A Conference Report from Lund (Sweden)

I love libraries and archives, yet shy away from the 'cultural heritage' industry. How come? I grappled with this question last week when I visited Lund where a EU meeting of national archives took place. The event was called "Improving Access to European Heritage" and I was invited to speak in section 3 on Friday entitled "Where are we heading"? BTW. before me spoke Pelle Snickars, the co-publisher of an anthology on You Tube who works at the Swedish National Archive as a researcher. Whereas he urged the dusty archivists to get more involved in Web 2.0 and do experiments with Flickr, YouTube and so on, I was more cautious.

The main emphasis of the meeting was on the progress of the Europeana project, which was launched late 2008 (read the Wikipedia entry for more info). You can find the ppt presentation of the Europeana director Jill Cousins here. Cousins emphasized that the Europeana digital libraries initiative is the most visible part but only the tip of the iceberg. Only 2% of Europe's archives are digitized. Together with others it so far received 20-180 million euros in European funding. The emphasis on technical work is done through EU programs such as eContentplus/CIP and brought together in the Europeana Thought Lab. Europeana will look for public-private partnerships and has to figure out how to generate revenue. The main concern, so Cousins, is to work towards a reform of the fragmented copyright framework. There is a real risk of 'national silos of information', archives such as the one in Norway that is only accessible inside the 'national web'. Europeana thrives for cross border access. Other problems are 'orphan works', broken links and the danger of a 20th century 'black hole' because of expanded copyright, for instance on audio-visual material. Limited access to 20th century material differs from earlier collections that are in the public domain and 21st century (user generated) content that is published under Creative Commons.

The main problem I have here is Europe's preoccupation with its past. Why not Giving Access to the European Future? It's in particular the European Commission who is to blame for this. It is save to put money in the past and risky to invest in the future culture. There is money to made from history. When I think of Europe I see Asian

tourists doing' Paris and Rome. How can we get rid of this cliché? Maybe we're in Amsterdam all too sensitive for this problem of the tourist industry as a trap. Can we ever overcome Museum Europe?

In my abstract I wrote:

> From a perspective of new media research Europe allocated too much of its resources into the digitization of its cultural heritage, leaving the debate over the architecture of the network society to hyped-up IT gurus and business management evangelists. Once again, the future was located in the past. Now that the 1.5 billion Internet users worldwide are preoccupied with social networking and other Web 2.0 activities, digital content is proclaimed dead and 'free'.
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> The question central in my work has always been how Europe can be liberated from its preoccupation with the archive in order to mobilize its creative energies towards a 'future culture' that is both critical and innovative. How can we develop an intellectual environment that is capable to shape things to come that is not condemned to writing academic histories? In our work at the Institute of Network Cultures we highlight actual interventions in emerging fields such as the culture of search (beyond Google), critical Wikipedia research and the artistic use of online video, proving that a critical techno culture is small but alive and well.

In my talk I warned for the Web 2.0 hype. Why don't we talk about SecondLife and Orkut anymore? I urged institutions first and foremost to concentrate on their website and content. Web 2.0 is an ever-changing collection of national platforms, closed 'walled gardens' that facilitate selective, non-public so-called 'social' conversations. Rather than migrating to Twitter and YouTube for marketing purposes, let's make materials

- •Searchable
- •Findable

- •Tagable
- •Shareable (cc-licence, .ogg)
- •And maybe even mashable (open API)

Just have a good website, then the Web 2.0 crowds will do the rest. Let them work for you, these prosumers!

In the roaring nineties librarians played a pivotal role in the Internet access movement. At the time were ahead of the game. These days it seems that they have lost their edge and are busy with large digitization programs of historical material. There seems to be less and less money for public libraries and more project-based resources for ‘digitization’ of old stuff. This is why we see occasional panic over (US-American) commercial services like Google, Twitter and Facebook. If librarians and archivists would engage more in the development of standards and protocols, software and interfaces, they would gain confidence and have a more confident and sovereign attitude towards the fads of the market and its libertarian techno-evangelists.

What we need are creative and critical concepts, for instance in the case of Europeana, which is clearly neither a portal nor a search engine. Europeana’s goal, according to Jill Cousins, is to get higher up in the ranking as collected archives and libraries. We all understand that it is frustrating for individual archives not to even show up on the first three pages of a Google query. But Europeana is more than just an expensive search optimization project? Is it merely an ‘assistant engine’ to help or correct the big search engines? Should we for instance call it a content lobby site? Or a meta library? The archive of archives? Wikipedia calls it a ‘search platform’. According to Europeana it’s a ‘prototype’. In my view terms matter, so let’s become even more ‘beta’ and invent them. Central concepts shape and organize socio-technological developments; and focus attention and resources. This is where the role of theory becomes important as a futurist concept laboratory.