LIGUE DES BIBLIOTHÈQUES EUROPÉENNES DE RECHERCHE
ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN RESEARCH LIBRARIES

EUROPEAN DIGITAL HERITAGE:

CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

First of all I should like to thank the organizers of this conference for their invitation to give the key-note address. It is an honour to be asked and, as always, a great pleasure to visit Greece, to renew my acquaintance with the wonderful Benaki Museum in its new building and to have the opportunity of meeting Greek colleagues - in person and not just virtually!

I am speaking today on behalf of LIBER, the Association of European Research Libraries, and it is my very pleasant duty to convey warmest good wishes from the President and Executive Board of LIBER for the success of your conference. LIBER is currently re-defining itself as a significant player representing research libraries on the European cultural stage. We very much look forward to strengthening our representation and contacts in Greek research libraries in the coming years.

Introduction

Within LIBER's Executive Board I am responsible, as Chair of a Steering Committee, for the areas of heritage collections and preservation including digital curation. My focus today will therefore be on documentary heritage in the form of library collections of print and manuscripts rather than on archival materials, art works or museum objects. But I will do my best to address what we should now call "cross-domain issues", recognizing that digital technologies almost compel us to think across traditional curatorial boundaries. Indeed these technologies have the potential of enabling us to transform access to our documentary heritage. In this short presentation I shall attempt to develop some ideas about how, working together, we might contribute to that transformation. Finally, I will suggest some ways in which LIBER might play a constructive role.

Europe as common cultural heritage area

LIBER's reach is truly European, with member libraries from Ireland to Turkey and from Finland to Portugal. Finding common ground and establishing practical cooperation among institutions in this wide range of countries is of course an enormous challenge. If we compare the European cultural space with North America (the United States and Canada) we must recognize the extraordinary number of political, linguistic and cultural boundaries we need to cross. In addition, we mustn't forget the disparity between the resources available for cultural heritage in different countries. Of particular concern to

those working in research libraries are national differences in curatorial practice. Even within our own domain, we have widely varying standards for describing and presenting cultural content. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if North America appears to have a natural advantage in coordinating its efforts in a region comprising only two nation states with a single dominant language (with my compliments to French-speaking Canada) and a shared tradition of library standards and practice.

In Europe, therefore, we face significant challenges, not simply in the sheer quantity of heritage material our collections contain but also in our extraordinary diversity. The EU has been very much aware of the importance of this diversity, taking measures to promote and secure both cultural and linguistic variety. Nevertheless, our presence today here in Greece, to which our civilization owes so much, reminds us that Europe has a common heritage and that more unites us than divides us. Being in Greece also reminds us that this common heritage is widely distributed across national boundaries. Allow me to cite but one example from my own experience. The British Library, where I was for some years Head of Early Printed Collections, contains collections of international range and scope. In the year 2000 I was involved in setting up a project to describe and make accessible via the web the collections of Frederick North, 5th Earl of Guilford, a governor of the Ionian Islands while under British occupation, an avid collector of Italian and Greek manuscripts, and of course one of the great

19th century British Philhellenes. The project was of such interest here in Greece that we obtained financial support from the Greek government. But the collection also contains material relating to Italy, other areas of the Mediterranean and even the Middle East and China. National heritage, therefore, is not exclusively to be found within national borders. Digital technologies enable us to access materials virtually that are physically widely dispersed.

The Guilford collection was purchased in the 19th century by the British Museum and is now held by the British Library, the national library of the United Kingdom. Much international cooperation and exchange within Europe has so far been based on national cultural institutions, in our domain national libraries. One thinks of Europeana and its precursors especially The European Library (TEL). This focus on national libraries was a logical development in the early phase of cross-boundary cooperation but is now increasingly recognized as too limiting. As we have seen, national libraries such as the British Library have collections of international breadth covering all periods and documentary formats. In contrast, other national libraries have a much more limited remit in terms of collecting and preservation, sometimes covering only the current and recent national imprint. But nowhere is documentary heritage confined to the national library sector. Collections and material of international importance are to be found in research libraries outside the national sector and other public institutions across the continent. This has been emphasized by LIBER in our

response to the European Commission's questionnaire about the future of Europeana. We firmly believe that all our member libraries have a crucial role to play in building this shared European environment for our common documentary heritage and supplying cultural content.

A final point on this topic. We should not forget that we share our heritage with much of the world outside the boundaries of Europe. European exploration, colonization and emigration have spread evidence of our heritage across the globe. We shall need to intensify our collaboration with institutions worldwide, and especially – but not exclusively - in North America, if we want to transform access to our documentary heritage. And last but not least, we should also not forget the contribution now made to our European culture by populations that have moved into Europe in recent decades from overseas. In other words, if Europe is indeed a common cultural space, then it's one that needs to be seen in its global context.

Inventory: describing and mapping heritage collections
The earliest impact of digital technologies on libraries and archives was the automation of catalogues and finding aids since the 1970's. Later, with the advent of the Internet, these inventories of our collections could be made available outside holding institutions, transforming knowledge about and access to documentary heritage materials. Much of this original effort was based on

retro-conversion of existing print catalogues using new standards for bibliographic description. Some saw the opportunity for the creation of new databases of machine-readable records based not on retro-conversion of card catalogues but on new cataloguing of unrecorded or inadequately recorded material. Automation was supposed to accelerate the cataloguing process and enable material to be searched more easily. I was myself involved in a national bibliographical project to record 18th century printed materials from the English-speaking world, the so-called Eighteenth Century Short Title catalogue (ESTC). This project, begun at the British Library in 1976, was in turn based on a century-long tradition of producing national bibliographies of print from particular geographical spaces and epochs, in this case the English-speaking world since the introduction of printing.

Nationally-based retrospective cataloguing projects now exist in many countries but, like national libraries, they too have their limitations. By excluding printed materials from beyond national boundaries, national bibliographies, valuable as they are, have given a distorted picture. At a workshop in The Hague last year celebrating the completion of the STCN, the Dutch national bibliography to 1800, I pointed out that the database excluded the work of Dutch printers working outside the Netherlands printing in languages other than Dutch. Similarly, such national bibliographies take no account of books that were read

at the time if they had been imported from abroad, as many were in the early modern period.

National bibliographies still have an important role to play, in my view, but we are increasingly developing what might be called "aggregating services" covering metadata for print and manuscript collections that do not have the necessary limitations imposed by nationally-based programmes. The Malvine project (Manuscripts and Letters via Integrated Networks in Europe), for example, provides a single point of access for a number of European databases of manuscript holdings. The Heritage of the Printed Book (HPB), database developed and maintained by CERL, the Consortium of European Research Libraries, is another important example of such a service. I am delighted that LIBER is working closely, indeed symbiotically, with CERL. We see in the HPB a potential platform for extending practical cooperation across Europe in the presentation of metadata and the development of services enhancing access to documentary heritage materials. LIBER and CERL are also working closely with OCLC whose WorldCat service provides one of the most powerful tools that libraries have for extending their reach across the Internet.

Digitisation: creating digital facsimiles

Parallel with the increasing availability of metadata about collections, research libraries in the twentieth century often initiated programmes to produce or

reproduce facsimiles of heritage materials. They did not need to wait for the development of digital technology to do this. At the British Museum Library, for example, University Microfilms (UMI) began a programme of microfilming of early English texts before the Second World War. This gave the English-speaking world an advantage as digital reproduction become possible: large sets of microfilm facsimiles could readily be converted to digital form and marketed by commercial publishers such as Chadwyck Healey, ProQuest and Gale Group as machine-readable text corpora. This material is available, however, only by subscription. National libraries such as the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* and Library of Congress were funded by governments to digitize national heritage material and make it freely available on the net. Since the mid-1990s many European institutions have placed digital images of heritage items and collections on the web drawing on a wide range of funding. National libraries obtained funding from the EU to develop Europeana on the basis of the European library project, an aggregator of digital content derived from national library collections and national digitization programmes. Standards for digital facsimiles were developed at an early stage, found wide acceptance and have remained relatively stable over a significant period.

More recently, attention has focused on the activities of the Google books programme which promises – one might say threatens - to transform the accessibility of early printed material on the net despite the often chaotic

presentation of related metadata. The Google programme, welcome as is, has raised many issues about the quality of image capture, presentation and metadata.

Despite the best efforts of Google, Europeana and other programmes wide gaps remain in the coverage of documentary heritage. Only now, for example, has the Netherlands begun with a systematic programme to digitise Dutch early printed books. The Netherlands did not have the advantage of being able to draw on existing microfilm sets, as Dutch-language material was not seen as a serious marketing prospect by commercial publishers. The Dutch government has frankly been slow to recognise the need for the comprehensive digitisation of early texts, although it has funded the exemplary projects 'Metamorfoze' and 'Memory of the Netherlands' that aggregate selected text and graphic collections from Dutch cultural institutions. This is now also available via Europeana. The result for my university library, for example, is that a large quantity of modern photographic material is available on the web (via 'Memory of the Netherlands' and Europeana) but that much unique print material of equal or greater interest remains to be digitised owing to lack of funding. Only recently has the National Library of the Netherlands announced its intention over a number of years to digitise all Dutch publications since 1470.

Some further challenges and opportunities

As more and more digital content based on heritage collections is placed on the net by a growing number of institutions in various countries we are faced with a wide range of challenges including, of course, the issues I've raised so far. I might summarize these as: duplication of effort, gaps, metadata of variable quality and the restriction of access by commercial publishers. Decisions about what to digitize and to what to give priority are often arbitrarily dependent on funding agencies. Coverage of European heritage in the net is therefore unsurprisingly inconsistent.

On the more positive side, there is a much better understanding of the long-term preservation of digital collections and a number of practical initiatives, such as the commitments to preserve digital heritage long term by the National Library of the Netherlands. Digital curation is another topic for our Steering Committee and especially the working group on Preservation. Important though this topic undoubtedly is I will not have time to deal with it in detail today.

Let us return to the enormous benefits that digital technology can bring to the accessibility of European cultural heritage. Digitization can play a particularly useful role in reuniting virtually material that has been broken up, dispersed or removed from its original context. A recent example has been the project to reunite virtually the Codex Siniaticus, a Greek manuscript which was originally held at St Catherine's Monastery in at Mount Sinai but which is now dispersed

over four institutions. A quote from the website: "Digital photography of the geographically distributed leaves of Codex Sinaiticus is central to the Project' s virtual reunification of the manuscript. Careful imaging of the original leaves provides a life-like view of the pages, thus allowing, for the first time, worldwide access to the manuscript."

There is an increasing recognition of the opportunity digital technologies offer not only for virtual reunification of related material but also for bringing together material curated in different domains, especially libraries, archives and museums. Sites such as the German "BAM" portal provide integrated access to the metadata (and often the digital facsimiles) of libraries, archives and museums. I am currently working on a project with colleagues in Britain and Germany to bring together material that is dispersed both geographically and across domains and formats. This is material relating to Johann and Georg Forster, the 18th century German scientists, whose anthropological and natural history collections made during their voyage to the South Seas with Captain Cook in the 1770's, as well as their writing in the form of printed books and manuscripts, are widely scattered through libraries, archives museums (and country houses) throughout Europe, North America and Australasia. This material is not only of great intrinsic interest, bringing it together for the first time since its dispersal in the eighteenth century should provide new insights into the Forsters' achievement.

The potential role of LIBER

We believe that LIBER through its new structure can play a significant role in stimulating and coordinating developments in the fields of European digital heritage. We have established a steering committee for Digitisation and Resource Discovery in 2009 and since 2007 have been organising a series of European Digitisation Workshops aiming to:

- identify good practice

- build a community of practitioners

- exchange awareness

- map what is happening in Europe

We are also involved in the Europeana*Travel* project. This European project will digitise over one million pages or items on the theme of "Travel and Tourism" based on the collections of 19 partner organisations across Europe. LIBER has also submitted a funding proposal to the EU for a project (to be be called PEARL2) to aggregate some three million digital objects or pages for The European Library to be discovered in Europeana.

I should like to end this short presentation with a brief overview of topics for action and cooperation based on the draft plan for 2010 in the fields of Heritage

Collections and Preservation, the LIBER steering committee for which I responsible. In this period we aim to:

- Identify the opportunities for practical cooperation with other international organisations working in the field

- Ensure that communication channels in the fields of heritage collections and preservation are open and working

- Become a communication partner at the EU level

- Organise conference(s) and/or workshops and/or training events in the fields of heritage collections and preservation

- Develop a particular focus on building dialogue with colleagues in central and Eastern Europe in line with LIBER policy

- Partner in discussions about funding proposals

- Address the development of standards

- Identify existing projects and organisations delivering digital materials on demand in order to identify gaps

- Examine whether there is a need for a European registry of what has been digitised

- Expand the CERL Portal for Manuscripts and Early Printed Materials to be hospitable to all Special Collections materials

- Monitor the outcomes of the EU consultation on Europeana, and the potential for bringing research libraries' collections into The European Library and Europeana

- Liaise with archives, to examine common standards, reconstructing collections, developing strategies for mass digitisation

This is of course an enormously challenging programme and probably over-ambitious for our first full year of existence but it demonstrates the breadth of our ambition and the many areas where we could benefit from pan-European cooperation. We should be delighted if we could work with partners in Greece on making this vision a reality.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Graham Jefcoate

Nijmegen, 19 January 2010

Annex

Current LIBER members in Greece

- Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Central Library
- University of Patras

- National Documentation Centre | NHRF, Athens