

Communication from the Commission of the European Communities

i2010: Digital Libraries

Introduction

1. The Communication stems from an April 2005 proposal by six EU Heads of Government to create a virtual European library, aiming to make Europe's cultural and scientific record accessible to all. The Commission has welcomed the proposal and will contribute to it through its i2010 initiative on digital libraries.
2. The Communication deals with Europe's cultural heritage; a further Communication in 2006 will look at Europe's scientific information heritage.

Summary

3. European libraries and archives contain a wealth of material – including books, newspapers, films, photographs and maps. The digital libraries initiative aims to make these resources easier to use online. In some cases however, digitisation will also be used to guarantee the material's survival.
4. The initiative covers both material that has been digitised, and information originally produced in digital format. It will look at three main areas: i) online accessibility; ii) digitisation of analogue collections; and iii) preservation and storage.
5. Under EU law and international agreements, material resulting from digitisation can only be made available online if it is already in the public domain, or with the explicit consent of the right-holders. Therefore a European digital library will be focussed on material already in the public domain and without copyright restrictions.
6. At present, only a small part of European collections have been digitised. Although digitisation activities exist in all Member States, efforts are fragmented and progress has been slow. A number of challenges affect the pace and efficiency of digitisation: financial; organisational; technical; and legal.

7. Making a digital copy does not guarantee an item's preservation. All digital material has to be maintained in order to keep it available for use. Digital content can be lost in the succession of generations of hardware that can render old files unreadable; the rapid succession and obsolescence of computer programmes is another factor; and the limited lifetime of storage devices (eg. CD-ROMs) is of concern too. Digitisation without a preservation strategy can turn into a wasted investment.
8. Organising and funding the digitising of collections is primarily the responsibility of Member States. However, work at a European level can add considerable value. Such work will now be stepped up and complemented by new activities.
9. Existing initiatives include the creation of a new National Representatives Group, and the launch of a new Action Plan on the digitisation of the cultural heritage, developing the work begun under the Lund action plan of 2001. In the audiovisual sector, a Recommendation on cinematographic heritage is being worked on. EU research funding has led to several projects supporting co-operation between Europe's national libraries (eg. TEL, PRESTOSPACE).
10. Outside the EU, other projects include a proposal by Google to digitise 15,000,000 books from four major libraries in the USA and one in Europe (University of Oxford).

What next?

11. Responses to the Communication will feed into a possible Recommendation (from the Commission) on digitisation and into other relevant Community initiatives such as the revision of the Copyright Framework Directive.
12. The Commission will increase its efforts to stimulate European co-operation on digitisation, and a high-level group of experts will advise it on how best to address the challenges identified in the Communication. The new Action Plan (launched in November 2005) plays an important part here.
13. The Commission's research and eContentplus programmes will focus on digitisation with a European interest, and the Culture 2007 programme and the Regional Funds will contribute further to this.