

Digitizing old manuscripts in Morocco: A history research issue

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study the information needs of researchers via the analysis of their attitude towards an old manuscripts digitization project. This study is necessary in order to lay the foundations of a real digitisation project destined to safeguard and preserve invaluable collections of manuscripts all over Morocco.

This study is based on a survey conducted using a questionnaire distributed to a sample of students and researchers in the field of history in the University of Abdelmalek Essaadi, Tetouan/Tangier. The study shows that at a first glance a digital library of manuscripts does not seem to be very interesting for them. Many factors affect their awareness of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), availability of physical access to real collections and the fact the many of the collection holders are themselves historians and represent a great help for them.

KEYWORDS: Cultural heritage - Use of information by researchers - Old Arabic manuscripts - Hidden collections - Digital libraries- university researchers- digitization project.

1. INTRODUCTION

E-research is more and more a daily reality in occidental universities. But this is far from being true for third world research communities [GENONI 2006]. Cultural heritage digitization projects are widely visible around the world. It is no more the strict area of specialization of government agencies. A number of institutions have set up huge and immense digitization projects for cultural material of diverse nature [UNESCO 2007]. Third world countries find themselves in front of the same challenges. However, in their case it is even more difficult to make progress because of national priorities and funding limitations.

One of the most interesting areas for digitization in

Morocco is their transnational type of manuscripts. This material offers a window into the society and its intellectual tradition and history from the late 17th century onward. For decades these manuscripts have been largely inaccessible and ignored. They are now under big threat from a variety of sources, both natural and human. The idea of the paper is to study the possibility to digitize a selection of the manuscripts and make them available to a national and international scholarly audience and, at the same time to support critically important conservation and cataloguing efforts. But before all, many questions are raised: For whom the project may really be interesting? Are researchers ready for the change? Would it be worth digitization cost? Would it be used? And what to do or think if there is no demand from the research? What is the ICT level of the potential users?

2. PRESENTATION OF THE COLLECTIONS

Kept in poor conservation conditions in private libraries of some individuals, the manuscripts and their covers demonstrate a sophisticated visual and technical artistic quality and reflect a rich intellectual and scholarly tradition. They cover a diverse range of topics and genres, including old fascicules of the Coran, the natural and physical sciences (astronomy, mathematics, botany, and medicine); the literary arts (poetic verse, panegyrics texts about holly men, families or caliphs, grammar); the Islamic religious sciences such as theology, jurisprudence, legal opinions; and historical accounts. Many of the manuscripts are written with Moroccan Arabic script. Charts, diagrams, commentaries, and marginalia are abundant; some describe complex genealogies of local prestigious families and scientific theories, others record intellectual disagreements among scholars, teachers, and commentators.

During the past two centuries, most of the manuscripts have been concealed, often buried or hidden to safeguard them from colonial agents. Partly as a result of the

conditions in which the manuscripts were stored, they face an array of conservation challenges, including damage from insects, desiccation, and the fading of certain inks. And what is really sad is that a lot of documents simply disappeared or were torn into shreds.

The digitization and preservation of Morocco's fragile manuscripts involves a serious series of challenges: ubiquitous dust, termites and other insects, humidity, variations in temperature, a lack of technological infrastructure, and, most important, the fragile and precarious condition of the manuscripts themselves, simply kept in boxes with no preservation perspectives.

3. AN ACADEMIC ISSUE

The universities, local and international NGO's should be working together to preserve and make these manuscripts available to a broad community of scholars, students, and researchers. Despite the discouraging nature of the challenges involved, meaningful and lasting progress can be made. If some of these manuscripts become available in digital form, this would revolutionize how students and scholars in the country and people around the world may access this literature for research and study or simply for appreciating the beauty of cultural items. Furthermore, by offering a selection of the manuscripts through the internet in the framework of a digital library we can hope to raise awareness among the national and international scholarly communities and local political authorities and academics of the immensity of the challenge, but also the rewards to be gained, inherent in preserving and cataloguing these materials.

We can find this type of documents written with the same "Moroccan calligraphy" all over North Africa and part of Africa (Mali and Niger) as a vestige of Islamic influence. And a lot of documents written in Tamasheq (Berber language) and African languages and dialects were also written with arabic letters.

The manuscripts add great depth to our understanding of this part of the world history and its civilization. By studying and translating these texts, which would require a huge effort, scholars and students of Islamic studies, Arabic and Berber anthropology, and historiography have an opportunity to play a unique role in discovering new insights about the contribution of the Maghreb to the history of ideas.

By working to preserve and make available the Arabic manuscripts from Morocco, we show our commitment to building a rich scholarly resource about Morocco by working with a diverse array of partners and organizations. In order to build technical capacity, better infrastructure and institutional involvement is needed. The unique patrimony of Morocco's manuscripts must be safeguarded and preserved for current and future generations to interpret, and understand.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

In our opinion technology should be serving the scientific community needs anywhere and in any research area. Technology developers and managers should do so to "enable the extension of the reach of research and education, an improvement in the quality of learning". Digitization is even more urgent in developing countries [see for instance Rajan 2008] where everything is lacking: government funding and involvement, civil society actions and international cooperation. In most of this kind of projects, users and potential users are not consulted. Users come from different cultures [See for instance Zhixian 2007] and have different backgrounds; therefore we cannot generalize user studies in the USA and apply them in third world countries; the difference is mainly economical. Great effort should be made in order to ensure access to all information to all people through a well-defined policy of preservation and an enhanced access [See for instance Forde 2007]. The digitization of cultural heritage is very special because it is an emerging field with high relevance to education. [See for instance Chen 2005] stressed its importance while analyzing different elements such as cultural understanding; collaboration at different levels was recommended. Collaboration should increase between librarians and researchers in the sense that the huge volume of patrimonial documents to be managed is overwhelming; thus researchers should give them a helping hand. Researchers could contribute by adding their comments and annotations through an automated system [see for instance Lalou 2001]. But some questions are still to be answered: "why digitize, what to digitize, the audience for and packaging and discovery of digitized material, and finally the sustainability of such enterprise".

All actors in a digitization project should formulate answers to a number of questions related to this kind of projects: planning, cataloguing, handling copyright issues, technology evolution over time [See for instance Lopatin 2006]. Developing countries are very demanding in the area of technology, while their resources are weak. Some efforts have been made; the Library of Congress had already created and added to its digital collections a series of scanned document of Arabic manuscripts from Timbuktu. Although it was not what we can call a digital library, at least it shows the increasing interest and the emergency of the situation of these valuable documents. Another interesting project for developing countries is the Aluka project [See for instance Rajan 2008]. The organization named Aluka has created an online platform offering scholarly content to the whole international scientific community. Content owners (we focus more on their Timbuktu manuscript digital library which is similar to the Moroccan manuscripts collections) offer their collections to an international audience, but a lot of actions are still needed, mainly at acquisition level. Here issues related to copyright are still to be cleared even though the owners are enthusiastic about the idea of a

digitization project. [Pantalony 2008] noted « IP law developed to regulate the ownership [...], and is a system of laws that confers enforceable rights upon the person responsible for the intellectual output, so that the creator or owner of IP can exercise a measure of control over its future use”. Moroccan law about intellectual property seem to be favourable for digitization of old manuscripts since that diffusion is free for anyone [see for instance Bulletin 2006].

Digitizing must have clear goals. It should lead to the reduction of handling of fragile material, possibility of access to what previously was not accessible and protection from all kind of risks [HUGHES 2004]. Scholarly communities are changing around the world. They are changing their habits and orientations in documentation are more and more electronic. Librarians have now a very important role than ever in mediation [GENONI 2006].

5. METHODOLOGY

We have chosen to go for a survey using a questionnaire in order to assess user’s potential attitude towards a digital library containing collections of rare documents and especially manuscripts. An online questionnaire helped with the data analysis. We took a sample representing researchers in the field of history of Morocco. The target population is the whole scientific community working in different fields: archaeology, philology...etc.

The questionnaire then was designed and administered to junior and senior researchers in the history field, who have been shown a sample of a digital library under the Arabic version of Greenstone [Greenstone 2008]. That was achieved in order to make them see what advantages that they could draw from digitisation. The survey is aimed at measuring their interest and willingness in obtaining access on- or off-line to the digital version of a manuscript through a (value added) digital library.

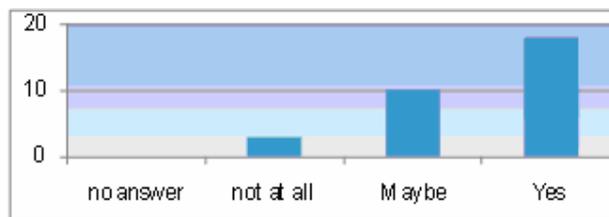
Table 1: Total number of sample and target population

Total number of population	+/- 500
Sample	31
Rate of response	100%

Table 2: Frequency of physical access to collection

Frequency of access	Use of direct access
Always	71%
Sometimes	29%
Hardly ever	0%

Table 3: Measure of researcher’s interest about digitization.



6. RESULTS

The study found out that even though the researchers realize and appreciate the importance of digitisation of the manuscripts for their work (see Table 3), they still prefer accessing the collections directly by requesting access to the physical locations from the owners (see Table 2).

This can be explained partly by the fact that they can benefit from rich commentaries and the point of view of the owners of the manuscripts.

This study is important in the sense that it forms a unique point of view. It gives shape to an angle in digitisation which is the user attitude and opinion before the construction of the digital library destined to give him a unique opportunity to digital versions of the documents he wishes to consult. We should not forget that we are in Morocco and that ICT expansion is new and above all the use of the ICT is limited to communication (email-chatting etc...). In that sense they were shown a sample of a digital library to see if that would influence their attitude.

The study shows us that an integrated action plan is needed. The opinion of the researchers, that is, the preference to manage alone the access to the subject of his research is not enough. This suspicious opinion is certainly due to the lack of confidence in local universities and in the ministry of education and not to a lack of interest in the new information and communication technology. This may be the first time that a user survey analyses the opinion of researchers in such projects. As we know that the digital organisation in universities in Morocco is not well developed and that student still use library card catalogues (there are very few OPACs), then our findings are not surprising after all; perhaps the response of the researchers can be considered even as a normal, expected reaction.

The need to digitize old manuscripts is also a cultural heritage issue. Considered from this point of view, this user behaviour analysis would represent a modest participation in safeguarding a threatened cultural heritage material. In Moroccan Universities the penetration of ICT is now great. More and more access to digital content is guaranteed, but initiatives like digitising and evaluating user needs in relationship with the manuscripts are needed because they do not form part of the digital scene.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

We think that surveys should also cover other stakeholders at national and international level. This would be interesting to understand how viable digitisation projects are. Future research should not only planned but ought to be deepened and varied. It may include the university authorities and evaluate their involvement in this kind of digitization project; it should also be investigated if digitisation can be integrated in their digital programs for the universities.

We decided for the future digitization project to have a simple planning. We outlined two levels of decision-making. The first set of decision is specific to aspects of collection development:

- Selecting source material,
- Dealing with copyright,
- Defining the scope of the collection.

The clearance of permission to include material in the collection in national copyright laws is still to be studied more closely. Even if recently Moroccan law stated that the copyright stays with the owner, this owner can not interfere if anyone wants to publish the material.

The second set of decisions is specific to aspects of project management:

- Defining project objectives and milestones
- Deciding on technical aspects,
- Workflow (or work plan),
- Execution and staff decisions.

The order of these aspects of planning are not always so clear and decisions at a phase may precede the phase that was planned before it. The conditions in the reality may not be as good as we may hope.

A specific point in the planning of a digital collection is finding sources for funding and developing a budget.

7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we focused on the researcher's attitudes and expectations of use of digitized material and especially old manuscripts collections in Morocco. Through a survey, we found that they do not seem to be willing to use a potential digital library that would ease access to these documents. The results show though a tendency to prefer physical access to manuscripts, while questions were centred on willingness and inclination to use the digital library.

The present research is limited, partly because there is very little practical research done to explore the users' attitudes in special scientific areas. Besides, we can not generalize definitively as ICT grows faster every day in the country. Progress has been made in providing access to electronic information (especially e-journals) in the universities.

In the beginning our work, we had set up the hypothesis that a digital library issued from a digitization project would be welcome by researchers in history in Morocco.

After a survey of their opinions about this subject we concluded that they are hesitating and are not very enthusiastic about the idea. They still prefer physical access even if it is difficult and at times not possible.

A digitization project is necessary anyway to save the documents, which are in a real threat of total disappearance.

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