived as a reality to come.

It is commonplace to state that the ubiquity of digital technologies and networks is profoundly changing our societies and our ways of apprehending things. All the boundaries set up by practice and by habit are shifting. It is somewhat less commonplace to create and to experience new practices which break with the comfort of habit.

Archives, libraries and museums which, for convenience one could call cultural or memory institutions, have evolved at their own rhythms in the 20th Century, though in many ways they spring from the same social need and ideal. They have, so to speak, strayed apart. Yet this is clearly one of the areas where the digital technologies are most profoundly shifting the boundaries and changing definitions. There is already some recognition in some countries (such as the UK and Scandinavian countries), and among some professionals, of the commonalities between the different institutions in facing both challenges and opportunities provided by electronic resources to their services and to their custodial traditions. There are commonalities, and in many respects convergence in the type of issues - both strategic and technical - which are arising and which each institution is beginning to address.

There are also common factors, which are a *de facto* effect of the digital technology tools themselves. Technology-enabled user access (via the Internet) is one obvious example,

which is imposing similarities in overall approaches and expectations and which none of the memory organisations can ignore. It is not only the fact that the software and hardware tools are the same for all (pen and paper are also common tools!). We are now in an era of access. This has enormous implications well beyond the technicalities of the term "access" itself - implications such as openness and availability of that which can be accessed and naturally of that which should become accessible. The paradigm is the same for all the institutions - they have the duty to be pro-active in disclosing their holdings. This has an impact on the way institutions are organised but also influences their missions and roles, which take on new dimensions and even new definitions and directions.

The substratum of that which is to be accessed is information from which knowledge, culture, understanding can be elicited. To quote Mr Matthew Evans: "Our libraries, archives, museums and galleries are vast repositories of information which have contributed since time immemorial to the world's storehouse of knowledge" (from the recent press release on his appointment as chairman of the MLAC). Information, which can be accessed, is also a resource to be exploited and implies services, which must be provided to users. A new terminology, a new language, is springing up which leads away from the conception that our cultural institutions are vast monuments, which are there to be an end in themselves. It affirms their continued relevance to our modern society.

The challenges of the "shared networked information space" are similar for all the organisations. The issues raised are in the first instance largely technical, provoked by the rapid pace at which the technologies

themselves change and become obsolete. But these issues permeate all activities and raise more structural and fundamental questions:

- How to plan in an unpredictable environment without making choices which may turn out to be inappropriate and costly investments.
- How to define new "fit for purpose", stable and user-relevant services when the user is the most unknown entity (except when he or she is a consumer expecting value for money) and how can one predict fashions in what the user will want.
- How to ensure the preservation of the digitised information resources for future generations, in order that our society may have a past and a history. How to know what to preserve for posterity, when it is notorious that information by definition has short-lived relevance (or else it would be knowledge).
- How to manage the tension between stable traditional practices built around traditional physical objects (books, paintings, sculptures etc) and the emerging requirements of holdings on new digital media, which can be evanescent and fragile - how to acquire the right balance of skills to deal with both when we do not have the time.
- Who owns the digital information resources made accessible and how the legal framework built up over centuries should evolve in the networked environment.
- How to create or transform institutions in order to guarantee persistent, predictable and economically viable services in a context where the concept of public service is also undergoing change and new infrastructures are appearing.

- What are the key components, which define the value of the services and the information thereby provided.

I believe that because they share these preoccupations and many others, there is also much ground for co-operation and co-ordination between the worlds of libraries, archives and museums, which can be beneficial to all, including to their users. Some of the themes upon which co-operation and co-ordination can be built involve harmonised approaches and joint strategies (even if this may take the form of agreements to differ over some parameter). The themes to consider include: the adoption of technical standards (and the timing of their adoption); the development of best practice; the protection of intellectual property rights with its corollary, licensing models and other conditions of access; the preservation of digital records in order to ensure long-term access; frameworks and policies for the selection and digitisation of collections to avoid duplication of effort.

In today's automated and networked universe, people expect integrated (albeit perhaps physically distributed) end-to-end processes, which the technology is already able to provide, rather than stand-alone applications. But that requires from organisations a holistic vision and the ability to provide the right content and services. There is co-operation and agreement on guidelines needed in such practical areas as the development of common metadata pools, common service profiles, agreed system interfaces, common criteria in the structure and management of exponentially growing, complex data repositories. This type of co-operation can facilitate inter-working across services and thus provide an end-to-end process of information access. The Internet has created expectations that information resources can be bundled together in terms of interests and immediate needs without constraints of medium, geography, practice or even the capabilities of holders of the resources. This in itself is already sufficient justification for co-operation.

Shared cross-domain views are also required on the development or use of new more infrastructural technical "network services" (as opposed to information services), which support communication and access though they are not necessarily visible to the users. These network services, whether they are developed by the organisations themselves or are provided by third parties include for instance locator or registry services, resource discovery services (sometimes termed subject gateways), authentication and rights management services, query routing and other forms of broker services and many others. There is a plethora of such infrastructural tools, which are now essential and need to be developed in a coherent fashion if information is to be accessed easily, efficiently and usefully.

Another important area where joint effort and consensus is needed has to do with costs and economic and business models. As public service institutions, libraries, archives and museums have in the past been less preoccupied with the justification of costs than with obtaining adequate appropriations to fulfil their public service mission. The digital and networked environment is however changing the cost structure of service provision without necessarily removing other costs. Some of the new cost elements are also frequently open-ended. Economic issues are arising such as rights to reuse material held or owned by the cultural institutions and the nature of commercial partnerships that can be entered into. Cost/benefit, cost/efficiency and the potential added value of certain operations are all parameters, which they now have to take into account in developing or enhancing their services.

Cross-domain co-operation, between the cultural institutions themselves and also with other sectors such as education, will create substantial added value. Moreover this co-operation should be international and at the least on a European scale. I say European not only because we have a common history - although that is also surely a good reason. A common

European enabling framework is evolving on matters as diverse as privacy and copyright, communications policies and infrastructures, education and culture - the latter recognised explicitly by article 128 of the Maastricht Treaty for the European Union, thus marking "a new stage in the process of European integration".

The arguments are convincing in my view. Nevertheless, however reasonable, rational and productive such collaboration can be between all types of libraries, archives and museums, clearly there is still a great deal to do to create understanding and mobilise awareness of its benefits - and thereby allay the fears of professional discomfort generated by inevitable organisational changes. There is a need for top-down political leverage, as is happening in the UK with the creation of the MLAC, but also at European level. There is also an equally important need for bottom-up discussion and joint experiment on all the themes mentioned, as well as many others, for such co-operation to become commonplace reality.

Actually, I believe that if our cultural and memory institutions are to remain relevant in the information society and maintain the intrinsic Values (with a capital V) which they represent, they have little other choice but to work together. Battles of influence will not be productive because none can win except the outsiders whose stakes are elsewhere!

One of the key areas, which should be the focus of joint priority attention is that generally called "preservation" or sometimes "digital archiving" for lack of better words. It is everybody's problem and brings together under a single flag most of the issues raised on information access in the information society environment. Much work is being done for instance in the US and in Australia on the topic, but I particularly recommend serious thought to be given to the recently published report of the UK National Preservation Office: "Digital Culture: Maximising the Nation's Investment" (edited by Mary Feeney). It

demonstrates in clear terms that the problems to be confronted are of another order of magnitude than those known up to the present, and provides a thoughtful analysis as well as a set of recommendations.

I would like to close with a mention of the European Commission's programmes and in particular the new Information Society Technologies (IST) RTD programme which has an explicit mention of libraries, archives and museums under Key Action III (Multimedia Content and Tools). The IST programme does not dictate co-operation between the cultural organisations but can provide real opportunities (and corresponding funding) to explore together through pilot projects and common platforms some of the key questions and themes cited earlier. This can contribute to building up invaluable experience and awareness across Europe of what is possible and give the measure of what is feasible. The research themes in the programme (under the heading of "Digital Heritage and Cultural Content") should serve as common denominators for such co-operation. Note that past RTD programmes, such as Telematics for Libraries, already invited projects to develop models and lay the first foundations for cross-domain services. There are also other European programmes in the education and cultural areas, which can provide yet other opportunities.

In today's world, time is a precious commodity, which cannot be ignored. NOW is the moment to seize the opportunities to participate in - and why not, to steer the changes, which the networked technologies have made possible - and even inevitable. I would add as a codicil that to preserve the social and cultural values represented by our memory organisations, we have the duty to work together in order to steer our public institutional ships in the right direction. If not, events may well overtake us, which our children might later regret.

