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The role of libraries in the information society

CENL Conference

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the first time I have the pleasure to meet the Conference of European National Librarians as Commissioner for Information Society and Media. We share a common interest - and that is content and how it can be brought to the citizen.

Recently how, or if, we can access the accumulated knowledge of the past and present has become a topic of public debate. The initiative of Google has to a large extent put the spotlight on what is at stake.

The Internet is increasingly the information source privileged above all other. Can it also be used to make Europe’s uniquely valuable cultural heritage more visible and accessible?

There is an emerging political will to make this happen. I warmly welcome the letter sent by President Chirac and the other 5 Heads of State to President Barroso on 28th April this year. In his reply, Mr Barroso set out the European Commission’s intentions to reinforce actions at European level. He called for the Heads of State to support him in the European Commission’s approach to safeguarding and adding value to Europe’s cultural heritage, the mirror of our cultural diversity.

But it is not going to happen automatically. It will require a real commitment of all involved, not least from the national libraries.

The importance of libraries in our society

The stakes are high, from a social, cultural and economic point of view.

Libraries play a fundamental role in our society. They are the collectors and stewards of our heritage; they are organisers of the knowledge in the books they collect – adding value by cataloguing, classifying and describing them; and, as public institutions, they assure equality of access for all citizens. They take the knowledge of the past and present, and lay it down for the future.

Europe’s libraries and archives contain a wealth of material representing the richness of Europe’s history, acquired over the centuries. These materials cover a range of forms - books, newspapers, films, photographs and maps. By bringing it online, we make it easier for citizens to appreciate their own culture as well as our common European history.

Library collections in the different countries represent their cultural identities. Language is at the heart of these identities. As a Luxembourger, I would say: ‘d’Sprooch ass d’Haerz vun der kultureller Identitéit vun éngem Land’ or, ‘le langage est au coeur de l’identité culturelle d’un pays’ or ‘die Sprache ist das Herz der kulturellen Identität eines Landes’.. Indeed, the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale du Luxembourg, our hosts today, is an example of many languages making the history of one single country.

The internet provides an incredible opportunity to circulate our heritage to advantage and to make it known on a world scale.

Economically, cultural industries and cultural heritage are major sectors of activity. For example, according to statistics collected by the LIBECON study, European libraries employed nearly 337 thousand staff in 2001 and had 138 million registered users¹. This is almost one third of the entire EU population. This shows the social impact libraries have.

Once digitised, content from cultural institutions can be an important economic force - as a source of material to be re-used for added-value services and products in sectors such as tourism and education. It can also be important as a driver of networked traffic: books lead to booksellers, to libraries, to museums, to information about places, and back to other books.

Let me now place the issue of digital libraries within the wider policy for the information society and media.

**i2010 – general**

I have recently launched an initiative aimed at re-invigorating the contribution of information and communication technologies to the Lisbon priorities of economic growth and the creation of more and better jobs.

This initiative – which you are certainly already aware of – is i2010. It provides a framework to address the main challenges facing the Information Society and media sectors in the next 5 years.

**i2010 – 3 pillars**

i2010 is built on three pillars:

- firstly, a common information space, creating a modern, market-oriented regulatory framework for the converging digital economy; and stimulating the availability of digital content,
- secondly, investment in research and ICT innovation,
- and thirdly, focus on a more inclusive European Information Society.

propose three flagship initiatives: caring for people in an ageing society, the intelligent car and digital libraries - the topic which brings us together today.

**A Europe's digital libraries**

We must recognise that there are many views of what is a digital library. Is it an electronic library? A digitised collection? A scientific repository of softwares and models? A publisher’s collection? Or the world wide web itself?

What then is the European digital library, as I see it? I am not suggesting that the Commission creates a single library. I envisage a network of many digital libraries – in different institutions, across Europe.

These libraries will give the citizen online access to books, to local historical records, to archive films, and museum objects – and provide services so they can use them. If you like, we are creating a virtual temple where the libraries are the pillars and Europe supports the structures that hold them together. In other words, our added-value is in promoting and sharing the vision, and in helping realise it. This means cooperating to avoid duplication, cooperating in networking and standards, cooperating in developing common and more cost-effective solutions. At the same time I will encourage the Member States to develop, strengthen and increase their own pillar.
Realising these digital libraries at European level implies work on three main problems:

- **Digitisation** – always bearing in mind that though it is important to get the paper of the past online, our digital libraries of the future will also have born digital materials in an increasing range of formats – for example, audio, still and moving images, 3D graphics dynamic web pages.

- Making resources accessible over networks – users expect that books and articles can be delivered to them over networks. It appears increasingly paradoxical to them that they have physically to visit the library to consult an electronic publication.

- **Preservation and archiving of digital resources.** Digital material needs to be maintained to keep it alive, if not it risks being lost because of the rapid changes of hardware, software or because the physical supports (e.g. CD-ROMs) are decaying. This comes as a shock to most citizens, especially those with digital cameras, but the library world recognised the issue years ago and is looking for ways to deal with it.

### Specific challenges

Progress in all three of these areas – online accessibility, digitisation and digital preservation - means tackling a range of challenges. These are economic, legal, organisational and technical in nature.

**Economic and financial:** Digitisation is an expensive, labour-intensive, industrial process. Firstly, we are potentially dealing with huge volumes of materials, even if we are selective about what to digitise. To take books alone, in the EU25 there were more than 2.5 billion in 2001 in libraries, with many of the large national and research libraries having collections in the tens of millions.

Similarly, the long term costs of digital preservation are unknown, though studies and experts indicate that these are likely to be significant, if one considers the increase in the number of born-digital publications. Again, solutions need to be pursued with the private sector and the publishers through appropriate partnerships.

**Legal questions** revolve around copyright, as the recent problems of the Google library project show.

To digitise is to make a copy. This may be problematic under current copyright law. There is an exception for public libraries and archives in the copyright directive\(^2\), but this exception has been implemented in different ways in the Member States. This issue may also affect the ability of libraries to maintain electronic deposits as technically copying is required.

Copyright conditions are most relevant for **online availability**. Having a digital or digitised copy does not automatically mean you can disseminate it to the public. Under current EU law and international agreements, digitised material can only be made accessible online if it is in the public domain or with the explicit consent of the rights’ holders. Where the author has been dead for more than 70 years, works are in the public domain – but even this criterion is not clear-cut and contains traps.

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Re-prints can include a new preface, which means volume 1 can still be covered by copyright but volumes 2-4 can be copyright-free.

As a result, the model of lending physical books, for centuries a core function of libraries, cannot simply be transposed to the digital environment. In a time where the library could, in principle, come to the citizen, the citizen has to come to the library. An online library offering works other than those in the public domain will need agreements on a case-by-case basis with the rights' holders or substantial change in the copyright legislation.

The risk for us is obvious – that we create a 20th century black hole in the digital collection of knowledge. This will arise unless we find cost-effective and manageable solutions for clearing rights so that copyrighted materials can be digitised and made available online. This is particularly striking if one thinks of audio visual heritage, which is almost exclusively 20th century, and which provides unique evidence of the cultural and historical events of our time.

Organisational

This scale of the economic challenge for digitisation requires cooperation at European level in order to optimise the resources available.

New ways of working are necessary to make digitisation happen. Effective digitisation efforts on such a scale cannot depend on the public purse alone. Telecom Italia is supporting the digitisation of a library in Milan. In Spain, Telefonica has partnered the Biblioteca Nacional and the Biblioteca de Catalunya in digitising catalogues and documents.

More public private partnerships are needed to digitise and exploit the resources in our cultural organisations. And, of course, close collaboration with publishers and other rights' holders is necessary to find new models for bringing copyrighted material online.

Furthermore, investments in digitisation must be accompanied by organisational changes within the institutions concerned. New types of skills are necessary to deal with the technological tools, together with the extensive expertise that already exists within the institutions. For libraries, this means tackling training and re-skilling as well as recruiting staff with the new skill-sets.

Technical

Tools for digitisation. We need to improve the tools for the digitisation and indexing of texts, particularly for non-English language and for old materials and fonts.

Progress with the technological tools can contribute to reducing costs and to increasing efficiency of digitisation. To do this, we need to combine the specialist knowledge in the Member States with the different stakeholder communities – enterprises, libraries and archives, universities and research organisations. Interdisciplinary cooperation in real centres of competence can help us advance the technologies for digitisation in Europe.

What users want from digital libraries are easy-to-find materials that are the most precise and complete answers to their queries, without having to navigate through pages of results or information on screen. This requires much more sophisticated and automatic indexing of the resources that will be in our future digital libraries – audio, visual, 3D constructions, as well as text.
In the mid-term, we need to develop systems that can integrate advanced search tools with the existing systems in libraries.

**What has been done so far?**

Although the challenges are formidable, they are not new and we are not starting from scratch. In all Member States, initiatives exist to bring the national cultural heritage online, but the intensity and focus of effort may vary. The Internet is creating a huge jigsaw of different services, collections and resources.

Even within countries, the picture is fragmented and there are different initiatives for joining up the pieces. Denmark has its Digital Electronic Research Library; the United Kingdom is developing the framework for a research libraries network. France has taken the recent initiative to set up a multi-stakeholder steering committee to report on strategies for a European digital library.

These initiatives have the national libraries as key partners but reveal the wide variety of other stakeholders involved, from research, technology and industry, and from the public and private sectors.

The recent initiative of France to set up a steering committee to report on realising a European digital library has given a new impetus, bringing together the stakeholders from different sectors to address the problems. The Commission has been instrumental in mobilising cooperation between Member States since 1990 in the case of national libraries, and more recently through the Lund Principles and Action Plan of 2001. In the future, this cooperation needs to be extended to multiple levels – between the Member States, between the cultural organisations, such as libraries, but also between the public and private sectors.

Libraries have also worked at European level to make their systems more interoperable so that users can search their catalogues collectively, rather than one at a time.

The most recent and ‘telling’ example is the launch of TEL (The European Library) on March 17th this year. TEL provides users for the first time with a single point of access to the catalogues and some of the digitised treasures of those eleven libraries who are taking part.

**How can the Commission help?**

The Commission will take action on a number of fronts – political, strategic, and technical. We need to accelerate the work towards a European digital library. The Commission will take action on a number of fronts – political, strategic, and technical.

For our flagship initiative for digital libraries, I will shortly be publishing a Communication on digital libraries. This sets out the three linked challenges - digitisation, access and preservation - and the issues surrounding them. It will bring these to the attention of the European Parliament and of the Council, and it will be discussed on 14 November at the Culture Council. It will create a commitment to tackling the problems at a political level.

**Strategic.** We will immediately follow this with a consultation exercise with stakeholders on the Communication, with questions on key issues, such as copyrights, for future legislative and other actions. I invite you to contribute collectively and individually to this and to encourage your colleagues in your countries to do the same.
The results of this will be used as input to a Recommendation on digitisation and
digital preservation. At the same time, I will establish a High-Level Group to advise
me on digital libraries.

Our research programmes are already working on the **technological** issues. In the
current IST Programme we have just closed a Call for proposals that will contribute
at least 36 million Euros for co-funding research. One area will fund research into
retrieval of cultural and scientific resources, contributing to the development of
search engines. The second targets research in preserving digital content - and this
is the first time we have specifically dedicated funding to this topic.

This research will be expanded under the seventh Framework Programme,
presenting increased opportunities for work on preserving digital memory, and on
accessing cultural heritage and digital libraries.

One way of making progress is through Centres of Competence which will take
forward the established know-how in libraries, in research, and in the private sector.
These centres could become the cornerstone of European digitisation and
preservation, a basis for improving the technologies, processes and skills and for
public-private partnerships.

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**eContentplus.** In addition, 60 million Euros are available for access to digital
cultural content from now until 2008 within the eContentplus programme. It aims are
to make it easier to discover cultural resources, and to make a critical mass of
existing cultural resources available for re-use, multi-lingually and across borders.

The programme does not finance digitisation itself, but will support the networking of
national collections that are already digitised. A first Call for proposals has just been
published.

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**Conclusion**

Libraries face real challenges in coping with the transition to the digital age. To
avoid becoming the dinosaurs of the future, they have to adapt, to attract new and
young users, and to develop new business models. This implies profound changes
in the organisations, in the skills and sometimes in attitude.

If you are ready to make this change, then European digital libraries are a real
opportunity. Cooperation is at the core – and CENL is proof of its value.

Putting together at European level the different pieces of the jigsaw that will make
up the European digital library requires a **clear vision** and a **commitment over the
long term.** We cannot do this rooted to the technologies we see today but must
have the ambition to deliver the technologies and solutions for 2010 and beyond.

We have considerable strengths in Europe so let us exploit them. We have uniquely
valuable sources of our cultural heritage.

It is not confined to a few privileged large organisations, but has also been collected
over the centuries in our regional and local archives, libraries and museums, in all
languages.

Libraries have a unique role to play in disseminating knowledge about their
collections. The information society offers you new possibilities to do this. To seize
the opportunity, you need to act in collaboration amongst yourselves and with other
stakeholders. I am ready to help you in taking up this challenge.