Bibliothèque Nationale de France:
A proud presence on the Net

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Abstract:
Between President Mitterrand's announcement in 1988 of the creation of a library "of a completely new sort" and its contribution to President Macron's "grand national debate" in 2019, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) has become an active public player in the digital realm. Changes over the past twenty years have affected this centuries-old institution's assignments: the collection of documents, their conservation, organization (cataloguing and referencing documents, and producing data and metadata about them) and diffusion. At present, a major issue is how to take into account documents that have, from the start, been electronic. By addressing this issue, the BNF is making available to its community of users the services expected of a big library. Far from what we might think, the National Library of France does not have to prepare for the move toward the Net; it has already done so for a long time now. However it must continue convincing authorities that, for it to remain effective, the investments earmarked must be maintained.

The digital transformation of the National Library of France (henceforth BnF: Bibliothèque Nationale de France) with more than six hundred years of history had two motivations: political (*i.e.*, the strategic choices made in 1988 and 1998) and professional (*i.e.*, the determination, for more than twenty years now, to pass from the irruption of a new technology to the construction of a model for operations).[1]

The political motivation was, it should be pointed out, the announcement made by President François Mitterrand in 1988 of a "*library of a completely new sort*". Independent of technical considerations (such as issues related to copyright law), this announcement opened the very utopian perspective of a universal diffusion of our collections, which would become universal since they would be in electronic format. At the end of the 1990s, the BnF's president, Jean-Noël Jeanneney, pitched battle with Google, a somewhat chivalrous contest probably based less on a knowledge of the underlying issues than on a strong intuition grounded on a "certain idea of France". In opposition to those who thought that the very concept of national independence was in vain and to the managers who thought that involving Google would have the advantage of saving money, the BnF claimed that an ancestral institution, and through it an old nation, could not back down from modernity.

To pass from intentions to actions, a solid institution was needed, capable of absorbing radical changes and rising (over time, from the depths and far from declarations) to the challenge that, precociously formulated in the announcement, arose, day after day, anew. For sure, this meant making a start by digitizing the BnF's collections and, even more, moving beyond the showcasing of a few hundred documents on line so as to literally stake out a public claim in the digital realm. By creating Gallica, the BnF's digital library (now with five million documents, one of the largest digital libraries of a heritage collection) and even more (and more broadly) by undertaking "digitization" of activities at all levels (conservation and circulation of documents, production of data on our collections), by making all this operate in what is a national library, and by maintaining the

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[1] This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France).

momentum for change at the pace set by technological requirements and new uses… most of this work was done after the public declarations.

The recent Great National Debate in 2019 seems to be a pleasant (and optimistic) echo of this past, which I have just sketched. In line with the government's approach, the rhetoric about innovation and agility for attaining the stimulating objectives (organize debates, collect the demands and thoughts formulated during them, and analyze them) — all this expected within tight deadlines — entailed, from the start, turning toward startups and firms in the Net economy. Quite soon however, the "old" world (which had long been "converted" to digital technology) was solicited… owing to its digital qualifications and skills. The motivations for associating the old and the new were probably complex. Questions related to, for instance, transparency, durability and the law (data protection, public archives, etc.) could not have been handled without the help of public institutions. But all is well that ends well, since the Great National Debate made known in the hallways of power what the BnF has become. Our contribution could be effective only if our qualifications in digital technology were on par. To be ready to march and, therefore, able to respond immediately to demands — digitize contributions to the debate within a few days, prepare them for an automatic analysis, shape them into a technologically homogeneous corpus that could be easily data-mined — the BnF has been capable of doing all that. The long-term storage of the data and contents collected, their orderly deposit in the archives and, too, the designing of a tool, transparent and protected, for consulting these archives in the future, the BnF has also been capable of doing that. It had already done as much, under the supervision of the National Archives, during a program for collecting throughout the country records on 1914-1918. The Great National Debate has, therefore, been an occasion (even if this was, of course, not the key issue) to demonstrate the efficiency of the BnF, its digital ADN, a form of congruence with modernity perfectly in line with its historical duties.

From this introduction, a few lessons can be drawn to explain what "digital modernity" means in the case of a cultural establishment like the BnF.

FROM THE LIBRARY'S VIEWPOINT, the intent was, beyond lip service and sound bites, not so much to graft onto this debate something more or less decorative as to seriously realize that it had to become digital. Century after century, the BnF has paid attention to technological trends. Let me insist: becoming a "digital" establishment implied focusing not just on the digitization process, as has often happened and still frequently happens. The digitization of our collections was, and is, important; but this program as such will have been a stimulus for deploying a global digital strategy for coherently processing our collections, storing them, organizing them (cataloging, referencing, producing notices as well as all the data and metadata needed for the contents to exist in the physical world and on the Web) and diffusing them.

What has now become of the collections digitized twenty years ago by Google? With its mostly commercial goals, this firm hardly addressed the question of the diffusion of knowledge and paid no attention to the upkeep of contents, which were (much too soon) deemed outdated. Public institutions that were not concerned did not, of course, loose the ownership of their property — as was feared at the time (even though, in my opinion, this fear was secondary); but they did fail to fulfill their mission. Aware of the talk about an emerging information society (especially in the United States), some institutions did realize the danger of standing pat and invested in digital technology for storing and circulating their documents. They did not save as much money as expected, but they still exist, today as yesterday.

What would have happened to the BnF had it not made the choice of independence? Taking into account the debates that roiled the small word of culture, I am deeply convinced that we would have been unable to address current issues and would have thus risked a sharp decline. We would not have digitized our collections enough to attain, like Net firms, a critical mass for existing on line. We would not have developed the software (SPAR) for permanently storing and archiving our collections; nor the tools for their digital circulation (Gallica). We would not have become a "digital

refinery", and this technology has turned the BnF into an active national library. True, libraries were predestined to survive in an electronic format. After all, they share with the Internet a conception about organizing knowledge and, thus, all the associated vocabulary (files, referencing…). But what would have been missing was to accept to make the substantial investment so that the result be more than commendable. The BnF has become a "national champion" that, in the world of libraries internationally, is admired as a model — a rare institution whose heritage has deep historical roots but also a public library, a digital library expert in this technology on a national scale, and the official legal depository of publications of all sorts. The experience already acquired with the Internet has enabled the BnF to fully play its role as a national library.

Moving beyond questions related to the mechanics of the library economy, we must address the current issue of how to bring into our collections documents that are natively electronic. The proliferation of electronic documents (including on the Web, a dense space for circulating information) raises questions about how to absorb on an industrial scale this output. Given the volume of this production, legitimate questions crop up about the procedures for legal depositing electronic documents. The procedures for Web archives (as managed by the BnF since 2004 and legally instituted in 2006) are different, more selective, than for the conservation of printed matter. What is at stake for democracy in relation to the formation of a "common" memory is a matter of principles. The BnF safeguards this memory. The DADVSI Act, which, in 2010, transposed into the digital realm the arrangements invented in 1537 by Francis I, is still not fully effective because the decree for implementing it has not been issued. But the BnF has not waited; it has explored and developed (in a form that is more than experimental and is now being deployed under an agreement with editors) the industrial chain for entering electronic documents in our national collections. It is preparing its information systems to better handle audiovisual products (and is thus part of the "*transformation of public action*"). It is reorganizing to be capable (without weighing too heavily on state administrations) of significantly extending its scope of interventions. Many challenges have arisen, and the BnF is trying to take them up by staking out a position at the right place — the place that enables it to fill its historical role. Had the BnF not learned over the past twenty years to think and act like a digital player, it would no longer be the national library, this fabulous depository of "*the whole memory of the world*" (to borrow a phrase from Alain Resnais).

FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF USERS, this successful transition has yielded many advantages. One is the availability of collections that used to be hard to access or even inaccessible (owing to the fragility of certain documents for example) — an availability without, in the case of digitized collections, any need for the user to find the reading hall where the document will be made available. Another advantage is the invention of a new sort of serendipity since digitized collections are open for browsing. Our extraordinarily rich and varied collections thus become a well of inspiration. Yet another advantage: the most innovative techniques (the recognition of shapes) are applied for reading our collections and, too, for the digital humanities (thanks to data mining — a laboratory of data analytics is being set up). A further advantage: openness toward a more collaborative approach that, instead of abandoning the ideas of authority, control, and authentication, makes them coincide with more open, intensive exchanges with users.

On each of these points, the BnF is prospecting, inquiring, innovating, inventing… new ways to do its assignment: bring together all data in a web semantics. The BnF created the website data.bnf.fr in 2016, operates Platon for the visually impaired and contributes to the sharing of knowledge by crossing contents from scattered collections that share themes (for instance, Bibliothèques d'Orient, a digital library created in 2016 with documents from eight Middle Eastern institutions and now involving fifteen libraries worldwide). There are so many examples of programs that have been carried out or are being prepared. The principle of adaptation, specific to public services and common to any activity that is to survive and be deployed, is powerfully active. Now, like twenty years ago, it should overcome the ignorance and pessimism of all those who, numerous, are ready to give up too fast.

FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES, the BnF's ability to move into the realm of the Internet has, quite simply, enabled state authorities to play their role of overseeing the conservation of our history and preserving the sources that tomorrow's historians will use to understand today's world, the sources that journalists use to follow current events and that slake the thirst of creators. For the defense of French as an international language, the BnF's digital move has justified the presence of French authorities at international meetings where the standards are set for producing the data and metadata necessary for diffusing documents and for their visibility on the Web. Given that the called-for investments are substantial, the tools for circulating electronic documents, which are also tools for protecting them, have been pooled with four hundred partners around the country.

Far from what is taken for granted, the digital transformation of cultural institutions and, in particular, of the BnF, is not an objective to be pursued simply in order to "catch up". Public administrations are frequently accused of not having switched to the Net. This accusation does not hold for institutions like the BnF, which has actively staked out a position on the Web for more than twenty years now. For these institutions, the issue is different: how to persevere in an approach that has been rigorous and expensive but effective and that requires relentless attention? and how, in France, to convince people that what has been done is reason for pride?