



Developing a Concerted Digitisation Policy for Jewish Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

The Internet served in the last 10 years as a vehicle for an ever-increasing interaction among Jews. Jewish content became more accessible and support many areas of Jewish life – education, scholarship, Torah learning, family life, community activities and many more.

We witness lately the rapid dissemination of broadband access and the convergence of media. A technological transformation of the Web is under way through the program being carried focused on the concept of the Semantic Web and the ensuing availability of services like sophisticated and focused tagging and retrieval of information, learning objects available through heterogeneous virtual learning environments, the deployment of smart agents and the like. On the other hand many valuable resources remain unavailable, either only locally accessible at the databases of Jewish institutions or not yet digitized.

Such processes present challenges and embed promises for Jewish Cultural Heritage institutions. As trustees of Jewish memory and life they now have opportunities to reach a much larger target population; their holdings, treasures of Jewish civilization, hold the promise for a backbone for a much-enriched Jewish education and for the renewal of cultural and artistic creation.

The Jewish Cultural Heritage sector should take some initiatives and develop basic infrastructures to realize this potential. Such program can be carried out in a way similar to those being now deployed at the national and international level in Europe and North America.

It is possible to attempt to develop a comprehensive policy for Jewish Cultural Heritage digitisation may be developed as a joint effort of the main Jewish institutions in North America, Europe and Israel. Such exercise may increase the awareness of the Jewish cultural heritage institutions, decision makers in the Jewish community and funding sources, institutional as well as private, to the opportunities now presented by digitisation for the preservation, access and renewal of Jewish heritage.

National and International Frameworks

DigitalPromise, a Century Foundation Project (<http://www.digitalpromise.org>) published in October 2003 a report to the Congress of the United States – “Creating the Digital Opportunity Investment Trust (DO IT)”. It recommends that a portion of the proceeds from the auctions of the spectrum be dedicated to create, improve and develop sophisticated new information technologies that will transform education and training. It also recommends that these funds be employed to enable the US libraries, museums, and universities to digitize their collections for the benefit of all.

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Among the first priorities indicated: (1) Develop learning models so as to provide teachers and students with basic digital aids to reading, writing, math and languages and as sophisticated as simulations and visualizations impossible to create in the real world – a virtual solar system; a working 3-D model of the human body; a recreation of Mark Twain's America. (2) Digitize the collections of universities, museums, libraries and cultural institutions. DO IT should help digitize these collections and set standards to conserve "born digital" materials ensuring their accessibility to all.

The **National Academy of Sciences** published in 2003 the results of a two-year study: "**Beyond Productivity – Information Technology, Innovation and Creativity**"ⁱ. They identify a powerful alliance now being formed between IT (Information Technology) with creative practices in the arts and design to establish the exciting new domain of information technology and creative practices (ITCP). After an exhaustive analysis of the opportunities and challenges of this new area of inquiry and creation, the committee set up its recommendations. Among those relevant to our concerns is that recommending support for computer science students that provide direct experience in the arts and design, critical discussion, and formation of broader cultural perspectives – not merely as semi-recreational enrichment, but at a sufficiently challenging level to raise hard questions about the social and cultural roles both of science and technology and of the arts and design. They also recommend that foundations and government agencies underwrite a better knowledge base – ... the details of who is doing what, where, when and how – that parallels the knowledge base in scientific and engineering fields. They also suggest that infrastructure; archiving and preservation needs should be factored into grant levels because this support is essential to enable future work.

In the framework of its **eEurope**ⁱⁱ initiative the Council of the European Union decided in 2001 on the principles for a policy on digitisationⁱⁱⁱ. The Council highlighted the value and importance of Europe's digitized cultural and scientific content that provides: (1) An accessible and sustainable heritage. (2) Support of cultural diversity, education and content industries (3) Digitized resources of great variety and richness. Among the key problems identified limiting the realization of the potential of these resources: (1) Fragmentation of approach (2) Obsolescence (3) Lack of simple, common forms of access for the citizen (4) Intellectual property rights (IPR) (5) Lack of synergies between cultural and new technologies programmes (6) Institutional investment and commitment. These values and problems were expressed through the **Lund Principles**.

These principles have been translated into the **Lund Action Plan for coordination mechanisms for digitisation**^{iv}. The Lund Action Plan identifies four main areas where specific actions are needed. For each action it defines objectives, the implementation approach and associated tasks, actors, and results to be achieved: Area 1: Improving policies and programmes through co-operation and benchmarking. Area 2: Discovery of digitized resources. Area 3: Promotion of good practice. Area 4: Content framework.

A **National Representatives Group (NRG)** of the European Union countries was established to monitor the process of implementation of the Lund Action Plan. The NRG held its fourth meeting in Parma, Italy, December 10th, 2003. This



was the first time when it convened enlarged with the participation of the accession countries from Eastern Europe; Russia and Israel.

The **MINERVA Consortium**^v was established with funds from the RTD Framework Program of the European Union and matching funds from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage of Italy. This operational framework of experts is carrying out, jointly with officers of the European Commission, the actual work required to implement the Lund Action Plan. The aim of Minerva is to create a network to discuss, correlate and harmonize activities carried out in digitisation of cultural and scientific content, for creating an agreed European common platform, recommendations and guidelines about digitisation, metadata, long-term accessibility and preservation.

Israel as a member of the RTD Framework Program was accepted as a member of MINERVA through the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Science and Technology. This membership set unlimited access to methodologies, surveys, research tools, standards and protocols, know how and experts endeavoring to set national and European digitisation policies. In the remainder of this paper I suggest that the pondered adoption of these tools by a cooperative framework of leading Jewish institutions in North America, Europe and Israel may lead to the definition of a digitisation policy for the Jewish Cultural Heritage sector.

Digitisation Policies for Jewish Cultural Heritage

National Status Reports and National Policy Profiles^{vi} – The NRG members have prepared under the guidance of MINERVA National Policy Profiles on digitisation. These reports details: (1) Bodies responsible for cultural and scientific policies and other institutions relevant to digitisation. (2) The digitisation policies framework of each country. (3) Main programmes for digitisation. (4) Most significant on-going projects. The countries are also required to periodically provide status reports that detail: (1) Actions undertaken (2) Institutions involved (3) National network development (4) Problems and suggestions (5) Priorities for future strategy for the NRG.

These reports are basic tools for establishing a baseline for further policy development and monitoring its progression. The European Commission will soon publish an initial report for Israel. It is available at:

http://www.ejewish.info/reka/minerva/israel_status_report_dec03.pdf

Recommendation 1: The National Foundation of Jewish Culture, the European Association for Jewish Culture (and other main European players) and the Jewish Agency will jointly prepare a basic policy profile on Jewish Cultural Heritage

MINERVA Working Groups (WGs). The following WGs have been established in MINERVA:

Interoperability and Service Provision: The objectives of this working group consist of supporting interoperability and the delivery of shared services, by analyzing, identifying and evaluating activities on metadata, registries and

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schemes. As a result of this work, progress can be made towards identifying a common framework for an information environment that could be adopted across the Member States. The group is now focusing on issues regarding IPR and business models.

Identification of Good Practices^{vii} and Competence Centers^{viii}: Examples of good practice in digitisation will be selected and promoted in order to: (1) exchange experiences and skills (2) collect consensus from different communities of users. Organizations and centers with leading skills and competence in key technical domains will be identified and contacted. The purpose is to establish a "consortia" of such organizations with services to support and inform cultural organizations embarking on digitisation.

Benchmarking framework: To assure exchange of compatible information on programmes and policies and to give visibility to national activities in order to exchange similar experiences and skills. An important objective is to promote the adoption of a benchmarking framework as a key tool for coordinating and harmonizing national activities as well as to develop measures to show progress and improvement.

Inventories, Discovery of Digitized Content, Multilingualism^{ix}: The activities will consist of the analysis of existing activities, to identify national inventories of projects or selected content. These inventories will be selected according to quality standards, with the aim to organize test-beds in partner countries, following a common methodology. The group now focus its work on a survey of multilingual controlled vocabularies. Such survey may lead to projects of common access to content (v.g. [SWAD SKOS W3C Initiative](#)).

Quality framework and user needs^x: The objectives include the development of a common quality criteria and framework; encourage the use of a quality framework in cultural web sites by implementing and disseminating quality criteria; facilitate the networking of cultural information and encourage training actions in cultural websites. Following the initial works substantial efforts are being made in dissemination of the quality principles; usability and accessibility technologies.

Recommendation 2: Jewish Cultural Heritage institutions, academic departments and corporations will be invited to nominate experts to compose Working Groups in the above-mentioned areas focusing on the Jewish Cultural Heritage. Priorities will be jointly agreed on the deployment of such groups. Significant outputs have been achieved in MINERVA regarding Technical Guidelines for Digital Cultural Content Creation (in the Interoperability WG); Good Practices and Competence Centers; Quality framework. These may be applied and disseminated into the Jewish Cultural Heritage area.

Interest has been already expressed by The National Foundation of Jewish Culture, the European Association for Jewish Culture the Jewish Agency and some EC supported cultural heritage projects.

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Survey of Controlled Vocabularies Related to Jewish Cultural Heritage and Israel

A *controlled vocabulary* is an established list of standardized terminology for use in indexing and retrieval of information. A controlled vocabulary ensures that a subject will be described using the same preferred term each time it is indexed and this will make it easier to find all information about a specific topic during the search process.^{xi}

The following benefits may be expected from the identification of existing controlled vocabularies related to Jewish Cultural Heritage and Israel: (1) The development of controlled vocabularies is an expensive endeavor. Agreements may be established between developers, maintainers and users regarding the use, acquisition and adaptation to new needs of existing vocabularies. (2) Clusters of vocabularies dealing with related matters may be identified. Developers may decide to collaborate in the maintenance of their vocabularies and further development of services. (3) A map of existing vocabularies will set up the ground for possible experiments in establishing access to heterogeneous databases of digital resources in the area of Jewish Cultural Heritage and Israel.

Recommendation 3: The present undergoing survey of Jewish Heritage Controlled Vocabularies will be expanded in collaboration with the main interested parties. Following its completion they will jointly carry a feasibility study in establishing a pilot (s) experiment(s) on seamless access to heterogeneous databases of digital resources.

MILESTONES

Proposed Milestones:

1. Status Report and Police Profile for Jewish Cultural Heritage Digitisation

- a. The interested parties nominate their respective officers in charge of completing these reports. Interest already expressed by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, the European Association for Jewish Culture and the Jewish Agency
- b. First draft completed
- c. First draft presented and discussed at the conference on digitisation of Jewish Cultural Heritage in the first semester of 2005. Feedback and complementing information requested from the participants.
- d. Work continues
- e. Methodology and commitment set up for the periodic update of such reports.

2. Jewish Cultural Heritage Digitisation Working Groups

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- a. The interested parties nominate a Working Group to seek and publish a directory of Good Practices and Competence Centers in digitisation of Jewish Cultural Heritage.
- b. The concept of and deliverables of the MINERVA WGs are presented at the Conference on the Digitisation of Jewish Cultural Heritage. The initiative is disseminated and WG leaders identified.
- c. Leaders of the WGs prepare detailed work programmes and timelines for such WGs. The WGs are established and budgeting sources for their work identified and allocated.

3. Survey of Controlled Vocabularies Related to Jewish Cultural Heritage and Israel

- a. The present survey identified about 20 Controlled vocabularies and an additional batch of 40 institutions that promised to complete the questionnaire.
- b. The interested parties join the effort and a deadline is jointly set for its completion and publication at the conference.
- c. A pilot experiment on seamless access to heterogeneous databases in Jewish Cultural Heritage is set.

ⁱ William J. Mitchell, Inouye, A.S., Blumenthal, M.S. (Editors): Beyond Productivity – Information Technology, Innovation and Creativity. The Committee on Information Technology and Creativity of the National Research Council of the National Academies (2003). The National Academies Press <http://www.nap.edu> ISBN 0-309-08868-2

ⁱⁱ European Commission – Information Society – eEurope 2005
http://europa.eu.int/information_society/europe/2005/index_en.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ See the Lund Principles at http://www.cordis.lu/ist/directorate_e/digicult/lund_principles.htm

^{iv} See the Lund Action Plan at ftp://ftp.cordis.lu/pub/ist/docs/digicult/lund_action_plan-en.pdf

^v MINERVA – Digitising Content Together <http://www.minervaeurope.org>

^{vi} National Status Reports <http://www.minervaeurope.org/structure/nrg/status.htm> and National Policy Profiles <http://www.minervaeurope.org/structure/NRG/npp.htm>

^{vii} <http://www.minervaeurope.org/listgoodpract.htm>

^{viii} <http://www.minervaeurope.org/competencecentre.htm>

^{ix} <http://www.minervaeurope.org/structure/workinggroups/inventor.htm>

^x <http://www.minervaeurope.org/structure/workinggroups/userneeds/docindex.htm>