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WHO MAKES THE CHOICE? MAJOR ISSUES IN CULTURAL DIGITISATION POLICY

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Abstract

As more assets are digitized and as the role and function of institutions is influenced by this practice and its products, policy makers will need to critically examine the way in which these technologies will transform the institution and its relationship with its user

Keywords : policy, access, digitization

Zusammenfassung (DE)

Da mehr und mehr kulturelles Vermögen digitalisiert wird und die Rolle und Funktion von Institutionen dadurch beeinflusst wird, werden politische Entscheidungsträger die Art und Weise, wie solche Technologien die Institution und ihre Beziehung zum Nutzer verändern werden, kritisch betrachten müssen.

Schlüsselwörter: Politik, Zugang, Digitalisierung.

Résumé (FR)

Alors que la numérisation des fonds patrimoniaux s'étend, et que ces pratiques et leurs produits influencent le fonctionnement des établissements, les décideurs ont besoin de faire un examen critique de la transformation par la technologie des institutions et de leurs relations avec leurs publics.

Keywords : Politique culturelle, Accès au patrimoine numérique, Numérisation

When the digitisation policy statements for most countries are analysed, access is the strongest focus of all the fields in national policies. Yet access to what, chosen by whom and for what purposes are neglected questions. The concept of access, is usually undefined. I suggest where it is undefined it will be filled by collecting organisations with the perceived requirements of traditional stakeholders rather than with the rather more uncomfortable preferences of potential users such as young filmmakers, games developers, school teachers and indigenous communities.

Collecting institutions as currently formulated and resourced tend to service the requirements of traditional users, particularly those for whom studying an object and turning their observations into text is a substantial part of their requirement. But what if your requirement is quite different, dynamic, participatory, creative not passive? Is it reasonable to expect a collecting institution to cater for this?

Digitisation is expensive and most collections will only be partially digitised, often only a small percentage, and largely in two rather than three dimensions. The choice of what gets digitised is very important and the costs of lost opportunities may be higher than we realise.

This paper will touch on the emerging body of literature and published policy which deals with the position of the user in the age of digital collections, and suggest further lines of inquiry including the potential of organising mechanisms to represent the interests of classes of users and the logic of including these options in government policy.

My background is perhaps relevant to the discussion of this topic. After a long detour into information technology and information management in particular, I returned to arts management a few years ago. I run a large portal website containing content and access to other websites in the cultural sector (www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au). I also run various programs for the cultural sector on achieving the best results from new technologies and ebusiness, whether they want to sell tickets or display online exhibitions. (<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/ozeculture/>) . For the last two years, however, I have been looking at digital content from a different perspective: that of the emerging digital content industry, those companies and individuals who want to create new digital content in games, visual effects, educational multimedia and new media artworks.

We have recently completed a series of eight reports called the Creative Industries Cluster Study (CICS) available at www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/cics. Part of this research touched on the interest of such industry in digitised content which was either often not available and the somewhat haphazard nature reported of their contact with collecting institutions. This experience has given me a different perspective on collections and collecting institutions and led me to the position which I am discussing in this paper.

In the 21st century, digital media are the communication modes of choice. They allow people to mix words, pictures and sounds in dynamic ways. Digital technology crosses the creative and cultural industries and established media, adding depth and value and new ways of behaving with the known and the imagined. Examples are massively multiplayer online games, educational multimedia, interactivity on websites whether they be for museums or soft drink. The seductive theme is exploration... go where you cannot go, see before it is built, touch what isn't there and do what it is too dangerous to do... all in virtual reality.

The digital paradigm takes both new and old content across the economy into diverse sectors: health, education, finance, tourism, security, defence, architecture – creating new products and in particular new services and opportunities for utilising content which was perhaps always attractive but unable to be encompassed in the past. And some of this content or in particular the raw material for this content will come from cultural institutions.

Digital technologies support re-use and re-purposing, allowing material to be created once but appear many times over in different applications. They also change the relationship between creator and user. The user can change from passive audience to active participant when they can fairly readily obtain the tools to alter, repackage, repurpose and challenge so many concepts about ownership and moral rights.

This is part of the context as digitisation becomes an established practice in collecting institutions. Digitisation practices to date have usually been determined by the institutions themselves with reference to their established supporting communities such as professional associations.

There are emerging opportunities for diversifying the relevance of these practices to the users of the material whether they be individuals, non-profit organisations or commercial entities.

This is particularly important in an environment in which both the potential value of digital materials to diverse users and the resource costs of digitisation are rising.

My review of the literature on digitisation has concentrated on the policy rather than technical issues. I have found five themes of particular interest:

1. The purposes of digitisation, including priorities or selection criteria for content digitisation;
2. The selection of the target audience and the role of the audience generally;
3. Collaborative activity, in particular across institutions;
4. The impacts on the role of the collecting institution; and
5. Economic impacts, within the institutions and on the economy generally.

For the purposes of this paper I intend to concentrate most closely on audiences and impacts on the role of the institution

The digitisation of materials held in the collecting institutions, in Australia or anywhere else in the world, is a manifestation of the impact of technological development on the management and perception of objects of cultural significance.

This can and does have significant impact on the roles of these institutions, particularly in terms of their external relationships, with other institutions, with government and with new classes of user. The potential uses of that digitised object are also much more diverse and so too are the perceptions of whether those uses are legitimate or illegitimate.

Let's argue that digital content will become ubiquitous and that what has previously been available to the few and the dedicated will be available to the many and the casual. The fragile icons of the past can be incorporated in the alphabet of the future. Whether this happens will largely be determined by choices in digitisation and those choices will be determined by who and how they are made.

What is the interest of public policy makers in this area ?

By "public policy", we mean governmental decision-making that decides on choices, levels, and mixes with regard to controversial alternative ways of doing things....The methodology of finding the optimum policy in general can be reduced in its most simplified form to a one sentence rule, namely: Choose the alternative that maximises net benefits, where net benefits are total benefits minus total costs. (Nagel, S S and Neef M, 1979, p134)

‘By definition, policy analysis at least partly involves seeking to achieve or maximise given values or social goals rather than ignoring them.’ (Nagel, S S and Neef M, 1979, p145)

From a public policy perspective my interest is predicated on the belief there are opportunities to improve the correlation between the digitisation policies of government and cultural institutions collectively and the requirements of users, both current and potential.

Is it safe to assume we know the requirements of potential customer in the online world? This is a question I am particularly interested in unpacking - do we know the customer? That we know the customer who faces us across the counter and demands x and y and z is a statement I am willing to believe. That we know the online customer, the browser, the person seeking not well defined information, the customer without much time, the customer who wants to “play” with the two or three dimensional object, the future customer - I am not so convinced.

Two articles outside the sphere of digitisation nevertheless provide some insight on collective institutions and their changing social roles:

Sandell, R 2003 “Social Inclusion, the Museum and the Dynamics of Sectoral Change” *museum and society* Vol 1 No 1 pp 45-62 viewed at http://www.le.ac.uk/museumstudies/m&s/Issue_1,1.html on Oct 5 2003

The paper discusses the UK experience of the policy of social inclusion as it applied to the museum sector. It suggests that rather than simply being a synonym for widening access, the challenge of the concept to the museum sector is more fundamental. The paper includes a particularly interesting description and diagrams of the change inhibitors acting to slow or prevent change. As part of this analysis, it observes that few museums share decision-making with individuals and groups outside of the organization. The paper draws on the literature of organisational change to suggest enabling strategies to allow changes accepting of the social inclusion policy to take place.

Macdonald, S J 2003 “Museums, national, postnational and transcultural identities” *museum and society* Vol 1 No 1 pp1-16 viewed at http://www.le.ac.uk/museumstudies/m&s/Issue_1,1.html on Oct 5 2003

The author looks at the museum as a cultural form with particular technologies of representation and then considers the arguments by social theorists on current transformations and their implications for museums.

These two papers both appear in the first issue of the online research journal, *museum and society*. In particular relevance to this research, Sandell 2003 posits a democratisation of power between the museum and its audiences which will be important if the opportunities presented by technologies for the change in role of collecting institutions will be allowed to happen by current policy makers. Its analysis of barriers to change concerning social inclusion practice are likely to have significant overlap in those opposed to changes enabled through the access opportunities provided by digitisation. MacDonald 2003 considers some specific issues related to the role of the museum in relation to the nation - state and the potential for museums to move into post-national roles. This research is specifically relevant when considering the role of the national collecting institutions.

I accept that the collecting institutions as currently formulated can service the requirements of traditional users, particularly those for whom studying an object and turning their observations into text is a substantial part of their requirement. But what if your requirement is quite different, dynamic, not passive and is it reasonable to expect a collecting institution to cope with this? Some of the experience through the CICS research suggests that collecting institutions are not sure of how to interact with some of the new classes of user who are emerging and how legitimate are their requirements.

The requirements of some new classes of users are challenging technically, in intellectual property considerations and in terms of resources. Where the customer can be identified as belonging to a class or community, I would like to suggest that the concept of the organising mechanism may be the best way to articulate and activate the demand at the end of this chain of potential value.

For this particular model I would like to discuss The Learning Federation (TLF), Australia. TLF is an initiative designed to create online curriculum content and infrastructure for teachers and students to use to enhance their learning experiences in the classroom. The category of users therefore organised in a coherent manner by the TLF is classroom teachers and their students.

A fundamental driver for the TLF Initiative was the recognition that without government intervention, the development of online curriculum content and the information systems to deliver such content for Australian and New Zealand schools would be sub-optimal – too little suitable material would be produced too slowly by private market activity.

TLF content typically consists of learning objects – components of online material that can be identified, tracked, referenced, used and reused for a variety of learning purposes. Learning objects may include text, pictures, simple animation, sound, full motion video and computer coding or script that is necessary to provide in-built functionality of the learning object, and associated metadata.

This content is developed by a wide variety of commercial suppliers for different parts of the curriculum. Some of these objects come from collecting institutions including digitised heritage material from the National Museum of Australia. This way cultural material is entering the world of use and reuse, handling, symbol and reinterpretation which is the digital future.

Another example of a mechanism is the Joint Information Systems Committee in the UK. The JISC is again from the education field, but from the higher and tertiary education sector. Its Digitisation Programme is funded with a £10 million grant in recognition that a series of large-scale digitisation projects could bring significant benefits to the UK Further and Higher Education community.

The selection criteria for funding are:

- The materials should be of broad disciplinary interest and should form a coherent theme or themes.
- A small number of large-scale projects should be funded that would not be possible without an investment of this size.
- The materials would need to be fully compatible with the common information environment.
- The materials would need to meet rigorous quality-assurance standards and be of value to the wider post-16 education community.

The digitisation working group sought input from the further and higher education community on twelve short listed proposals and sought suggestions on any additional collections that

would fit the criteria for inclusion in the programme in early 2003. The JISC received over 300 responses to the questionnaire and eight digitisation proposals were identified.

An alternative model of organising mechanism exists in a commercial agency such as Corbis (www.corbis.com) which I visited some years back. Corbis accumulates digital visual content, both still and motion, from multiple sources including cultural collections, catalogues it and sells it to commercial and non-commercial entities for further use. This model is widely known and acknowledged but interestingly enough again seems to be overlooked by overt policy.

Some types of collective mechanisms for users are created by collecting institutions themselves. These include the European COINE (Cultural Objects in Networked Environments) project which is now moving towards a conclusion as demonstration partners. This project has involved a wide variety of groups of potential users in contributing their own stories. Sharing experiences is at the heart of COINE and they demonstrated that users ranging from young schoolchildren to elderly retired people were able to use modern information and communications technologies to tell their stories. There are parallel projects in Australia. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) “Digital Storytelling” and “Memory Grid” projects are both examples of how communities can create digital works and spaces with a cultural institution.

I would like to finish by proposing some of the principles which might apply to successful organising mechanisms for classes of consumers who utilise the digital resources of cultural collections:

- They have their own resources or a third party allocates resources on their behalf – the capacity to pay the piper makes a lot of difference.
- They should have requirements which are able to be articulated, preferably with a way of sorting priorities eg being prepared to pay, having a curriculum use etc.
- They will probably do best if they are from a group that whose objectives co-incide most closely with those of collecting bodies. This is where I suspect the educational users will probably always do better than those who have commercial reasons for wanting to access materials.

In some ways this area is a microcosm of the digital content industry at least in Australia at the moment. Difficulties in articulation of demand and in ensuring relevance of supply in this field are in many ways emblematic of some of the bigger issues in the maturation of this

wider industry. Australia's digital content industry is characterised by fragmentation and a lack of integration internally and with the wider economy. I am sure this is similar to the experience in other countries around the world as this industry gathers shape as it matures.

The future is not the past. National digitisation policies should consider the formation of organising mechanisms as an aspect of ensuring the meaningful access which they seek. If we insist on taking microfiching policies or an alphabetical approach to what should be digitised, we are doing our users a disservice. There are good arguments for the use of mechanisms like the TLF and Corbis and community based projects to articulate requirements when digitisation policies are being developed and priorities are being set.. What will continue to be of concern is those classes of user for whom collective action is unlikely or whose needs are as yet not well defined.

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