

Digitization and cultural heritage

Marco de Niet, director, DEN (Digitaal Erfgoed Nederland), The Hague

Digitization is not just a means for creating digital reproductions of physical objects. Digitization is a process that has a profound impact on workflows, expertise and even organizational structures. This is most prominent in the development and renewal of a museum's public services.

In a networked society, textual and visual information are key principles for interaction. The objective information and expert knowledge that a museum records about its collections ("context") is therefore becoming as important as the collections themselves ("content"). Naturally, museums are still responsible for describing and making available the contents of their collections, usually through databases. By publishing these databases on the Internet, they can be accessed by interested parties and linked to other services, such as cultural heritage portals.

However, the popularity of the social web (Web 2.0) puts pressure on this working method. The focus of the social web is not on the institution and its collections, but rather on the users, who play an increasing role in enhancing the value of the collection. Museums and other heritage institutions are experimenting extensively with 2.0 services in order to take advantage of the knowledge and enthusiasm of user groups. Part of this means allowing users to add keywords or annotations to individual objects in their image databases. Another example is the Wiki Loves Art project, which encourages museum visitors to take photographs of non-copyrighted museum pieces for inclusion in Wikipedia.

Despite these activities, most institutions are still unsure how best to deal with this decentralization of information. What do you do with information on online platforms that has been added by visitors? Do you leave the user-generated content on the platform or combine the information with data from the traditional information systems? Does the institution have to verify the quality and reliability of the information provided by users? Or do you leave that to other users? Meticulousness and verifiability are traditionally considered important aspects of the work carried out by a cultural heritage institution. It is a challenge to safeguard these same values in the interactive knowledge exchange with user groups. This not only requires rethinking the relationship between experts and enthusiasts, but also making choices about the openness of the ICT infrastructure, the organization of collection registration and user support and the role of the museum in user communities.

Biography

Marco de Niet is director of the DEN foundation, the Dutch ICT knowledge center for cultural heritage. He studied Dutch language and literature, and the history of the book at Leiden University. Before DEN he worked at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek - Nationale Bibliotheek van Nederland (Royal Library - National Library of the Netherlands), as head of Innovative Projects and Digital Preservation. He is one of the founders of The European Library service.