Digital unification: back to square one

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Abstract:

In this paper, we examine digital unification as a way to safeguard, disseminate and enhance collections scattered around the world in the course of time.

Documentary cultural heritage artifacts and collections have, over time and due to a wide variety of circumstances, found their way in countries and memory institutions thousands of miles away from their original location. Technological advances of the past decades now make it possible to digitally bring together collections thus, providing a fuller view of interconnecting cultures and history as well as providing access to s a wider audience and researchers wherever they may be.

In order to bring the ongoing conversation a step further and to foster digital unification of documentary heritage, IFLA set up in April 2017 a working group. The IFLA Digital Unification Group has been working since on establishing a set of recommendations for implementing collaborative digital unification projects. The group launched a survey in 2017, all projects selected for the study have in common to be international cooperation initiatives and to focus on digital reconstitution or compilation of sets of documents dispersed in cross-border collections and representing either a documentary / unity, in terms of national heritage, language, religion or culture, or a geographical unity arising from a common history. The analysis of the data, drawn from the case studies, allowed the group to issue guidelines providing both a guiding thread to undertake digital unification projects, with a list of issues to consider, and suggested best practices to support decision making.

To illustrate the approach, a case study based on the Shared Heritage collection of the French national Library is proposed in the current article. Launched in 2018, this collection aims at safeguarding, collecting, sharing an enhancing a shared heritage between France and various geographical areas.

An IFLA initiative

Collections and original documentary cultural heritage objects have, over time and due to a wide variety of circumstances, found their way in countries and memory institutions far away from their original location.. Technological advances of the past decades now make it possible to digitally bring together collections which can provide a fuller view of ainterconnecting cultures and history and give access to users and researchers wherever they may be.

In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference adopted the *Recommendation concerning the preservation of and access to documentary including in digital form*, while IFLA's Key Initiative 3.2.2 aims to foster debate and exchange of ideas to explore collection and access issues through digital unification of documentary cultural heritage content.

In 2016, the IFLA National libraries Standing Committee organized its open session to discuss National Libraries and digital collaboration: building connections and communities, preservation, enhancement and access to shared documentary cultural heritage.

To further the ongoing conversation and help the digital unification of documentary heritage, IFLA set up in April 2017 a working group including members from the IFLA Governing Board, the IFLA relevant professional units (Preservation and Conservation, National Libraries, Indigenous Matters, Rare Books and Special Collections sections), the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, the International Council on Archives (ICA), the Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL) as well as expert members from the British Library, the National Library of Korea, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the National Library of Israel, the Center for Global Heritage and Development, Leiden University and Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

22 case studies collected around the world

During its first meeting, on 23 August 2017, the group decided to create a template to collect case studies. The group reviewed the template on December 2017 and decided to launch a survey. After final adjustments suggested by the group, the survey was launched in March 2018 through the CDNL mailing list.

Closed in July 2018, the survey was filled in by 22 institutions and presented 22 projects, associating 1300 institutions (1200 for one project alone) for some 50 countries. The most represented countries in the projects are the United States, with 7 projects, France, with 6 projects and the United Kingdom, with 5 projects.

Figure 1 – 3 logos of digital unification projects (from left to right): KTIV, Europeana Regia, Codex Sinaiticus

The projects selected were those stemming from international cooperation and having the purpose of a digital unification or compilation of sets of documents dispersed in cross-border collections and representing either a documentary? unit, a unity in terms of national heritage, language, religion or culture, or a geographical unity arising from a common history.

Not selected were projects aiming at creating national digital libraries or aggregating national digital libraries at a regional level.

Out of the 18 digital unification projects selected, three main objectives emerged:

- To digitally reconstitute a document or collection: the documents or collection of documents were once grouped into a single collection and then dispersed as a result of political events or the wishes of the owners; institutions in possession of parts of a whole work together to reunify it digitally.

- To digitally compile documents produced by the same national, linguistic, religious or cultural community: the aim is to create a digital compilation of documents that were produced by the same national, linguistic, religious or cultural community, while not necessarily ever being gathered together in the same place at any given time in history. Thus compiled, the documents constitute an important heritage collection serving to educate future generations about their history.

- To digitize and enhance documents produced as part of a history shared by several countries: the aim is to digitally compile documents produced in the context of a past common to many countries, without necessarily having been gathered in one place at any given time in history. The resulting documents are not only made accessible but also enhanced in order to foster the study and a shared understanding of this common history.

Practical guidelines built on the case studies

The case studies are to be published on dedicated webpages on the IFLA website, along with Guidelines drawn from the case studies, to provide both a guiding thread to undertake digital unification projects with a list of issues to consider and suggested best practices to support decision making.

These Guidelines are intended for anyone contemplating or planning a digital unification project, in particular in a library, archive or other heritage institution. It should not require any particular prior experience of such initiatives, technical expertise or resources, but should provide a helpful guide and checklist to anyone engaging in digital unification work.

The Guidelines are organized following the three main phases of the life of a project: define, manage and finalize. The defining phase takes into consideration the objectives of the project, the outlines, the partners, the resources, human, material and financial, and the timeline. The managing phase is describing the operational steps: conservation, cataloguing and metadata, digitization, dissemination and enhancement. The last phase is about finalizing the project notably with regard to reporting and sustainability issues.

Each step includes a set of questions one ought to consider when planning a digital unification project and a list of recommendations, legal issues and professional standards to take into consideration.

The group underlined a certain number of principles: seeking transparency through formal agreements; encouraging free access and open data; using international and interoperable standards; building on existing level of competences to promote skill transfers; engaging with communities and researchers to guarantee content integrity and scientific value.

Focus on a case study from the French national library : the Shared Heritage collection

*A universal heritage, a shared responsibility*

Since its origins, BnF was thought as a universal library. In 1515, François the 1st (1494-1547) initiated the legal deposit by an Ordonnance which required all the printers of the Kingdom to deposit at the king's library a copy of each book they published in the Kingdom of France. But his intention already was that the library collection should not be limited to knowledge published within France's borders and should reflect a universal one . The collection has thus been enriched by the innumerable and varied diplomatical and cultural interests that France has aroused. François the first notably introduced to France the Italian Renaissance, as well as a purchased numerous works of art.

In 1666, Louis XIV's Chief Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683) moved the King's Library to its own permanent location in Paris, it is also under his patronage that the Royal Library began to focus on collecting books outside Europe.

This original intention of universalism and encyclopedism was pursued during the 18th and 19th century, with a number of acquisitions and donations such as the library of Abbé Bignon, appointed librarian to the King in 1719, who was in contact with missionaries in China who sent him regular shipments of books. He also dispatched abbots to the East, which allowed the acquisitions of Persian and Turkish volumes. Throughout the 19th century the increase remained important, with for example in 1898 an important collection of Mexican manuscripts bought by Eugene Goupil Joseph-Marie Aubin.

Figure 2 -
Gallica, BnF,
Manuscripts section.

Left, *Mexican*,
Right, *Pelliot Tibétain*
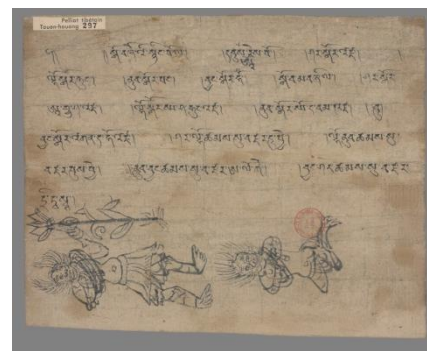
This intention was reasserted in the decree issued in 1994 when the Bibliothèque nationale became the Bibliothèque nationale de France and moved part of its collections and services on a brand new site, in the 13th district of Paris..

Thus, the French national collection is the result of political, diplomatic, economic, cultural or scientific exchanges between France and the rest of the world but also of the library curators' cooperation with leading international scholars across the centuries. In this regard, one could mention among others Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718-1793), Eusèbe Renaudot (1648-1720), Henri Léonard Bertin (1720-1792), Jean-Louis Asselin de Cherville (1772-1822) or Paul Pelliot (1878-1945).

The Shared Heritage collection

In our times, this long tradition of scientific cooperation has evolved towards both a scientific and digital cooperation.

Since 2008, the BnF has developed a unique model for the digitization of collections held in French libraries, their long-term preservation and their dissemination via Gallica, the digital library of the BnF and its partners. They benefit both from the visibility of the site (15,2 million visits in 2018) and a guarantee of long-term preservation.

In 2015, the BnF decided to build on this national digital cooperation experience and extend it to a shared digitization strategy with foreign partners.

In 2017 the "Shared Heritage" digital collection was created. It proposes a set of digital libraries presenting the same graphic identity and the same organizational principle to collect outstanding documents bearing witness to the relations between France and the rest of the world, the legacy left by this shared history and the reciprocal cultural transfers born out of this context , with the aim to make them accessible everywhere and to all.

Figure 2 - Communication visuals for the collection

This project pursues four main objectives: to safeguard, describe, enhance and disseminate a shared heritage through digital unification. It aims at fostering dialogue between the BnF collections and those of its counterparts; building national and international digital scientific partnerships; and involving research communities in the digital enhancement of this heritage.

Safeguarding, describing, enhancing, disseminating

Depending on the country and the institution, the conditions for the preservation of documents do not always guarantee their long-term preservation. Curative and preventive restoration is key both for physical preservation and future digital action. Financial support and sharing of expertise is needed to help in preserving unique documents. Thus, as part of

the project Bibliothèques d'Orient, actions have been undertaken to restore unique documents such as a *Bet Gazo* from the 11th century or a *Gospel for the use of the Coptic Church* from the 14th century. The project also includes training local staff, especially in a brand new Conservation Centre settled in the Charfet monastery, seat of the Syriac Catholic Patriarchy. School worksites will be organized in Irak in 2019 within the framework ofthis same project to enable Iraqi young professional to become restorers. All restored documents are digitized and disseminated through the websites.

Figure 1 -
Before and after restoration of a Gospel for the use of the Coptic Church from the 14th century. Held at the Melkite Salvatorian Convent of Joun, Lebanon

Bibliographic description and dissemination are both key aspects to protect documentary heritage. Hence, the Shared Heritage collection seeks to strengthen existing national and international partnerships to encourage the production of updated, multilingual and enriched metadata through shared expertise. This is notably the aim of the Profession Culture program, supported by the French Ministry of Culture, to host foreign professionals in order to enhance the knowledge of our collections and benefit from skill transfers. In 2018, as part of the France-Brazil project, the head of the digital library at the National Library of Brazil was hosted at the BnF. It enabled the teams to work together on the project and identify documents needed for the project. This year, as part of the future France-Vietnam site, a colleague from the National Library of Vietnam is hosted to identify and select documents from the Indochinese legal deposit. It is also an opportunity for him to meet BnF teams to explore new modes of cooperation (harvesting, IIIF, etc.)

Figure 2 –
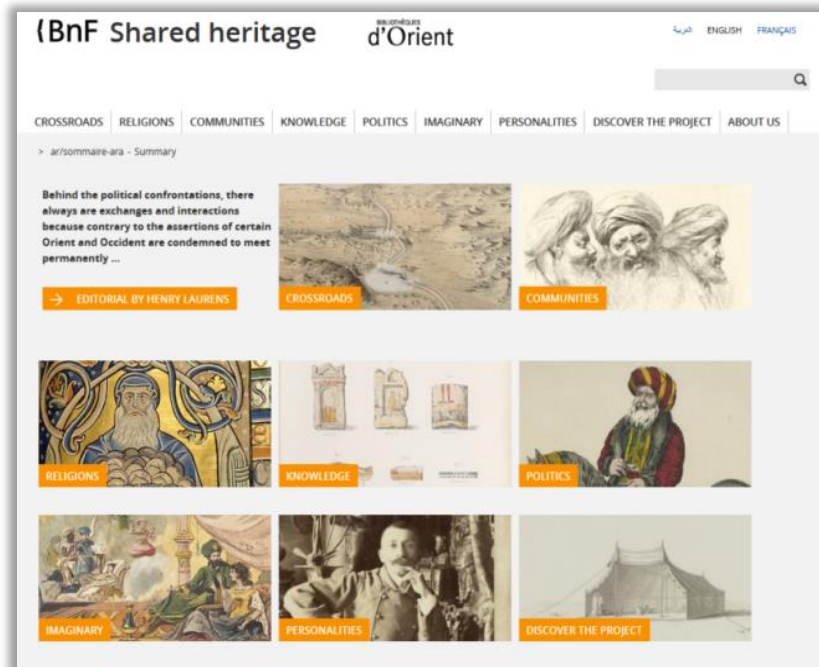The Brasilian and French scientific managers of the France-Bresil project at the BnF in 2018

Figure 3 –
Summary of the Bibliothèques d'Orient website

But the sites of the "Shared Heritage" collection do not simply provide access to digital copies and metadata. They organize these primary sources through thematic ensembles, displaying outstanding documents or documentary corpuses based on their unique value and their scientific interest. The choice of the tree structure and the documentary selection are entrusted to a scientific team, associating all partners.

The documentary selections are presented and enriched by articles written by French and foreign specialists, curators of libraries, researchers or academics to provide backgound information based on the latest research. Researchers advise partners on the documents to be digitized, the corpora to be highlighted?. These exchanges have led to academic discoveries following the digitization of documents requested or the unification of separate part of volume of printed documents. Among these discoveries is those made by Jacqueline Chaabi, a French historian, specialist in Arabic studies, who, while comparing four successive editions of the translation of the Koran by the 19th century orientalist Albert Kazimirski, now all accessible on Bibliothèques d'Orient, discovered mistakes in a verse of the 1840 edition that could not be proofread before publication by the translator and that was corrected in the the revised translation published in 1841.

Main results in figures

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2017 - 2019	5 digital libraries open by the end of 2019
	38 partners (including 14 French institutions) in 10 countries
	22 709 documents valorized through the websites
	230 articles
	124 scientific authors
	65 researchers involved in the scientific councils
	50,000 visits to the first two sites in the first year
	1 visit out of to ten lasts more than 20 minutes
	2 symposium to gather the participants and the researchers and to foster new ideas
	6 communication events in prestigious places (IMA, Ambassade Brésil, NYPL, Vietnam, Nancy…)
	325 000,00 € of funding by private sponsoring/patronage
	Acknowledgment by the French president
	Supported by UNESCO
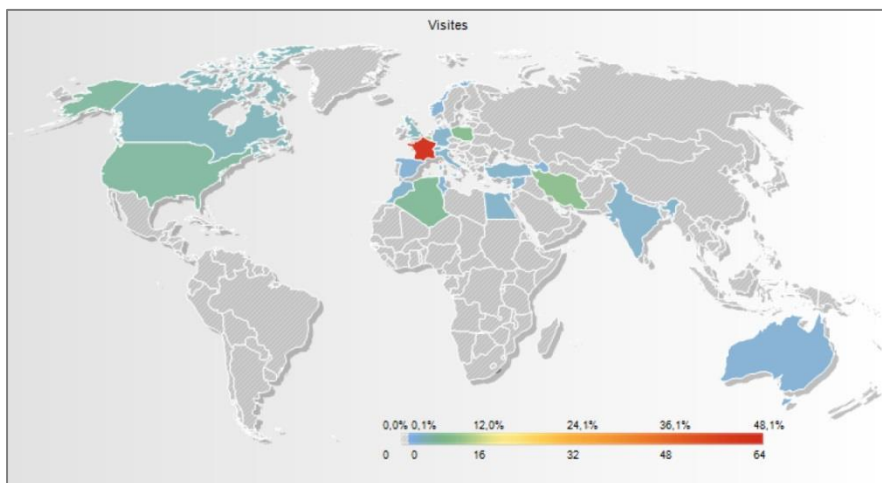
Figure 4 – Geolocation (countries) of the visitors of France-Pologne and Bibliothèques d'Orient in 2018

Figure 5 – French President Emmanuel Macron with Bnf President Laurence Engel at the Library of Congress in 2018 for the launch of the "France in the Americas" project.

Acknowledgments

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Bibliothèques d'Orient
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France-Pologne
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France-Brésil
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France-Chine
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