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Culture, Languages and the Internet

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The Internet began in 1969 in the United States. It began as a means of communication for the military and domains of science such as high-energy physics and astronomy. This original strand of the Internet is now converging with efforts of NASA, which foresees the development of an interplanetary Internet architecture extending to Mars and beyond. This strand of the Internet, led by the Internet Society and the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), entails at most a few thousand scientists around the world and focusses on the sharing of scientific and technical information. Its working language is almost exclusively English.

The World Wide Web (WWW) as we now know it began in 1980 in Europe at CERN. In the past decade the WWW has grown rapidly from a narrow scientific community to over 400 million users and is estimated to grow to over 1.5 billion users within the next five years. The WWW now includes over 70 languages and English is no longer its dominant language.

The WWW now entails 7 million new pages of information daily. Persons have turned to meta-data (information about information) in order to master this enormous influx of information. In this context, American projects such as the Dublin Core and the Open Archives Project have made valuable preliminary contributions.

While these are excellent stopgap measures, they have an underlying assumption that the Internet/WWW is primarily about business strictly in terms of new methods for electronic transactions. In this model the interests of private enterprise threaten to eclipse the public (governmental) sphere.

Europe is different. Europe assumes both a public (government and citizens) and a private (business) sphere, both of which assume the complexities of linguistic, cultural and historical diversity. Europe thus requires policy to create networks of centres of excellence in digital cultural heritage. At a public level these centres can develop multi-lingual and multicultural meta-data for the Internet to ensure that this diversity remains in the future and new methodologies for education. At the economic level, these centres need to develop new business models, which use cultural and historical diversity as a point of departure. Europe thus has a choice. It can blindly follow the American model and aim at an information highway. Or it can develop its own methods using the World Wide Web as a means for reaching a new vision of a knowledge society.