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Toward an Italian Digital library: an overview

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It is now recognized all over the world that the European Cultural Heritage is a great economic resource, also for development, that expresses a great wealth diversity and variety of its contents even though it shares common roots. Today, new technologies give the opportunity to make this heritage available to an enlarged public through the creation of “portals” for culture, which can add value to European cultural diversity in a framework of European integration.

The Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage has promoted some initiatives in this way: one of them is Minerva project - taking inspiration from the “principles” established at Lund in the April 2001.¹ The aim of Minerva project is the realization of a Common European platform of technological standards, recommendations and guidelines for digitization promoting communication and the exploitation of Europe's cultural and scientific patrimony through the WEB. The challenges to be faced are: the interoperability of different systems, multilingualism, the management of intellectual property rights and copyright, the conservation of digital resources and the creation of new business models. Italy is the coordinator in the context of the IST programme (Technologies for the Information Society) and the Fifth Framework Programme. Minerva was started in 2002 and would be ended in springtime 2005. Minerva therefore, operates on two levels: one political and the other technical. The political level consists in ensuring a close collaboration among member States through high-level institutions (Ministries of Cultural heritage) and them with the European Commission. Minerva works giving visibility to national initiatives, promoting the exchange of good practices, and ensuring the diffusion and awareness of community policies and programmes at local levels and national too. The technical level concerns the creation of a common European platform based on a series of recommendations and guidelines, metadata, standards related to digitization, to the long-term conservation and accessibility of contents in the framework of quality guarantees.

An operative structure for general coordination was created: the Steering Committee and some thematic working groups. Each European country has its own National commission referring to this Steering Committee. Each National commission points to prepare a National policy profile or other reports, favour awareness and the exchange of experiences, individuate and start up coordination mechanisms. The results and the outcomes of Minerva project are all available in its site.

Crucial is in this while the connection between Minerva and the project born in the same years, for the enhancement of different programmes for digitization in libraries up to the BDI project. In Italy the connection to the main national project SBN and the connection to other similar European projects involved in digitization is strong and compulsory.

I think the exploitation of the national library project SBN could be enough known, it is possible to see the ICCU WEB pages and to query SBN Index in its feature applying z39.50 standard at the unique national large catalog, that is becoming the starting point up and the arrival point of every action of digital library and now is becoming the core for public services using digital contents resources in libraries but also for archives, museums and other cultural institutions.

The BDI (Italian Digital Library) project is born at the end of 1998; at the beginning of 1999 the General Direction for books and libraries has financed a feasibility study, finished in 2000 and

¹ See the site: www.Minervaeurope.org and for the activities and documents produced see in particular: <http://www.Minervaeurope.org/structure/workinggroups/goodpract.htm> and for Principle of Lund see: http://www.cordis.lu/ist/ka3/digicult/lund_principles.htm

presented in February 2001 at the 3rd national conference of books in Padua. The study was very rich and it represents a basic document, available till now in web pages. ²

The cooperation is the most important factor to enhance a project like BDI, supposing the convergence of archives, libraries and museums and hopes for this the creation of a group of experts of State, Regions, Universities and cultural institutions too working together to prepare the "Magna Charta" of the digital matter. That means the milestones, the principles, the cultural and scientific border to which every present projects of the future would be referred to.

In that context a National Steering Committee for BDI had started up, (I have the pleasure to be a member of it), with a hard and not easy role: the assessment of technical standards and methods for digitization of whatever documents/objects, but mainly it has the task to design and suggest policies for digitization giving priorities on contents and objects in our libraries. That all is including also in what Minerva project has foreseen.

It could be said that Italy was not, of course, the first European country building a meaningful digital library project, made at national level. We know the realizations in France like Gallica, or other of British Library.³The Italian approach is necessary based on agreements among State, Institutions, Regions, but also Universities and some Municipalities should take part in the project because of their competences on great important libraries or giving experience and technical resources as software or hardware up graded.

In ninety years it appears in Italy some experiences of applying digitization and managing digital resources It is enough to see what the BNCF in Florence, (Galileian Manuscripts) or the University in Rome, or Padua have done⁴ and also the complete digitization of illuminated manuscripts in Bergamo and Brescia or in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana or in other public libraries and the manuscripts of Music in the Conservatorio Verdi in Milan and the most part of the historical and modern periodicals digitized by the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense in Milan. The problem is now how to put them in a digital library and make them available in the Web and no more only on site and to organize them, as much as possible.

A group of libraries and central institutions depending on the Minister of Culture, have played a central role in starting up the national project. The National Library in Florence has a special task about the conservation of digital (web sites included) and the definition of methods to take over the project. The ICCU and ICCD are concerned in standards for cataloging and the metadata related to; the Discoteca di Stato is concerning sound resources, the Biblioteca Marciana of Venice is responsible for music and maps; the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense in Milan, with its Mediateca of S.Teresa is responsible for the digitization of periodicals (see <http://emeroteca.braidense.it/>)

One of the crucial goal of the national digital library is to check the inevitable rushing of institutions, libraries who, pressed by local needs, run to digitize creating small local wildcat realizations sometimes very expensive, not recovering, even with difficulties, in the national project. Very important for that, there are the monitoring on existing realization, made ahead Minerva and the same BDI, also in collaboration with the new BEIC⁵.

What we have done.

Since three years the Steering Committee of BDI has promoted an organic series of digitization actions: the historic catalogs of Italian ancient public libraries, the funding support and participation of our country to the European cooperative network Virtual Renaissance, a programme to digitize manuscript and printed music, and a scheme to digitize periodicals, photography and maps. Related to these actions also guidelines have been prepared to manage digital contents not yet including

² See : <http://www.Iccu.sbn.it/docbdi.html>

³ See: <http://www.gallica.bnf.fr/> ; www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/papers/bl/

⁴ Università di Roma-- CIBIT and Project Biblioteca Italiana Digitale see: <http://cdrom.cics.uniroma1.it/>

Padua Seminario matematico see: <http://www.cab.unipd.it/progetti/dml.php>

⁵ Biblioteca d'informazione e cultura Europea of Milano Bei see <http://www.beic.it/associazione/cosaebeic.html>,

This new institution even the construction of the building will be starting up next Winter has just offered its collaboration to BDI.

commercial digital objects. These many actions demonstrate the will to coordinate a scenario very complex, to define a reference help point, useful to by pass the difficulties of the fragmentation as recommended also in Lund's Principles and pursued through Minerva. Therefore, some of these initiatives seem to show the beginning of a national coherent strategy with a new consciousness but also with the important role covered in international programmes as Minerva (or other like ERPANET: <http://www.erpanet.org/>).

We must consider in any case the effort that State has done with the BDI to coordinate and to maintain reduced times and costs.

This preliminary action, at the end, consists in finding and trying a common language for a shared distributed organization, encouraging coherent initiatives ahead the adopted principles and to get divergences and opposing initiatives disheartened.

In Lombardy the situation of governance is well planned: we point at the convergence among archives, libraries, museums and cultural institutions too, as recommended by EU, essential component in each public policy.

Some important consequences, operative and conceptual too are involved.

First, the cultural institutions or the institutions implied in the processes of conservation of the Memory (local or national) could now be considered as components of a unique large infrastructure with extended large fields to select or to cross and to merge. Besides, the user requests to this infrastructure in its generality could be described as information needs, then as books, museum objects or archival papers. The user can now refer to heterogeneous and across contents: for example a museum's object, the referred bibliography, and the archival documentation related to. What that before was inevitably separated or used, of course, in different time today can be potentially used simultaneously in integrated way. In other words, libraries and museums as specific institutions are really different. Moreover from the point of view of an integrated infrastructure it becomes possible to combine through new technologies information and images about their objects.. In this direction Lombardy is moving.

I invite you to visit our site: www.lombardiacultura.it. I indicate to you in particular the archivist-documentary projects. The portal Lombardia Storica , that contains even the archival inventories available in Lombardy, in PLAIN, also the digitization of ancient documents in the Codex diplomaticus of Lombardia and in next months will be enriched with other type of documents result of thematic digitization made concerning local history and documents linked with other already available; then the AIM archive referred to many thousands images of photography, property of Regione Lombardia and now retrieved at the new national Centre for photography, close Milan, the AESS audiovisual archives of digitization of etnoantropological resources work out of researches and studies of Regione Lombardia .⁶All the standards used for digitization, for cataloguing and metadata records management are compatible with those of national archives.⁷ (OAI system).

But let me go back to the BDI, to the activity of the National Steering committee who did not choose for its implementation sophisticated technologies. As I have told before, starting the Committee has decided to solve the problem still unsolved: to recuperate the old manual catalogs, precisely those manuscripts on the cards, on mobile sheets or on volumes

The unification given by the virtual drawers filing images to be leaved through represent in any case a step forward the easy access to ancient and unknown and precious documents, even to read them

⁶See: DG Culture: <http://www.cultura.regione.lombardia.it/index.cfm> ; AESS: <http://www.aess.regione.lombardia.it/> Lombardia Storica: <http://plain.unipv.it/> ; SIRBEC: <http://sirbec.itec.cnr.it/> . To implement and manage the *portal of Lombardia Storica* Lombardia has signed an agreement with the University of Pavia ; instead of the AIM and AESS Lombardia Informatica Spa directly supports sites, like the pole SBN.

⁷ The standard used for digitization are published on our site above mentioned, the other standards are those of archives available in the site of Ministry of culture pages of ICCD <http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it/standard/index.html> and ICCU, SBN above mentioned

it is still necessary the contact the library holding them in original, or sometimes digitized on a support off line. This is not really a beginning with contents but on mediations instrument again, those catalogs not yet included in the retroconversion project managed by SBN That digitization have been recuperated in reasonable short time and at convenient costs.

We could find in the realization 158 historical catalogs, as virtual pages of images, of which 75 volumes format and 83 on cards. The precise list and all information about the libraries interested in could be found in the pages of this project, at the mentioned site ICCU. Now, I try to give only the idea of the pages they are 7 million digitized pages of catalogs before forgotten, difficult to be used and not useful for on line researches⁸.

Ahead the work out of the BDI the Committee want to give technical scientific consultancy activity as suggestion of the national programme to valorize the cultural heritage, indicating themes and sectors to be involved, helped also by expert's advices and experiences. These programmes could also enhance even possible a financial support, if they get new value for the growth of local shared projects.

Last considerations go to the interaction between BDI and SBN. Now is eventually limited to the metadata components. The integration between the two dominions of interest is therefore necessary and this concept of the originary design of SBN Index, built like a simple indicator to the remote local databases, could be considered as a model for the BDI system too.

A particular integration design is suggested therefore in the actual project NCT (<http://www.nctproject.com/>), the Touristic cultural network sponsored by the same Ministry of Culture including the concept of Italian digital library. The new suggestion would guarantee the organization and implementation of the system knowledge management out coming from bibliographic records, digital documents extracted from digital repositories and Web sites generating the cross-connection through NCT computers and bank and mail systems to manage together information systems and the related economic transactions. In this perspective the OPAC of SBN will be integrated with new services of digital resources.

I mean at the end that the Italian project of BDI does not at all consider the original native digital resources. This is really a very crucial large matter but we think to put early on the table useful guidelines to face this problem involving also private partners, as industry and hard/soft houses producers. By the way we consider the preservation of the web sites of libraries and public institutions. In the Minerva environment this type of objects are being monitored by the working groups like the variety of community information that many libraries are used to manage.

The BDI is now a growing standard open system started up with formats imaging, building a Digital repository. What to digitize is being a choice for public institutions. I notice to you that in few months a collection of Laterza Publisher will be digitized for BDI concerning Italian culture of ninety century and that the format scanning OCR even without other intervention at the moment. Also to the formats by images will be added.

We have a lot to do! Not only a digital library but many digital libraries, not only large structures but a lot of themes linked by a common language and a communication based on the assumption of responsibilities among different partners, public and private interested in the same mission to let everybody able accessing information and knowledge, which is a part of the long- life value over the librarian profession.

Many thanks for your attention.

⁸ See. Cataloghi storici : <http://cataloghistorici.bdi.sbn.it/code/index.asp> and for the Metadata group: <http://www.iccu.sbn.it/grupmeta.htm>