To the Museum of Alexandria and Back Again

Italy
Elena
Calandra

I have chosen here to depart from the Museum of Alexandria: it was a research institute (not a museum in the modern sense, as its name would imply), with an annexed library that was up to date in all the fields of knowledge available at the time. It was arranged by subjects, ranging from the sciences to the conservation of historical literary texts. For example, the astronomer Ptolemy integrated and systematically organized into one synthesis all the astronomical knowledge of the previous centuries, thus providing an important model of the new way to arrange the available information. The aim of the Museum was therefore to preserve, hand down to posterity and expand the knowledge that had been accumulated up to that time.

Nowadays we are experiencing a similar situation with the Web (naturally, I am speaking here about the field of cultural heritage). We have an extraordinary amount of data, introduced on-line for various reasons: the majority of public institutions in recent years have set up their own Websites, sometimes with a citizen's help-desk function; in these cases, the quality and correctness of the information is examined and guaranteed at the source by the institution. However, the Web also hosts amateur sites, which should always be evaluated carefully.

Part of this large quantity of data already existed before the advent of the Web, and part of it was produced explicitly for Web ancient

Palazzolo Acreide,
Casa Museo
Antonino Uccello,
Puppets.
Picture by Maria
Teresa Natale

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Roma,
Jewish Catacombs,
Fresco.
Picture by
Maria Teresa
Natale

publication (often using self-made facilities). If we consider the Italian situation, for decades we archaeologists have been used to creating and interrogating data bases, geo-referencing information on the ground, and working with images: thus, we are involved in managing a large amount of knowledge in order to extract from it a set of specific, concise results. With special programs we even manage to map and/or reconstruct ancient monuments in three dimensions. Like us, all those who managed data bases of any kind performed an operation of "information retrieval", introduced into the computer world in the 1970s. This operation is done now by either general or specific search engines that organize the material around a particular subject. These engines are often of Anglo-Saxon ori-

gin and are easily accepted throughout the world. However, do not be misled by the immediacy of the results of on-line interrogations: a search engine selects data from different sources and provides a sequence of results organized in a horizontal rather than hierarchical sense, from which the user must then make further selections following his individual cognitive processes. This way of working is particularly convenient and rapid, but the layers of knowledge behind it shouldn't be ignored: at least within the humanist sphere, whoever is forty or more years old in Italy in 2010 comes from a predominantly "paper" culture and is used to starting from a printed text and searching for sources in a real, physical library; in contrast, a 14-year old today who must write a research paper for middle

school will find everything on the Internet and often does not even know of the existence of the encyclopedia on the bookshelf.

We are therefore experiencing a new era of knowledge, in search of a new organisation: on the one hand, the Web has a democratic side (broad accessibility to all social levels), but on the other hand it produces a worrisome flattening of the logical structuring of information. Moreover, the links between sites that have been set up in different times and in different ways completely upset any initial planning system and, if used correctly, promote communication among different sources of knowledge on-line.

The use of digitization also has a considerable economic and organizational impact. From an economic perspective, even in Italy we can observe an ever-increasing (albeit sometimes rather slow) tendency towards free electronic publishing, supported by open source and commonly shared tools, driven also by the current economic crisis. From an organizational point of view, one typical examp-

le is particularly eloquent: the "dematerialization" of documents. Some institutions have been scanning ("dematerializing") documents for years, conferring upon them the full validity of the original: this is a great help when we consider the chronic lack of space in the archives, but sometimes it becomes an incentive to produce more digital documents, which then need maintenance and reordering just like paper archives.

Focusing on the spread of cultural heritage content in Italy, the effects of on-line publication are certainly beneficial. As I have pointed out on other occasions, next to traditional methods (e.g. on paper), the publication of digital content produces new mechanisms that promote the opening up and spreading of information to users whose numbers are increasing and who are refining the quality of their requests. Occasions for encountering the users concerned have shown that people now inform themselves *before*, and then go into further detail *after* visiting a monument: these people use a paper document as a tourist guide, but increasingly use the Web for information
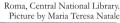

Paestum, Museum.
Picture by
Maria Teresa Natale

or updating. Publishing digitally, in any case, allows monitoring and rapid implementation of variations. This means that sites must be constantly dynamic, something that is often requested by the public in the name of the vitality of the product.

When speaking of the Italian cultural panorama, one observation cannot be avoided: the use of the Italian language is increasingly losing ground, at least in the humanist sphere, while its use was abandoned from the beginning in the field of science. Nowadays Italian is read only by Italians: except for a small minority, the time is past when cultured non-Italians read and often fluently spoke Italian. This has been obvious for some time already in the paper-based media, where quotations of Italian authors are quite rare, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, and it continues on the Web, where the dominant and leading language is undoubtedly English.

Turning back to the internal Italian situation, the way that languages and modes of expression change should be noted: the power of the image has taken clear precedence over the effectiveness of text in spreading a message: many web sites (for example, those of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage) are attractive precisely because they have a photo gallery, best organized around themes (indeed, thematic routes are expanding rapidly): this means organizing knowledge according to different modalities. A photo gallery, when applied to works of art, somehow continues the lesson of Walter Benjamin, who warns of the consequences of the reproducibility of works of art – and that of André Malraux, who hypothesizes the "imaginary museum".

Some trends, on the other hand, have yet to be fully explored: in Italy, "virtual museums" are far from being used to the full potential (and hopes) with which they were originally founded, and much work remains to be done in this direction: in the end, from the Museum of Alexandria to imaginary museums to virtual museums and back again.