MICHAEL:
Multilingual Inventory
of Cultural Heritage in Europe

Kate Fernie, MLA
Antonella Fresa, MICHAEL Technical Coordinator

The MICHAEL project began in June 2004 as a partnership between NRG members from Italy, France and the United Kingdom. The project's goal is to promote access to the digital collections of museums, libraries and archives from across Europe and it is with real pleasure that we announce the launch of the MICHAEL Plus project in June 2006. By the time that this report is published, MICHAEL will have expanded to include representatives from the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden as well as the three original countries. We look forwards to more countries joining the network in the near future. Over the last twelve months, we have established national instances of the MICHAEL platform in France, Italy and the United Kingdom. In all three countries work is underway to populate our national inventories. Work is most advanced in France, as its catalogue began life in 2001 in an earlier system; it now contains descriptions of 1,000 digital collections from libraries, archives, heritage services and museums and from all types of institution: national, regional, and municipal, associations and foundations. In the United Kingdom, the MICHAEL inventory contains descriptions of around 350 digital collections and 250 websites; over the next year consultants will be cataloguing more collections from across the UK. In Italy, the MICHAEL platform is in place and agreements have been reached with the Italian regions, universities and with institutions under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture; as in the UK consultants will be cataloguing digital collections from across Italy over the coming year. Currently we are planning for the launch of public services. Each country will have a national website for its inventory, which will provide launch-pads for the MICHAEL European Service; our websites will be harvested using OAI-PMH for the European Service. Our national websites have been designed and have been under evaluation for the last few months; they are due for public launch towards the end of 2006. We have also been working together on the multi-lingual services required for our European search portal. This work includes agreeing multilingual controlled vocabularies and evaluating cross-language information retrieval and machine translation tools. A first prototype of the MICHAEL European Service was produced to enable the multi-lingual functionality to be tested and a second prototype will be released for evaluation this autumn.

In our work we are building on technical standards developed through the MINERVA project and by others. We are benefiting from previous work on metadata standards, terminology, open source software and language tools. An important aspect of our work has been to establish a data model and technical approach for MICHAEL that support interoperability with others and provides a working methodology for establishing inventories of the digital cultural heritage. Our standards are published online and the MICHAEL software platform will be made available under an open source licence.

These are some of the reasons why this great project is attracting interest from across Europe and beyond. We are making connections with cultural authorities, professional networks and with the community of researchers studying digital library applications through initiatives such as DCMI, DELOS and CLEF. We are also building strategic relationships with other networks such as TEL and European Schoolnet and sharing ideas and results.

By the end of 2006, MICHAEL will establish an International Association to enable this work of promoting access to European digital culture to continue.

We welcome enquiries about MICHAEL. Further details are available from the project website, where you will also find announcements of events.
<http://www.michael-culture.org/>