

## **‘The Theatre of Memory’**

**A talk given at the SCONUL Autumn Conference held on 4 December 2007 in the British Library Conference Centre, London**

### **1 Introduction**

I'd like to thank SCONUL for the invitation to speak today. It's particularly pleasing, coming as it does at virtually the end of a momentous year for the National Library of Wales, the centenary of our foundation.

The title of this talk, ‘The theatre of memory’, may be a mystery unless you're a specialist in the hermetic philosophy of the Italian renaissance. But I'm going to keep you in the dark for a while yet.

What I want to do first is to identify some general themes related to digitisation, based mainly on our now quite lengthy experience in the National Library of Wales.

I should say I've gained a lot of insights, though, from other institutions, and from being a member of the JISC Digitisation Advisory Committee. All of us in research libraries owe a great deal to Stuart Dempster and his JISC colleagues, and to Jean Sykes, the Committee's chair, and the other members. The JISC digitisation programme has been crucial in helping us in the UK to understand how best to use the powerful tools now in our grasp.

There's one feature of the current JISC programme I want to single out. I believe strongly that a national library has a duty to serve all the citizens of its country, rather than any single group, such as academic researchers. So it's very encouraging to see that JISC are giving powerful encouragement to the recipients of its grants to open their digitised resources to wider audiences, if possible, and not to restrict their availability and benefit to higher education institutions.

Just one other preliminary. If any of you can come up with a better term than ‘digitisation’ I can offer a substantial prize. It's an ugly word, of little attraction to potential funders, and in any case it tends to emphasise perhaps the least important part of the process, data capture.

### **2 The National Library of Wales and digitisation**

A word next about the National Library of Wales. Two special factors make digitisation of critical importance to us in Aberystwyth.

The first is obvious enough to those of you familiar with our location, well populated with animals but less well endowed with humans. There are about 4.5m sheep in our hinterland, compared with only 180,000 people, and to make matters worse not all of the sheep are yet fully literate. We're seventy miles from any major town or city. The attraction of technologies that offer access to our assets via the internet is overwhelming.

Less obvious is the fact that of all the national libraries of the world the National Library of Wales has perhaps the widest range of media represented in our collections: in addition to books, manuscripts, maps and other staples, we house the country's de facto national archive, its national photographic collection, its screen and sound archive, and its second largest art collection. All this adds up to a highly attractive and varied pool of material for digitisation.

We began digitisation over 10 years ago, on a small and experimental way, with a project to create images (not, incidentally, intended to be available on the internet) of stills from films for the Welsh television channel, S4C. Today almost one million items have been digitised, we have over 10 projects in train, and employ over 40 digitisation staff (one way or another). Material from a huge range of original media has been treated: books and periodicals, maps, manuscripts and archives, paintings, prints and drawings. Only film, sound and broadcast media are not yet well represented. We've also produced electronic versions of many our exhibitions.

It's worth saying, too, that the Library has been the base from the start for the 'Gathering the Jewels' website, one of the best People's Network projects, which brings together images of objects from over 140 libraries, archives and museums around Wales. 'Gathering the Jewels' is one of a number of projects in the care of a body called Culturenet Cymru, a limited company owned by the Library and dedicated to promoting online Culture in Wales.

### **3 Continuities**

What I'd like to do is to point to some major themes arising from our experience, starting with three themes that have remained constant from the beginning.

#### *1 Mainstreaming funding, producing in-house*

The first is the kind of organisational model we've chosen to realise our digitisation projects.

From the beginning we wanted to develop a body of internal practice in the art and science of digitisation: not just data capture, but the entire workflow, from selection to presentation. We built up small teams of scanners and metadata experts, and added others to contribute in other areas, such as preservation and online presentation. Almost all the digitisation we've completed has been done in-house. The main exceptions are large-scale text digitisation, and especially optical character recognition operations.

The advantages of this approach are that it becomes possible to nurture a body of highly knowledgeable and skilled people, who can transfer their expertise from one project to another, and from one medium to another. Our policy is only possible, of course, because we took an early decision to treat digitisation as a central core function, and to use mainstream National Assembly funding to support it.

Other digitising institutions have taken a different course. The British Library, for example, has never used mainstream grant funding for digitisation, relies on

opportunistic external funding opportunities, and regularly outsources its digitisation operations.

## 2 *A whole process approach*

From the time of our first digitisation strategy in 2001 the National Library has always preferred to treat digitisation as an integrated series of operations, starting with selection and preservation, moving through image and data capture and metadata addition, and ending with presentation.

Two examples. We recognised from an early stage that metadata, not just descriptive but also technical, was going to be crucial once we got beyond experimental efforts. The Library pioneered in the UK the METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard) schema devised by the Library of Congress. We also commissioned software to manage the entire internal workflow of a digitisation object from analogue original to digital storage.

‘Their past, your future’ (TPYF) took integration a stage further. TPYF was a Big Lottery Fund-financed project based on the Second World War. It was run by Culturenet Cymru and featured not only a large digitisation project but also a travelling exhibition, oral history and education packs and a conference.

## 3 *Partnering*

Thirdly, although naturally enough the Library was concentrated mainly on its own collections as the subject of its efforts, we’ve also been keen to work with other institutions as much as possible, to realise one of the main advantages of digitisation, the online collocation of physically distributed analogue originals.

I’ve already mentioned Culturenet Cymru’s ‘Gathering the Jewels’ and its 140 institutional contributors across three domains. The website is phenomenally successful: it receives millions of hits each year. And though it began as a limited project it’s now a continuing programme, and is still being added to and improved.

Culturenet Cymru is now extending its partnerships from public and private institutions to community groups involved in creating their own digital history projects.

Another Culturenet Cymru project is called Glaniad – in English, ‘Landing’. It is a trilingual website, in Welsh, English and Spanish, and brings together material about the Welsh in Patagonia in the nineteenth century: material in Wales as well as material collected in Patagonian archives and museums.

## 4 **Discontinuities**

These are the constants. But in many ways our digitisation programme has moved on over time. It shows a number of important discontinuities.

### 1 *From images to texts*

To start with we were content with images and image files. Brand new technologies excite childish wonder, and digitisation was no exception. We marvelled at the fact that a reasonable likeness of one of our objects could be conjured up for the world to see.

Soon, though, we realised that digitising texts so that they were searchable word by word could transform their usefulness. We came to an arrangement with the publishers of the multi-volume 'Dictionary of Welsh Biography' to re-key its entire contents and place the resulting database on the Library's website. What was a complex multi-volume work in its printed form is now available instantaneously. Future contributions to the Dictionary will be online only, and the Library itself will be the sole publisher.

## 2 *From boutique to IKEA*

Ronald Milne, I think, is responsible for the phrase 'boutique digitisation'. That is, the meticulous and painstaking treatment of a single library treasure to ensure a true likeness, possibly accompanied by transliteration, translation or scholarly notes, was presented to the reader.

This was a natural and understandable initial approach to digitisation of one's prized collections. But the Google Books programme, announced at the end of 2004, inaugurated the IKEA era, and since then most libraries have aspired to – if they haven't always found the means to realise – much larger-scale, mass-production projects. Many of the current JISC funded projects fall into this category. Selection is simplified: whole collections can be treated, without worrying about making choices. Volume sometimes wins over quality, speed over care: but the end result can have more utility.

## 3 *Into the copyright jungle*

Another natural instinct in the pioneering days was to avoid the complexities of dealing with material in copyright. The result was a collection of digitised objects with a faintly antiquarian tinge to them. Archives, manuscripts, photographs and pictures dominated. More recently, emboldened maybe by Google, libraries have begun to bite the bullet, and get to grips with what would otherwise be, to quote the term used in the recent LIBER-EBLIDA conference in Copenhagen, the '20<sup>th</sup> century black hole'.

Our own 'Welsh journals online' project is a good example. Almost all of the contents of the 100 periodicals included are assumed to be in copyright. A large part of the project has consisted of finding and operating ways of enabling digitisation to take place despite the apparent and real difficulties. The apparent outnumber the real, it seems, in a small country like Wales, where authors, publishers, libraries and the state occupy much the same territory of assumption, but that's not to say that we haven't encountered severe problems with in some areas, chiefly literary works.

## 4 *From presentation to exploitation*

Like the Web itself early digitisation offerings were in essence ‘presentations’: static pictures to be studied and admired by the grateful viewer.

More recently, with the advent of Web 2.0, digitisers have paid more attention to the user interface. They make what they offer capable of re-use in different ways. They build in interaction with users, allowing people to add comments or joint online conversations. They let people add their own material, from tags to text.

I recently heard of an excellent example from Poland. The National Library digitised the contents of the established canon of literary works all Poles are expected to know, and invited teachers and others to add notes, commentaries and translations to help bring these historic works alive for a contemporary audience.

The only drawback is that this kind of rich interactivity tends to be labour-intensive. There is still room for the pile-‘em-high school of digitisation.

## **5 Business models, copyright conflicts**

The convinced modern digitiser faces two big challenges: money and copyright.

The desire for digitisation will always outstrip the supply of funds. In practice an organisations like ours will usually rely on a mix of sources:

- mainstream funding (the National Library took an early decision to use its grant in aid from government for this purpose)
- external funding for special projects (for example from the JISC Digitisation Programme)
- commercial funding, including support from cybergiants like Google and Microsoft

Other models might emerge in future. One is micro-charging for use, already used by The National Archives for access to many of its commercially produced sites.

Copyright will remain a major restricting factor on selecting decisions, at least for a responsible public organisation. 100m videos may be watched every day on YouTube, but the copyright complexities of the moving image have prevented all but a very limited range of material being presented in digital form by libraries and archives.

## **6 Whole-country digitisation**

Overcoming copyright problems is one of the main features of what I’d like to end with – the ‘Theatre of Memory’.

The original Theatre of Memory was the invention of Giulio Camillo Delminio, an Italian who lived between 1480 and 1544. He devised the Theatre as a universal encyclopaedic memory aid. Thousands of images were arranged round the tiers of the auditorium; the actor viewed them from the stage. The images were meant to ignite the imagination of the actor and call to mind significant knowledge.

In early 2005, inspired by Google's announcement of its books programme and taking Camillo's Theatre as our inspiration, we in the National Library began to imagine what it might mean to digitise the entire printed output of an entire country – Wales.

What if it might be possible, in principle, to translate the contents of all the works ever published and printed in Wales – books, periodicals and newspapers - into digital form and make them available free for all?

For a large country this is an impossible ambition. The Bibliothèque nationale de France has come nearest with its 'Gallica' programme, but that fights shy of in-copyright material.

The Welsh Journals Online project is the first segment of the Theatre of Memory, but we'll need many more funds to realise the whole vision.

In the meantime other small countries have arrived at the same concept, and are busy attempting to put it into practice. The National Library of Norway plans to convert its entire collections within 20 years. The National Library of Slovakia has secured 163m euros to digitise Slovakia in print between 2008 and 2013. Canada is preparing a co-ordinated national digitisation strategy with the same general aim.

If the controlling motto of the future is 'if it isn't online, it doesn't exist', this kind of all-country approach offers a bulwark against oblivion, for libraries, and for whole cultures. It might mean that the National Library may be able to survive and flourish, though in a very different guise, for a second hundred years.