

How to Blend Perfect Feedback Cocktails

Improving Knowledge Institutions' Digital Offerings through User-Centred Research

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The arrival of new technologies has had an impact on the users of knowledge institutions as well as on the practices and working methods used in the humanities. Institutions such as libraries and archives should therefore be able to identify the new needs and expectations of their audiences so that they can respond to them appropriately. For this reason, the CegeSoma, the State Archives of Belgium and the Royal Library of Belgium launched the MADDLAIN project in March 2015.

The institutions' users are seen as essential sources of information for the project. The researchers involved in MADDLAIN employ six different approaches to investigate the behaviour and needs of various audiences with regard to the digital access to the collections of the CegeSoma, the State Archives of Belgium and the Royal Library of Belgium. The aim of the project is to provide the aforementioned institutions with the information they need to improve their digital offerings.

In a first phase, interviews were conducted with the staff of the institutions. The participating staff members were all responsible for the management and/or the valorisation of collections. Once the responses to the interview questions had been analysed, the results were used to compose a user survey directed towards the general public. Another aspect of the MADDLAIN project concerns the collection of structured data (such as clicks and entered search terms) from the institutions' websites and catalogues. The collected data is currently being analysed by means of web analytics.

The results of the interviews, user survey and web analytics will be used to devise usability tests. These tests will be conducted with the digital cataloguing systems of the institutions in order to gain additional insights into the user experience the current systems offer. Studies concerning the applicability of e-learning and Virtual Research Environment to libraries and archives are also underway. The e-learning study focuses on university students who are studying humanities subjects while the study concerning Virtual Research Environments centres on researchers in the humanities.

The first year of the project was dedicated to data collection but at the beginning of the second year, the first results are starting to emerge. Three broad observations have thus far been made. First of all, the digital catalogues of the institutions are too complex. Users are accustomed to performing keyword searches through search engines such as Google but generally find using the digital cataloguing systems provided by libraries and archives challenging to use. A second observation concerns the lack of technological innovations in the digital cataloguing systems. Modernisation of the systems is a must because at present users who perform searches in French are presented with other results than those who use Dutch. The possibilities Linked Data offers to rectify this situation will be explored. A final observation is that communication is a weak spot for the institutions. It is, for example, not always clear which sources have already been described in a digital catalogue and which physical sources are also available in digital format.