

National Policy Guidelines Turn into a National Digital Library

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Published in: The National Library of Finland Bulletin, 2009

Thirty-five organizations are involved in the National Digital Library project. Approximately 80 persons, ranging from a Permanent Secretary to IT specialists, participate in the meetings of its governing bodies. It is difficult to determine precisely how many persons are involved in other ways. Confusing? Yes, sometimes, but what everyone senses and shares is an atmosphere of commitment and enthusiasm.

The National Digital Library project unites in more ways than one. It has brought together people from very different organizations, but who are dealing with the same kinds of problems. Colleagues within the same organization have also found a new need to integrate and harmonize their work. And while the increase in cooperation among library, archive, and museum sectors has been remarkable, no less important has been the way the project has given each respective sector reasons to analyze and re-think its own methods and operations.

The project combines, urgent, more practical needs with advanced principles and objectives that might appear to have little to do with daily life.

More access for a longer time

The National Digital Library has its roots in several combined initiatives that were initially introduced separately. There are four main focus areas:

- A common user interface platform for web resources in libraries, archives, and museums;
- A solution for long-term preservation of digital national cultural materials;
- Intensified digitization of the most essential non-digital collections in libraries, archives, and museums;
- Increased research and know-how concerning the various aspects of the digital library.

Obviously, the National Digital Library will also affect the fundamental tasks of the National Library of Finland, which is one of the key participants in the project.

One-stop shopping with customized services

Finnish libraries introduced the Nelli information portal (www.nelliportaali.fi) in 2004. It has been a great success, but the world has changed since then. Nelli focuses primarily on current digital scholarly and textbook resources, as well as traditional library catalogues. Today

however, archives and museums are generating an increasing amount of digital content, and libraries are contributing by digitizing their printed legacy collections. From historical land registries to butterfly collections, from 3D models of museum artifacts to digitized newspapers, this content belongs with current scholarly publications and printed national treasures; the users are the same, and different content sources are complementary. The same applies to research data that is becoming increasingly digitized and accessible.

The current Nelli portal has been tweaked to fit the conventions of the library world. Users often consider Nelli too complicated and perhaps too slow for their current needs and expectations. With the National Digital Library, the concept of a search portal will be taken to a new level in three ways.

First, where applicable, remote databases will be indexed instead of searched, thus greatly reducing the time needed for searches, and providing improved opportunities to normalize and pre-process heterogeneous data. Naturally, certain resources still require remote searching, but the trend seems to be that more and more data is becoming available for harvesting and indexing, even regarding scientific journals and databases. We are seeing a new form of business blooming around these services.

The new user interface will cover a wide range of digital resources, including those created by museums and archives. This is a major undertaking. Generally speaking, the systems used in those organizations are much more focused on data curation than dissemination, and they tend to differ among institutions.

By a “common user interface” we do not mean that every Finn needing information will flock to a single website. Rather, it means that a consistent technological infrastructure for all participating organizations will be used in a way that best suits them and their customers. What resources are given priority, what services are offered, how the interface looks like and how it relates to other resources and tools on the web – all this will be a matter of local customization.

Thirdly, the user interface is not just a gateway to information resources; it will also offer a wide selection of supporting services. Besides entailing user authentication, payment methods and other auxiliary services, the customer interface will provide users with the tools to process and reuse information. The aim is that the National Digital Library will be present in the natural working environments – such as online learning platforms – of its customers.

The long way to long-term preservation

The Bulletin of 2008 already described the early stages of the process that has now become part of the National Digital Library project. As a member of one of the working groups has stated that because memory organizations have more similarities than differences, there should be a unified national effort to find feasible solutions.

The problem of long-term preservation is not that it cannot be done; the problem is that it is not being done. It is a case of conflicting priorities. No one denies the importance of preservation, but in the digital world its needs are easily overshadowed by the more compelling concerns of quick output, perceived efficiency and immediate user satisfaction.

And yet, preservation should be considered from the very incipient stages of a digital document's life cycle.

Memory organizations will build a common long-term preservation system; the construction of the actual system however lies outside the scope of the present project. Instead, our aim will be to address the most immediate political and practical issues and be as ready as possible for the next steps; the preservation system alone requires a considerable amount of preparation.

Currently, the work with functional and technical requirements is proceeding smoothly. Much if the work is however fairly abstract in nature; in the autumn the project will concretize the plans with more hands-on experimentation.

The Enterprise Architecture Method – solving the puzzle

At first, some might have thought that the National Digital Library Project combined separate projects under one name to appear more impressive, but this notion was quickly dispelled. There are so many linkages – from digitization to dissemination, from dissemination to preservation and back – that the overall vision was at times unclear; a special effort had to be made to really grasp the entire system.

Consequently a convenient tool, The Enterprise Architecture Method for Finnish Government, was utilized in the project. It offers tools for government organizations to design functions and information, information systems, and technology solutions. This was actually the first time the method was implemented at this scale. There is no denying that, at the first sight, the model seemed rather intimidating. However, with the help of knowledgeable people it was tamed and proved to be extremely helpful in understanding and explaining the project's complex interdependencies.

As part of the architectural work, a standards portfolio currently being assembled will contain guidelines governing metadata formats, search protocols, document identification, user authentication, and other similar functions.

Fitting into the bigger picture

The National Digital Library project would not exist if it did not fulfil two critical preconditions. The memory organizations and specialists working for them must recognize it as something genuinely worthwhile. Secondly, its results must be something that the government considers important and relevant regarding its overall priorities. Happily, both conditions have been met. The Finnish government has encouraged the development digital content and services in a number of strategy papers such as the:

- Information Society Programme 2007–2015;
- Government resolution on the objectives of the national information society policy for 2007–2011; and the
- Action Plan of the Ubiquitous Information Society 2008–2011.

The National Digital Library seems to be benefiting from a happy coincidence of practical and theoretical objectives. Why do such cases seem to be so rare? Is it that we crave diversity? Or is it that we want the same things but speak different languages? As much as we hope that the National Digital Library will be what our customers need, it may also turn out as a necessary learning experience for memory organizations.