
University and Cyberspace

A Personal Diary in English

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Reshaping Knowledge Institutions for the Networked Age

<http://university-and-cyberspace.org>

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Selection

The event is exceedingly well documented in text, videos, twitter messages, newspapers etc.^{1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9}. Therefore my report to the members of the Digitale Allmend¹⁰ is more in the spirit of a selection of highlights, rather than an exact protocol of everything that happened.

1.2 Personal

These selected highlights are supplemented by my personal associations that arose during the workshop's sessions. They are distinguished typographically like quotations by indentation and a smaller font.

1.3 English

Other COMMUNIA members may be interested in the way the event is mirrored in this diary. Therefore I write this diary in (my non native speaker's) English, although most members of the Digitale Allmend are comfortable with German,

2 COMMUNIA AND THE CONFERENCE

2.1 COMMUNIA

The Digitale Allmend has joined the COMMUNIA effort last year. Our attendance of the Istanbul workshop was unfortunately prevented by a volcano.

COMMUNIA is an EU project which is intended to build up a „network of organizations that shall become the single European point of reference for high-level policy discussion and strategic ac-

¹<http://www.communia-project.eu/>

²<http://nexa.polito.it/>

³<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/communial/>

⁴http://www.facebook.com/posted.php?id=124132130945223&share_id=126606434039327&comments=1#!/group.php?gid=124132130945223

⁵<http://twitter.com/search?q=%23Communia>

⁶<http://comunicopolito.it/polimedia/>

⁷http://www.lastampa.it/_web/cmstp/tmplrubriche/cyberuniversita/hrubrica.asp?ID_blog=313

⁸<http://www.lastampa.it/redazione/cmsSezioni/salonelibro/201005articoli/55046girata.asp>

⁹http://www.lastampa.it/_web/CMSTP/tmplrubriche/giornalisti/grubrica.asp?ID_blog=2&ID_articolo=1041&ID_sezione=3&sezione=

¹⁰<http://www.allmend.ch/>

tion on all issues related to the public domain in the digital environment, as well as related topics such as alternative forms of licensing for creative material (including, but not limited to, Creative Commons licenses), open access to scientific publications and research results, management of works whose authors are unknown (i.e. orphan works).“¹

In order to pursue this objective COMMUNIA has organized a series of workshops (roughly 3 - 4 per year). The workshop in Turin is probably the last major COMMUNIA workshop before the end of the project. The members of COMMUNIA are assembling recommendations for the EU. The editing of the final version of these recommendations will be the last activity of the COMMUNIA project.

One small but important aspect of the COMMUNIA project: It is supposed to gather existing research results of the participating institutions. Therefore there is no money for work, only for travel and workshops. Had I known this earlier, the communications on the mailing-lists would have been more clear to me.

2.2 Conference

The conference is a cooperation of COMMUNIA with NEXA² and Berkman³. Its three days were focused on the past, the present and the vision of the future. Between talks and sessions it was punctuated by relatively short „High Order Bits“ which permitted original and personal views to be presented in a concentrated form.

The conference organization was impeccable and the staff – mostly students – did an admirable job of smoothing over technical difficulties etc.

The conference mainly took place in the Aula of the Polytechnic University of Turin. In the virtual realm it was accompanied by live-streaming and twitter. The twitter messages were displayed on a screen beside the speakers or panel participants.

3 DAY 1 (28.06.2010)⁴

3.1 Kick-off

I have decided not to make use of the interpreter service which was available. My passive Italian proved to be sufficient for understanding the occasional Italian contributions, except for one speaker on the third day who spoke very monotonously and swallowed the ends of his sentences.

Among the introductory speeches I noted a nice usage of the term “public domain”: Everything that is freely accessible to everyone without the need to fear legal persecution or punishment.

One of the problems of all our discussions of Open and Free is that we have specialized the term Public Domain so much, that works under GPL or cc-sa are not in it. We should find a nice new term for generously shared content that is not so much burdened with legal technicalities. (Yes the PD Manifesto⁵ does a good job to reclaim the term for this general meaning.)

¹<http://www.communia-project.eu/goals>

²<http://nexa.polito.it/>

³<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/>

⁴<http://www.globalknowledgeexchange.net/the-future-of-the-university-in-cyberspace>

⁵<http://publicdomainmanifesto.org/>

3.2 Arduino

This first High-Order Bit by Massimo Banzi was very inspiring. The Arduino Project¹ is about „Free Hardware“. I think this device might be of interest for the *bj institute*² establishing vocational education and training in India.

3.3 Digital Natives

I had heard about Digital Natives about two years ago at the IBM Research Lab in Zurich. The term denotes people born around or after 1980 who don't remember the non-digital era. All older people who have adopted digital tools and methods are called Digital Immigrants.

Although I liked the speakers and authors of the book that propagated the expression, I think the concept is a lot of dangerous hype that tends to lead to the wrong conclusions. (Just think about calling everyone born after 1780 a „Mechanical Native“, everyone born after 1880 an „Electrical Native“, everyone born after 1920 a „Wireless Native“!) People certainly adapt fast to new potential available to them. That, however, does not change people's nature. Many Digital Natives are more naïve than native and don't use digital means very efficiently or sensibly. Many Digital Immigrants are more native than the natives. (After all, somebody having developed his first program in 1973 has had more time to grapple with the new concepts and their possibilities and consequences.)

It is claimed, that Digital Natives can do more things in parallel than Digital Immigrants. They have replaced exclusive concentration by multi-tasking.

This, of course, is hogwash! I know as many young people as older people who are capable of multi-tasking. And others who have to stand still, while they explain something to you, because they cannot walk and talk at the same time. It is not a very lofty goal to aspire to a short concentration span! What I really see, when I observe Digital Natives as well as Digital Immigrants when coping with the newly available information overload is a new strategy of filtering. They have discovered that you can recognize nonsense much faster than absorb useful information (Gunter Dueck explains that you only need logarithmic time for recognition as opposed to understanding.) This new strategy is not a genetic transformation of the Digital Natives but just an adaptation to the new requirements of the Digital Age. For acquisition of information in the Google age it is useful to alternate between roaming through much material superficially and concentrating on the selected few interesting items.

A cartoon I was told about later: A Digital Native talks to an old guy and tells him how he can do all kinds of things at the same time: Twitter, Facebook, attend a lecture on-line while in the classroom off-line etc. He laughs at the old fogeys who are frightened by this. In the last panel of the cartoon the old guy finally breaks his silence and says: Yes, I know. I programmed them all.

3.4 The Problem of the Universities

In the talks of the first day I learned a lot about the subjective quandary of academia which is only marginally related to the Generation Internet or Open Access. It is felt that the onset of neo-liberal politics (1980 – Reagan, Thatcher) brought a trend toward economic pressures and that Bologna politics increased it with bureaucratic pressures. Thus the 18th century ideals of academic independence and freedom have been replaced by unfulfillable demands. Academia would like to return to 18th century ideas – not only with respect to Open Access.

¹<http://www.arduino.cc/>

²<http://www.bjinsitute.org/>

3.5 Harvard Open Access Initiatives¹

Stuart Shieber from the Berkman Center for Internet & Society and the Office of Scholarly Communication at Harvard University presents the Harvard Open Access Initiatives. The core idea is: authors must opt out of rather than opt into Open Access.

Academic authors usually do not put up much resistance against publisher's contracts taking away a huge amount of their copyright. The new regulation makes them give over the Open Access right to the university with the proviso that they can always have exclusive copyright back, *when they ask for it explicitly*. Thus the university's Open Access policy protects them from restrictive and exclusive copyright contracts with the publishers.

Many publishers have learned, that their profits are not reduced, when they publish with non-exclusive rights. A few insist, that the professors procure the exclusive right from the university (a web form to be filled in followed by a written grant if the exclusive rights within a day or two).

On the whole now more than 80% of all publications are published under Open Access regimes whereas before most of them were published with exclusive rights belonging to the publishing companies.

This exchange of opt-in and opt-out is an excellent example that the Digitale Allmend should copy for a proposal of regulating Open Access to cultural works receiving public subventions! As the Public Domain Manifesto states: Openness should be the default, exclusive rights the exception. In this model no rights are taken away from the author. Only the default is changed and the author is supported in his bargaining position with the powerful publishers. Even the publishers profit because works in Open Access repositories are in higher demand than exclusive ones.

3.6 Africa

The High Order Bit about Information Infrastructure in Africa reminded me that plain physical and technological access to the Internet as a Knowledge Reservoir is still a privilege that the „First World“ (North America, Europe) only shares grudgingly with the „Third World“ (Africa, South America).

4 DAY 2 (29.06.2010)²

4.1 Information Infrastructure

On the morning of the second day the participants of the conference split into three groups: Digital Natives, Information Infrastructure, Physical/Virtual Architecture. I joined the Information Infrastructure group where many interesting projects and developments were presented.

A Brazilian initiative for Open educational material and course work is presented. It is all published under a cc-nc license because the university is afraid of the competition of other universities. (Does not make a lot of sense to me.)

A medical expert presents the profit of using complex networks of open scientific information for diagnosing diseases.

Wikipedia's success with crowdsourcing is presented. Some criticism is vented against missing „semantic web“ aspects (RDF).

¹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YauVgMy6fKE>

²<http://www.globalknowledgeexchange.net/the-future-of-the-university-in-cyberspace-part-2>

The OpenLibrary project¹, which originates from Harvard is presented. The software is freely available and open-source. (I haven't found the license of the software yet.) The API might be of interest for the CultLib project² of the Digitale Allmend.

In Israel a Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education³ was introduced to help mitigate the legal insecurities accompanying the new Israeli copyright law from 2007. Its effect appears to be beneficial and successful in reducing legal uncertainty.

A critical voice states that universities are politically forced to compete and to be economically successful. Competitiveness entails secrecy. How can an Open Access policy be upheld in such a climate? I object that competitiveness does not necessarily entail secrecy. The old adage of „knowledge is power“ is coming to an end in the Google age. Universities (and private enterprises) can still compete in striving for excellency based on equal and open access to knowledge. In the more critical areas which can be protected by patents it is only necessary to keep things secret until a patent is filed. But still the fear of „they will steal my ideas“ prevails in large areas of academia and outside it.

4.2 Universities as Civic Actors

A few take-ways:

Academic freedom must resist being instrumentalized for political goals.

Bologna's original goal of facilitating student mobility is noble but its effects are increased control and bureaucracy.

The universities mourn their loss of being opinion leaders. In this respect they act just like the great TV chains and Ralph Murdoch. They find it difficult to confront a democratic media which weakens their elitist monopoly over public opinion. That is at the core of the difficulties universities display when in contact with new media. But academia has survived for more than 500 years now. It will adapt to the new age too.

4.3 Platforms for Learning

A panel that is really a sequence of lectures without discussion.

I was impressed with Oilproject.org⁴ and Peer-2-Peer University⁵.

4.4 The Highlight: Joi Ito

Joi Ito (look him up on the web!) gave an absolutely charming and fascinating talk about the new access to knowledge available to non-academics (like himself) made possible by the development of the Internet. He asks academia to renounce their elitist position and join up with the rest of the world.

He mentioned that the communication on the Internet has moved from push to pull. Whereas media monopolies in the past could determine the agenda of the public attention by foisting the

¹<http://openlibrary.org/>

²<http://www.cultlib.ch/>

³http://www.atrip.tf.vu.lt/docs/Presentation_Fischman.pdf

⁴<http://www.oilproject.org/>

⁵<http://p2pu.org/>

information on the public (broadcast), it is now the public that decides which piece of information gets its attention (multicast, social media, blogs).

A truly inspiring quarter of an hour! No wonder we find him in the next day's edition of *La Stampa*¹.

4.5 COMMUNIA

The day was ended by a nice introduction (for me) to what the COMMUNIA project has been doing in the past and where it stands today.

Lucie Guibault (WG 6) described the work leading to the Public Domain Manifesto. Its main thrust as a recommendation to the EC: Public domain is the rule – copyright the exception! She mentions that most of its principles can also be found in the Europeana Public Domain Charter².

Patrick Pfeiffer (WG 3) explained the Public Domain Calculator. In this area there is some activity of the Europeana Open Knowledge Foundation³, which continue with this work, when the COMMUNIA project comes to an end. He also mentioned the successful launching of the Public Domain Day which was also celebrated by the Digitale Allmend⁴.

Jonathan Gray (WG 5) talked about Open Government Data. It is estimated that the total „copyright“ value of government data in Europe that should be open is about 27'000'000'000 EUR. That is the value of which the public is deprived. The (for me) new acronym for this data is PSI (Public Sector Information) He mentioned another EU project (ending in -PSI) that will be active in this area.

Sirin Tekinay from Özyegin University in Üsküdar (Istanbul) (WG 1) related progress in the area of Open Education, Copyright Harmonization, Open Courseware. The recommendations are that education must not be hindered by absurd rules that you are only allowed to use part of a work etc.

Ignasi Labastida (WG 3) described the current state of memory institutions with respect to Open Access. Many of them still struggle with the technological problems of digitalization. Many have narrowed the exceptions for education and have made scholarly publications more difficult by affixing a non-commercial clause onto their digitalized content. Universities sign Open Access declarations but nobody checks their compliance. The on-line survey ranking the universities is trying to counter this a bit. (But it is the universities themselves that answer the questions of the survey ...)

Philippe Aigrain (WG 2) talked about technical aspects. One has the impression that no major technical aspects of the COMMUNIA effort were of importance. He mentions that one could have analyzed Public Domain Registries / Public Domain Certification.

Finally an outsider, Paolo Lanteri from WIPO stated the position of his organization. The WIPO's goals are no longer to raise the level of protection. Instead they want to concentrate on lowering the barriers for the visually impaired. On the whole he sounded somewhat apologetic. Also I did not get the impression that the WIPO were about to stop their witch hunts against „piracy“.

¹<http://www3.lastampa.it/cultura/sezioni/articolo/1stp/257742/>

²<http://version1.europeana.eu/web/europeana-project/publications>

³<http://www.kennisland.nl/nl/filter/opinies/public-domain-calculators-at-europeana>

⁴<http://blog.allmend.ch/2010/01/02/public-domain-day-first-impressions/>

5 DAY 3 (30.06.2010)¹

5.1 Quality and Excellence

Jean-Claude Guedon (University of Montreal) gave a High Order Bit about the Republic of Letters (Gelehrtenrepublik). The concept started early (Boyle, Hobbes) and found its realization in the times of enlightenment of the 18th century. Universities acted as truth and reality seeking communities. Today's universities are encouraging competition over the community spirit. The elitist pressure is reminiscent of training athletes for the Olympics. There are only very few who attain excellence. But in all this shuffle of competition for excellence which is encouraged by the fatal metrics of the Science Citation Index and the Monopoly of Publishers the quality is lost.

High summits need a broad base. Quality in university life would be encouraging the growth of this broad base rather than pushing the few to excesses of excellence. The mind-set of Open Access and the spirit of Creative Commons may help mitigate this problem. Currently financial barriers exclude possible scientists and scholars! The aim of Open Access in the universities should be to help leveling the field, building the commons which has been lost.

5.2 Science Fiction

True to the organizer's concept of dedicating the third day to the future and the visionary approach they invited a science fiction author, Bruce Sterling, to talk about Digital Culture, Network Culture, and What Comes Afterward.

His contribution was more a rhetorically brilliant poem, a collection of culture-critical associations than a clearly structured presentation. Therefore it should be enjoyed live².

He poked fun at the contradiction between the time-honored concept university and the tacky hype term cyberspace and predicted that the latter – currently the name of a unit of the US army – will sound very outdated in ten years from now. He suggested to look at today from the perspective of the future, when Facebook, Twitter and Second World will look stale and a bit quaint. Currently the net hysteria reminds him of religion and nationalism. He invited the students to attack and criticize the Internet and its institutions. Only then will they be true „Digital Natives“.

A little cynically he describes the universities as having only two purposes: Establishing the spirit of a generation in the peer group and of freeing people's parents from the burden of child-raising. Only vocational schools worry about learning and teaching. The universities are about passing on the torch of civilization.

He likened many „Web 2.0“ sites (e.g. Facebook) to favelas. They are built precariously without regard for long-term duration or quality. The Internet culture is a slum culture. Use universities to free students from those slums.

5.3 Politecnico

The High-Order Bit by David Orban contained the important concept of the „economy of attention“. The panel with students from the Politecnico presented activities of the students and did not mention the Bologna Process.

¹<http://www.globalknowledgeexchange.net/the-future-of-the-university-in-cyberspace-part-iii>

²http://www.celm.polito.it/polistream/gestione/index.php?cod_cat=E1

5.4 Afternoon

In the afternoon's break-out session I participated again in the group concerned with the Information Infrastructure. Recommendations were collected to be integrated later in the conference results.

As I had a train home to catch, I could not stay to the very end of the last panel.

6 SIDE-LINES

6.1 Anonymity in Italy

The conference material I received on Monday morning contained a flyer with the title „Hey, why do I have to show my Passport?“ From it I learned, that it is law in Italy (Decree 27 July 2005, no. 144 after London Terrorist attacks; then law 31. July 2005 no. 155), that everybody who wants Internet access needs to show a picture ID which will be photographed by the access provider. The access provider must monitor the Internet traffic and register the IP address you are using and your access times, Such is the case for a WLAN connection at the Turin Polytechnic University. Small wonder I could not find a single Internet Café in the streets of Turin!¹

6.2 Search Engines in Turkey

From Turkish participants of the conference I learned, that it now has become impossible to access the Google search engine in Turkey. I had known, that Turkish residents have been blocked from accessing YouTube for more than two years now. It was news to me, that this prohibition now extends to the Google search engine. The blocking of YouTube was originally argued on moral grounds. In the end a court of justice decided, that YouTube must be blocked, because it contains material critical of Kemal Ataturk. My friends in Istanbul apparently learned using IP addresses for YouTube pretty fast and everybody I know there, has used YouTube a lot. It is unclear to me, why there is now a much more restrictive blocking of the Google search engine. The minister of Transportation responsible for his move talks about money that Google has to pay Turkey. Other sources claim, that all Google IP address ranges needed to be blocked, in order to prevent the easy circumvention of the YouTube block. Still other sources note that the block was instituted when the Turkish boat with foreign aid for Gaza was attacked by Israely armed forces. Whatever the real reasons: Turkey appears to be drifting away from Europe and is joining China, Pakistan Iran and Syria in curtailing free access to information of their population.

7 CONCLUSION

The conference was very inspiring. It is encouraging to see so many people who are in favor of Open Access. The young lawyer's assistant beside me was all surprised that everybody seemed to agree on such a visionary view of the world.

Zürich, 6. Juli 2010

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¹<http://nexa.polito.it/anonymity>