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Cultural Networks and Cultural Portals A New Infrastructure for Cultural Sector

Summary

The first Croatian portal in the field of culture (CultureNetCroatia) was initiated by the Ministry of Culture and the Open Society Institute - Croatia and has been accessible to users since 2001. The aim of the Project was to pool all the available information sources on Croatian culture, encourage its elaboration and enable professionals in culture to find in one place all the information they may need as well as find partners for their projects. Accordingly, the project was geared at promoting cultural co-operation both within Croatia and with foreign countries as well as enhancing better communication between Croatian cultural institutions, between institutions and artists and between all of them and the broader cultural public.

As a joint project it has been accessible on the Web since April 2004 and since then, the project is a responsibility of the Ministry of Culture.

A large number of existing websites and portals does not necessarily guarantee the networking that exceeds the exchange of links and development of new joint virtual projects, an issue the cultural sector has been deliberating on for quite some time now. We will analyse our four-year experience regarding the operation of the portal and services developed in order to define the role of the portal today and whether it has succeeded in networking and initiating cooperation between professionals in culture as well as establish what kind of relationship it has achieved with its users. Along with a review of the project scope to date, the presentation will also contain elements for its evaluation in the context of the changes on the Croatian cultural web scene in the four years of the project's operation. Given that the project has become part of the regular activities of the Ministry of Culture its developmental possibilities within national and international developments in the e-culture sphere need to be reassessed.

Introduction

Eugene Tacher asked a question: are we connected because we are collective, or are we collective because we are connected? (Tacher,

Networks, Swarms, Multitudes, www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=422) Today there exist different kinds of structures that are called networks: technical infrastructure networks – such as Internet; ‘biological networks’ – such as swarms; multitudes – such as global political movements; or organisational networks – such as many existing sectorial or thematical associations (networks);. Some are simply connecting us and some transforming members into a collective. Their characteristics are not the same, but these differences can be blurred with terminology related to network society.

ICT networking environment has enabled development of many on-line resources and cultural sector has gone virtual and networked a decade ago. Digitisation of existing cultural goods, e-born cultural goods and documents and their accessibility through the Internet network present a new context that cultural institutions must take into account in the information society. This new context defined by digitisation and network infrastructure affects the way the cultural sector operates, and opens new possibilities for the distribution and consumption of cultural goods. The new ways of communication and knowledge organisation in the networked environment are result of the trend of digitisation and technological convergence - merging of the computer industry, communications, broadcasting and publishing that enabled fast and easy way of information storage, reproduction and distribution of information. So, has cultural sector started with new networked practices? Are they interconnected, thus forming a collective or maybe not?

Cultural Networks – Real and Virtual

In the 1990es cultural networks became popular organisational infrastructure in the cultural sector in Europe and they have commonly been referred at as a 'communication infrastructure for European cultural cooperation' (DeVlieg, Evaluation Criteria for Cultural Networks in Europe, www.efah.org/en/resources_for_culture/networking/evaluationnetworksma.pdf).

In their evaluation of existing European cultural networks, Minichbauer and Mitterdorfer define term cultural network as 'a structure and work method characterized by non-hierarchical, horizontal cooperation, a transnational orientation, establishment by the grass roots, a non-representational character, diversity and the absence of the powerful central forces' (Raimund Minichbauer and Elke Mitterdorfer. European Cultural Networks and Networking in Central and Eastern Europe, eiPCP, 2000, http://www.eipcp.net/studien/s01/ecn_en1.pdf). They consider that minimum requirements for cultural networks are that they are designed for a long-term cooperation, the existence of a common goal, the existence of members, and their physical meetings. Different authors also add to these minimum requirements: loosely defined network borders, voluntary participation of members and redundant structure that can continue functioning if a particular member decides to leave network.

The reason for popularity of networks as a cultural cooperation infrastructure can be found in fact that they try to enable flexible ways of cooperation, they try to solve concrete problems that members are facing, they bring together people in common pursuit of interest, that through them existing institutions can be bonded together around common projects, and they provide efficient communication channels for their members.

Communication is important aspect of networks success. Reliability of information received through the network channels and possibility to communicate with fellow members are crucial for efficient functioning of networks. In the situation of the information overflow it is not necessary easy to communicate ones information through existing public channels, and networks and networks' focus towards particular themes of types of members enable efficient filtering mechanisms that enable members access to relevant and reliable information. Quick and simple on-line communication can enhance communication and exchange of information among network members. The new information technology paradigm, as an underpinning material base of information/networked society that Castells describes, has enabled spreading of a network models and virtual networks in particular. Its main elements - information as its basic element or raw material, networking logic, flexibility – are also basic characteristics of cultural networks, and many existing cultural networks have gone virtual in order to raise effectiveness of their functioning.

As Internet has become a basic information infrastructure in all developed countries different virtual networks and portals have become a part of virtual landscape in the cultural sector. Looking at some existing virtual networks in the cultural field we can see that they either started from existing members base of real cultural networks and have than extended their activities in the virtual domain, or they started with objectives of providing infrastructure to cultural organisations and end users that first must be motivated to cooperate, such as is in a case with many existing CultureNets and portals. But in most cases they are trying to balance technological base with communication and information elements trying to provide to their members and users services that they need.

Cultural networks, as well as communication networks enable access to their members/users, and combining them into virtual networks is an attempt to provide structure for professional virtual communities in cultural sector. When existing cultural networks create their virtual versions it is somewhat easier to achieve building virtual communities, but if attempt is made to build it from scratch the process is a bit more difficult as a motivation and trust that exists among network members has to be built from scratch as well. Numerous discussion forums, mailing lists, and specialised portals are created with such aims. Their effectiveness depends on members' interest and motivation as

well as on their goals. Today we witness proliferation of numerous portals¹ and a question is - can we consider them to be virtual networks, in a sense described above, i.e. as a structure supporting cultural cooperation?

Example of CultureNet Croatia – a Portal or a Network?

An issue that is relevant to both cultural institutions, as providers of content, and to users is how to ensure that users reach the content that is available on-line. Strategies for attention getting and filtering are important elements in developing any e-culture service. On-line search engines, e-newsletters, specialised portals and virtual networks are existing mechanisms through which users are receiving information that interest them. Thematical portals, networks and newsletters are considered important due to their attempt to introduce a 'quality control' of available information, i.e. to canal relevant information only.

For a cultural Internet site it is important to what Internet servers, portals or gateways it is linked to. Commercial portal, cultural portal, educational portal, tourist oriented portal, regional or city portal, etc. bring special user groups to a cultural site. If the portal answers the needs of the user group it is more popular and more effective. Its management should include the strategy of adequate context for it – which must include well developed communication strategy linking its resources with its users and content providers. In the ever increasing commercialization of Internet, cultural strategies of different European countries have recognised the importance of ensuring a public infrastructure for accessing existing cultural Internet sites.

As an important element in national social provision, in the last decade the concept of 'culturenet'(on-line, free, public access to information about cultural resources and activities²) was formed in the context of rapidly changing technological, economic and social circumstances. Culturenets have tried to cater for the needs of cultural professionals, as well as for the wider public interested in culture and culture related issues. Their role in the 90ies was not just to provide easy access to the existing cultural sites but also very much to assist in development of on-line cultural resources and common standards. Today, in addition to search engines, different cultural portals are main gateways between creators and consumers of cultural products available on the Internet network.

Aims and services

In 2001, Croatian Ministry of Culture and Open Society Institute - Croatia have jointly established CultureNet Croatia web portal. The mission of the CultureNet Croatia was to strengthen the cultural sector in Croatia by creating

¹ Cultural portals or gateways are defined as centrally coordinated web based gateways which offer access to accredited websites, with limited original content or other resources available at the gateway site. (Digicult Report pp 56.)

² definition from Evaluation report on CultureNet Sweden, 1999

a common virtual cultural platform, and providing tools for sharing information using new technologies, as well as ensuring active participation of artists and general public and their interaction - i.e. building links or connections, as well as community or collective. The project main aims were set to be:

- enabling easy access to all cultural virtual resources in Croatia through a single entry point;
- promoting diverse issues of culture and technology; and
- enabling cultural professionals to find information of their interest and to find cooperation partners for their projects.

It was intended for Croatian artists and cultural professionals and general public, as well as for the foreign visitors searching for the information regarding Croatian culture.

The context in which Culturenet Croatia started its development was one of rather scarce web resources in the cultural sector. In 2001 most cultural institutions that had web pages, had often only basic information available, on static web pages that were not frequently updated and in most cases cultural institutions did not provide any newly developed virtual services or products. There were several sectorial referral points on the Internet, such as MDC – Museum Documentation Centre, Croatian Centre of ITI or Music Information Centre, providing information about museums, theatre or music within the scope of their interest, but for many cultural sectors such information infrastructure was not existent. So the first task of the CultureNet Croatia included mapping a Croatian cultural sector (including institutions that were not necessary present on-line), and providing a communication mechanism through which cultural professionals could easily announce and disseminate news and information. As there were no systematic intersectoral referral information already developed, this seemed to be an adequate starting point for the project.

The project's initial time frame to develop its activities was 3 years. In the first year, the initial activities have been oriented towards choosing the appropriate technology, establishing of the basic services and information mapping, and building models of cooperation with cultural professionals. After several months preparation phase, in which organisational structure was put in place and extensive information mapping was done, the initial version has been put on-line with some elementary information in July 2001. The portal started functioning as an experimental work in progress version, reachable at www.culturenet.hr. As the main goal of this version of the web site was to inform the public about the project and to give a hint of what it should become, the objective was to find an adequate solution that will be cost effective, easy manageable and quickly achievable.

The portal opened with the following services:

- **Database of Croatian cultural institutions** (with links to their websites in case they have them)
- **Calendar of cultural events in Croatia** (with links to the existant websites)

- **Information about European and international foundations and networks** with links to their websites

In order to raise the quality of the culture related information, in the second version of the portal that opened in summer 2002 some joint information services were developed together with other key sectorial referral centres in different cultural sectors in Croatia. The **thematical segments on different cultural fields** have been commissioned from leading institutions or professionals from different fields and culture, and arts information and news section has been developed (in cooperation with the SCCA - Institute for Contemporary Art from Zagreb (www.scca.hr)). This news segment was named **Info-service** and it greatly contributed to the portal's dynamics, as news was posted there daily. The described services are focused mostly on providing structural information to the users (i.e. it fulfilled a function of a subject oriented gateway), and not so much to provide users with possibility to communicate among themselves directly. The mentioned segments, except Info-service, present mostly static information and do not provide for dynamic information flow on the portal. Still as content of the portal is oriented towards current cultural activities organised by cultural professionals (i.e. target users of the portal), portal must rely on communication with users as main content providers.

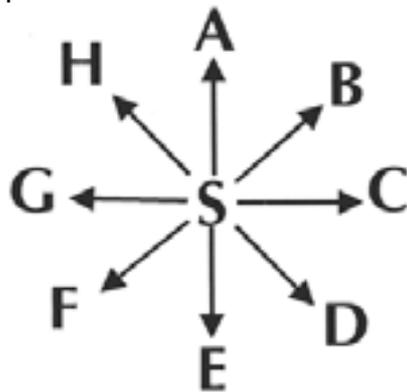
After initial services design and a phase of initial collecting of information, the main challenge that Culturenet Croatia had to face was to build a community of interested users that will regularly use the portal and be interested in placing information about their work through it. The first services were intended for cultural professionals as they were the main target users of the portal, as well as the intended information providers. Efforts were made to identify the strongest institutions or associations in different cultural sectors that were the serving as information disseminators. The existing professional associations were notified about the project and invited to cooperate. They were offered possibility to start their mailing lists through the portal. The information that was disseminated through different specific mailing lists was also available through Info-service segment of the portal and portal's daily newsletter, thus it could reach wider audience that extended a narrow circle of association members, and as portal archives its news it provided archive for news published by them as well.

The described activities generated growing interest from users of the portal and today the most used segments of the portal are Catalogue of cultural institutions and Info-Service segments – 2/3 of all users access these two services, while 1/3 of the portal visits correspond to all other available resources. This indicates that these segments correspond best to the users needs. The segments aimed at general audience such as Panorama thematical segments are used in lesser extent but this is not surprising as the information in that segments are presentational in nature, thus not dynamic and the content in this segment does not change frequently.

Although initial plans included wider range of information services, limited human and financial resources hampered portal's faster development. Also, as portal provides for only a limited interactivity in certain segments, updating is a task of a portal staff and this limits the capacities for updating information and developing new projects. Having existing constraints in mind after now 4 years of operation it is possible to rethink future strategy for Culturenet development.

Evaluating CultureNet Croatia networking structure

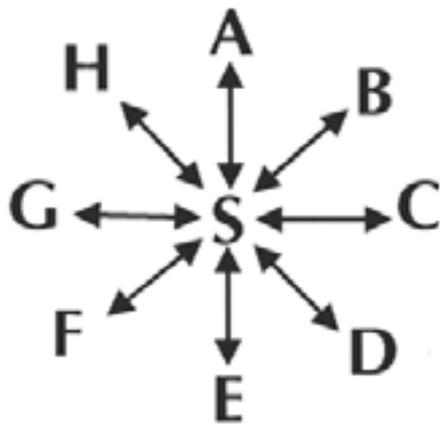
So far the developed services of the portal can be analyzed through several phases. Providing referral information services ensured creating an interdisciplinary cultural subject oriented gateway, accessible in the Internet network environment. Its initial model could be described by the following picture³.



According to Paul Starkey this model is not considered to be a network, but a service for information dissemination as it does not provide for reciprocity of communication (from end users to the 'network' secretariat/centre. At the very beginning, by establishing its initial services, such as Catalogue of cultural institutions, calendar of cultural events, database of foundations etc., Culturenet Croatia has provided its users with such a communication model, i.e. a broadcasting model (which is a model that portals aimed at general audience are using). This network model does not prompt users for participation in sharing content, but just in using it.

In the second phase CultureNet Croatia has changed its networking model to the one that allows for easier communication of the end users with the network secretariat by enabling them to use the portal to disseminate their information through Info-service and daily mailing list.

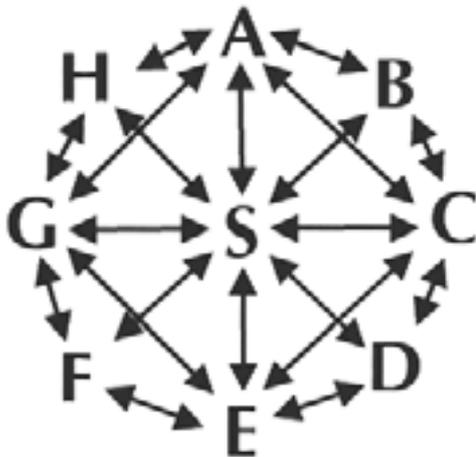
³ Paul Starkey has described a several network models in his book *Networking for development*, 1999, IFRTD. The illustrations used are borrowed from his work.



The second described model has increased possibilities for information exchange through the portal and this has proven true as the portal use has grown significantly after starting the Info-service segment⁴. Both models have provided users of the portal with possibility for connecting, but, still, this level does not really provide structural possibilities for forming virtual communities, i.e. transforming users into a community or 'collective', as its main purpose is informing users of relevant news through established information services.

The second model presents the present phase of CultureNet Croatia portal structure. In order to transform existing networking model towards model of previously described cultural networks (as platform for cultural cooperation) portal should be able to generate genuine cooperation among some of its members as a result of its own activities. The model below illustrates this situation where network secretariat just facilitates members' joint activities and cooperation projects (as is the case with previously described cultural networks).

⁴ Today portal has generated steady number of users and it generates some 6000 visits per month. Although this is not a big number in comparison with commercial portals aimed at general audiences, for Croatian cultural sector this is not an insignificant number. Some 2000 users are subscribed to the portal daily mailing list, 6000 for a newsletter, and information for inclusion in portal Info-service continuously comes in from users of the portal.

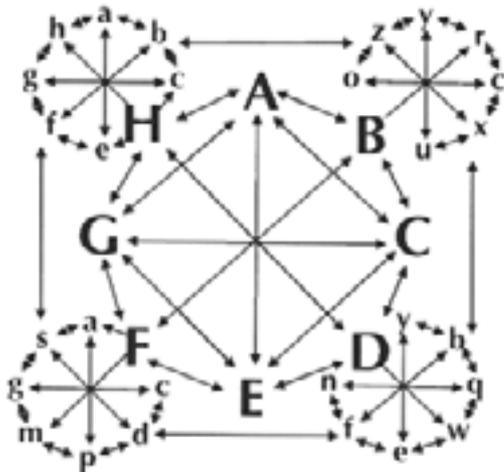


This claim cannot be made for CultureNet Croatia portal. Even as its mission envisioned *strengthening the cultural sector in Croatia by creating a common virtual cultural platform, as well as ensuring active participation of artists and general public and their interaction*, it is not to be expected that the portal with no specific narrow focus, but covering different cultural sectors and topics, will generate vibrant community of dedicated members with a strong commitment towards portal's topics and common projects. The strategy needs to be directed towards building sustainable relations with cultural professionals as providers and users of the portal services and providing those kinds of information services presently lacking in cultural sector.

One possible strategy of portal's future development could be oriented towards building a systematic information infrastructure that would support cultural research (particularly research in the field of cultural policies in Croatia). By developing 'on-line thematical bibliography' of articles and studies related to cultural policy and providing users with possibilities to archive their works on the portal or link it where they are accessible, by linking to existing on-line journals of cultural studies, or by starting a series of cultural studies or a cultural e-journal portal would bridge the existing gap in this kind of information and target the more specific category of users – cultural researchers and policy makers, that in Croatia do not have a hub catering for their information needs. This line of further portal development would be useful for the Ministry of Culture that today is running the portal as it would gain benefit from a newly created systematic resource. Such services would also contribute to creating a common virtual cultural platform that portal's mission envisioned, but more in a sense of building knowledge infrastructure for cultural sector than actual virtual community with dedicated members.

In the four years of the portal functioning, its surrounding context has changed. While in the beginning Culturenet has tried to map Croatian cultural sector in the situation of few web resources, in 2003 and 2004 situation has changed and today other thematical portals in culture exist and number of cultural institutions with own webpages has grown. Network structure implies decentralisation and if in the beginning it was necessary to build a referral

point and gateway through which Croatian cultural resources would be mapped at one referral point, today this is not enough. Networked cooperation in everyday activities of cultural institutions in Croatia is not so much present, so building virtual projects in cooperation with other partners still presents a challenge. If the portal would have resources to develop activities that would not be based on a simple information exchange but would initiate actual projects in cooperation with other cultural institutions in the field of culture yet another network model could be developed - the model based on decentralisation.



This model of networking could be suitable for both different communities and their cooperation activities in different related sub areas (museums, libraries, theatre, cultural tourism, etc.), for establishing cooperation with existing thematic portals, as well as for developing different cooperative virtual projects. Although promoting diverse issues of culture and technology was stated in the initial list of aims of the portal, its activities have never started developing in this direction and all activities on the portal were limited to mapping resources and sharing information. For engaging in cooperative virtual projects different partners should be recognised, resources should be offered to them and planned services should be designed in close cooperation with them. This model works only if it represents a true partnership between all involved.

Conclusions

Blurred use of the term network can put expectations on the project that it in fact cannot fulfill just by building informational infrastructure. The four years of functioning of the CultureNet Croatia has contributed to better information flow in cultural sector and has succeeded in enhancing communication between cultural professionals and interested public as well. The project has fulfilled the gap that existed in Croatia in developing the systematic information infrastructure in the cultural field on a national level (subject oriented gateway), in building services that facilitates information exchange among cultural professionals, in enhancing access to information on possibilities for cultural cooperation in Europe and in some lesser extent - through its English

version - in presenting information on the Croatian cultural scene to the European cultural professionals and public.

Although initial expectations stated also that it should contribute to enhancing the use of the Internet tools by cultural professionals and sharing experiences and knowledge in the field of application of information technologies and Internet in cultural field, any advances in this respect could not be contributed to the CultureNet Croatia activities, nor it contributed to the further development of virtual culture or to promoting network cooperation in the cultural sector.

Today this project faces a new challenge. It can either continue providing a communication channel for announcing different news and current happenings and mapping existing cultural resources (still a very useful channel), or it can opt for change towards decentralised model that would try to embody a real cooperative network in the field of eCulture in Croatia. It is clear that cultural networks that were described above rely on more than on the networked information infrastructure, they have a common goal, common projects and members that are participating voluntarily. If CultureNet Croatia hopes to transform itself into decentralised network it must recognise specific needs of specific groups of users/members and design different services based on their actual needs. Just to say that it is aimed at cultural professionals is not specific enough and recognising different groups of partners/users, their needs and possible joint projects is a starting base for a successful design of a real network.

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