Towards the Project of an Open Catalogue of Manuscripts

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After the description of the research methods usually adopted in scientific disciplines and particularly in palaeography, some hypotheses on the influence of new technologies on human learning and some examples of the use of Web technologies in manuscript cataloguing are proposed.

The reasons for the project of an Information System adopting Web technologies for manuscripts cataloguing are then reported and the meaning of an open catalogue strictly related to the above IS is presented. The project is applied to a concrete example to show one of the possible ways the Information System can be used by the palaeographers' community and, more in general, by scientific community.
Common features of palaeographic research methods

Various methods are used at different extents when researchers are involved in manuscripts' studies: qualitative or quantitative methods and global or analytic methods are perhaps the main ways they can adopt to obtain new knowledge.

Together with the knowledge methods used by researchers it is important to remember here two specific features of their work.

- the former one is mostly due to the way manuscripts have to be analysed; every researcher has in fact to study personally manuscripts in archives or libraries and compare the ideas emerging from collected data with other scholars' hypotheses in different times (a manuscript is a unique book also when there are different copies of it and it can be very difficult to get in touch with it)

- the latter feature is strictly related to the material until now adopted by scholars to share the results of their work with the scientific community: the catalogue. It is the result of a really difficult task, which requires a deep competence in a lot of fields, from philology to history, from the history of art to palaeography, from literature to library science.

Until now only the publishing of a catalogue (printed matter) gave a definite form and scientific value to the work of the researchers.
Manuscripts and catalogues’ printing

From 17th and 18th century when first catalogues were written, thousands of manuscripts have been analysed but an enormous amount of manuscripts remains still uncatalogued, if not unknown.

In a recent paper by the Committee of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (CDF, 2001) (the publicly funded German foundation for research) responsible for the cataloguing of manuscripts in that country, a clear statement is made about the uselessness of the publication of ‘stationary’ catalogues (i. e. in the form of printed books or CD-ROMs). After sponsoring more than 200 printed catalogues throughout Germany in the last 40 years they are now convinced that the Web is the central medium to present and disseminate the results of research. Information about manuscripts should be free and open to collaboration and integration.
The proposal of an Open Catalogue of Manuscripts

The Internet has gained a relevant role among communication media and its use has changed the way knowledge can be acquired, built and shared.

In Palaeography many experiences involving the use of the Internet have been carried out till now, but in the authors' opinion a further impulse to the use of the Net in Palaeographic studies can come from the adoption of specifically designed Information Systems.

It is possible in fact to give scholars new and more powerful tools to improve their work and create an open catalogue, i.e. a catalogue in progress, constantly changing with the continuous contribution of new information.
The Information System

The IS the authors hypothesised for the creation of the open catalogue led to three different access levels for its users

1. **system and scientific administrator level**: only a person having the scientific responsibility of the catalogue can enable researchers and scholars to enter into the system and gives them the access rights to manage the materials to be published; at this level it is also possible to manage all the data produced by everyone

2. **scholars and researchers level**: allowed people can insert, modify, delete and display the materials to be published (manuscripts' descriptions, notes, images etc.), at least when they decide their materials have an ultimate structure and can be publicly accessed

3. **user level**, where only the answers to specific queries can be obtained (i.e. the descriptions and images of manuscripts, notes etc.).
The Information System structure - 1

Fig. 1
The Information System structure - 2

Fig. 2
Interior of Malatesta Library - Lecterns
Malatesta Library

Lectern within Malatesta Library with chained manuscripts

Detail of chained manuscripts
Malatesta Library

15th century bookbinding with the chain
Nicolaus de Lyra, Postillae super Psalmos (D. VI. 3)
Piana Library

(The library of Pope Pius VII)

Choir Books from Cesena Cathedral (Duomo C., fol. 75v)

Beheading of John the Baptist
Bible, Genesis, 14th century
D. V. 2, fol. 4r
The arms of Malatesta Novello, founder of the Malatestiana Library (1452)