

MICHAEL and MICHAEL Plus: new access to the Multilingual Inventory of Cultural Heritage in Europe

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In December 2006, the MICHAEL Culture European service <<http://www.michael-culture.org/>> was launched during an international conference in Rome organised by Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. The new service, which offers its users with opportunities to find and explore digital collections, was presented to Francesco Rutelli, Deputy Prime Minister of the Italian Republic and Minister for Cultural Heritage and Activities, and Fabio Colasanti, Director General for Information Society and Media of the European Commission, with an audience of conference delegates from across Europe and beyond. At the time of its launch, the service provided access to details of collections from Italy, France and the United Kingdom along with editorial articles about aspects of the European heritage, user stories and details about the MICHAEL project and its results.

Since the MICHAEL project began in June 2004 with the installation of the MICHAEL software platform and national cataloguing programmes in France, Italy and the United Kingdom it has attracted interest from colleagues in other countries across Europe and worldwide. In June 2006, with the start of the MICHAEL Plus project, the initiative extended to include Germany, Greece, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. More recently we have been joined by partners from Estonia and the Flemish community of Belgium. We have put in place measures to enable new partners from other European countries to join our initiative to create the inventory of European digital cultural assets and provide one of the building blocks for The European Digital Library.

Joining the MICHAEL Culture initiative involves new partner countries or regions in installing the open source MICHAEL software platform and initiating a programme to catalogue the digital collections, websites, elearning resources and electronic services created by cultural institutions in their region.

The MICHAEL software platform includes a cataloguing system that supports remote data entry, which enables national partners to establish networks of locally based cataloguers who contribute details of the digital assets created by their institution or by institutions in their local area. The software platform also includes

the necessary components to enable partners to establish a MICHAEL OAI-PMH repository for their inventory together with a national website compliant with the MINERVA Quality Principles. Thus the details of local digital collections that are captured using the MICHAEL software platform may easily be published on national cultural portals while simultaneously being made available to the MICHAEL Culture European Service and other cultural information services via OAI-PMH.

For example, national portals have been established by the national partners in France, Italy and the UK based on the MICHAEL software platform and the national MICHAEL inventories:

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<http://www.numerique.culture.fr/mpf/pub-fr/index.html>
<http://michael-culture.it/mpf/pub-it/index.html>
<http://www.michael-culture.org.uk/mpf/pub-uk/index.html>
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During 2007, similar national portals will become available for each partner country in the MICHAEL Plus project. Through these national portals, partners are able to publicise the results of national digitization initiatives to audiences within their own country and also tailor-make services to meet the specific needs of their users. For example, MLA is working with partners to develop services, based on information captured for MICHAEL, for teachers, for public library users and for tourists.

The ease with which the details of locally held digital collections may be published on the MICHAEL European Service is also important. It keeps the Service dynamic (as it is continually updated with details of new collections) and helps in promoting our local cultural heritage to worldwide audiences. For national partners this involves a little bit of translation to make sure that their national languages are supported in the Service. The experience that we have gained in supporting the 14 languages of the project partners (including Finnish, Hungarian and Greek) means that we are well placed to advise and support new countries wishing to join the service in future. In June 2007, the MICHAEL Culture AISBL was

established to sustain the initiative beyond the lifetime of the projects funded by the European Commission's eTEN programme. The AISBL (Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif) is an international not-for-profit association established under Belgian law, has the mission of 'providing services to access cultural digitised resources' and of maintaining the MICHAEL Culture European service, software platform and partnership. One of the first actions of the AISBL has been to make the MICHAEL software platform available under an open source licence and to make both software and documentation available for download by open source developers on SourceForge.net, the download repository for open source code and applications. Next actions include planning for the future maintenance and development of the service and, of course, inviting others to join the MICHAEL Culture AISBL as full or associate members. For the future, we see the MICHAEL initiative and the MICHAEL Culture AISBL making a positive contribution to the vision of establishing The European Digital Library. We look forwards to working within the EDLNet project towards the Foundation for The European Digital Library during 2007. Last but not least, we look forwards to our users discovering details of the rich diversity of the European cultural heritage that has been digitized by our museums, libraries, archives and cultural institutions.

Further details are available from the MICHAEL Culture website, <<http://www.michael-culture.org/>> or you can email us on <info@michael-culture.org>.