

A Digital What?

Kenneth Hamma, J. Paul Getty Trust

Implicit in some of the papers and discussion at the January 2006 meeting “Digital Library of the Middle East” hosted by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was the notion of ‘digital library’ as a well-organized electronic cataloging system behind which reside the world’s physical – and so largely inaccessible – knowledge resources. If that remains true we should probably be looking for a redefinition of our expectations. To the extent that digital library suggests static classifying metadata as pointers to immutable resources and not the resources or surrogates of physical resources themselves as well as the processes that are their modes of creation and formal evaluation, their periodic reconsideration and continuous availability, we are probably already setting the bar too low. At the outset our expectations for a digital library should not be reduced to specialized and scholarly communications but extend to those modes of exchange and access that support every level of education as well as public engagement with the scope of human inquiry, in other words, all of the activities that can lead to enlightened and civil discourse on the questions and values present in our time.

Unlike a traditional library

We might hope that our digital library would go beyond the catalog to deliver the electronic resources that are cataloged as well as high quality digital surrogates of physical resources. These would include not only the digitized pages of monographs, serials and archival repositories but also high quality images, three dimensional models and streaming media of the products of human expression and the results of inquiry into the natural world.

We might hope also that our digital library would provide knowledge management services that go beyond collecting, digitizing and cataloging to include provision of infrastructure and tools to enable peer-review digital publishing services, and on-going curation of digital resources according to knowledge domains and interest areas as opposed to the typology that currently determines library – archive – museum.

We might hope that our digital library would provide tools sets to enable contribution, selection, annotation, organization, exhibition and communication to as many individuals and communities as might engage with content. Without limit these might include individuals and communities that self-define around regional interests, around topics of historical or current interest, around specific activities such as teaching children or creating structures for life-long learning.

Openness

Because the global network favors free (as in speech, not beerⁱ) information by enabling the realization of unexpected value for unknown audiences when it has access to freely accessible resources, the library should value openness in services, technology and content. The default mode of the library should be characterized by openness, while

A Paper submitted for the Digital Library for the Maghreb Workshop

Held in Rabat, Morocco, January 25-27, 2007

admitting a restricted need for limitations based on definable parameters that may range from global security to tribal custom to commercial copyright ownership.

The software, at the very least that which touches access and public services, should be open source, supporting and encouraging development of interoperable but purpose-specific tools for more communities than any one or all of the world's digital libraries could possibly hope to know.

Services that support activities of combination and creation should result in open access publications, exhibitions, and aggregations, creating eventually an open-access information environment that brackets, with public domain at the other chronological end, a relatively ever-smaller body of materials closed because of intellectual restrictions. Attribution rather than ownership could guarantee authenticity of information as being what it professes in origin and authorship.

Recognizing that the most valuable library for any individual is 'my personal library,' the digital library should marry the values of open archives with expert repository management, allowing the organizing principles of specialized knowledge domain skills – wherever on the network they might exist – to complement the “putting” and “harvesting” of individual patrons, other digital libraries and other managed repositories.

While technical architecture and infrastructure for a digital library present themselves as immediate and obvious issues, the infrastructure of traditional knowledge guardianship and the architecture of inclusive access will likely prove the leading issues, both more intractable and by far more rewarding to address. What is a publication? Who is a librarian?

In the end

The digital library may look anything like a library only to those who manage it. To anyone else who has first-hand or mediated access it likely will exist as the sampled content in the chosen presentation mode on the available technology. It might look and sound like the cultural memory of the Maasai, like a time-lapse sequence of the demise of the polar ice caps, like your fourth-grade spelling and arithmetic lessons, like the professional communications host for polymer physics, like the history of recorded sound as well as the repository for my sound.

ⁱ www.fsf.org