How to Prepare a European Digital Library

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Abstract. This presentation shows how the joint efforts of the national libraries of Europe over the past 20 years have paved the way for the creation of a European Digital Library; currently a collaborative platform for European museums, archives and libraries, but in future also a webservice for end-users to discover Europe's heritage on an unprecedented scale. This presentation sets out the recipe for the first construction phase (2007-2008) and discusses the ingredients that are needed to build an operational European Digital Library from 2009 onwards.

Keywords: Digital library development, Europe, computer-supported collaborative work, project management, strategic information systems planning, systems development.

1   Introduction

The European Library[1] is a multilingual portal currently offering access to over 200 million resources in the 47 national libraries of Europe[2]. It offers free federated searching and delivers both bibliographical and digital objects - some free, some priced. The European Library is a service of CENL[3]. Established in 1987 this organisation has increased and reinforced the role of national libraries in Europe, in particular in respect of their responsibilitiy for maintaining the national cultural heritage.

The European Library, launched in 2005, is not only a website for end-users, but - by offering a strong framework for collaboration - has also tremendously accelerated technical & interoperability standardisation, trust and understanding between the national libraries of Europe. As a direct result of this The European Library has established a track record of successfully implementing and using some of the vital ingredients for a European Digital Library. These include A) a cooperative organisational network, B) a technological platform based on creating, maintaining and conforming to common standards in i) data harvesting & access protocols, ii) metadata and C) multilingual access.

In 2004 Google announced its plans to digitise millions of books from 5 major Anglo-American academic libraries. Initiated by fears that Google's initiative could

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[1] The European Library – http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org
[2] The 47 national libraries of Europe – http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/libraries
[3] CENL – The Conference of European National Librarians – http://www.cenl.org

create a bias towards Anglo-American language and culture, Europe quickly united to mobilise funds for the digitisation, preservation and accessibility of European cultural heritage and the creation of a European Digital Library, planned to include millions of digital works from libraries, museums and archives by 2010.

It was decided that this European Digital Library should not be constructed from scratch, but should center around pivotal initiatives such as CENL and The European Library, with their proven track records.

Within their own domains, museums, archives and libraries each have well established routines regarding object descriptions and accessibility, as well as dealing with technical, human, usability and business issues. Respecting these practises means that in creating a unified European Digital Library no single solution can be imposed from above. The only way to tackle the fragmented cultural heritage map of Europe is – similar to Europe's national libraries – by *creating consensus, trust and interoperability* between the 3 domains.

For this purpose in summer 2007 The European Library and CENL set up a 84 partner cross-domain strategic network[4] to establish large scale dialog between the archival, library and museum sectors. Such new collaboration on this scale is a significant step forward.

Running for two years, this network will investigate the political, human, sustainability, organisational, interoperability, technical and semantic ingredients that are needed to create a multilingual service for accessing digital content from Europe's distributed and varied cultural institutions.

The project will also develop a fully working portal prototype, with interoperable multilingual access to at least 10 collections from each of the three domains. This proof of concept will attempt to identify 2 or 3 European themes where there is digitised material that can demonstrate the power of this cross domain initiative.

By 2009 the network will result in a larger and more visible community of archivists, librarians and museum people committed to making content available and interoperable. It will also deliver a roadmap showing what needs to be achieved by when and a proposal for one or more separately financed practical implementations of a European Digital Library from 2009 onwards.

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[4] EDLnet Thematic Network - http://www.digitallibrary.eu/edlnet/