A Model to Increase the Visibility and Usage of Cultural Heritage Objects: UNESCO's Memory of the World List as a Humanities Data

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Abstract

Cultural heritage connects the past with the future by forming an integral part of the identities of societies. Thus, countries must protect their cultural heritage and create policies to ensure that people benefit today and pass the heritage on to future generations. Beyond physical protection in the face of globalization, increasing access to cultural heritage is necessary to ensure participation and evaluate practices from an international perspective. Advances in computer and communication technologies are being exploited for these requirements. Acquiring knowledge about and interacting with cultural objects in any part of the world today is possible through the digital humanities approach. In this study, a conceptual model was formed to increase visibility and usage of Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute Manuscripts, the Hittite cuneiform tablets from Bogazköy, the Works of Ibn Sina at the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Evliya Çelebi’s “Book of Travels,” and the Old Assyrian Merchant Archives of Kültepe registered in UNESCO’s Memory of the World List. In this model, which is prepared with the digital humanities approach, best practices applied in the field are considered as examples in the literature. Suggestions are made on how to utilize digital humanities tools to increase access and visibility by revealing the economic, social, and cultural values of the works based on the model.

Keywords: UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute Manuscripts, Hittite cuneiform tablets from Bogazköy, Works of Ibn Sina in Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Evliya Çelebi’s “Book of Travels” in the Topkapi Palace Museum Library and the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Old Assyrian Merchant Archives of Kültepe

Introduction

The new focus of states that are striving to find new revenue sources is to increase the existing value of their cultural heritage objects. The European Commission has declared the field of cultural heritage as a priority area to support sustainable tourism by creating vitality in potential heritage areas. In addition, studies on heritage contribute to the sustainable economic development of countries, growth of the business sector, and promotion of social perception and belonging (European Commission Culture, 2014).

All of these objectives require a new approach to cultural heritage conservation as well as a strategy of innovation. Recently, digitization efforts have spread with the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) to protect cultural heritage and transfer it to future generations. Since the 1960s, the content of these digitization activities has changed with the birth of the digital humanities field. Digital humanities studies are concerned not only with the digitization of cultural heritage but also with the visualization of related works using mathematical methods and computer technologies. This field of research, which redraws the boundaries between social sciences, arts, and natural sciences and provides new opportunities, enables countries to gain access to cultural heritage with greater effectiveness and to increase the visibility of their cultural heritage objects throughout the world (Burdick, Drucker, Lunenfeld, Presner, and Schnapp, 2012, s. 122). The purpose of this field is to capture opportunities that arise with digitization, revitalize history by using developing technology to influence visitors and users, and attract new visitors by increasing public access to cultural heritage.

In Turkey, which has hosted many civilizations (Wikipedia.org, 2017), remains of old civilizations are still being excavated. Turkey has not fully actualized the economic, social, and

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cultural potential of its varied cultural heritage. At both national and international levels, research is insufficient to enhance the sustainable access and visibility of this country’s heritage.

In Turkey, the ratio of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s budget for 2016 to the general budget was only 0.49%. Of this ratio, 33% was intended for planned investments in the opening of new museums, restoration studies, arrangement of ruins, and other works. Among the activities mentioned in the Ministry’s 2016 budget presentation, no activity aimed to employ computer technology except for manuscript digitization (Ministry of Culture and Tourism Budget Presentation, 2016). However, investments in this area in the world are considered to bring the greatest economic and social profit. For example, in the United Kingdom, every £1 spent on this sector is converted into an additional economic return of £1.6 over a period of 10 years (Heritage Counts, 2016).

Although registration to the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme has created awareness, the registration process has not made a significant difference in the visibility and accessibility of the heritage objects. Studies that evaluate the Programme have emphasized the need for new strategies to be identified by considering the impact of information technology on access (Petherbridge, Kitching and Wolf, 1999; Evaluation of the Memory of the World Program Survey Results, 2012).

In this study, a conceptual model was proposed on the basis of digital humanities approach through five objects from Turkey registered in the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme. Our model is based on a lifecycle approach and a holistic comprehension. In the model, suggestions are made on how to use digital humanities tools to reveal the economic, social, and cultural values of the objects and increase their accessibility and visibility.

Research Questions and Method

In the studies to be conducted on the five cultural objects registered in the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme,

- How should we characterize the technological standards for transferring these objects to digital media?
- What metadata standards would be used?
- What should be done to ensure digital integrity and sustainability?

Conceptual Model based on Digital Humanities Approach

The model proposal based on best practices in the light of international theories, concepts, and studies in the literature aimed to increase the visibility and usage of cultural heritage objects in Turkey through the digital humanities approach. This model has already been prepared in accordance with globally applied standards.

The model we have prepared for the five cultural objects registered by Turkey in the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme consists of four main parts. The model begins with the first process Strategy. This process involves Policy development, Stakeholder identification, and creation of the Project Team to undertake the work. In the second phase, the process of Analysis on the cultural heritage begins. Social, Historical, Economic, Physical, and Content Evaluation of the objects should be conducted in this phase. The next step is Design/Implementation, where digital humanities tools and instruments are applied to cultural heritage. The Design/Implementation phase involves Creating, Maintaining, Managing, and Publishing applications. Finally, the Promotion/Access process based on studies on digital humanities is promoted (see Figure 1).

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2 Manuscripts at the Bogazici University Kandilli Observatory and Earthquake Research Institute, the Hittite cuneiform tablets from Bogazköy, the works of Ibn Sina at the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Evliya Çelebi’s “Book of Travels” in the Topkapi Palace Museum Library and the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, and the Old Assyrian Merchant Archives of Kültepe.
Conclusion
Using computer technology to uncover the hidden value of cultural heritage objects and increase access to the international arena has been a priority of countries. States are now working to exploit the economic, cultural, and social potential of the cultural assets within their borders. At this point, studies on digital humanities have been conducted to improve the understanding of the past by recreating digitized content on cultural heritage.

To increase the visibility and usage of these five cultural objects, a conceptual model was prepared based on the digital humanities approach. In the model, within the framework of research questions, the following are proposed:

- to take images of the five cultural objects with high spatial resolution and high color resolution even for the smallest details;
- to use interoperable standards that can talk to other systems while generating metadata;
- to apply digital humanities tools (such as Annotation Studio, Voyant, and Pundit) on the objects, considering the intended aspects, targeted mass, and other machine-readable information (such as material type and language characteristics);
- to cooperate with Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Turkish National Commission for UNESCO, national and international fund providers, digital humanities laboratories, academicians and non-governmental organizations, and end users; and
- to increase national and international recognition of the objects, promotion should be announced on the website of UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme and the Turkish National Commission for UNESCO; metadata and links should be shared on international databases such as Europeana, World Digital Library, Internet Archive, and Google Cultural Institute; workshops and trainings should be conducted with specific groups (information professionals, users of cultural memory institutions, and students) about digital humanities studies on the five cultural objects.

References

