

Chapter XLII

Enhancing Collective Memory with a Community Repository

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses a project for the implementation of a digital repository in a specific context, namely a small Italian town. The latest developments of Web 2.0, as well as recent concepts of the libraries as places where ‘conversations’ are fostered, can enable new ways of managing library collections, by allowing every member of the community to collaborate in the process of selecting and acquiring sources of information. The author hopes to provide evidence that such a project can represent a valid approach to enhance co-operation among people with different backgrounds who share the common aim to build a community repository that can represent all of them.

INTRODUCTION

“For years ... the mantra has been: aggregate, virtually collocate, and federate. The goal of seamless federation across distributed, heterogeneous resources remains the holy grail of digital library work” (Mischo, 2005).

Despite a virtual landscape where various national and international projects are available to users (such as the European Digital Library,

Gallica in France, the Michael Project, Biblioteca Digitale Italiana in Italy, etc.), the development of digital collections into organized digital library services is still in progress.

Development of technologies suggest to small-scale project promoters the possibility of access to local collections as well as to well-established projects of nationwide or international digital libraries (Mischo, 2005), such as the Bricks Project, Diligent (cited in Petrelli, 2006), Digital

Library Reserve (cited in Meinhardt, 2007), and the others mentioned above.

To provide this broad access it is necessary to establish partnerships from the beginning, in order to aggregate and disseminate resources more efficiently. Frequently, these partnerships are sought not only between similar institutions, but also between different ones (museums, archives and libraries), in order to compile and share databases and repositories. As Dempsey (2006) points out, resources fragmentation is one of the major problems facing library managers, since the new network environment causes a loss of “gravitational pull.” This means that only experienced and acquainted users will explore and find needed resources, while other potential users may not reach them. The solutions proposed are either to aggregate demand above their institutional level, or to join major Web-based search engines, booksellers, and so on—that is, some of the virtual places most visited by real and potential users of digital resources.

It is widely believed that the most important issue about sustainability of digital library projects will be the digital preservation capacity of the institutions that started and implemented such projects. According to Mischo (2005), this issue will involve both the individual and the nation, as it might attract “increasing commercial interest, as well as growing unease and concern from the general public.” This opinion finds a counterpart in the urge to introduce agreed frameworks for metadata, taxonomies, and folksonomies organization, affirmed by some authors like Bruce (2006), who emphasizes the impressive trends in the use of Web 2.0 facilities.

Another shared opinion among information professionals is that the success of a community digitization project depends on the level a community develops into a real learning community, wherein, according to Sévigny & Prévost (2006), six levels of interaction are to be identified, namely the project management, the portal, the local government, citizenship, networking, and local

development. It seems, then, that digital libraries will constitute a constant challenge to the institutions and communities that decide to invest in such projects. Nevertheless, they will always be part of the changing information landscape, and represent a stage of transition from present to future technologies (Mischo, 2005).

Three main issues emerge from these considerations. First, to assess the technical aspect that involves the choice of the adequate technologies to create a digital library. Secondly, to develop the managerial aspect that implies staff has to evaluate critically the costs and benefits of such projects. Finally, it is necessary to determine the users’ interaction level with the digital library resources, in order to measure the success of the project in itself and the users’ engagement with new technologies.

This final point could exemplify the key implementation factor in small-scale digitization projects, because small populations must sustain high digitization costs and therefore participation and interest of all potential users in the community has to be favored.

As devised in the IFLA UNESCO Public Library Manifesto in the 1994 version, “constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture, and information.”

Recently, Lankes, Silverstein & Nicholson (2007) merged this need for participative culture with the developments of the Web 2.0 into a series of recommendations that exemplify the role of the library as facilitator of conversations.

The digital library can be oriented towards its community, and act as a means to allow the community to participate in the process of building the digital collections. By being open to the contribution of all members of the community, the library enhances the visibility of the institution and the project, thus attracting potential stakeholders and sponsors.

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