



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 067-E
Meeting: 79. Genealogy and Local History
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

IF WE CAN DO IT, SO CAN YOU

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Abstract:

There are many well-funded national schemes that involve cross-domain partnerships, linking archives, libraries and museums, such as SCRAN in Scotland and NEWSPLAN 2000.

Our Unnetie Project is a much smaller digitisation project. We started with very little experience of collaboration with partners, less funding and originally no idea of the process. Helped by the New Opportunities Fund and Resource, our Library Service is working with a County Record Office, a Museum and a local history society to digitise the little-known archive of a local photographer to provide a searchable website of images alongside several storylines illustrating life in the region.

The project team has been supported by these partners, overcoming our lack of knowledge and various obstacles, such as the lack of commitment on the part of the IT developers. The benefits of working with our colleagues were immeasurable and the relationships that have been built up will continue. Our experience shows that what is needed is enthusiasm, energy, perseverance and the will to talk to associates in the same field.

Conference Paper

Introduction

Last Christmas 2002 I working from my parents' home on my father's computer. On Christmas Eve my Project Officer, also on leave, was doing the same. We had a deadline for our Unnetie Digitisation Project. This small project involved the County Libraries Service, our County Record Office, and a large museum run by the National Parks and a local history society. The weakest link was our County Council IT

Services Unit who were contracted to develop the front end of the project and to satisfy the requirements of our funders that there should be a live website up and running by the last day of December. Our web-developer had not structured the fact that we might be on Christmas holidays into his planning. However after badgering and encouraging emails, the IT Services Unit did complete enough web content to satisfy the requirements of the New Opportunities Fund. We managed the deadline.... just! We had a web presence! The resultant website was not perfect, but it was a start.

It has been said that our project, the Unnetie Digitisation Project, began four years ago with an idea which started with obstacles, moved on through insurmountable obstacles, and became opportunities, which have now transformed themselves into insurmountable opportunities...

But it is an interesting project, one of a few innovative and collaborative ventures. It has taken our County from nowhere in the field of electronic services to learning so much. All the vicissitudes and the celebrations of putting the project together, bidding for the funding, appointing the project team and continuing with even more challenges have been worth it. We have been included in the community of local history specialists, using the new technology of the internet to display our heritage and historic traditions for the benefit of the public. It has forced us, as a Library service, to co-operate with partners, both inside and outside the library sphere in a way that we had not done before. It has forced our Communications Unit into considering electronic practice, revising their projections and bringing forward a programme for a county-wide content management system by a couple of years.

National schemes

In developed countries, there are many national schemes that involve cross-domain partnerships, linking archives, libraries, and museums. Many of these are well funded and have the authority and the capacity of the national organisations backing them as well as trained and experienced staff.

SCRAN: the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network in Scotland (1) was a Millennium Project launched by the Scottish Office Minister for Arts and Cultural Heritage in 1997. Starting with a massive start-up fund of £15 million, SCRAN was set up to build on the collections held by libraries, archives and museums in Scotland. By giving grants to these bodies to digitise their collections, SCRAN has given access to over one million digitised records, while employing the highest standards of preservation and working towards the sustainability of the project for the future. Access is its main aim. This is a multi-media educational resource on Scottish history and culture, which is now available for any educational institution that belongs to the SCRAN organisation. Teachers, librarians and students associated with SCRAN can download and use illustrations, movies and sound clips from the site, all copyright cleared, along with resource packs, topic banks and virtual reality files. One of the UK national newspapers, the Guardian, described SCRAN as "*An ongoing feast of Scottish history & culture*". (2) The site was shortlisted for a prestigious Website Award 2002, open to sites achieving real quality in developing online educational resources. (3)

NEWSPLAN (4) is another extensive British collaborative programme. In 1983 after a report of the Working Party on Access to Newspapers, the British Library established a Consultative Group on Newspapers. A report on those local newspapers held by the South-West region of the country was supported and published in 1986. This led to representatives from public libraries, the British Library Newspaper Library and the national libraries of Scotland, Wales and Ireland meeting together in ten regional committees to focus on the country's historic local newspapers of the last 250 years. Many volumes of the local press were discovered in unsuitable storage conditions, in publishers' attics, in basements and in one case propped up in the Gents' toilet. Others had found their way into Record Offices and museums. Staff at all these resource centres worked together to list the editions and to take part in the co-ordinated NEWSPLAN microfilming and conservation programmes. Archival standards were established and easier public access to the newspaper content on microfilm has been encouraged. Through the efforts of NEWSPLAN committees, several of the regional newspaper catalogues have been placed on the internet.

This collaboration between Archives, museums and libraries over what is a prime historical resource for local historians was further advanced by a successful £5 million Heritage Lottery Fund award for the *Local Newspapers in Peril* initiative. Over a three year period it is hoped to save 1,700 rare or fragile newspaper titles dating from 1800 to 1950 and held in libraries and archives, universities and publishers' offices throughout the United Kingdom. The regional NEWSPLAN committee members have also been listing not only their own titles in this category but deciding which titles of those stored as copyright at British Library would benefit their readers.

These are all massive collaborative UK projects, and there are many similar in the developed countries.

Picture Australia is a national cross-sectoral collaboration of twenty-two cultural agencies that from one portal gives the internet user free access to the online digital images in the collections of the participating agencies. Information is shared across the network and the partners reach a wider public than they might otherwise do. (5)

But all these projects began with a simple idea. And part of that idea was that co-operation between local history resource centres must be useful.

Most enterprising people introduce this germ of an idea and they continue and progress this with enthusiasm, starting simply, learning as they go along, being persistent. And not taking no for an answer.

Hackney Archives

In London, the Hackney Borough Archivist collaborated with an information management consultancy, and with the National Trust who owned a nearby property with an attached education centre, Sutton House. The result was *Hackney on Disk*, a visual database that brought together digitised illustrations, drawing and paintings linked to historic Ordnance Survey maps of the borough around Sutton House. A search facility used key-words to identify appropriate images and there was a single front end with a split screen facility. Funding came from several sources including the banking firm Save and Prosper, British Library and the Heritage Lottery Funding

for Small Projects. (6) This was exciting and innovative in 1998 and Hackney was thought to be *'the first record office and local studies library in Europe to offer this new way of researching local history'* (7) Here again a vision had been progressed through tenacity and collaboration. Recently Hackney has expanded the concept with *Tudor Hackney*, by collaborating with a touring theatre group presenting drama to schools and community centres, and by developing a website, (8) demonstrating a virtual reality reconstruction of a Tudor building in the parish, Hackney Rectory. Audio-visual web pages on the same website will also investigate events in Hackney at the beginning of the seventeenth century, referring to William Shakespeare who was writing and performing in plays at the theatre in Shoreditch in 1601, and to the death in 1625 of Antony, 'a poore old negro', Hackney's first recorded black person. (9)

The North Yorkshire Unnetie Digitisation Project

Libraries, archives and museums cannot deliver new, exciting services in the local history field alone. Co-operation between professionals working in the same field broadens the scope of any accomplished work and gives each institution much needed support.

Our own UK North Yorkshire Digitisation Project, the Unnetie Project, is a prime example of a small project that brought together, under the banner of the New Opportunities Fund and Resource, partners from the Library Service, the County Record Office, the Dales Countryside Museum and a local history society, to digitise the little-known archive of a local photographer, Bertram Unné (1913 – 1981) and to provide packages of digital educational material relating to the history and culture of the County. (10)

Bertram Unné came of a Swedish family, but his father was a medical masseur practising in North Yorkshire. Unné established himself in his home-town of Harrogate and was active as a photographer from around 1940. He was an outstanding photographer, one of the best ever connected with Yorkshire. Employed by the local Borough Council and other firms and country estates such as Castle Howard to undertake photographic work, his illustrations were published in newspapers and local journals. He specialised in people and scenes of the Three Ridings, documenting folk activities and the landscapes of farming and coastal communities. In particular he recorded the way of life in the Dales and the Yorkshire countryside between 1940 to 1979 – thus within living memory, and this is one of the delights of the collection. In 1979, Unné sold the photographic negatives and prints, mostly negatives, to North Yorkshire County Council for £5,000. We were pleased to have this rare slice of local history and the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Library recognised its value by contributing over half the purchase price.

However since then it became increasingly apparent that this was a static collection. A rudimentary index did indicate the subject themes, but there are at least 19,000 images in boxes and envelopes and the storage conditions were deteriorating. Access was only by appointment, and the collection became a 'hidden treasure', known only to serious researchers. When I first came to oversee the collection at a time when the only library PC happened to be the one in my office, I had ideas of publishing a book of Unné illustrations. This came to nothing due to staff

commitments. The chance of the New Opportunities Fund Digitisation programme seemed like a prospect that we had to grasp.

This was in 1999. As a Library Service we had little experience of writing funding bids and our background of internet and digitisation practice was sketchy to say the least. There had been sporadic contact between the Library Service and the County Record Office, the Dales Countryside Museum and the local history society in the past. I had participated in Local History days, prepared educational material, given talks and organised exhibitions with all individually, but this was to be the first time that all four units would work consistently on any joint programme. At the start the idea that we could accomplish anything at all was greeted with some scepticism, so I will be forever grateful to my colleague at the Museum who, when I put the proposal of co-operation to her, immediately said, *'Why not? Let's try!'*

The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) (11) supported by Resource (the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the strategic national body advocating partnership between museums, archives and libraries) (12), is a distributor of National Lottery money. NOF awards grants to education, health and environment projects throughout the UK. The digitisation programme was one of the strands applicable to organisations like galleries, libraries, museums and universities which held material that would excite and benefit the public through being digitised and placed on the internet. Expressions of interest were requested. I began to consider the application form, and wondered how I could prove that a project, designed simply to open up an almost forgotten collection to local historians, would demonstrate 'cultural enrichment', 'aspects of identity' and 'life-long learning'. I experienced a lot of late nights and ran around trying to get explanations about budget control and database software

Our project relies on the digitisation of 7,500 of the Unné negatives, but also the addition of engravings, postcards, lantern-slides and prints from collections held by two of our other main libraries. This latter is to ensure that there will be interest from staff in all our libraries, spread as these are over the largest of England's counties. In any case these earlier nineteenth century illustrations from established local studies collections complement the more modern Unné photographs allowing us to create uncomplicated educational storylines on the themes of work and leisure in Yorkshire communities. The Archives and the Dales Countryside Museum will contribute digitised images of manuscripts and artefacts relating to the storylines and the oral history section of the local history society will provide audioclips commenting on the storyline images.

I would like to say that we went from strength to strength, and in a way we did. But it has been an interesting journey. A very steep learning curve for an organisation who are still awaiting the delivery of an ICT content management system and whose IT department has been desperately challenged by our plans and under constant pressure. Our first set of bid-forms passed the requisite tests and the New Opportunities Fund placed our proposals into a regional Consortia of four similar projects, thus providing our team with further much-needed advice and collaboration, since each of the four library authorities had strengths in different areas. The modest size of the Unnetie Project allowed the disparate members of staff to support each other, and I was especially grateful for the assistance of our experienced Consortium

leader who, just before we submitted the second set of applications, gave me a lengthy tutorial on how to endure while setting out Risk Logs and gathering auxiliary statistics from customer questionnaires. As we had anticipated, hardly any member of the public that we approached knew about the illustration collections. However articles were placed in the local press and on local radio and a calendar that we produced as a promotional aid at the end of 2001 created much interest, both at home and in other parts of the country. We had expected interest in Unné landscapes but I had not realised that there are general collectors of historic farming scenes. We were even asked to supply photographic reproductions to be framed as a gift for Prince Charles – just before the report into the sale of gifts from the Royal Household.

There were times when I felt that the representatives of the Archives and the Museum Service were more helpful than the County Council Unné Project Executive Group, set up to oversee the running of the bid. The weakest link has been the background ICT. Our project has brought forward the County's ICT strategy by two years, because we need the content management system to give us to have a search facility on the illustrations database. I am considered to be 'difficult' but this is only because website deadlines are rarely met and there is little consultation given – which means that the Project team have to ask for basic alterations to the website that should have been caught before the pages went live. By dint of some coercion, we persuaded the web-developer to ensure that the website hosted some static storylines in time to be included on the UKEnrich NOF-digitisation portal just before its launch in March 2003. (13)

Unexpected difficulties have emerged, as they always do. The Digitisation Agent charged us too much for a batch of work. He also mislaid several negatives, both unintentional mistakes, easily rectified. The staff recruited to the Project suddenly had to encourage the scrupulous librarian indexing the Scarborough illustrations in the middle of a total library re-furbishment – he eventually took boxes of photographs home with him and recruited three keen colleagues to assist him – and we upset another staff member by inadvertently omitting her photograph from the website.

Through all the insurmountable opportunities we have been able, with the help of our network, to take advantage of the funding and to work towards overcoming our chronic lack of knowledge of process, our inexperience of collaboration with partners, our lack of funding, and, originally, the lack of interest on the part of our ICT developers. It is a small project, but we could not have done it alone. The benefits of working together were immeasurable and the relationships that have been built up will continue, past the completion of the present schedule. I will miss the meetings in the basement Project Office when it is all over and I may have to concoct another collaborative project in order to maintain the links. We learned the very important lesson that we had to have all our partners on board from the very beginning, that we had to persuade colleagues in our IT Services department time and time again of our integrity and good intentions. We had to cope with a long-running library staff re-structure which occupied my energy as I was obliged to go through an application and interview process for a new post. We had to be so patient.

We were one of 150 organisations across the UK to be awarded a digitisation grant in 2001, but my experience has taught us that what is even more important for any

project of this kind is enthusiasm, energy, perseverance and the will to talk to colleagues in the same field. It can be done. From an original idea to a useful outcome starts with the first step and collaboration makes even a simple project easier.

In the Santa Clara Valley of the United States, a network of archivists and librarians from the local universities, education departments, libraries, museums, and archive centres has gathered together short descriptions and contact details on *The Silicon Valley Local History Resources* and placed these on the web. (14)

Within the Norwegian *Netting Local History* project, librarians and archivists from Sogndal Public Library, the County Archives of Sogn and Fjordane and the Heiberg Collections to provide an information and enquiry website on local history, *Lokalhistorisk Spørjevev - Ask the Web about local history*. (15)

And in Hungary one enthusiastic librarian has just gone out with a digital camera and created a 'then and now' website with his local studies department. He is now talking about his strategy, saying, like us, 'If we can do it, so can you.'

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May 2003
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