

Executive summary

Handbook for quality in cultural web sites. Improving quality for citizens

Version 2.0 - Draft
edited by the Minerva Working Group 5
Identification of user needs, contents and quality criteria
for cultural Web applications

PRESENTATION OF THE HANDBOOK FOR QUALITY IN CULTURAL WEB SITES.

Over the last few years, the growing awareness in every sector of the importance of communication via internet has led to the need for a Handbook for Quality in Web Applications of Cultural Institutions, that clearly hold a role of specific responsibility in controlling quality in this medium. The field of Culture in particular, plays a fundamental part in achieving the goals of the Society of Information and Knowledge which are to spread culture to all citizens and thus to promote conscious growth and the affirmation of an added European Value.

It is in this context then, that the Handbook for Quality Criteria in Cultural Web Applications is a useful tool for achieving a common European platform to promote accessibility of the cultural and scientific heritage through the internet. This is a fundamental part of the policy of digitalisation of the European cultural heritage in the quest for unified access for all citizens to cultural contents.

In conformity with the regulations developed in the Action Plan eEurope 2002¹, on accessibility of content of public administrations, the handbook proposes the adoption and application of criteria for the quality, not only of content, but also of accessibility to information and communication technologies (ICT) and to the specific on-line information services of cultural web applications. Particular attention is paid to the needs of disabled users, this being a pre-requisite for guaranteeing an Information Society open to all. The sharing of common quality criteria across all cultural web applications will guarantee that quality information on cultural heritage is supplied according to minimum European standards. The criteria for quality will be flanked by a method of analysis and validation allowing measurement and assessment of the degree of quality achieved by a cultural web application.

The handbook is organised into four main sections:

1. General Definitions, fundamentals and recommendations.
2. Introduction to quality: general criteria for web applications.
3. Minerva Quality Framework for CWA.
4. Appendices: Cross References with others Minerva Working Groups, Catalogue of Patterns, Tables of examples, Repertory of national rules on Web Applications, Bibliography and References.

1. General definitions, fundamentals and recommendations

The topic of web quality in the area of culture has various aspects. The web, with its own specific conceptual, functional and linguistic expressions, meets with the field of culture, that is to say, its specific role of conserving and exploiting the cultural heritage.

This union is still in an innovative and experimental phase. On the one hand we have the world of culture; a world which has been defined and classified by centuries of theoretical and practical formulation. On the other we have a new, "revolutionary" technology, which is having an extraordinary impact on communication and the spread of information and knowledge.

¹"e Europe 2002: content and accessibility in Internet sites of Public administrations" (COM(2201)529 – C5-0074/2002 – 2002/2003(COS))

For these reasons, in the early phases of formulation of the handbook, it was both necessary and important to clarify concepts, areas, and subjects. The starting point was the practical need to find efficient definitions which were real and suited to their destined purpose.

Indeed, the **definitions** chosen, allow the goals of the Cultural Web Application to be linked with the identity and the mission of the Cultural Entity. The Cultural Web Application (CWA) must reflect the mission of the Cultural Entity (CE) and guarantee its transparency. To this end, the main **goals** of the Cultural Web Application were identified. Besides a clear description of the identity and transparency of the mission and activities, it is hoped to create a sector network, possibly at the European level. This network of virtual communities with specific cultural interests would include: presentation of the main regulations and standards in the sector, diffusion of multi-medial cultural contents, services for scientific research, professionals and educationalists, services of cultural tourism, and the ordering and acquisition of goods.

Each of these goals is analysed for every Cultural Entity. The definition of a Cultural Entity was deliberately generic in order to include different national characteristics, both politico-administrative and techno-scientific.

In order to produce useful quality criteria and guidelines while taking into account the vast and composite nature of the sector of culture, the task was limited to the categories of cultural heritage. Across the member states of the European Union, these categories have been formed in an essentially common historical process of cultural and of legal-administrative definition, with the aim of administering – in the widest sense of the term - the cultural heritage. More specifically, the handbook addresses the problems of Archives, Conservation Institutes, Centres for research formation and production, Temporary Exhibitions and Events, Projects. The handbook is intended to supply useful guidelines and indications for managers of web projects in cultural entities, taking into account the specific, different characteristics of the various entities.

Another fundamental theme considered in the Handbook is that of **user needs**. Generally speaking, in the field of web applications, the preliminary planning stage is dedicated to pin-pointing “user-profiles” which are then used as a basis for designing crucial aspects of the web application. The principle goal of a CWA must be considered that of diffusing culture to all citizens, thus favouring their growth. To this end, various strategies (such as pre-selected user-paths, correct choice of language etc.) require investigation.

User needs constitute a complex pattern including the desire for a content which is reliable, comprehensible, rich, and up-dated, and can be used to satisfy purposes as diverse as curiosity, professional growth, and scientific research. The contents must therefore be produced and organised in such a way as to allow the user to access them with the greatest ease.

Among the **strategies** considered necessary for the best possible development of a CWA, is the co-ordination of information flow from within the organism to the outside. This necessitates the creation of various channels of communication within the Cultural Entity, and also of controls on the IPR and the privacy level of contents published on the Cultural Web Application. The creation of an archive of CWA's would hence be advisable.

2. Introduction to quality: general criteria for Web Applications

The characteristics and requisites of a quality Web site can be identified by analysing the general principles related to **Accessibility** of contents and Usability of the Web Application. Accessibility and Usability are the objectives which quality web projects should aim to attain.

A Web site is accessible when its informational content is available to visitors regardless of disability, of the technology they use to access the site and of the operational context from whence they visit the site. The summary indicates the main initiatives in the field of Accessibility, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and the European resolutions.

Principles of **Usability** view the user as a focal point in planning the interface, the modes of interaction and organisation of contents. To guarantee the effectiveness of this “user-centred” methodology, a representative “panel” of users – including disabled users - will be constituted and will check the accessibility of contents.

The criterion of Usability groups together problems in the main categories and in particular those criteria which refer to CWA's, such as Institutional Image and Institutional Responsibility will be addressed.

A system based on the use of **Patterns** is proposed as a further methodological approach and a useful instrument for planning Quality Web Applications.

The language of Patterns developed from the field of studies on Architecture and has found wider application in the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI). A Pattern defines a tried solution to a recurring problem in a specific context. A Pattern is made up of three parts: Context, Problem and Solution. Through classifying the problem in specific contexts and through solutions that resolve problems in repeated situations, a Catalogue of Patterns is built up. Here, the individual Patterns appear in sequence; within each are the Related Patterns that are useful for resolving certain aspects specific to Web projects. The Catalogue of Patterns and their definitions can be found in the appendix.

3. Minerva Quality Framework for CWA

The specific missions of CWA's require not only that the general quality framework valid for all web applications be respected, but also necessitate the adoption of specific goals. These criteria may vary according to the single goals or objectives of the application, and these goals in turn are the direct result of an interaction between the aims of the Cultural Entity and the needs of the users. These comments are valid for all categories of CE with additional notes and clarification for the particularities of each category.

4. Appendices

The manual will have a series of appendices. One particularly important appendix is the Catalogue of Patterns, an important instrument for planning a cultural web site. A critical orientation round the regulations in the European sector will also be provided, and in addition, a topic specific bibliography.

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Bibliography and references