Digital resources and real users. The cases of Europeana and ASSETS

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A lot of time ago museums could see *all* objects as having some potential for use in understanding the past of their chosen subject: «Victorian museums were venues in which each object representing the subject was desired and collected in attempt to provide a full catalogue of the subject»((Jessica Hadfield, «Deaccession and Disposal: the Theory in Context», in Peter Davies (ed.) *Museums and Disposal Debate*, MuseumETC, Edinburgh, 2011, p. 87)). Over the last decades it became clear that museums cannot continue to acquire items without becoming larger and less manageable institutions.

Sometimes digitization seems the most up-do-date avatar of this Victorian bulimia, as if digital media were

supposed to can grow indefinitely, gathering (virtually) everything and avoiding the material contraints, which do limit the collection of physical objects. Still, also the indefinite expansion of digital collections is a process not simple to manage, and absolutely not «for free». It is evident that physical objects and bytes are not exactly the same. What it is not always evident is that also digital item need material resources (i.e. very powerful servers and a lot of money), and that their expansion in the virtual space cannot occur without posing serious problems of sustainibility((«The sustainable museum can be defined as one with a fully strategic approach to collections management, which includes programmes of community engagement, documentation, storage improvement, acquisition, and disposal», Nick Merriman, «Museum Collecting and Sustainibility», *Museum Management & Curatorship* 17 (1): 3-21, p. 5)).

In this speech, I will present *Europeana* and the related ASSETS project as case study for a better understanding of both options *and* problems related to the collection of digitised books, paintings, films, museum objects and archival records. I will consider these projects from the vantage point offered by the content provision's work done by the Luigi Micheletti Foundation((Luigi Micheletti Foundation (see <http://www.fondazionemicheletti.it) is a non profit institution which is concerned with research on contemporary history. The Foundation has a wide variety of documentary heritage: library, newspaper library, archive, picture library, photo library, film library and media center. The Foundation also publishes books and magazines, promotes research and study projects, organizes conferences and seminars. The Micheletti Foundation is also the main promoter of Musil – Museum of Industry and Work in Brescia (see <http://www.musil.bs.it>), for which, since the Eighties, it has gathered a rich collection of exhibits of industrial archeology)).

In the first part, I will present the structure and the goals of Europeana and ASSETS.

In the second part, I will focus on Europeana's strategies for expanding and involving users and I will explore the potential impact of ASSETS' services on the "virtual" life of museums and archives.

1. ASSETS for Europeana, Luigi Micheletti Foundation for ASSETS

T**he life of Europeana** is short but successful. Europeana's prototype was launched in 2008, with the goal of making Europe's cultural and scientific heritage accessible to the public. In the legal document governing the operations of Europeana Foundation we find the following objectives: «to facilitate formal agreement across museums, archives, audiovisual archives and libraries on how to co-operate in the delivery and sustainability of a joint portal; to stimulate and facilitate initiatives to bring together existing digital content; to support and facilitate digitisation of Europe's cultural and scientific heritage»[(See <http://pro.europeana.eu/web/guest/about/europeana-foundation> (31 March 2012)]).

Europeana spent 2009 and 2010 creating an operational service and ingesting a critical mass of data from some 1500 providers across Europe. Today((See <http://pro.europeana.eu/web/guest/press-release> (31 March 2012))) **the** European digital library already holds 20 millions of items, including videos, movies, newspapers, paintings, music archives. Renowned names such as the British Library in London, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Louvre in Paris are featured alongside smaller organisations across Europe. Together, their assembled collections allow to explore Europe's history from ancient times to the modern day.

ASSETS project (Advanced Service Search and

Enhancing Technological Solutions for

the European Digital Library) aims to improve the usability of Europeana. During the 2 years project (2010-2012), ASSETS developed advanced services to improve the search of multimedia objects, the navigation and user interface, involving directly targeted user groups in requirements analysis, design, large-scale implementation, testing and evaluation. Moreover the problem of long-term access to digital contents and their preservation has been faced.

The ASSETS project, co-funded by the European Commission within the CIP-Policy Support Programme, is implemented by a consortium including 24 international partners (cultural institutions, broadcast and technological companies) from Italy, Austria, Spain, Netherlands, Greece, France, Germany, Belgium, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Sweden and one partner from Japan. Furthermore, the UNESCO participation in the project guaranteed a worldwide coverage.

Through ASSETS project, partners achieved the following main outcomes:

· a set of value-added search, browsing and long-term access services to directly enhance the content accessibility and improve the usability of Europeana's operational services (development will be coordinated by CNR – Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche);

· a large-scale validated implementation of such services in the real context of use of Europeana;

· a set of recommendations, guidelines and best practices concerning the technology adaptation, and service roll out strongly contributing to the promotion of the standards and specifications addressed in Europeana, and paving the way for an increased interoperability;

· making new multimedia digital content available to and

accessible by Europeana portal, as delivered by content providers in the ASSETS consortium.

Luigi Micheletti Foundation is involved in ASSETS project as content provider: it

provides to ASSETS (and by this to Europeana) part of its digital archives. Moreover Luigi Micheletti Foundation, in collaboration with EMA — European Museum Academy((See <http://www.europeanmuseumacademy.eu>)), has taken part in the dissemination activities: it helped to publicize the project to other cultural institutions and to disseminate the know-how on the technical procedures of the use of new services, raising awareness of the use of Europeana as digital resource among end-users.

2. The day after digitization. Ideas & tools from Europeana and ASSETS

What happens the day after the digitization?

Often archives and museums make huge efforts in digitizing their heritage. Still, sometimes they conceive digitization as a goal, and not as a tool. Nevertheless, contemporary museums must consider themselves as part of a cultural information landscape, and digitization can play an important role in making museums «cultural memory organisations»((More about the meaning of this phrase in Peter Van Mensh, Léontine Meijer-Van Mensch, *New Trends in Museology*, Museum of Recent History Celje, 2011, pp. 79-85)). As Kathy Gee put it: «One reason for having museums is not simply to conserve and store objects but to preserve the information or knowledge that objects embody»((Kathy Gee, «Wonderweb», in Museums Journal, 1995 (3), p. 19)).

The problem is: how museums can use the potential offered from digitization and Internet? How they could engage people in their virtual venues? Here some ideas & tools from Europeana and ASSETS.

2.1 Europeana for museums. The collaboration with Wikipedia and the virtual exhibitions' project

Reading the strategic plan of Europena(See <http://pro.europeana.eu/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c4f19464-7504-44db-ac1e-3ddb78c922d7&groupId=10602>, (31.03.2012))), one can note that the collaboration with Wikipedia is presented as a promising way for engaging users: «We will devote increasing resources to initiatives that bring out the value of the contribution that users can make. We will continue to work with Wikipedia to develop opportunities for collaboration. Wilkipedia's model of user involvement, multilingual content, range of cultural and scientifi c coverage and extensive interpretation offers strengths that are complementary to Europeana's»((P. 19)). Europeana wants to reach out to and engage with users in collecting, augmenting and curating content, and Wikipedia is considered a strategic partner.

In fact, a collaboration between Wikipedia and Europeana seems reasonable, since these institutions are really «complementary» from several points of view((For all these points I'm in debt with David Haskiya, Product Developer for Europeana. See his inspiring blog: <http://kadmeianletters.wordpress.com>)). For example, both Wikipedia and Europeana are non-profit foundations with the goal to make information and knowledge freely accessible – Wikipedia from a global and total, all subjects, perspective; Europeana from an European and «culturally-oriented» perspective. While Wikipedia has focused on community-creation of information, Europeana aggregates existing professionally documented information. Wikipedia has the network of engaged citizens and a huge audience, Europeana has the network of GLAM-experts. In this sense, forms of convergence between Wikipedia and Europeana seem worth to be explored. Like other current initiatives((The project «Wikipedia GLAM» (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:GLAM>; 31 March

2012) could become a sort of point of reference in this domain)), this collaboration could encourage culture-sector professionals to improve Wikipedia in their area of expertise.

Still, my personal impression is that, in the present state of the art, this cooperation appears as promising as it is risky. From my point of view, Europeana can offer the digitized works related to Wikipedia's pages on persons, places, periods and subjects, but contextual and factual information provided from Wikipedia is sometimes too inaccurate or misleading. To put in the words of Alan Shapiro: «Knowledge is based in society and as such Wikipedia not only represents knowledge, but also stupidity. And what most people believe in society is based on accepted clichés»((See <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/cpov/lang/de/tag/shapiro/> (31 March 2012))). A closer reading of some Wikipedia's pages((Particularly interesting is a comparison between the Wikipedia-England's page dedicated to the film *Russian Ark* (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Ark>) and the Wikipedia-Italy's page dedicated to the same film (see <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arca_russa>). From this «museological» example (the film is completely played inside the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg) one can easily conclude that (1) English page is by far more accurate and more thorough than Italian page and (2) Wikipedia's articles in a controversial area (like arts, literature or cinema) can be a mixture of clichés and real knowledge (while Wikipedia's pages in a non-controversial area, like basketball, are almost always really good))) show that we did not yet obtained a good compromise between community-creation of content and the work of scholars who have dedicated a lot of research on particular issues. For this reason, the collaboration on the editorial level is crucial for the future convergence between Wikipedia and Europeana. It is important to note that Europeana has already worked as a sponsor of «WikiLovesMonuments» and as part of the project «Europeana Awareness» that starts in 2012.

Europeana's project on virtual exhibitions((See <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/about-exhibitions>. Many thanks to Anne Marie van Gerwen (Marketing & Communication Manager, Europeana) for making clear to me the goals and the strategies of Europeana in this domain))is nearer to the routine of museums and archives. By putting a virtual exhibition online, a museum can be open 24 hours a day and can reach audiences that would never be able to visit their venue.

In fact, Europeana is just a repository of digitized objects of cultural heritage. But a repository is not yet a museum experience: to offer this, the objects must be contextualized, meaning must be added. Or, to put it in other words, curated. Museums do this in many ways: they display a selection of objects, in a specific order, they add stories, they explain, etc. Europeana is looking at ways to turn a repository into a museum-like experience.

Europeana's virtual exhibitions are showcases of the content available on the portal. Provided with extensive curatorial information, these exhibitions allow to learn and discover even more about the displayed items. The goal is to add service layers that add meaning, context and/or curation to the objects. In particular, one of the main goal of Europeana is to make the exhibitions more interactive: to allow viewers to add their comments, or to offer them the possibility to create their own exhibitions and share them on places outside our portal.

Europeana is limited in the number of virtual exhibitions which can be offered. For this reason, Europeana makes the exhibition platform available to the partners and host their exhibitions. In this sense, museums could be providers of virtual exhibitions: if they do this in addition to the content they already provide to Europeana, they add layers of context/meaning and in this way they become «context providers» instead of just «content providers». An example is the MIMO virtual exhibition((See

<http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/browse?tags=mimo-en>
)). Another example is the exhibition «From Dada to
Surrealism»((See
<http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/dada-to-surreal
ism-en>)), a museum exhibition that got a virtual version in
Europeana.

2.2 ASSETS (not only) for Europeana. New open source technologies for cultural institutions

In this final part I will present the way ASSETS
services can be used and exploited by cultural institutions
not directly involved in the project.

ASSETS tools are mainly designed to support the
enhancement of the services Europeana provides to the digital
libraries community, so their natural exploitation is based on
the successful integration within Europeana. Nevertheless,
they could be very useful in supporting other digital
libraries, cultural heritage institutions as well as private
companies using digital objects in improving the quality of
their content and effectiveness of search experience by the
community they involve.

It's worthwhile noting that the developed services
are based on open source technologies and this affects the
business model and the exploitation concept. Applications
based on open source technologies save money, support easy re-
engineering and are tightly connected to offering added-value
services.

ASSETS results can allow institutions to improve
the discovery of their collections without duplicating and
wasting time and money, and contributing in users engaging in
digital archives.

Museums, Archives, Public and Private Libraries
facing large amount of digitized data need a number of
specific tools: services for harvesting and normalizing

metadata, tools for linking historical documents to bibliographic record provided by a very heterogeneous set of experts, tools for a improved search experience with better recall and higher quality and uniformly classified metadata etc. Moreover, museums need a content management system to provide day-to-day access to the digital collections, even if they may lack technical infrastructure and qualified staff. Often, museums need support to ensure that their heritage will be professionally managed, controlled, and backed up to meet its longterm management responsibilities. Access to materials in digital repository, including the rights to retrieve, use, alter, or delete items, need to be restricted to a limited number of museum staff.

Here I will present only four ASSETS's services((For the full list see <http://www.assets4europeana.eu/>. Thanks to Morena Rizzo and Anna Rita Guadagni (Ciaotech) for providing me a draft of the Exploitation Plan. This document helped me to better understand the potential re-use of ASSETS services by museums, archives and other cultural institutions)). I hope that these short descriptions will make clear the reason ASSETS can be also «for museums», and not only «for Europeana»:

– Search recommendations and Metadata based ranking

This toolimproves: i) *Query Suggestion Service*, to show how query suggestions can improve the users search experience. In this scenario, while the user is interacting with the ASSETS portal, query suggestions system will provide related queries that can help the user in better specifying his information need; ii) *metadataBased Ranking Service, to* provide an enhanced ranking function that exploits knowledge mined from query logs.

– Image search engine integrated

This tool which improves the Images indexing and retrieval.

— **D**igital Preservation Risk Management

The Preservation Risk Management provides a preservation risks estimation. The service computes risk analysis for given data and generates rule based preservation plan recommendation.

— Digital preservation notification

This service aims at support the adequate communication/notification of events and changes which can potentially impact on long-term accessibility and usability of the digital library objectives. Notifications have to be addressed to data curators which have expressed interest and capabilities for reacting and properly maintaining the digital library objectives. So whenever events, potentially impacting the digital preservation, are identified by systems, those events are notified to the data curators, allowing trigger corrective actions. This service is targeted to technical roles, such as programmers, developers (who want to add feature to their digital libraries), content providers (who want to understand the behavior of the deployed service).

Some final notes on the ASSETS's impact on Luigi Micheletti Foundation. Foundation's website will offer more specialised forms of data search and retrieval, thanks to the specific tools developed by ASSETS technical partners. In particular, ss main actor of the Museum of Industry and Work of Brescia, Luigi Micheletti Foundation is interested to Digital Preservation Services, with special reference to procedures for events that could impact on long term content access.

The Kenneth Hudson Seminar 2011 The Virtual Museum

References

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