

Joint UK-Ireland Digitisation Workshop

The Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

Tuesday 20 May 2008

This workshop on digitisation was organised by An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (The Library Council), MLA and the National Museum of Ireland, with funding provided by Minerva EC, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism.

Welcome

Roger Dixon began by welcoming delegates to Cultra Manor and the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum and by thanking the funders and organisers of the workshop.

Session One

Chair: Anne Grady, National Museum of Ireland

‘Digital Vision for Europe and EU Member States’

David Dawson, Senior Policy Advisor – Digital Futures, MLA

David Dawson introduced Europeana, The European Digital Library (EDL), which will provide a common multilingual access point to cultural material from organisations throughout Europe. Europeana is based on The Electronic Library (TEL) gateway, which provides access to the collections of European national libraries, and the MICHAEL project (the Multilingual Inventory of Cultural Heritage). The prototype Europeana website will be launched in November 2008, and some of the proposed functionality can be seen at www.europeana.eu. Museums and libraries should now be planning for inclusion in the European Digital Library, ensuring that content is created using open standards (see MINERVA Technical Guidelines, <http://www.minervaeurope.org/bestpractices/listgoodpract.htm>).

The European Commission has asked member states to increase digitisation, enable access, tackle IPR issues and enable preservation. The Culture Ministers have agreed to draw up and update strategies for digitisation of cultural material and to set up national coordination mechanisms for digitisation. A Member States Expert Group has been set up by the European Commission to coordinate these strategies. Practical support for museums and libraries is available from eContentPlus projects such as EDLocal and Athena.

‘Digitisation – a Museum perspective’

Clifford Harkness, Head of Collections Management, National Museum Northern Ireland

Clifford Harkness looked at reasons for digitisation, approaches to digitisation, the impacts of digitisation on museums and their users, and possible directions for the future of digital objects. External pressures are often given as reasons for digitisation – positive pressures such as improving access to collections and providing content for educational use, as well as negative ones, such as the fear of not being seen as progressive and doing it because they have been told to do it. Grants often provide for websites to be developed and hosted for a short period, but there is often no continued development. Digitisation leads to new and uncertain activities and relationships, and projects often develop assets with no preservation or sustainability strategy. We need to consider whether our digital collections are worth the resources required to put them in place. We also need to consider whether links should be made between the different cultural websites or whether the content on these sites should be aggregated. Social networking is a growing phenomenon, and the sector needs to decide where it should position itself within that. Intellectual property rights are also an issue – are we willing for our digital content to be manipulated?

Session Two

Chair: Annette Kelly, Assistant Director, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna

‘Digitisation under the Branching Out Library Policy Programme: Meath County Library.’

Ciaran Mangan, Meath County Librarian

Ciaran Mangan began by giving the background to County Meath and its involvement in the Branching Out programme. Meath County Library has provided content for the Ask About Ireland website, under the headings of Architecture, The Big House, Flora and Fauna, Poor Law Union, and Irish Traditional Music. The information about thatched cottages, provided under Architecture, was also used to create a unit for primary school students in the Ask About Ireland Student Zone. The Student Zone has the added advantage of allowing for development of further partnerships with the local schools. Balancing local collection needs with national opportunities was a challenge, with topics selected to match the national criteria, but the library was impressed with how the content was presented online and with the associated publicity materials.

The benefits of local involvement with the Ask About Ireland website included upskilling of staff, the provision of an outlet for unique material relating to the county, access to library resources nationally and access to other local studies resources such as the Irish Historic Maps and the Irish Times Digital Archive. Ciaran concluded with an overview of some of the potential future projects, including digitisation of the Conway Papers, audio publishing, and development of a photographic archive and website.

‘Establishing Digitisation Programmes...towards a NI Libraries Strategy’

Beth Porter, Chief Librarian, South Eastern Library Board Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Public Library service has reached an important juncture, with the establishment of the new Northern Ireland Library Authority and with the availability of funding for digitisation. There have been some successful individual and cooperative digitisation projects already, but now a strategy needs to be put in place.

Beth Porter suggested a number of steps towards the development of a strategy:

- Audience – identify target groups
- Holdings – identify materials/content
- Guidelines/procedures – follow best practice
- Technology – take standards and interoperability into account
- Partnerships – identify potential
- Funding Streams – ensure sustainability of the projects.

This strategy should fit in with the ones for museums and archives, as well as with any digitisation strategy in the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Benefits include coherence, better value, improved access to collections, conservation and encouraging creativity.

Session 3

Chair: Roger Dixon, Librarian, Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

‘Towards an electronic library of core research resources on Ireland.’

Dr. Paul Ell, Director, The Centre for Data Digitisation and Analysis, Queen’s University, Belfast

The Digital Library of Core Materials on Ireland (DLCMI) will make journals, monographs, and manuscript images in the field of Irish Studies available online free of charge to residents of the UK and Ireland, and by subscription for the rest of the world. Reasons for digitising included preservation, widening and enhancing access to resources and providing improved bibliographic resources for Irish Studies. The content for digitisation was selected on the basis of consultation patterns, academic recommendation and the journals that were out of copyright or willing to sign licence. Technical challenges encountered included the volume of pages to be digitised, the high image quality required, the use of historic journals, detailed metadata requirements and the implementation of reference linking. Project success is anticipated because of the broad international interest in Irish Studies, the business model and technical solutions that are in place (with JSTOR), content selection by academics, the volume of content to be made available and significant CDDA investment in equipment, software, staff and other facilities. Further development is planned in terms of available content and semantic search capability. Challenges will include interlinking existing QUB e-resources, the advancement of an Irish Studies research agenda, content management and the implications for metadata and contextual searching, and ensuring sustainability.

‘Cultural Heritage Digitisation Programme: Challenges & Opportunities’.

Joan Ward, Executive Librarian, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (The Library Council)

The Cultural Heritage Digitisation Programme was one of the key recommendations of the Branching Out policy. Pilot projects were set up to develop best practice in digitising different types of materials. These projects formed the basis for the Ask About Ireland website (www.askaboutireland.ie), which allows the user to access information relating to particular topics or places and showcases content from the local studies collections in Ireland. User feedback indicated that contextual information is needed in addition to the digital items themselves. The programme has continued by developing content for the adult section of the site, including new educational content and providing access to national datasets (e.g. Irish Historic Maps, The Irish Times Digital Archive, Griffith’s Valuation and digital books). Local newspapers may also be added to the site in the future. Partnerships have been a key success of the programme, as have flexible models, user focus and consultation. Programme drivers included the Branching Out policy, i2010. Funding was available initially through the Information Society Fund and then directly through the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Dedicated digitisation units were recommended during the pilot phase, but while some were set up, others were not possible. Ongoing issues include the availability and upgrading of machinery, avoiding duplication of effort, in-house vs. outsourced digitisation, copyright and IPR, metadata, access issues and staff mobility.

Session 4

Chair: David Dawson, Senior Policy Advisor, Digital Futures, MLA

‘Digitisation and user access’

Aly Conteh, Digitisation Programme Manager, The British Library Council

The British Library has created 50 million digital objects since 1992. Their current project with Microsoft involves the digitisation of 25 million pages of 19th century books. The project involves scanning whole sections of the book collection, so it will include many books that might otherwise have been missed. The digital collection also includes newspapers, sound recordings and manuscripts images. Challenges have included digital preservation, interface development, intellectual property issues, the use of web standards, interoperability and sustainability. User panels, usability labs and awareness of trends have been important in ensuring that the services meet customer expectations. The EC funded IMPACT project (Improving Access to Text) is working to address some of the issues such as OCR quality and the lack of tools for working with historic texts.

‘Digital Preservation’

Frances Boyle, Director, Digital Preservation Coalition, UK

Frances Boyle spoke of the importance of preservation of the digital items that are created. Digital assets must be kept for as long as they are needed, and we need to make sure that they can still be accessed despite changes in hardware and software. Content accuracy must also be ensured, since many file types can be easily be modified and may be needed for future reference for evidential or academic purposes. Material that has been created for one reason may be repurposed in the future, making it difficult to determine which content has outgrown its usefulness. Drivers for digitisation include government initiatives, research agenda and legal compliance. Technological, organisational, cultural and legal challenges must be addressed, and strategies must be put in place to ensure good practice. Preservation strategies such as information migration, emulation, technology preservation and digital archaeology can be used. The Open Archival Information System (OAIS) provides a common vocabulary, defines a model for objects and metadata, and defines a functional model for digitisation activities.

The Digital Preservation Coalition is a cross-sectoral membership organisation, which works to progress the digital preservation agenda. The ‘Mind the Gap’ report is available from the DPC website (<http://www.dpconline.org>), and gives preservation advice at practitioner level.