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Digital historical materials for academics, educators, hobbyists, creatives and browsers: the visitors evaluate digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi

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This user-centred presentation is based in the responses (n=128) to a survey conducted on digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi between May and September 2016. Through this survey we learn about the needs and opinions of all kind of users of the portal for digitised and digital newspapers, journals and ephemera of the National Library of Finland. The survey was realised in the framework of the Aviisi project that aims to discover actual and potential uses in research and education of these materials.

This survey had two motivations, first to evaluate the user interface of Digi, which has recently changed and secondly, to learn as much as possible about situations in education or research in which it has been used. Among the most important findings, some corroborate previous research on Digi (Höltkä, Rautiainen) or other digital platforms (Terras), new findings convey new knowledge that complements the literature on the subject and is sketched in this document.

Diversity among users

Staff working in cultural heritage institutions (libraries, museums and archives), both academic and administrative, are the largest user-group among respondents. Other than pointing towards bias in the data, the analysis of responses

evidence the similarities between this group, academics, history hobbyist and family researchers. Responses unveil an emerging group of browsers (2 out of 10 visitors), who, not looking for anything in particular are rather looking for material that can inspire them. One of the applications of the narratives provided by real users, is the construction of personas (Overbeck, Hagedorn-Saupe), one of many methods that facilitate the process of improving digital services or creating new ones. We will encounter in the course of the presentation a number of personas, their interests and impressions of this digital library.

Unfolding the relationship between motivations, expectations and satisfaction behind visits

In ten minutes something useful can be found, though one visit can take as much as a whole working day, or be fragmented, "*half an hour now and half an hour in the evening from home*". Analysing the respondents' account of their visits to Digi, the complexity of this concept unfolds; also, the relationship with this space is made more explicit. This space not only comprehends the visitor's computer or a mobile device, but is as well combined with the physical presence in the institution or is connected to their everyday lives.

Though 6 out of 10 respondents found what they were looking for in Digi, we should most worry about those unsatisfied users who left the site without leaving their remarks. This makes the more valuable the feedback of that 20% of respondents who, not finding what they were looking for, point with their comments at difficulties. Some of these difficulties appear when searches retrieve multiple pages, when certain publications are not found or knowing that there are materials digitised between 1911-1915, these remain restricted.

What materials are important for visitors?

Newspapers and magazines published during the 1910s, followed by the 1920s are in highest demand among respondents, while materials of the past 60 years are mentioned less. Ads, product pamphlets, industry-related materials and images found both in newspapers, magazines and other material are popular as well. Knowing the interests of the visitors allows to sketch ideas for facilitating access to “hidden treasures” and to establish links with materials found elsewhere.

Future vision

Asking what would they like to find or do, point at new opportunities that culture providers could consider. Respondents familiar with a service have interest not only in the materials available, some show interest in learning why OCR works or doesn't, others would appreciate to know what materials will be opened next. The large user-group of family researchers could find a place in Digi to exchange ideas or tips on how to undertake family research. Academic researchers are used to dive into expeditions that might last beyond opening times of the National Library, allowing access to all materials in university libraries that have the infrastructure that researchers need was in this respect, one of the most helpful suggestions.

Final thoughts

The methods employed in this research action take in consideration more recent academic research but are based in research practices

established in visitor studies since the 1990s (Kom), and can be applied to any given meaningful encounter with cultural content, digital or analogue. It is not unusual that evaluation processes are undertaken individually by institutions and results are kept internally. This paper is a call for sharing results that can potentially help similar institutions organise their digital presentation, discover shared problems and find jointly solutions towards overcoming the high institutional barriers that fragment digital cultural content today.

References

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