Cultural Heritage: the Conflict between Commercialization and Public Ownership

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Introduction: The role of selection in cultural studies

Cultural heritage can be seen as specific form of public information: many cultural collections are owned by public institutions and are therefore public good. Thus usage and commercialization are topics of public interest. On the other side parts of cultural heritage are public information: collections of files of past public administrations are public information as well as currently emerging files.

Due to this it can be argued that the discussion on cultural heritage is at least partly also a discussion of the usage and commercialization of public information. In the following the elaborated arguments are also valid for public information, even though they are specifically developed along the discussion of cultural heritage.

Due to Zeyringer (2000) cultural heritage is characterized by ambivalence: Memory is one of several possible ways of selection. In memory spaces there are bundles of conflicting meanings, allowing for different approaches, different interpretations, different views.

In this sense reported history is moving along the time axis, but still it stays ambiguous, selective and exclusive. Friedell (1927) points out that the decision of historically relevant pieces, items and artifacts is left to experts who gain power through their expertise. Additionally Assmann (1999) refers to culture not only as collection of artifacts but even more as "communicative memory" based on social interactions[1]. While the latter are eliminated when the carrier groups die, the former stay as proof of certain time periods. Thus culture determines a space of a common understanding of rituals and signs which consists of several memories: the communicative – referring to interactions, the cultural – based on rituals, the storage memory – consisting of unstructured files, and the function memory – selecting from the storage memory by applying present requirements.

As a consequence remembering always follows an intention. Pomian (1998) calls the according objects "semiophores": Semiophores are made in order to manifest more than themselves, they particularly have symbolic value rather than material value. Who is authorized to determine semiophores, is a question of power. As a consequence it can be stated, that history – understood as collection of various semiophores and their

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[1] Halbwachs (1985) calls this „groups" forming cultural units.

interpretation – always is the result of selection and thus is a question of power. Even though if the people being in charge for describing and interpreting historical events and their meaning have an expertise in the concerned fields, it cannot be neglected that there are many different ways of selecting and interpreting.

This general problem of selecting certain artifacts as symbols for historical events and processes emerges again when discussing which objectives should be selected for digitizing and then being opened for public access as discussed within the cultural heritage forum. Again the question emerges which documents and artifacts are "worth" to be selected. This is a crucial question since a huge amount of documents, files, artifacts, texts, music recordings, film material and other objects are waiting for publication and exhibition. Some are already selected, some are not even known as existing. Thus the project of digitizing collections is a severe financial problem and has to be discussed very carefully in the light of limited budgets.

Digitizing cultural heritage: a stake-holder approach

Dempsey (2000) describes a vision in which the different types of cultural institutions, namely archives, libraries, and museums are interwoven in a common space of knowledge based on distributed local databases. Hünnekens (2000) argues in a similar way: the usage of cultural heritage shall not be reduced to questions of conservation and market interest but also provide the interested public with new learning tools in the multimedia space. Grassmuck (1998) even sees in a "living museum" a chance to support dynamic learning by implementing various functions:

- archive function: implements a kind of "data warehousing" allowing for ordering and selecting digital artifacts for the public
- presentation function: is realized by tools such as VRML
- communication function: is realized by technological tools such as mailing lists, newsgroups and the like.

In other words, new information and communication technologies allow for rather innovative usage of artifacts and thus could be used for explorative learning and knowledge building. The main features are interactivity, multi-media and communication that could offer interesting ways of integrating public information into net-worlds.

It becomes clear that there are several, completely different vested interests situated around the question of digitizing public information. As Hanappi-Egger (2001) points out the mentioned task is a political one, thus the theoretical background has to be system analysis (see also Luhmann, 1987), more precisely a sensitivity analysis combined with the stake-holder approach. This can easily be argued: since the process of digitizing cultural heritage is settled in the public sphere, there is an interesting interdependence between certain endogenous (e.g. services) and exogenous variables (e.g. budget). Furthermore within the social system there are several actors making decisions by changing the variables of the system.

Generally the stakeholders of using cultural heritage can be identified as: political decision makers, scientists, commercial users, providers (archives, museums, libraries) and their visitors (interested public). While political decision makers are handled as external entities influencing and changing the system-internal structures and processes, the other stake-holders are treated as internal entities being connected by different links, partially conflicting ones.

In order to identify the conflicting interests as well as the possible solutions in terms of usage, access and prizing of cultural heritage information, a research project[2] has been performed. During a time period of three months (from December 2000 to February 2001) forty three experts have been extensively interviewed (for more details see Hanappi-Egger 2001).

The picture which can be drawn shows that the usage of public information and in particular cultural heritage information is an important topic. Many institutions are already aware that new information and communication technologies can offer interesting ways of providing people with the according accesses. Nevertheless the question of cost of digitizing and presenting information lead to the question of selection: Which information should be presented in the Internet ? Which groups should have access and which prizing policy is adequate?

The most important results of the research concerning those aspects will be presented in the following.

The problem of selection

Since it is clear that not all kind of artifacts can be digitized, the question of selection becomes virulent. Various aspects have been mentioned to be important for selecting information to be accessible via the Internet. In this point there are clear differences in perspectives of the involved stakeholders:

Representatives of museums, archives and libraries argue that there are still many collections not even formally described. Thus they propose to offer online-catalogs for the interested public as well as for scientists in order to get those people informed generally where which collections are available. Formal description would force effective actions concerning the various collections:

- Digitizing existing catalogs would lead to a careful evaluation of artifacts.
- It is a good reason to follow new knowledge on standardization and description of objects.
- Digital catalogs can be globally linked and allow for local design.
- Digital catalogs lead to a reduction of search effort because users can do it by themselves.
- Digital catalogs allow for several search criteria.
- Digital catalogs provide users with essential knowledge on the location of collections.

- Digital catalogs give an overview on existing collections and allow for distributed digitization of artifacts.

Besides the visibility of collections other criteria are maintenance of original artifacts (mentioned in particular by representatives of museums, archives and libraries), historic relevance (mentioned in particular by the same), demand (mentioned by representatives of the information industry), compatibility and maintenance (mentioned by political decision makers), participative selection (mentioned in particular by representatives of museums, archives and libraries)[3].

It becomes clear that the underlying interests vary from stakeholder to stakeholder: While representatives from the information industry think in terms of commercial usage, political decision makers consider cost criteria, and representatives of museums and the like have the users and their role in mind.

Value added services and prizing policy

In particular political decision makers mentioned the importance of value added services: The institutions should gain additional budgets by introducing fees. Even though many experts from archives, museums and libraries insist on the public ownership of cultural heritage (since the administration is paid by tax payers) and thus on free of charge accessibility, others are aware of the principal opportunity to ask for fees: In particular the following services should not be free of charge: collecting and maintaining links, better quality for commercial usage, certification of material, data bases for downloading, pre-delivery, marketing possibilities.

Experiences with prizing politics show that about 10% or at a maximum 20% of the budget of according institutions could be earned by fees. On the other side the administration of a prizing policy causes cost, too. From the information industries' point of view several public information data bases are interesting (also for fees), such as legal data bases, laws, documentation of norms and the like.

Accessibility

Even though the number of Internet-users is growing, there are still groups not being able to use the Internet (see also Hanappi-Egger, 2000). Women, elder people and even young people stemming from underprivileged families still are not in a position to have Internet-access due to lack of technical equipment or lack of qualification. The responsibility for those people is mentioned by many experts as important in order to prevent the digital divide (for an interesting overview see Bowie, 2000).

It becomes clear that the question of providing people with digitized cultural heritage is caught in a web of different interests: while there is a self-understanding of memory-institutions of being owned by the public, political decision makers as wells as the

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[3] Even though interested public has been identified as stakeholder, within the project "consumers" were not explicitly interviewed, but they have been considered as part of the representatives of museums, archives and libraries which also described their clients.

information industries consider those data bases as source for commercial usage. Even though on the first glance it looks as being specific for cultural heritage several analogies for public information can be shown:

Conclusions: Analogies of cultural heritage and public information

Of course some could argue that cultural heritage is a somewhat different concept than public information. While cultural heritage refers to a particularly valid subset of historically produced artifacts, the concept of public information refers to the terms of usage of a set of artifacts. Nevertheless part of cultural heritage is also public information maintained by public administration. It even could be stated that the public information of today is at least partially the cultural heritage of tomorrow. Thus there are some basic conclusions which can be drawn from the discussion of cultural heritage: As Egger (1990) already showed public information is the basis of democratic systems in terms of getting people informed (see also Hanappi-Egger and Katsikides, 2001). The Swedish freedom-of-information system has a long tradition in this point, Austria for sure has a different history. Nevertheless the problem of people being policy-averse ("Politikverdrossenheit") is a severe one. Even the current discussions on e-democracy or e-administration show attempts of citizen-participation in terms of informing them on actions and decisions within the public sphere. As a consequences similar problems as within the cultural heritage discussion exist: It has to be decided which information are relevant for political participation, which selection criteria should be applied. The questions of presentation and navigation are crucial as well as aspects of user interface design. Digital divide has to be prevented in order to guarantee equal access to public information in the net and of course the problem of prizing arises in particular if commercial use of public information enters the game.

From the cultural heritage experiences it becomes clear that there are several stakeholders involved in the process of digital public information: political decision makers, the interested public (that is of course a heterogeneous group), representatives of public institutions and representatives of the information industry. They all have different interests and different approaches to the same question. Thus it is clear that there are conflicting interests. To find solutions means to realize the different standpoints and to try to find compromises or to weight the different stakeholders. This is a political process, but public information cannot be isolated from the specific situation: being a public good embedded in a net of stakeholders, in particular when discussing commercial use.

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