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European Networks of Excellence and Japanese Silk Roads

Modern science and new technologies such as the Internet are typically global. They bring with them the need for global solutions and standards in a quest for interoperability. By contrast, culture entails shared customs and expressions, which are typically local, regional and national. Although its formulae can be translated into many languages, science is most efficient if it functions in a single language. By contrast, culture is essentially multi-lingual and loses in richness if these many languages and dialects are reduced to one. Earlier versions of science may help us understand how we got there, but they have no role in everyday practice where only the latest version is relevant. Hence science in this sense is non-cumulative. By contrast, in culture, earlier versions play a crucial role in everyday practice and the latest version is useless if we do not have access to historical context. Hence culture is essentially a cumulative process. English culture is great partly because of Shakespeare and partly because of four centuries of commentaries on Shakespeare. Modern science can pretend to be a-temporal. By contrast, culture, if it becomes a-historical loses its meaning. If we impose the needs of science and technology on culture we are doomed to a McDonaldization of culture: cf. Barber (1995), Ritzer (2000). A challenge lies in using the potentials of science and technology to meet the needs of culture and not conversely.

The lecture outlines a number of steps in answering this challenge. Whereas science requires only international standards, culture in a global context requires a re-organization of knowledge whereby international concepts are linked with national, regional and local variants. These will bring into focus cultural and historical dimensions of knowledge. In the West we have developed a Euro-centric vision of cultural history and art history in particular. This vision focussed particularly on the so-called high culture of literate societies. Needed are new models, which extend to pre-literate societies (e.g. aboriginals and Inuit) and include the richness of cultures all over the world. One of unexpected dimensions of the new media is an ability to bridge the literacy/illiteracy divide: offering new ways of sharing knowledge between persons whether they can or cannot read. In this context, the potentials of using technologies for new kinds of augmented culture are also outlined.

The world wide web is expanding at a rate of some 7 million new pages per day. As a result enormous amounts of cultural information are becoming available. Many provisional networks are emerging (e.g. the ICOM virtual library of museums, the Virtual Heritage Network). Needed, however, is a cultural grid whereby research institutes will be linked by broadband networks. In Europe, there are plans for a network of Centres of Excellence in Cultural Heritage, which can become part of the European Research Area

as foreseen by Philippe Busquin (DG Research, European Commission). Needed is a broader vision, which would link these plans with Japanese work on Digital Silk Roads. Science has discovered that the quest for standards must not undermine our bio-diversity. The new technologies can help us to ensure a corresponding cultural diversity.