Review of the LIBER "Think Tank on the Future Value of the Book as Artefact and the Future Value of Digital Documentary Heritage", National Library of Sweden, Stockholm, Sweden, 24-25 May 2007

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DOES THE BOOK HAVE A FUTURE AT ALL?

What is the future of the book, or maybe rather, does the book have a future at all? These are questions that are raised again and again within different disciplines in the digital age, from e-strategists to historical bibliographers.

During a two-day Think Tank, held at the Swedish National Library at Stockholm on May 24-25, authors, critics, scholars, representatives of libraries, archives and other heritage institutions and knowledge organizations tried to find answers to these and other related questions, such as: do the concepts of 'value' and 'authenticity', which are based on physical objects still have any meaning? Does digitisation decrease or increase the value of the book as an artefact? Will the rapid growth of digitised and born-digital publications lead to a new digital cultural heritage? Indeed, has the critical mass of 'born digital' and digitised material already created a new digital cultural documentary heritage?

Speakers, from a wide range of disciplines, tried to find answers to these questions from different angles. The first important question that was raised was: what do we wish to retain? This is a problem not new to heritage institutions. It is impossible for libraries to retain everything which has ever been published. Ephemeral publications for instance were not collected or preserved or were even disposed of in the past by many institutions. These days such material can be of great importance for our knowledge of history. The same applies to material that was published in large quantities, such as newspapers and periodicals. Only a small part of it is still present in libraries. Professor Nichols describing the work of the CLIR Taskforce on the Artefact in Library Collections, spoke of preservation as, essentially, an unfunded mandate, whilst the occasions for collecting are unlimited (Nichols, 2001). He engendered an interesting debate about the nature of preservation and conservation - being variously defined during discussions as "managing the process of loss", "managing the process of change", "managing the process of deterioration" and "the management of risk".

The recent tremendous growth of information that only exists in a digital form has put new pressure on this issue. In her presentation, Yola de Lusenet of the ECPA discussed an interesting question: does digital cultural heritage exist, and if so, how can this new "cultural space" be defined? In 2003 UNESCO drew up a charter on the preservation of the digital heritage. But in view of the overwhelming quantities of digital information we are dealing with, choices have to be made. But how to decide what is important to preserve for future generations? Are blogs, games, hyves, flickr, facebook and YouTube part of our digital heritage? These web-related activities are part of new social and cultural processes which are developing at this moment. From this point of view they should be considered part of our digital cultural heritage. Taking a cue from part of UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage as being "constantly recreated by communities" and not fixed, cyberculture can be seen as part of the intangible heritage. So, she argued, we should not make the same mistakes as in the past by neglecting "ephemeral" digital material. And it is not only important to preserve the end result of these processes, but also the way they developed. Web archiving may allow us to postpone these choices, but they have to be made in the end.

HOW DO WE PRESERVE OUR PAPER HERITAGE?

Another core question was: not only what to preserve, but how do we preserve our paper heritage? A possible solution is the "Google" approach: large-scale digitisation and presentation in the web. Carla Montori, recently of the University of Michigan Library (UML), which was one of the first participants in Google Print project, presented the dazzling figures of the UML project: 75 scanners, working around the clock five days a week, scanning books from the UML collection, resulting in 850,000 images each week. No selection is applied. All books in the UML are being digitised. Quality control is limited to users'

comments. So digitising costs are very low. But the Google project cannot be considered preservation imaging. About 1% of the books cannot be digitised because of their poor condition. The books are not disbound as a rule. Half of the books suffer minor damage in the process, 2% are significantly damaged. Carla Mantori summarised the Michigan approach as regarding "digitisation as the preservation formatting of choice not the preservation option of choice". The presentation engendered further debate about "what is good enough?" which was a recurring theme throughout the Think Tank.

Another approach besides the Google type of mass digitisation is that of careful selection and treatment. Jan Paris, conservator at the library of the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) explained how she decides whether vulnerable material from the special collections may be digitised and under what conditions. She has to take into consideration not only the condition of the objects, but also the purpose of the digitisation process: education, preservation, creating a facsimile edition or part of a large-scale preservation project. These can be summarised as the impact of preservation considerations - such as the reduction in handling, the reduction in the need for interventive conservation - and the impact of access considerations - such as enabling value-added research, on-demand digitisation and producing aids to teaching.

Lorcan Dempsey presented a grid plotting high and low levels of stewardship against high and low levels of "uniqueness" for different sorts of information, whether "classic library" special collections or the explosion in institutional data. Using the recurring phrase "rareness is common", he echoed Professor Nichols' opening observations when he talked of libraries owning the costs of managing and storing books, but not owning the books, leading to a rethinking of libraries. Lorcan Dempsey spoke of the stewardship of books placing increased emphasis on collective management (preservation, storage, resource sharing, digitisation) and the emergence of alternative institutional models for printed volumes. Digital visibility is creating more interest in, and use of, the originals and computational potential is revealing new possibilities. He ended with the observation that "everything is becoming less special because everything is becoming special".[1]

Lars Bjork of the Swedish National Library showed in a very visually compelling way the different ways of presenting a digitised object, from a simple 'linear' presentation of the content in transcription up to a three-dimensional presentation, which does full justice to the original, including layout, binding, gutter shadow and other information that is present in the artifact. He stressed the importance of the choice between presenting only the content or presenting it in its original context, showing all characteristics of the artefact. The underlying question is, of course: is a book just a mere carrier of information or is it more than that.

THE BOOK IN ITS PRESENT FORM HAS A FUTURE

The final speaker, the Swedish author Ola Larsmo again raised the core question which has always led to much discussion: does the book have a future? He was very positive and decisive about this. He firmly discarded the common theory that a new medium makes its predecessor obsolete, terming it "the temptations of the dinosaur theory". This has never happened, he argued. The radio did not replace the newspaper, the television did not replace the radio and the cinema, and so on. There always remains a form of coexistence when the new medium can do something in addition to the previous medium; he termed this "x plus 1". Ola Larsmo concluded that the book in its present form will be with us for many years to come, despite of, and as well as, the tremendous growth of digital information.

The Think Tank concluded with a panel discussion, in which the questions raised earlier and a series of statements (see: Ref 1) were put before the panel of speakers and the audience. The papers from the Think Tank will be published by the National Library of Sweden and LIBER later in the year.

REF 1

The statements were:

From "The Evidence in Hand", Stephen G Nichols, Chairman, Taskforce on the Artifact in Library Collections, Johns Hopkins University, November 2001.

"The artifact matters. It matters very much. Nevertheless, in a time when artifacts are abundant and resources scarce, the scholarly and library communities are called to rethink the status of the artifact in

terms of its content and material form. Acknowledging that every aspect of an artifact yields information that will be of use to some scholar or other, we nonetheless need to assess the relative importance of the different aspects of an artifact pragmatically. Scholars and library professionals jointly face issues such as the following. First, within the timeframe of the last 200 years, what constitutes an artifact worth retaining? The answer is not obvious in the case of nineteenth-century material artifacts: baseball manuals or railway timetables have not traditionally been viewed as important cultural documents, although they probably would be today."

In the executive summary the following question is asked:

"What qualities of an original are useful or necessary to retain in their original form? Under what circumstances are original materials required for research?"

K. Lehmann writes in the foreword to "Rational Decision-making in the Preservation of Cultural Property" ed. N.S. Baer and F. Snickars, Dahlem Workshop Report 86, Dahlem University Press 2001.

"The most characteristic features of this 'acceleration of history' are not permanence, linearity, and continuity but rapid change. The unity of historical time has broken apart. Time, however, can pass only against the background of what endures", or to quote Eduard Herriot, "culture is what remains when everything else is forgotten". This transience separates not only the generations but the people of a single generation as well. There is a great danger that the superficiality it produces will reduce public concern over cultural heritage to a narrow focus on isolated, spectacular events with high entertainment value.

Four major developments that favour momentary memory, as opposed to collective memory, should be noted: ... to quote the fourth

"an unmistakable tendency to favor economic rather than cultural perspectives. Everything found incapable of surviving the competitive crunch, everything lacking in economic rationale, is at risk of being relegated to a position of social insignificance."

"In our fascination with instant, global access, we often forget that society benefits not only from the rapid distribution of their most recent accomplishments but at least equally from the long-term availability of their "cultural products". Long term availability is not a prominent feature of public life in our fast-paced age and a society largely characterized by its throw-away mentality."

Lorcan Dempsey, speaking on 5th July 2005 in Groningen at the LIBER pre-conference said

"that on analysis of the 32 million print books on WorldCat (which is the largest bibliographic database aggregating over 20,000 library catalogues, reflecting largely North American library collections) ... only 120,000 works had both print book and e-book manifestations; ... only a third of print books have more than five holdings; half have two or less."

Jean-Noël Jeanneney, President of the Bibliothèque nationale de France speaking on the 3rd July 2006 in Uppsala at the LIBER pre-conference said

"that once the 'Google Five' libraries (New York Public Library and the University Libraries of Harvard, Stanford, Michigan and Oxford) digitisation projects had been completed with Google, taken together with other digitisation projects of English Literature such as EEBO (Early English Books Online) and ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online) ... that the majority of pre-20th century English literature would all be available on-line, accessible in a way never possible before."

Ronald Milne, at the time Acting Librarian of Oxford University Library Services, cited in his presentation at the main LIBER conference Lavoie, Connaway and Dempsey (2005):

" ...Analysing data from WorldCat it has been shown that about 50% of the holdings of the 'Google Five' are in languages other than English and that over 430 different languages are represented in the libraries' joint holdings. Furthermore, 56% of works are held uniquely by one of the Google Five libraries and that, when one compares two libraries out of the five, eight out of ten books are held uniquely."

Neil Gershenfeld, "When Things Start to think"

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"...Books boot instantly, and have a very high-contrast/high resolution display; they offer fast random access to any page, with instant visuals and tactile feedback; they are easily annotated with no need for batteries or maintenance; finally, they are robustly packaged. By contrast, the laptop meets none of these specifications... the only disadvantage of books is that they convey static information, whilst computers give changing information."

"Introducing the Book" on YouTube
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFAWR6hzZek

REFERENCES

Lavoie, Brian, Lynn Silipigny Connaway and Lorcan Dempsey: "Anatomy of Aggregate Collections: The Example of Google Print for Libraries". *D-Lib Magazine,* 11(2005)9.
http://www.dlib.org/dlib/september05/lavoie/09lavoie.html

Nichols, Stephen G. : The Evidence in Hand: Report of the Taskforce on the Artifact in Library Collections, Johns Hopkins University, November 2001.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

CLIR - Council on Library and Information Resources. http://www.clir.org/

ECPA - European Commission on Preservation and Access. http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/

Facebook. http://www.facebook.com

Flickr. http://www.flickr.com

Hyves. http://www.hyves.nl/

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. http://portal.unesco.org/

YouTube. http://www.youtube.com

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[1] See Dempsey's presentation: "The virtual cultural heritage".
http://www.oclc.org/research/presentations/dempsey/liberbook.ppt