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# **Spreading Cultural Wealth with ICT**



Opening Speech at "Audiovisual Archives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (AVA21)" Conference, Ghent, 13 October 2010

#### Ladies and Gentlemen,

Europe has a unique wealth of cultural resources, and for what concerns the last 100 years, no one would contest that audiovisual works are an essential part of that European heritage.

But wouldn't you agree that too much of this is hidden treasure? We need to expose these assets both to the general public and to key economic actors, like content and cultural industries. My message today is that, with the help of ICT, we can do that.

Yet, to achieve this, a number of challenges must be addressed on several levels: to both restore and keep accessible this material in digital formats, to get people to use it, and to make sure future material can also have a long and accessible life.

The European Commission has ideas on ways and means to achieve this – and I will present them to you in a moment – but I want to stress that point right away: we are also very much open to hear *your* views on digitisation; everyone here today can take essential steps in helping Europe reach these outcomes. Together, we share a responsibility for getting to Europeans the best of what the digital age can bring.

## The Digital agenda

The Commission has developed its vision in a strategic policy, that we call the Digital Agenda: we want every European to get connected. But at the end of the day, the Digital Agenda is about people and their social life and their culture, for Internet is probably the most powerful tool of our time to build our culture, and share it.

But what does this mean for audiovisual and film archives?

## **Challenges**

Of course, this raises a number of challenges. Let me present some of the main ones to my eyes.

First challenge – rights management. Take the example of orphan works. Unless we find a satisfactory solution to create a legal framework for dealing with orphan works in Europe, we run into complicated and costly processes. Even Public sector broadcasters with great resources struggle in clearing rights in their archives. Much smaller film heritage institutions are trying to do the right thing by evolving into "full access" well-springs of film culture. Yet, it is hard for them if policymakers can't create an efficient legal mechanism for

making this transition. There are interim solutions: look at what happens in Spain and Denmark for example. The Danish Film Institute has the right to screen subsidised films in its own cinemas and put on-line subsidised documentaries and short films. Spain can organise cultural screenings of subsidised films two years after the first release.

But this does not solve the problem and the bottom line is, we cannot allow these legal obstacles to keep these works in their "sealed box". That is not good enough. The Commission will soon adopt a Directive on orphan works. I consider it should also include audiovisual works. And I will fight for that.

Preservation is the second big challenge. We need to solve the dilemma of the life expectancy of film material (several centuries) being well ahead of digital life expectancy. A film museum director once said "film museums are the door to eternity for a filmmaker". We can't let that door close just because file formats change from time to time!

Thinking of this, I want to acknowledge the work of EU-funded researchers in this area. The work of the *Presto Space* and *Presto Prime* projects has been recognised by the communities involved in digital preservation. They have advanced leading-edge technologies that will help us and our future generation enjoy our heritage. Whether large and small

 all our archives will benefit from the Centre of Competence that these research projects are creating as a focal point for this digitisation support.

Third challenge – we need to make investments. Existing audiovisual archives won't be digitised overnight. This is a time consuming and costly business. But who will pay and who will benefit? We have to be creative here and envisage all ways and means, including possibilities for public private partnerships to be set up, as we see emerging in other sectors.

We also want film heritage organisations to be digitally equipped. There is no use having digital material if one has no way to screen it! We expect that the recently adopted Communication on Opportunities and Challenges for European cinema in the digital era will further incite the Member States to explore new ways to be active in this field.

The Commission not only urges the Member States to act, but also calls upon all stakeholders to work together on concrete issues for the present and the future.

For example, there is the *Expert Group on film heritage*, which meets in Brussels tomorrow in fact. And through our funding programmes – the MEDIA-programme, but also the

R&D programmes – we help the audiovisual sector face the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Fourth challenge – establishing common standards. Next on our list will be improving the ways we collect and receive digital material in our cultural institutions. If databases cannot interoperate, in the end we will fail to reach our goals. That is why the Commission will continue to promote the adoption of two European standards on interoperability of film databases and make funding available for training on these standards. I understand this matter will be discussed in *Workstream C* of this conference.

#### What will the Commission do next?

We have policy tools in place, but I am convinced we can do more to keep pushing digitisation up the European political agenda – and by the way, I will always fight to keep audiovisual material advancing as fast as other sectors of contents.

To look forward, I see the *Comités des Sages* and *Europeana*.

# The Comité des Sages on digitisation

Earlier this year, the Commission has set up a "Comité des Sages" - made of 3 personalities: Maurice Lévy, Elisabeth Niggemann and Jacques de Decker. The Comité will make recommendations on ways and means to best digitise Europe's cultural heritage and creativity, to make it available on the Internet, and to preserve it for future generations. This includes audiovisual material, but also books, photographs and documents from archives.

The mandate of this group is covering funding, partnership possibilities, where responsibility lies for digitisation, and how to deal with the complications of copyright. The *Comité des Sages* does not work in an ivory tower, indeed I hope at least some of you responded to their public consultation that ended two weeks ago, or will attend their public hearing at the end of October. They will deliver its recommendations by the end of the year.

## Europeana

Let me now touch on Europeana – the EU's most visible expression of our digital heritage. In less than three years, Europeana has established itself as a reference point for European culture on the Internet. It reflects the ambition of Europe's cultural institutions to make our common and

diverse cultural heritage more widely accessible to all. I even got in the spirit with some posts on my blog and Facebook and so on this month.

Europeana is not simply a digital library; it is a networked collection of digital cultural resources. It is the power of many available through a single access point.

12 million digitised objects is a great start, is it not? But let us not be complacent. It is still far from being representative of Europe's immense cultural wealth.

Not least, because copyright issues continue to exclude most audiovisual works. We hope that through initiatives such as the *European Film Gateway*, this situation will change for the better. The project is building a specific portal with about 800,000 digital objects from European cinemathèques.

#### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, I have sketched a picture of challenges and solutions we anticipate, from the European Commission viewpoint. I invite you in seizing the opportunities to make a better digital future our reality. Whether it is for remembering, learning, or simply relaxing, our audio-visual archives should remain available to everyone forever.

Thank you for your attention.