

Witosław Piotr Ryszewski

Maria Sliwinska

In Search of Polish Cultural Website Quality

The growing number of institutions present their activities on the Internet. Among them are also Polish cultural institutions. It was not possible to present in this paper a detailed analysis of the websites' design and use, as according to the recent available statistics¹ there are currently registered in Poland:

- 33 632 libraries (1 180 research, 8 700 public, 20 879 schools*, 350 pedagogical, and 2523 special)
- 196 archives (28 state, 18 of central institutions, 150 other)
- 665 museums
- 281 galleries

Therefore the conducted survey was based on a couple of printed guides and an Internet survey by the Goggle and Onet.pl browsers. Therefore it can be treated only as a first attempt at the evaluation of Polish cultural heritage institutions websites.

The libraries were the first cultural institutions to build their own websites. Our search identified 50 scientific and about 800 public library websites. All libraries present similar information; current events, addresses, resources, structure and library policy. Bigger libraries also provide information about their history, publications, exhibitions and other events, and what is of the utmost importance for their users, they offer on-line catalogues; three of them also allow ordering books using those facilities. An information layout is usually coherent.

Only 28 multilingual websites were identified (18 run by scientific and 10 by public libraries). 24 of them are in English, 1 in German, 2 in French, and 1 in Russian. Approximately 70 % of the information is translated into a foreign language. Graphic design is not imaginative; most of the libraries present only pictures of their buildings, and only a few present pictures of recently purchased books. Fifteen libraries have already started with digitisation of their most interesting collections.

¹ Electronic "Statistical Yearbook of Poland 2004", www.stat.gov.pl/serwis/polska/2004/, units: Education and Upbringing; Science and Technology; Culture, Tourism and Sport.

* Rocznik Statystyczny 1991. Warszawa 1992

66 galleries created their own websites with very diverse content. All of them publish addresses and general characteristic of a gallery: its history, activities, and resources. Some provide information about the artists they exhibit, policy regarding picture sales, and present picture images. 17 galleries have multilingual websites; most of them in English (16), but 4 in German, one in Czech and one in Spanish. Four galleries have more than one foreign language version. About 60 % of this information is also translated.

There are 20 state archive websites available, but only 10 of them have foreign versions; 7 in English, 2 in German, and 1 each in Russian and Ukrainian. Usually the foreign versions are limited to 70 % of the information from the Polish language page. A little poorer are web pages of Church archives. Only 5 archdiocesan and 15 diocesan archives exist on the Net; just one has a multilingual website – English and German. Only 5 university archives have their own websites; three of them in English. Just 4 central archives have websites; none of them in a foreign language version.

All archives have websites of similar quality. Arrangement of information most often is coherent, and content is similar, such as information about organisation, resources, access policy and current events. Some of them provide information about publications and archival services.

About 500 Polish museums have websites; among them are 7 national museums, 14 district museums and 22 regional museums. About 450 are state, city or small local museums, managed by societies, private persons or Churches. Information presented there is similar. Visitors may find out when a museum is open, the ticket costs, policy, and current exhibitions. More elaborate pages inform also about the museum history, and educational, publishing or research activities. One museum implemented attractive visualisation techniques. Some museums present pictures of their most precious artefacts.

About 60 museums have foreign versions of their web pages; 55 in English, 20 in German, 5 in French and 1 in Italian. Twenty museums have more than one foreign version. Foreign language pages hardly ever include 100 % of the information on the original Polish language page; more often it is around 80 %.

Analysis of Polish libraries, galleries, archives and museums websites leads to a few conclusions. Firstly, the quality of the web pages of a cultural institution depends on its institutional activities. Secondly, museums are more active on the Net, since 80 % of all Polish museums have web sites. Thirdly, the state institutions have more professional pages, as their financial condition permit the appointment of better specialists and implementation of more advanced technology. Fourthly, most of the institutions are not prepared for contact with

foreigners, because only 7% of them have multilingual versions. Finally a standard is lacking in website design; however a logical arrangement and a convenient search mechanism is the most important advantage of web pages. Search mechanisms can be found only in 10 web sites. Mostly it is a simple free-text search. Just 3 websites use controlled vocabulary search through keywords, thematic phrases and lexicon. To improve website design, in 2003 the Polish Library Association established a competition for the best library website. That first competition had no specific rules, but for this year's competition a list of a website component qualities to be met has been established. Among them are: Formal information (institution name and address, webmaster and editor names), as well as information about updates. Also evaluated are layout and graphics, completeness of information and its relevance, editorial issues such as grammar and information style, and fonts. A couple of technical issues, i.e. interface, navigation, search mechanism, user friendliness, on-line catalogues, multilinguality, help mechanism, and communication with users are also the subject of evaluation. Other issues concerning the web sites such as portal or gateway elements and educational possibilities are welcome and yield additional points during evaluation. Even though the agreed competition rules are not always coherent and often give too much flexibility to the evaluators, it is a big step forward in assuring the quality of cultural institution web sites.

It has been also discussed with the Ministry of Culture the possibility of improving cultural institution websites through the establishment of a European Certificate for good quality websites that meet the agreed criteria. Such criteria should be based on those presented by the Quality Principles group of the MINERVA consortium. The Certificate would be of the highest value for the cultural institution if awarded jointly by the MINERVA consortium in the name of the European Commission. Such an action would certainly improve the quality of electronic images of all cultural heritage institutions, and would encourage others to build their own web sites. For those without appropriate staff and technology ICIMSS could build a standard web site, including translation into a couple of the main foreign languages such as English, German, and maybe others, and cooperate with those institutions on maintaining and updating their information.