

Digitizing University Libraries

Études.....

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Introduction

Libraries in Algeria have often been marginalized due to a lack of awareness of policymakers on the role of libraries in the society. This has resulted in low annual budgets which are far below the 5% of the total annual funding recommended by UNESCO. On the other hand, users themselves have little been educated to using libraries, as the whole educational system added to a high oral culture , from primary to university levels focus on dictating courses that are in turn expected to re-appear in examinations answers. Furthermore, very few teachers give further reading lists that would encourage students to use the library.

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The advent of information and communication technologies, the world wide web and digitization have led to revolutionary projects such as the Google virtual library which would consist of worldwide library collections available on the internet. To a lesser scale, the Maghreb Digital Library project, is seen as a solution to make available collections of Maghreb countries into a digital library (Benidir, 2007). To fulfill such projects, digitization, the process that converts into electronic images library collections, has been undertaken in most libraries in the world.

Algerian libraries are slowly getting digitized.

As mostly relying on imported technology and know-how, is digitizing going to help Algerian university libraries get out of the lethargic state they have been evolving in for years ?

The present paper aims at attempting to answer the above question and look for the feasibility of such a process within the Algerian university libraries context and within the overall existing educational system.

The first part of this paper presents the current situation of university libraries in Algeria, the second considers digitizing, and the last one attempts to give some guidelines for future digitizing projects.

1- Situation of libraries in Algeria

For a long time, university libraries in Algeria, as their counterparts in developing countries, have consisted of repositories of old and obsolete materials, with few old titles of ceased journals. «L'état déplorable des bibliothèques des pays en voie de développement où les budgets sont sévèrement amputés et les collections sérieusement obsolètes est pour la plupart en totale inadéquation avec le contexte des besoins de développement de l'Afrique »(Kgomotso, 2003)

Inadequate funding has led to poor quality holdings and renewal of journals has ceased with the so called « serial pricing crisis ».

Moreover the public publishing sector, with its proper problems, cannot meet the demands of the growing number of students. Thus, library acquisitions have relied on imports mainly from Arab countries such as Syria, Egypt and Lebanon to support departments teaching in Arabic language and from France for the remaining departments teaching in French and English.(Bendib,1986)

Public and school libraries, when these latter exist, have remained as public stores, with poor

holdings and reading rooms used mainly by secondary school pupils just before exams.

School libraries consist of classrooms with some shelves of old books which do not even meet the curricula. They are run, when possible, for few hours a week by voluntary teachers.

Even homeworks are ordered at cybercafés and final print-outs are handed over to teachers without having been studied.

2- From traditional to virtual libraries.

Digitizing has revolutioned the state being of libraries as remarkable changes have occurred in a world known before as places with physical boundaries, physical collections on shelves and users. Traditional services have always consisted of book development, acquisitions, cataloguing, indexing, storing, preserving and meeting the information customer's needs.

While with digitizing, the collections exist in digital formats and stored in databases accessible through network services with links to other online sources (Kgomotso, 2003).

The advantages are undeniable.

2-1 Advantages of digitizing.

- librarians have evolved to manage digital libraries, other tasks have appeared while services have become easier and less time consuming.
- the library data can be accessed at any time all over the world. And the user no longer needs to go to the library
- digital collections are stored in data bases and do not require physical space.
- there are no longer problems of handling original copies which are saved from being damaged.
- cooperation through networking is enhanced at local, regional and international level (Liswiki)

2-2 Inconvenients of digitizing.

- the cost of digitizing is said to be excessively high as the process requires new technologies like scanners, hardware, software and maintenance. (Liswiki,)
- digitized material degrades rapidly so continuous migration of sources is required to avoid losing information and leasing licensing needs on going up-dating, thus generating more costs to the process.

Furthermore, the process needs to be run by qualified personnel to handle new tasks the digital library has created.

Libraries are getting digitized despite problems inherent to any new technology but what is most interesting is the emergence of initiatives as the Open Access Archives, (Dione, 2002) making scattered library sources available.

2-3 Algerian university libraries and digitizing.

To benefit from the global information and get access to it, libraries in Algeria need to digitize in order to preserve their holdings and make them available to the local and global community, and to have access research output rapidly. This will enhance local research.

But having assessed their state, are libraries prepared for digitizing?

Before any digitizing project, a prior question to be asked is why to digitize.

Generally speaking, libraries digitize because there is a high demand upon a collection and to preserve it from heavy handling the librarians decide to digitize it.

Little used material may also be digitized to gain visibility for example. But usually it is the content value of the sources that is taken into account for decision to digitize.

If the library does not hold rare materials, the choice would be to digitize materials that cannot be found elsewhere like theses for example.

2-4 Digitization at Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba.

The library has started digitizing some of its collection after having acquired some handy scanners. It seems there is no policy of choice of what to digitize first.

Digitizing has been going on for less than a few months and five series of an economic journal has been done in the « faculty » of human and social sciences.

Problems have however appeared concerning the handling of the scanners on which librarians may spend a full day to scan only one page. At this pace, more generations of librarians would be needed to finish the work. Other problems have been reported about the software acquired with the scanners. Acrobat reader cannot operate properly requiring new updating.

The internet is not fully operational and services of the library are not intra-connected.

3- Conclusion.

The situation of libraries in Algeria shows difficulties and it is essential to take them into consideration before any digitizing project is decided.

What is really needed is a shift from an oral culture to a reading one. Libraries in Algeria have existed despite their low level use.

- Public libraries have remained as public repositories of old books. Very little has been undertaken towards children in order to attract them and make of them future readers and library users.
- Public libraries can help lower the level of illiteracy by providing attractive services especially for children.
- School libraries can also help in that way by being initiators for reading once children acquire the skills and habit of reading. Using the library at the university level later, will not be a difficult task.
- University can help in the reading process by giving further reading lists of what is available in the library.
- If university libraries are to get digitized, it is important that a government orientated decision making structure supervises the whole process so that efforts do not get scattered, non-effective and duplicated.
- Such a structure could be held by the already existing Cerist that holds a qualified personnel and a long experience as a provider of information for universities. But to lead such a project Cerist needs to concentrate less on other projects. For example its project of creating a data base of Algerian theses is not a success as some master and doctorate students submit and get their degrees without giving copies of their theses to their local library.
- It is also important that university libraries benefit from open access archives to enhance local research. While waiting for digitizing to be fully implemented and effective, access to the internet for both students and teachers should be at their entire disposal.
- There is also a need to complement ongoing training programmes especially for personnel handling new tasks (created by the digital environment) needed to consolidate the networked infrastructure.

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