CONNECTING DIGITAL INITIATIVES INTO A GLOCAL NETWORK

The case of weLand in South Piemonte, Italy

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About the author: Born in Asti, Italy (07/05/1981), Stefano Caneva has been living in Belgium since five years (Leuven; Liège; Antwerp). Since 2012, he has enriched his academic profile as a post-doctoral researcher (Ancient History, Humanities, Digital Humanities) with an intensive activity as leader and member of NGOs (weLand, Wikimedia Italia, Wikimedia Belgium) working in the field of open data and new media for local administrations, cultural heritage and educational institutions.

This paper provides a history of the activities of the cultural NGO weLand (South Piemonte, Italy) as a case study concerning the establishment of a regional network of stakeholders, combining the needs of the local community with the high potential provided by transnational institutions and networks, such as Europeana.

Open Data and digital instruments are weLand’s tools; networks of people and ideas provide the ecosystem. The development of a smart land is the goal.

The paper is divided into four sections:

1. preliminary considerations on the Europeana “Local Networks” taskforce and its possible application to South Piemonte;
2. a chronicle of the projects carried out by weLand;
3. a plan of the possible interaction between weLand and Europeana at a regional level;
4. final considerations, based on weLand’s experience, concerning the conditions for the establishment of an open, dynamic and reliable network of stakeholders with a glocal perspective.

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1. Preliminary Considerations on the Europeana Local Networks TF

Since its foundation in 2007 as EDLNet (Europeana Digital Library), Europeana has been playing a fundamental role in the creation of a collaborative network of Public Administrations (PA), Research & Development (R&D) and Cultural Heritage (CH) institutions. The joint work of these partners has significantly increased the amount, quality and interoperability of digital cultural datasets (including rich metadata) and validated good practices enabling the accessibility, openness and reusability of the European Cultural Heritage for a variety of end-users: privates, creatives and professionals. Europeana partner projects have been carrying out a thorough analysis of some crucial issues for the Digital Cultural Heritage sector (DCH): the harmonisation between Open Culture and IPR; the confederation and coordination of existing stakeholders, projects and digital infrastructures; the development of a sustainable business plan for the CH institutions that decide to open up and share their archives in a digital environment. However, two major issues have become evident as regards the strategic placement of Europeana within European society during the first seven years of its life:

- a centralised governance was a consequence of the circumstances in which Europeana was born, yet the development of an increasingly larger network of partners has created the expectation for a more shared system of decision making, which should give more space to local partners and stakeholders (the Europeana Network) and consequently enhance their constructive feeling of being active parts of a global movement. These premises explain the reform of the Europeana Governance as well as the establishment of the TF “Creating local Europeana networks for collaboration and sharing information”;

- Europeana partner projects have been characterized by a top-down approach towards innovation. This implies that innovation should be incubated in a socially protected environment of experts before it can be disseminated and exert an impact on society. On the one hand, it is true that research requires a socially, economically and legally protected ecosystem to flourish. On the other hand, bottom-up engagement of the community should also be taken into account as a primary component of open innovation. This approach goes beyond the mere concept of reuse, which can be seen as a second stage which lies out of, and comes after, research. In this respect, ongoing EU-funded projects such as RICHES and Civic Epistemologies are embracing an innovative approach, which recognises the importance of matching top-down research flow with bottom-up co-curation of the Cultural Heritage by citizens.
Centralised governance and a predominant top-down approach can be seen as two interrelated causes of the difficulties Europeana has met 1) in having its brand widely recognized by people outside the (Digital) Cultural Heritage professional sector, and 2) in activating a fruitful economic reuse of digital datasets.

**A possible solution: Scaling down the innovation ecosystem to enhance local engagement**

For innovation to become a real driver of social and economic development, its entire ecosystem should be rethought. The social dynamics of innovation should become double-sided, i.e. they should combine top-down and bottom-up in a mutually influential way. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, central governance must be flexible enough to adapt to the needs and initiatives of different geographical areas and social environments. Governance should also enable the spontaneous development of fine-grained, linked local networks of co-innovators. The role of local mediators in this process is fundamental, as they connect local forces and promote a more engaging interaction with the global level.

The figure above combines an evaluation of the advantages provided by a glocal network (i.e. a local network interacting with others at a national and international level) with a representation of the connecting role that institutions such as weLand may play between local communities and broad translational networks, like Europeana.
2. WE LAND’S APPROACH: ACTING LOCALLY TO CREATE SCALABLE MODELS

weLand Association is a cultural NGO founded in Asti, South Piemonte (Italy) in August 2012. Its goal is to support the development of a regional network of individuals and groups interested in aggregating, sharing and reusing Open Data for GLAMs, education institutions and tourism stakeholders.

2.1. Vision and methods

Since its foundation, weLand has worked to support existing local energies and to connect them into a more effective network with a global perspective. The goal is to make South Piemonte a smart land: a region with a stronger cultural identity and social cohesion, acknowledging and promoting the potential coming from its history, landscape and environment, and able to attract and intercept human and economic resources at an international level.

The strategy: weLand operates to broaden the technical knowledge (digital tools), social approach (collaboration) and vision (acting locally, thinking globally) of the local community, including citizens, institutions, economic stakeholders. The methods adopted are the dissemination of new cultural and business models and the selection, adaptation and hybridisation of international projects and networks for the use of local cultural, social and economic development.

Concretely, this last point consists in creating effective collaborative interfaces between stakeholders with different backgrounds and visions, and in facilitating the interaction between different initiatives and brands, thus turning win-lose competition into win-win open innovation.

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1 A. Bonomi, R. Masiero, Dalla Smart City alla Smart Land, Bologna 2014.
2.2 Building upon successes to create a “me too” reaction

Step 1) WLM - Photographic meet-ups and contests

weLand’s first project (Wiki Loves Asti; summer-autumn 2012) was a collaboration with Wikimedia Italia to establish a local edition of Wiki Loves Monuments. WLM is the international photographic contest of the Wikimedia Foundation that brings people to take pictures of CH sites and to share them with a CC-BY-SA license on the repository Wikimedia Commons.

Wikimedia Italia is responsible for the Italian edition of the contest, in which Wiki Loves Asti is included. Due to legal restrictions concerning the economic reuse of public CH-related pictures in Italy, Wikimedia Italia experimented a campaign based on local initiatives: during the first edition of the Italian contest (2012), local PA or associations collected permissions for the monuments they wanted to include in the contest.

While this made collecting permissions a slow process in the beginning, it has proven a smart bottom-up solution in the long term, because: 1) it has allowed the Italia Wiki community to be active in an international project, by by-passing the deadlock caused by national legal obstacles; 2) it has spread the Wiki brand through people, making local communities aware of the importance of Open Culture and of the existing legal limits to its implementation; 3) it has built a relationship of mutual trust and collaboration between local communities and Wikimedia Italia.

Since 2012, weLand has never stopped enlarging the list of monuments “liberated” for WLM Italia. Together with Wikimedia Italia, weLand has kept on organising guided photo-walks and local contests/exhibitions, thus making WLM a traditional event of the local cultural calendar. Trust and interest have grown among local stakeholders thanks to the successful dissemination of the pictures from Wiki Loves Asti through the Wiki channels. Example: The winner of the first edition of Wiki loves Asti (2012) ranked 5th in the national contest and 15th in the international one. Since then, the picture of the
**Step 2) Wiki goes to school**

Building upon the success of WLM, in 2014 weLand has launched *Wikipedia va a scuola @ Asti*. The goal of the project is multi-fold: 1) implementing and testing a model of **participatory didactics** in high schools; 2) creating awareness among students and teachers of the advantages and challenges of **crowd-sourcing**, by turning end-users into content providers (in compliance with the approach “Do not ask what Wikipedia can do for you, but what you can do for Wikipedia!”); 3) setting the premises for the establishment of a **local Wikimedia community**, where **students can play the role of prosumers**, i.e. of qualified users who can contribute with their own knowledge and needs to the development of an open platform of knowledge.

The experience and guidelines of previous Wikimedia Italia didactic projects have been adapted to the needs of high schools in the province of Asti. The project has been organised in 2 phases:

1) during spring-summer 2014, teachers who manifested their interest in the project were offered a free introduction to the MediaWiki syntax and the functioning of the Wikimedia projects, with particular attention for Wikipedia (encyclopedia) and Wikivoyage (tourist guide). At the end of the course, they selected a topic, about which they would write a Wiki page with their classes. The chosen topics had to deal with an aspect of the cultural, social or economic aspect of the territory;

2) the second phase (ongoing; November 2014 – July 2015) has given classes an active role. Thanks to Wikimedia Italia and weLand staff members, a free introduction to the MediaWiki syntax and online tutorship have been provided to all the involved classes. Students working on Wikivoyage have also been instructed on how to combine text and audio-video information with digital storytelling based on Open Street Map.

The feasibility of *Wikipedia va a scuola @ Asti* 2014/15 has been assured by the collaboration between weLand and Wikimedia Italia. Wikimedia staff members carried out the first phase, during which weLand operators learned how to run workshops in schools. **Sharing knowledge** has been a key strategy to enable a more engaging and collaborative interaction between Wikimedia Italia and weLand during the second phase of the project. The voluntary work of Wikimedia operators has allowed weLand to run a pilot programme without asking
money from the participating schools. The project, which is disseminated through the channels of weLand and Wikimedia, will end up with a presentation of the results to the local authorities and citizens.

During this experimental edition of the project, the active role played by schools as prosumers and their contribution to the digital storytelling of the local CH have attracted the attention of local stakeholders. It is on this basis that funds will be sought to run a new edition of the project during the school year 2015/16.

Step 3) Wiki + UNESCO: Towards a regional, inter-brand network

In summer 2014, the vineyard hills of Langhe-Roero and Monferrato, in South Piemonte, were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Since then, and with the Milan EXPO “Nourishing the Planet” about to start, local authorities responsible for the UNESCO sites have been looking for new partners to strengthen their communication and networking skills and to increase their national and international visibility. In the meantime, Wikimedia Italia has updated its strategic plan by highlighting the importance of local networks to increase the efficiency of Wiki projects at a national level.

These happy circumstances have given weLand the chance to present itself as a dynamic aggregator, connecting local and trans-local needs and opening up effective interfaces for collaboration between different brands.

For the 2015 edition of WLM, therefore, weLand will play a central role in the establishment of a regional campaign, at two levels:

- Piemonte: at the regional level, weLand will be the first collaborator of WLM in South Piemonte, interacting with other institutions and informal groups for the organisation of the regional WLM prize Wiki Loves Piemonte. Within this framework, weLand is working to establish a regional partnership between Wikimedia Italia and Invasioni Digitali. Started in 2013, #DigitalInvasions are a project organising cultural meet-ups to support bottom-up digital storytelling in museums and other CH sites. People visit museums and other CH sites, which have previously given their permission to the event, and make intensive use of social media to storify their experience. Because Wikimedia and Invasioni Digitali have similar goals and deal with similar IPR issues concerning the permissions requested to upload pictures of museum exhibits,
weLand is fostering a win-win collaboration between the two institutions, with the goal of sharing permissions and increasing each other’s visibility;

- South Piemonte: in these days, weLand, the Associazione Paesaggi Viti-vinicoli Langhe-Roero e Monferrato and FAI – Giovani (the Italian consortium of young guides for cultural tourism), are negotiating an agreement to launch the local WLM prize entitled Wiki Loves Langhe-Roero e Monferrato #UNESCO 2015. The initiative will accompany people to visit the CH sites of the UNESCO area and to document them via pictures uploaded on Wikimedia Commons. By combining, for the first time, the world-famous UNESCO and Wikimedia brands at a regional level, weLand aims to provide an attractive and scalable example of collaboration which can tremendously increase the visibility of the regional CH.

Step 4) From the Hills of Europe

Parallel to the Wikimedia related network, in 2014/15 weLand has launched a digital school pilot programme meant to promote European active citizenship. The project has been carried out in collaboration with the Institut für Deutschlandforschung in Bochum (Ruhr-Universität, Germany). Two high school classes (in South Piemonte and Ruhr) have been trained on the effective use of social media and other digital tools for presentations and project management. Moreover, they have learnt how to monitor administrative Open Data to study the impact of EU structural funds on local CH institutions in their respective lands. Under the guidance of weLand members, the Italian class has made large use of OpenCoesione and Monithon.it, two platforms administered by the Italian Ministry for the Economic Development. These platforms have been used by students to share the results of their monitoring activity with the whole community. During the last phase of the project, the German class has visited Asti and the UNESCO hills of Monferrato for four days of intercultural training and exchange.

An Erasmus+ KA1 application co-signed by weLand and IDF has just been delivered, with the purpose of collecting funds for a new edition of “From the Hills of Europe” during the school year 2015/16.
2.3. To-do-list: merging successful experiences and launching new pilot programmes

• Towards a comprehensive Wikimedia related local network. The follow-up of the didactic project Wikipedia va scuola will have to address a broader audience: not only schools, but also GLAMs and operators in tourism. This approach corresponds to a two-fold objective:

1) increasing the **solidity and durability of the local network** of Wiki operators by extending the MediaWiki training among all the possible stakeholders and by promoting **interdisciplinary collaboration** among them. Within this framework, the chronological priority acknowledged to schools is a strategic point, which will strengthen the educational system’s outreach in the local community. In other words, a surplus of knowledge will entrust schools will a positive role as drivers of innovation. The goal is to give back to the educational system that primacy in experimenting new models of social and economic development which is generally lacking nowadays;

2) supporting the **bottom-up initiative** of stakeholders from GLAMs and tourism by entrusting them with the active role of **prosumers**: agents sharing the required knowledge and tools to take up **proactive initiatives in the documentation and promotion of the territory via re-usable digital contents**.

The feasibility of this **scaling-up initiative** relies on the ongoing negotiation, between weLand and Wikimedia Italia, of a [Wikipedian in residence](http://example.com) for the period Winter 2015/6. The project should be co-funded by Wikimedia Italia and by the local bank foundation Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Asti. The Wikipedian in residence is expected to carry out his activity as an ambassador of digital openness, organising and coordinating MediaWiki workshops, edit-a-thons and other related events.

• **Strengthening and merging Open Data projects.** The 2015/2016 edition of *From the Hills of Europe* will add MediaWiki to the set of digital tools used by the participants. The goal is two-fold: 1) to enrich the digital school package with an introduction to mark-up languages; 2) to share the results of the students’ monitoring activity on Wikis, thus enlarging the visibility of the project and the possibility to make its results reusable.
3. BringinG eUropeana to south PiemonTe

Starting from these premises, an ambitious goal of weLand for the upcoming years is to offer regional, small and middle-sized institutions and projects the possibility to join their forces in order to interact with Europeana. The following priorities, which are open to re-evaluation during the upcoming months, have been identified by weLand:

1. **Digitization, new media and storytelling for GLAMs**: weLand should enable the collaboration between local stakeholders in order to discuss, select and test the Europeana best practices and business plans for the switch from analogical to digital archives and communication. The strengthening of collaboration and the identification of shared needs are fundamental priorities in this respect, considering the middle and small size of GLAM institutions in the concerned area and the consequent difficulties that stakeholders meet when trying to acquire new knowledge and to develop effective strategies and business plans;

2. **New didactics**: implementation of Europeana datasets and tools as instruments for new digital didactics; collaboration with Historiana and EuroClio;

3. **Convergence** between European Food and Drink on the one hand and, on the other, UNESCO, Slow Food and other brands of excellence which are deeply rooted in South Piemonte. Local producers (especially wine producers) with a strong economic impact on the region should be involved in a joint venture aiming to launch and fund ambitious projects of digital storytelling related to the products of the territory. The involvement of these important stakeholders should also be seen as a possible source of funds to support the actions envisaged in point 1.
4. Final Considerations

Positive approaches for the establishment of a *glocal* network

WeLand aims to **combine the action of a local association with the vision of an international high-knowledge network**. As an association founded in South Piemonte, WeLand tests and validates projects in the area which constitutes its natural laboratory. As a cultural network with members living and working in Italy, Germany and Belgium, it aims to offer proactive persons from all over Europe a place where they can share and combine their competences in different domains. In these first years of activity, WeLand has been able to gain and give back a lot thanks to this open, collaborative attitude, which can be synthetized in the following points:

- **openness**: WeLand is neither politically affiliated, nor the local chapter of bigger institutions. This status has the advantage of enabling the creation of effective working interfaces between stakeholders with different backgrounds, agendas and policies, which can find in WeLand a third-party collaborator and mediator. This has proved particularly useful when introducing crowd-sourcing based projects, such as the Wikis, in cultural institutions such as GLAMs and schools;

- **mutuality**: while WeLand is always responsible for its own projects, its collaborative attitude ensures the possibility of establishing long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships between (inter)national institutions and networks on the one hand, the local community and stakeholders on the other;

- **usability**: WeLand’s projects are committed to supporting and disseminating a mentality of reuse of Open Data in the fields of culture and active citizenship. WeLand’s engagement also implies that all the products of its projects are released with a CC license, by default in case of actions led by WeLand alone, or through an agreement in case other partners are involved;

- **scalability**: WeLand’s actions are planned and implemented in order to be scaled up and/or adapted to other contexts, mashed-up and re-invented by WeLand or other partners;

- **networking**: WeLand is the first re-user and re-inventor of its own projects. WeLand’s strategy is to start with small pilot programmes, which enable a phase of informal experimentation, and then to build upon effective experiences in order to allow for new combinations, hybridizations and collaborations.