

Connections 2010 Abstract

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Abstract Title: The European Library: Improving Cross-Cultural Web Portals

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Abstract:

The European Library is a remarkable resource for gaining access to cultural heritage of many European societies. The outcome of the efforts by the members of the Conference of the European National Library (CELN), The European Library was created with a mission to “open up the universe of knowledge, information and cultures of all Europe’s national libraries” (Janssen, 2006). It currently features forty eight participating members and provides a point of access to digital and non-digital resources. Its intended audience includes researchers and ordinary users. The European Library Office is located in the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, the National Library of the Netherlands (The European Library, 2010). Cousins (2006) informs us that “The role of the European Library Office is therefore to create a stable portal that allows the user to search within and across the deep web and closed database collections of the National Libraries.” Although the library portal is up and running, the work is far from over. One of the most urgent priorities is the digitization of the European national libraries collections (Eur-Lex, 2009). Usability of the library's websites is among other prominently featured concerns. This aspect deserves further consideration.

Within the European Library portal, the user has several search options. He or she can use a search option available from a main page. He can also select the “Collections” button and explore any of the national collections. Finally, he can select the “Libraries” button and enter a web page of any single national library. It should be noted that two countries - Italy and the

Russian Federation are represented by two national libraries each. For Italy, access to national collections is granted through the libraries of Florence and Rome; for Russia, access is provided through the libraries of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Whatever entry point is selected, getting a meaningful result requires that user proceeds to a web page of the national library. Here he encounters a website that's design is markedly different from that of the European portal. As user continues to navigate through the national library's web pages, he encounters as many different designs as there are the national libraries. This fact poses some interesting questions concerning cultural dimensions of the European and participating libraries' websites. It can be argued that design of a cultural artifact such as website is reflective of the cognitive schemas prevalent within a given society. Therefore, studying the national libraries' website as cultural artifact may lead to a better understanding of specific cultural characteristics that are instrumental in producing the design outcome.

In essence, a library website is a knowledge organization system, and its primary purpose is to facilitate resource discovery. At the same time "Formal systems for KO operate in specific cultural milieu that require the user to conform perception to the reality modeled in the system..." (Smiraglia, 2008). For the European and affiliated national libraries, the issue of cultural diversity expressed through markedly different visual designs of their websites may be counterproductive to the project's objectives.

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to improve cross-cultural web portals of The British Library, The Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, the Russian State Library (RSL), and National Central Library of Rome accessible through the European Library portal. The objective is to evaluate user's access to catalogs and capture the most recognizable visual differences of each website design characteristics. The test scenarios will be created prior to

evaluation sessions. The researcher, acting as the fieldworker, will execute the specified tasks and document the outcome of evaluation. Five two-hour sessions will be carried out to evaluate each website. The results will be presented in descriptive form, reflecting the qualitative nature of this study.

References

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