NETcher
Social Platform for Cultural Heritage

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The EU Research & Education Agenda

The European research agenda has put digital humanities in the front line of its priorities. NETCHER intends to build on existing European programmes for research and innovation and to promote the development of new projects addressing the problem of trafficking and looting of cultural goods.

Education and training policy is the second key issue. Not enough has been done till now, even if there is a great interest and a wide potential in modelling new methods to raise awareness about cultural heritage and the feeling of belonging and identification. One of the key issues of the NETCHER mission has to be strengthening the collection of educational resources and facilitate their use through its platform.

Integration of European Policies

Another important transnational dimension comes from the need to strengthen cooperation among the officers involved in the definition of the different European policies for better identifying the interdisciplinary challenges of fighting against looting and trafficking of cultural heritage, such as languages, concepts, common vocabulary.

This activity requires a considerable effort to make these groups aware of the need to build an interdisciplinary approach. It is a difficult task, because it asks for rapid and effective results and it must be clearly understood by all the people concerned, despite of existing differences among the several professional environments. Building an effective strategy needs a lot of data and information.

Mobilising the Decision Makers

It is also necessary to reinforce the capacity of the actors involved in fighting against looting and trafficking of cultural heritage, to mobilise their key experts for lobbying our ideas at transnational level. Good practice from other sectors can inspire our effort: if we look at the awareness activities on wildlife protection, several messages in public areas, e.g. at the airport, remind us that trafficking wildlife is a crime. On the other side, there is no information concerning the protection of cultural heritage. When they are downloading a book, a record or a video from the web, users are informed by a pop-up window about the risk of an illegal action. On the contrary, there is not a similar information for the purchase of cultural goods on online malls. There is also a huge need for technical and creative human resources for this purpose.

Role of Professionals for Fighting Against Looting and Trafficking of Cultural Heritage

The top-down dimension on the legal framework for fighting against looting and trafficking of cultural heritage should be replaced by a bottom-up approach, able to facilitate the exchange of different ideas. Currently we see diverse, sometimes divergent national implementations of international directives and conventions. NETCHER supports a more direct involvement of the professionals active in the sector, useful for better connection among people and standards, and assessing what already exists. Technological tools can also provide a strong contribution to this challenge, exploiting the potential offered by artificial intelligence.

The Core Action: Networking

The concept of network is very trendy in human sciences, since it is a very effective governance tool, and can be applied in several contexts, thanks to its flexibility. NETCHER will focus on sustainability of the network created by the project, in order to keep it effective and adaptive, and able to generate good practices to disseminate. There are many different possible forms of cooperation, but all of them lay around the concept of network, which seems to be the key asset for success.

NETCHER actions after the Forum in Lyon

The NETCHER forum held in Lyon on 25-26 February 2020, started with a pessimistic statement: progress has been made in the protection of cultural goods, however we are currently in a state of emergency, especially due to the political situation in the Middle East. We can well see that trafficking generates an enormous amount of money, and looted objects circulate all over the world.

It is commonly acknowledged that this is due to the lack of tools and trained personnel, and we have to develop concrete recommendations to deal with this problem.

We can better exploit the existing initiatives, however the key issue is that often they are not linked to each other. Similarly existing legislations and existing databases are not interconnected.

NETCHER should help integrating, coordinating and harmonizing all these elements. The joint work of its community of experts should invent innovative and easy to use tools.

The effort in the next months should be in involving some professional communities that are not yet fully integrated in the NETCHER activities (e.g. magistrates, who are sometimes not completely aware of the dimension of the problem, underestimating its gravity). The art market sector should also receive a special attention, increasing its awareness about the issues of illicit trafficking.

Awareness and education are key issues, in particular awareness against the poor attention to the problem within the art market. We have the task to transmit to future generations our heritage, not only the most important monuments, but all the elements of the cultural heritage. It is our duty to continue the struggle and to involve the young generations in this task. NETCHER should do any effort to expand its community, become sustainable by the end of 2020, move from a network that simply issues recommendations to a greater force, able to have a stronger presence at European level.

Key Messages for All

Time:
The fight against looting and trafficking is an emergency. Quick and effective means are needed to report and prevent looting. We have to increase our knowledge about sociological and historical situation, information on sellers and buyers, etc. A careful ethical reflection is also needed: archaeologists study societies of the past, but work with modern people in a modern society, often in a country with a colonial connection to Europe.

Space:
Looting is generally located in distant countries, but often it is also at home, and can affect all of us. Trafficking can take several ways: web, dark web, flea market, internet malls, auction houses, etc.
It is a phenomenon that must be understood at local and international level. Specialists and amateurs, tourists and collectors: all of them must be made aware of its relevance.

Action:
Once more it is important to remember that the key issue is collaboration: people must know how to react and who can be contacted in case of need. Interaction is the other key work. There is no need to duplicate initiatives and efforts: it is just a way to spoil money and resources.