The best of both worlds: can Media Quality be combined with Open Content?

or

Archivists and general media literacy

Philippe Aigrain, Head of Sector "Software Technologies", European Commission DG INFSO/E2
Talk at the IFTA World Conference 2000

Disclaimer: views expressed in this text are only the personal opinions of its author and do not represent necessarily the official view of the European Commission.

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is a great honour and a privilege to be here today. That's not only because it gives me the opportunity to come back on the organisational site of some of my old crimes. Much more important is the opportunity to address you with a provocation, to provoke you at least to re-think over some issues. As it is a provocation, I guess that it is obvious that it represents only my own personal opinion and not my employer's.

In 1995, I had the pleasure to present[1] at the Joint Technical Symposium of the archive federations a number of tools developed in the research team I headed at the time. These tools included an automatic story-boarding program for video documents, a video logger / scripting programme using automatic video segmentation, and an interactive viewing programme for video documents exploiting features automatically extracted. In the next years, I had the possibility to witness the progressive introduction of some of these techniques into the television archive world and the commercial products that target it, often through projects supported by the European research and technology development programmes. I could describe this full process as a success story, along the lines of a classical technology transfer trajectory from research initiated in 1991-1992 in Japan, the United States and a few European teams. I could also elaborate on why, though the research quality was very similar, we see today most of the content-based processing products being based on American developments. But I have even more important questions to ask: what are we trying to achieve in this? What is the long-term perspective of the contribution that information technology can make to how people access media? Are the current developments in the television archive world meaningful in that perspective?

I would like first to challenge directly the initial part of the title of this conference which reads "Content is king". Media contents are the embodiment of people's creation and views on the world. Media contents are mediations between people, allowing people to elaborate their own views, thoughts and creations. Content is not king. People are. Now, the relation that they are able to build one with another thanks to media is an important part of their kingdom. Seen from this angle, moving image media are incredibly immature. Measured at the reference unit of the

---

1   Ph. Aigrain, Ph. Joly, Ph. Lepain, and V. Longueville, "Software Tools for Moving Image Archives: Access, Indexing, and User Interfaces", G. Boston, ed., Proc. Joint technical Symposium on Technology and our Audiovisual heritage, FIAF/FIAT/IASA/IFLA/ICA, London, Jan. 1995. See also: Ph. Aigrain, Software Research for Video Libraries and Archives, IFLA Journal, 21(3), pp. 198-202, 1995.

history of text, moving image media are sitting somewhere between times at which only scribes knew to write and read, and the 18th century, that historian Reinhart Koselleck described as the "Kingdom of Criticism". Unfortunately we are much closer to scribe times. Broadcasting media are few-to-many media, and they have developed historically in a way that has restricted the activity of reception to very limited literacy. At the birth of broadcasting this was for technical reasons: it was very complex technically and costly to produce any contents. That was the stone slab period. But later, television as a media remained totally cut from general personal elaboration even with the advent of the VCR and the camcorder. The main factor explaining it is lies probably in the funding schemes of broadcasting, and in particular with the predominance of advertising. The exercise of literacy whether in reception or production of contents is time-intensive, that is it steals some reception time from those who buy audiences, or it frees time for those who use it, depending on how you prefer to describe this possible revolution.

The main effect of information technology is to open the possibility of inserting the few-to-many media of broadcasting into a world of many-to-many media, in which people will do many of the things that only production teams, and archivists do today. If you doubt this, I would like to point you to a paper by Mike Holderness[2] in the Journal of Information Law and Technology, which argues for the same objective from a different perspective. There will always be a space for few-to-many media, if only because they allow the unique pleasure of sharing the relation to a live experience. But the incredible situation in which one eighth of the total living time and one half of "free" time of people is captured by these media, and captured in installing people in a no-literacy situation will not last. Unfortunately, when I say it will not last, I mean it will maybe last a few years and maybe a few tens of years. And that's the difference between seeing what has been and is my main dream realised, and leaving it for future generations.

Why am I telling this to archivists? Because you are today's holders of some of the most important ingredients of literacy: knowledge of media technique and history, knowledge of the production context, ability to analyse, to classify, to index, to annotate, to criticise. For all the researchers trying to develop video handling tools who approached your world with genuine curiosity, you have been a great source of inspiration. Now, either you will try to hold to these tools for yourself, you will accept to work within the absurd constraints of an intellectual property framework that leaves us 105 years after the birth of moving image media with still no public domain documents, you will accept to be brought to sleep by beautiful formulas that state that the archive is the nervous centre of the broadcasting enterprise but leaves it very little space for developing direct relations with the general users. Or, as one could see in some cases in this conference, you will on the contrary re-engineer your operations to focus on the elements that can only be done from the archive (contextual metadata, basic indexing for document location, document digitising, storage and networking) and accept that analysing, annotating, criticising, comparing, that's for everyone to do. You will make your documents as freely accessible as possible, and if the present intellectual property frameworks do not allow it for existing documents, you will try to turn around it by trying to have your organisation produce directly for the public domain.

To be frank, I am quite convinced that this will happen with or without you, and even with or without your organisations and companies. But with you, it will happen much faster (as I have already stated), and most important, it will happen better. The world of open content, that is of content directly produced for or contributed to the public domain emerges today on the margins of personal media and media culture political groups. If you do not work with this world, or even

---

2   Mike Holderness, "Moral Rights and Author Rigths: The Key to the Information Age", JILT, (1), 1998. This article is an unusual English version of the continental author and moral rights approach, emphasizing the difference of interests between authors and producers, and its evolution in the recent context. See in particular section 4 "Two possible multimedia futures". http://elj.warwick.ac.uk/jilt/infosoc/98_1hold/holder.htm#4.1

worse if you see it as an enemy, this world will have to slowly reinvent the ethics of attributing contents properly, of presenting documents in their context, of identifying what is sources and what is commentaries, or what is archive documents and what is present production. This world will be cut from the past history of media and contents. They will even have to reinvent painfully everything that constitutes media quality, from the technical quality parameters to knowing what's the proper film or sound editing language to convey a message. This process of the birth of open content, we see it today in full power for software and short texts, we see it still in infancy for still images, music and longer texts such as books. For moving image documents, we see only its very first signs, because there are still strong limitations for the network dissemination of digitised video. It means that it is not too late yet. You can still become part of the <mark>revolution of media appropriation by people</mark>, you can contribute your know-how, the tools you help to design, the databases that you own, and the documents themselves when it is feasible. But it's close to the last chance of doing it.

"But who will pay my salary if I give away contents?" or "How will my company be sustainable?". These are of course the questions blocking participation of existing organisations to the revolution of open content. However burning they are, it is wrong to let these questions stop you. There are millions of people out there, not just 150 European broadcasters and a few thousands production companies. Of course initially public funding and voluntary grassroots efforts are needed to create a critical mass of useful contents. But as soon as this critical mass will be there, the apparent contradiction between a successful economy of open content services (services for open contents, services based on open contents), and free non-economical societal exchanges will disappear. That day, contents will get their fair price, and creators their fair reward, media criticism will fuel media quality, and archives will turn themselves into services that each of us needs.

Thanks for your attention. If there is no time for questions, I will be available at the banquet for questions, comments, insults, praise and discussion.