Digital Libraries Initiative in Romania

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Abstract: - In the context of information globalization Romanian libraries must define their unit role in society, namely to capitalize on and preserve the national intellectual heritage by organizing, processing, access, preservation of national documentary heritage in various types of media. Promoted principles, like the principle of freedom of information and universal access to information, preserving national intellectual heritage, intellectual property rights, sharing information and documentation resources, promoting the role of libraries and librarians in society, promoting specific legislation, promoting national and international professional cooperation, promoting a multicultural and multilingual information context and new models of information and documentation, all these are milestones that any info-documentary structure must take into account. The basic objective of digital library initiatives in Romania has been to preserve the culture and heritage of this country being still in early stage.

Key-Words: - digital library, information society, digital information, online access

1. Introduction

In the last years was seen a strong concern of libraries and other structures holding valuable collections to preserve and convert the own documentary funds into digital formats, Romania being one of the European Union countries which has given more attention to this work, especially through the involvement of the Romanian National Library. The involvement of the librarianship structures in digitization and research activities have resulted in a better management of information resources adopting policies of long-term preservation of collections, by disseminating collection and resources and not least by finding the most best solutions for improving services for users.

The initiative “Digital Libraries” come within the scope of the European strategy aiming to define and develop a “digital economy”, a strategy to be defined by 2010 [1]. This strategy includes a number of active policies with a view to stimulating the development of an information society and of the media industry in Europe that will enable to use the potential of digital technologies in economy and society.

2. “Digital Libraries” initiative

At European level, the Commission has defined a number of policies and directions for action that would improve the framework conditions for the digitization of information and documentation resources and for the preservation of the above in digital format [2], as well as for the co-financing of certain projects and actions.

In this context were established three priority policies:
- Creating a unique information space (through the convergence of digital technologies)
- Innovating and investing in R&D (supporting trans-European research projects that would enable to integrate, at the level of small and medium institutions, the results achieved by research at EU level)
- Promoting the Inclusive European Information Society (eliminating the existing gaps between member States and the discrepancies in electronic services for citizens – eGovernment principles).

The “Digital Libraries” initiative is an integral part of the measures aiming to implement in practice the first policy, to create a unique European information space, by supporting services of digital library, creating diversified digital contents, adequate digital services, establishing a network of European digital centers (with digital information) and, last but not least, regulating intellectual property rights in the context of digital libraries.

In the context of global information, libraries have to define in a unitary way their role in society, that of capitalizing and preserving the national intellectual
heritage, by organizing, processing, ensuring access and retrieval, preserving the national documentary patrimony in all media. The promoted principles are: the principle of freedom of information and of universal accessibility to information; preservation of the national intellectual heritage; respect for the intellectual property rights; sharing of information and documentation resources; promoting the role of libraries and librarians in society; promoting specific legislation; promoting professional cooperation at national and international levels; promoting a multi-cultural and multi-lingual information context, new models of information and documentation, based on the existing advanced technologies.

The librarian science defined Digital libraries like organized collections of digital content available to the public. The documents contained in such collections may be documents on traditional support undergoing digitization in libraries or archives and documents prepared directly in electronic format.

This European initiative aims at ensuring access and online use of the cultural and scientific heritage of Europe. This is a most diverse cultural and scientific patrimony, both in terms of document typology and of information support: traditional documents, on printed support (books, brochures, periodicals, musical printed publications, photos etc.), audio-visual documents (music, films), electronic documents (traditional documents transposed in electronic format, multimedia documents prepared directly in electronic format, data bases, other electronic information contents).

3. European Projects

At the level of Member States’ digitization actions already exist, but the deployed efforts are unequal, random and their pace is below expectations. In most cases this is due to financial, organizational and decision-making issues. It is recommendable that Member States enhance the activity of their cultural institutions (libraries, museums, archives) and, through the coordination of National Libraries, participate to the creation of the European Digital Library.

A concrete project, part of this initiative and which aims at valorizing the European cultural heritage is “The European Digital Library”, whose aim is to ensure multilingual access via Internet to cultural collections in Member States. The Internet Portal “European Library” (http://www.theeuropeandigitallibrary.org) provides access to a very large array of digital resources: books, serial publications, children’s literature, cartographic collections, musical collections, photographs, various images, manuscripts, posters, doctors’ thesis and dissertations etc.)

The European Library (TEL) is a project initiated with the European funds which aims to provide free access to information and documentation resources available in 47 national libraries from Europe, in 20 languages. Thus, TEL-ME-MORE has supported ten national libraries in Europe become full participant in TEL, and TEL +, funded by the European Commission has proposed to digitize 20 million pages of content in multiple languages, supporting at the same time Romania and Bulgaria become full members in The European Library.

Europeana (www.europeana.eu) project is one thought in such a way that is more than a simple database and to provide a gateway to electronic materials of cultural institutions in Europe. The user can search through the various collections of various institutions (libraries, archives, museums) from a single web portal. The objectives of this initiative include:

- Integrating catalogs and digital collections of European national libraries […]
- Developing the European Library portal access to the development of multilingualism,
- Achieving the first steps in collaboration between The European Library and other cultural institutions, expansion of marketing and communication activities in the European Library service.

Thus, it allows searching simultaneous through the digitized collections of European libraries, archives and museums being accessible over two million books, maps, recordings, photographs, archival documents, pictures and movies from national libraries and cultural institutions belonging EU member states. José Manuel Barroso, European Commission President said in this context that "With Europeana, we combine Europe's competitive advantage in communication and networking technologies with our rich cultural heritage...Europeana is much more than a library, it is a veritable dynamo to inspire 21st century Europeans to emulate the creativity of innovative forbears like the drivers of the Renaissance.” [3]

In conclusion the European Commission identified three lines of action:

- online access (with all that the development of the information infrastructure and communication and specific information applications involve)
- digitizing collections (transposing in digital format existing collections on traditional or analogue support, integrating them in a unitary whole, together with documents directly created in electronic format)
- preservation of the involved electronic documents and collections, in order to ensure access to information for future generations.

The arising challenges are financial, related to the high cost of digitization and of subsequent preservation; technical, related to the diversity and the dynamics of technologies involved; organizational, in connection with the need of a proper coordination at national and European levels; legal, in order to comply
with ownership and dissemination rights. The “Digital Libraries” initiative is composed of two parts or two directions of manifestation: cultural and scientific. Digitizing information resources, ensuring online access to them, their preservation for future generations, all these are actions requiring huge efforts both at national level in individual states of the European Community and at European level.

Scientific and educational information is the second component of the Digital Library initiative. These types of information resources have an extremely dynamic character, due to the large number of existing publications, the huge volume of already existing digital content. The European Commission adopted on February 14th, 2007 the Directive on access to scientific information in the digital era, announcing a number of measures through which the Commission aims at improving access to technical-scientific information and preservation of those.

A number of projects financed by European funds had as their objective digitization of the European cultural heritage, with a view to creating new opportunities for science and education, ensuring the pre-conditions for economic and social development, improving accessibility to information for European citizens. There are transfrontier projects, the partners being from different member States; this way, is ensured the interaction between partners, cultural and linguistic diversity are promoted, while identifying viable models and long- and medium-term development strategies and granting online access to European digital content etc.

We would like to mention here certain projects, such as MINERVA and MinervaPlus that created a network of national structures in the EU Member States (even ministries) in charge with the definition and harmonization of digitization policies. A discussion forum was created, best practices were identified, an inventory of digital contents was made, typologies of information needs were identified etc.

Projects such as MEMORIES, EASAIER or CONTRAPUNCTUS have contributed to transpose audio resources in electronic format, facilitating access to digital music. Whole audio archives were created that have been indexed by specific methods and became accessible online. CONTRAPUNCTUS created an online library with information resources that are accessible also in Braille.

A number of projects concentrated on “online accessibility for all”; in these types of projects, the emphasis was not on the digitization of collections, but rather on the possibilities of their online valorization and exploitation. These projects developed new products and services specific to the digital context. Thus, the project BRICKS is integrating museums, libraries and other organizations (about 50) with a view to developing new value-added services. All the institutional structures gather around an open platform of multilingual digital library and share their resources through value-added products and services.

Local cultural institutions, such as public libraries, museums and archives, have a major contribution to the European cultural heritage. They have to be mobilized so that they could use in the most efficient way existing technologies and contribute to the creation, use and dissemination of local cultural content, providing for local information requirements and for the needs of education.

The European project CALIMERA created a huge network of professionals, researchers distributed in over 43 countries of Europe, its primary role being to make digital technology accessible to users irrespective of degree of education and age.

Another project that is part of the MINERVA initiative, known as MICHAEL, deals with multilingual services that will enable stakeholders to easier retrieve information related to cultural heritage via Internet. This was made possible through accessibility to the digital collections of libraries, archives and museums in any European country.

In order to offer support for e-learning a great number of projects were developed accordingly. Within the eContentplus Program a number of services were created that facilitate access to multilingual learning resources (eRMIONE), with particular emphasis on the cultural domain. It provides for students diversified content and also preparatory lectures in this field.

The EURIDICE service is in fact a specialized digital library offering over 10,000 scanned historic documents from European archives and libraries, giving support for institutions of education with unique, unpublished historic sources, through an e-learning methodology and specific technology for information retrieval, with a multilingual thesaurus and integrated platforms of information dissemination.

As we can notice, the Digital Library initiative includes a wide variety of actions to help European efforts towards developing various services within digital libraries by a better coordination of actions and by research activities that concentrate on:
- targeting services to users needs
- reducing the cost of digitization
- semantic indexation of content so that it be accessible and usable.

4. Romania implication in European projects

In Romania some libraries and cultural institutions are in the process of conversion their cultural patrimony in digitized resources. The advantage to digitize the rare resources is now well understood by specialists in information science, librarians, technologists and users. For this reason were organized many conferences over the world to demonstrate the necessity of preservation and
conservation of the patrimony resources through digitizing methods.[6]

Romanian Government through the Ministry of Culture helps such initiatives and we can speak about a commitment to provide information to users in digital form. In this context Romania was joined in some of these projects participating, as we will illustrate below, with a lot of patrimony works in digital form.

Our paper does not dwell on the technical solutions required for the development of this project; however, we should mention the principle underlying the development and functioning of this information structure: a unique point of access to the European digital content. In other words, even if the digital content is located in different collections, in various data bases, a single access point will allow search in various libraries.

Until now some Romanian cultural institutions have run some projects like following:

- cMeC - APOGRAF-National Digital Library of manuscripts and old books. In this project were digitized over 50,000 pages from the branch collection- Batthyaneum of the National Library of Romania

- Central University Library "Carol I" Bucharest - About 20,000 pages - rare books, manuscripts, serials, current monographs

- Romanian Academy - Over 36,000 digital facsimiles of "Eminescu manuscripts" in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, cMeC and Archive “Traian Vuia”

- Project Brukenthal Digital: incunabula of Brukenthal Museum collection (c. 50,000 pages).

- Metropolitan Library - Bucharest - Over 5,500 pages of educational literature available in the Metropolitan Virtual Library

- County Library “Panait Istrati” -Braila - Educational Digital Library with over 30,000 pages of Romanian literature, according to school curriculum

- County Library “Gh Asachi ”- Iasi - Over 2594 pages and 950 pictures

- County Library Brasov and “Casa Muresenilor” Foundation - Digitizing the publication "Gazeta de Transilvania"

Romania's Digital Library aims to be a unitary representation of national cultural heritage in digital format, providing accessibility to digital resources via a single access point by following thematic and institutional organization. Pillars of its topics are:

- Documentary Heritage (libraries)
- Mobile Heritage (museums, collections)
- Audio-visual Heritage (audio-visual archives)
- Archeology Heritage (monuments)
- Archive Heritage

National Library of Romania is considering in the near future implementation of cultural heritage in electronic writing's, promotion of cultural heritage at European level, to protect the bibliophile book and manuscripts, to protect documents in an advanced state of deterioration, to improve access opportunities to documents and the possibility to be consulted simultaneous by many users, to provide a method of documents consultation in the spirit of information and communication technology and to increase the number of electronic resources made directly in electronic form without an traditional equivalent.

Romania has participated in Enrich project (European Networking Resources and Information concerning Cultural Heritage http://enrich.manuscriptorium.com), too. The Portal was financed through eContentplus, coordinated by the Czech National Library, whose goal was to provide free access to European documentary heritage: manuscripts, incunabula, rare old books and other historical documents. Portal was built on the Manuscriptorium platform which managed to integrate so far collections of over 46 representative institutions in Europe, especially from National Libraries (85%).

National Library of Romania became associate partner in the project in April 2008 and contributed to Enrich with Romanian books from XVI and XVII centuries, culturally and historically valuable. Most are religious works, but also law and history. Until August 2008, the National Library of Romania completed European manuscripts collection with 52 documents from special collections, including the first printed book in the Romanian space, Liturgy Book (1508, Targoviste) by the monk Macarie at Dealul Monastery.

5. Conclusions

In the age of new information and communication technologies used in all realms of society’s activities and extended to the registration, storage and dissemination of information in digital format, we should admit that information technology has transformed the world in a global village, and the changes that took place in the IT sector influenced also the information industry, so that libraries have to keep in pace with the new discoveries and to cope with the ever more specific needs of users. Libraries and museums must become indispensable virtual destinations in the digital information landscape, and they must move their resources and services to the network [7]. We can say that this is a “sine qua non” condition to survive in the modern world.

Digital Library initiatives in Romania began, as we have seen, with the goal of preservation of culture and heritage values of our country. So Romania's cultural heritage will be easily known and accessible by any citizen of the world. National Library of Romania believes that promoting Romanian cultural heritage in
the world is an essential action to find information about Romania and its values. It is also a duty to our country, as a full member of EU, to participate in projects that aimed at awareness and promoting European culture.

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