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Europe's cultural wealth at the click of a mouse: frequently asked questions

What is digitisation?

Digitisation is the transformation into digital format of text and photos from paper, films from reels, music from vinyl or videos from tape, so it can be (dis)played and used from a computer. For text and photos this involves scanning.

Why is digitisation of cultural works important?

Information technologies make it possible to consult cultural material through your computer, but it has to be available in digital format first. Digitisation is therefore a precondition for a better dissemination of cultural content on the internet.

Older works in libraries and archives can be difficult for people to access and are susceptible to wear and tear. For example, ancient and rare manuscripts are not put at the disposal of all visitors. Digital versions of old works will not only guarantee survival through the ages, but reach a much wider audience without causing any risk to the original copy. Through digital libraries people will be able to visit the past virtually to find, understand and experience Europe's cultural wealth and history. Sometimes digitisation is the only way to preserve the content. This is the case for a lot of audiovisual material: ten thousands of hours of unique film material are lost every year because the originals in the audiovisual archives are falling apart.

This is why the Commission promotes the digitisation of cultural works like books, newspapers, films and photographs from European museums, libraries and other archives.

What kind of works will digitisation make available?

Digitisation will give European citizens the opportunity to use their computer to consult books, newspapers, works of art and films from their own country and from other European countries. For example, the following digitised works are already available to everybody at the click of a link:

- The two copies of the 15th century [Gutenberg Bible](#) preserved by the British Library or the famous [Magna Carta](#) which can be studied in detail through a particularly nice viewer.
- The [poems of Charles Baudelaire](#) or the full text of '[Les misérables](#)' by Victor Hugo from the French National Library.
- The [paintings by Johannes Vermeer](#) from the Dutch museum 'Het Mauritshuis'.

The online availability of more recent works – that are still in copyright – will depend on the way in which private right holders (such as publishers) want to exploit them. They could for example become available through agreements between the participating cultural institutions and the right holders.

Have many libraries, museums and archives "gone digital" already?

Many libraries, museums and archives throughout Europe have started digitising their collections. This is true for the major national institutions, but there are also many local and regional museums and libraries that are digitising their unique assets. Often the digitised material is invisible for the user, simply because it is not available online (only one out of four German museums with digitised material makes it available on the internet) or because it is difficult to find.

Soon however, European art music and book lovers will have a new source of pleasure: *Europeana*, the common European digital library, museum and archive, will make it easier to find and consult the hidden treasures of Europe's cultural heritage.

What is *Europeana*?

The Commission has stimulated and co-ordinated work towards the creation of *Europeana*, a common multilingual and digital access point to Europe's cultural heritage. Through this access point, users will be able to search different collections in Europe's cultural institutions in their own language, without having to visit multiple sites or countries. *Europeana* will be launched as a prototype in November.

The European Digital Library Foundation, established in November 2007, represents the commitment of the different cultural sectors to deliver *Europeana*. Its founding members include major European associations of libraries, museums, audiovisual and other archives.

A first presentation of *Europeana* can be found at: <http://www.europeana.eu/>

Who is *Europeana* aimed at?

Europeana will offer anyone with an interest in literature, history, art or cinema a simple route to access European cultural resources. It offers professionals and citizens a simple way of finding cultural material from different Member States. It is also expected to attract researchers as there will be a vast virtual collection of material from all disciplines. That said, it will be just as easy for school children to use it.

Will European citizens be interested in *Europeana*?

Experience with digitisation and online library initiatives so far shows that when cultural institutions have made part of their collections available online there has been an overwhelming interest from the public. For example, the online section of the French national library, Gallica, gets 1.5 million hits a month and 4 000 downloads a day. The popularity of regular European libraries provides a strong user base of 138 million registered users. Putting the material online will increase possibilities for these users and make it available for wider and cross-border use.

What does the Commission expect from Member States?

Like all libraries, the popularity and usefulness of digital libraries like *Europeana* will depend on the quantity and quality of the material it offers, and there is therefore a big onus on Member States to digitise material and make it available online. The content of *Europeana* will grow at the same speed as the underlying digital collections in the participating institutions. At present, only a tiny fraction of the collections in the EU Member States is digitised. For example, about 1% of the collections of Europe's national libraries are digitised. The estimate is that by 2012 this will have risen to some 4%. A common effort is necessary to speed up the pace of digitisation and online accessibility of the material.

First of all, Member States will have to invest in order to digitise their cultural content stored in traditional formats (e.g. text and photos on paper, photographic negatives, films on reels, music on vinyl records or tape, etc).

Building a rich European digital library is not just a matter of money. It also requires an organisational effort, including the conclusion of public private partnerships. Also the right conditions for digitisation, online accessibility and the preservation of cultural content need to be in place.

What efforts are being made to make more cultural work digitally available in Europe today?

In August 2006, the Commission recommended to Member States to tackle a series of priority actions for the digitisation of cultural material, its online accessibility and digital preservation ([IP/06/1124](#))

- **Digitisation of collections** in museums, libraries and archives: to increase the use of such collections.
 - Provide clear indications about what has already been digitised and quantify further digitisation plans. This will help to avoid overlap and create collections with European added-value.
 - Encourage partnerships between cultural institutions and the private sector.
 - Set up large scale digitisation facilities.
- **Online accessibility:** to maximise the benefits of digitisation for citizens, researchers and companies.
 - Promote the development of the European digital library (*Europeana*) as the single multilingual access point to Europe's cultural wealth. This can be done, for example, by specifying conditions for granting funding to cultural institutions for digitisation work.
 - Develop concrete solutions on copyright issues, for example mechanisms to deal with "orphan" works (copyrighted works whose owners are very difficult or impossible to locate) and works that are out of print.
- **Preservation and storage:** to make sure that future generations can access the digital material and to prevent precious content being lost.
 - Establish national strategies and plans for the long-term preservation of and access to digital material.
 - Adapt legislation, where necessary, to allow multiple copying and migration for preservation purposes, and to tackle the issues of web-preservation and the deposit of digital material for preservation purposes.

In November 2006 the national Ministers responsible for culture broadly endorsed the Commission Recommendation. In doing so, they agreed to move forward together to bring Europe's cultural heritage online and outlined a specific timeline for action.

<http://www.europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=PRES/06/309&format=HTML&aged=1&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

What progress have Member States made since 2006?

Today the Commission has published a progress report assessing the actions that Member States have undertaken since 2006 to make more books, newspapers, paintings, films and photographs from their museums, archives and libraries available online, as well as the actions to ensure the preservation of digital material.

The report shows that there has been progress in some areas:

- Several Member States have allocated extra money to digitisation activities and defined digitisation plans.
- There are examples of public-private partnerships and large scale facilities for digitisation across Europe.
- *Europeana* is starting to be a factor in plans for digitisation and access to cultural heritage.

At the same time much remains to be done, in particular on:

- Financial resources and quantitative targets for digitisation.
- Solid support from the Member States for *Europeana*, ranging from criteria for financing digitisation to work on standardisation.
- Mechanisms to make it easier to digitise and make available works that are out of print or orphan works.
- Financial and organisational aspects of digital preservation.

Why does digital material need to be 'preserved'?

Experts estimate that since 1945 over 100 times as much information has been created and stored than in the whole of human history up to that point. Others suggest that the world's total yearly production of print, film, optical and magnetic content would require roughly 1.5 billion gigabytes of storage i.e. 250 megabytes per person.

Not all digital information is worthwhile preserving, but a lot of it is. And that is where the problem lies. All digital material – digitised works as well as 'born digital' material – has to be maintained because otherwise it will be lost. There are several reasons for the loss of digital content: successive generations of hardware rendering files unreadable; rapid succession and obsolescence of computer programs; the limited lifetime of storage devices (e.g. CD-ROMs); and an increasing supply of information and dynamic content.

To ensure that the content of the digital age remains available for future generations, Europe needs to act now. In its 2006 Recommendation the Commission urged Member States to take the necessary measures (national strategies and an update of the relevant legislation) for preserving digital content.

What is the Commission's financial contribution?

The Commission has over the last few years:

- supported, through the Framework programmes for technology and research, the development of new technologies for making cultural heritage available and for preserving digital information. It has for example funded a network of centres of competence for digitisation (the IMPACT project) with a Community co-funding of €11.5 million.
- supported, through the eContent*plus* programme, libraries, archives, museums and audiovisual archives to improve the access to their digitised collections (projects such as TELplus with the national libraries, and Videoactive with television archives). The actions have focused on making sure collections' databases are compatible with each other and that descriptions are consistent (which is necessary for finding them through a single access point), as well as multilingual access.

In 2009 and 2010 the Commission will make some €69 million available for the further development of digital libraries (including digital preservation, better and cheaper digitisation, multilingual search, innovative ways of improving access to cultural heritage). In the same time span some €50 million will be made available for the deployment of digital libraries through the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme. This includes the co-funding of experiments supporting targeted digitisation actions, although the funding of basic digitisation will essentially remain a matter for the Member States.