
Organising a public information space about the crimes of a totalitarian regime

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The institutions dedicated to the organisation of the collective memory on the crimes of the fallen Eastern European regimes need urgently appropriate informational infrastructures. Adopting an "action research" methodology, I have already involved myself in this process, organising a digital library, dedicated to the history of the communist totalitarianism in Romania, accessible online. Starting from my research on knowledge management and propagation systems, I plan to pass on the next phase, organising an emancipated document space, that would catalyse the activity of the community interested in the consultation and development of the library. Through this intervention, I am trying to promote the SOMCRAC project (Space for the Organisation of the Memory on the Communist regime's Abuses and Crimes). Adhering to the "semantic web" and "pragmatic web" trends, the specifications exposed here propose: a Participatory and progressive definition of an ontology modelling state terror, evolving in pair with the clarification of the social problem and usable as a reference system b Better organisation of the digital document repository and of bibliographic records (indexed on the ontology and maintaining reference consistence when this one evolves). c Referencing the documents, participants and activities (collecting and validating testimonies, collectively constructing the indictment, organising repairing actions etc) on the same ontology- for representing or coordinating coherently the life of the "moral community" using the library. d Considering the ethical and juridical aspects and interoperating with other projects that aim at revealing and fighting the pathology of human condition.

Keywords: documentary space, collective memory, totalitarianism, semantic and pragmatic web, evolving reference system

1 THE PROJECT'S OBJECTIVES

1.1 Catalysing the organisation of a collective memory

The fall of Eastern European totalitarian regimes has created a pressing need for organising the collective memory- as a base for citizens' spiritual revival, society redressing and necessary juridical actions. Although in 1989, in Romania, a lot of victims, torturers and witnesses were still alive, the installed authorities have done almost nothing to unblock the justice. On the contrary, they locked the archives for 50 years, invoking "state interests", obliging the victims to die uncomforted and allowing to the culprits to prosper unhampered. Those who study the "Pitesti phenomenon"[1] (the organisation, in prisons, of demented tortures, from which the victims could escape only by becoming butchers and accepting to torture fellow sufferers) and understand that Romania has been exposed [2], for 45 years, to various forms of this procedure of in-chain compromising, realise the difficulties confronting the "Trial"... The repugnant conspiracy that still paralyses Justice is completing- through silence- the monstrous acts accomplished for decades, under the eyes of a powerless or indolent Europe. The immense scale of the crime contributes to this sinister outcome, posing a difficult problem of ... informational management. Millions of victims, witnesses, torturers, accomplices, heroes, repressive acts and events to elucidate. Tens of kilometres of pursuit records, used by the former political police, on the verge of being (at last...) made available to the civil society. A network of National Archives managed rudimentary and malevolently, that hampers the correction of economical abuses (refusing the release of proof on properties confiscated from their rightful owners) to cover-up occult and corrupt selective retrocession machinations. Historians, exceeded by thousands of testimonials already published in books, journals and newspapers. Jurists not knowing up to what level of gravity the abuses and crimes should be amnestied, so that the remaining key culprits (left reasonably few) can be tried for their actions. As this moral and juridical gangrene is about to be integrated in Europe, starting with 2007, it would be the case that Romanians be helped in the adequate organisation of the informational spaces necessary to treat it.

1.2 Understanding the effects of the totalitarian mechanism on the human condition

The organisation of the documentary space requires the elaboration of an "ontology of terror" usable as an indexing base. It is a perfect occasion to deepen the scientific analysis of a socio-political degeneration (pathology) phenomenon- to which so many societies have fallen pray and that should be understood better, to orientate the prevention. Otherwise, history will repeat itself, mercilessly, leading perhaps to the failing imagined by Orwell. Let's not forget that communist totalitarianism in Eastern Europe [3] struck after the Nazi episode. And it does not have the monopole of repression. Dictatorships of all political colours

(covering their acts with ideological diversions) transform societies in work, extermination, taming or alienation camps, deforming the human condition. The paltry interests (profitable businesses, cynical geopolitics, etc) and the redoubtable capabilities of the power centres call for solidarity among those wishing to defend human rights, regardless of where and how these rights are violated. The organisation of this front [4] would gain from the comprehension of the way the citizen of the "communist" Romanian state was transformed (during decennia) in an escapeless prisoner.

1.3 Organising digital libraries to emancipate communities

Due to the conditions mentioned above, organizing a digital library that would allow to an entire nation to rehabilitate its memory is a serious challenge for information science, posing interesting management problems at all levels: of the document collections continuously enriched and annotated, of the base of bibliographic records facilitating retrieval and exploration, of the ontologies used as reference for indexing, of the dialogue with those who contribute with information or consult them, of the relationships with the institutions that can intervene and of the norms to respect.

The main procedural axis of the library (organise collection structure and reference system- publish documents and bibliographic records- find and consult- react) can be accompanied by adequate support, at any level. The exploitation of the document and bibliographic records spaces can be enforced with various mechanisms and services, from the programming of agents for advising and matching [5] to the organisation of recommendation and cooperation forms between the library's users [6]. The information being distributed and accessible through the Internet, the formulas elaborated in "semantic WEB" can be valorised [7]. Finally, it is worth to signal the opportunity of calibrating, in such a project, of tracks explored in the pragmatic approach [8]- that give maximal attention the process of using an informational space, understanding that it refines the understanding of the notions that stand at its base. The continuous perfecting of the "ontology of terror" will be an objective of the community using the library, not only a means of retrieval and orientation. Between the evolving library, ontology and community, a circular relationship closes-up. This poses serious methodological problems and justifies the use of instruments developed in domains such as CSCW, "community informatics" and "distributed cognition" [9].

1.4 Applying Action Research

The last challenge is methodological. The comprehension of the informational physiology of human communities [10] can aim better organization ("progressive" orientation) or ritual conservation (ecological orientation). In both cases, we can use distant observation, in which the researcher minimally disturbs the studied phenomenon. But the adoption of a systemic vision [11] highlights the complex and evolutionary physiology of the global loop formed by a social phenomenon and the objects and mechanisms enriching it by "instrumentation". The development of the synaptic computer network infrastructure stimulates new communication formulas, determining reorganizations of the socio- cognitive physiology. In such situations, the "action-research" method is appropriate [12] : the analyst gets involved in the team, working on a socio-informational project, based on a plan for studying phenomena from inside. Success is reached if his intervention contributes to the project's accomplishment, in a way that validates the research hypotheses. In our case, it would consist of demonstrating that the digital library, through its content and physiology, has catalysed the public interest for the subject to which it is dedicated.

2 ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

2.1 Involved Romanian institutions and similar international initiatives

Obstructed by the authorities, the Romanian civil society has made pathetic efforts to reveal the true, provoking the apparition of institutions as: "Sighet Memorial" [<http://www.memorialsighet.ro/en/default.asp>] (studies centre dedicated to the memory of the victims and of the resistance, organising: a museum- in the former prison in which the Romanian elite was decimated, a documentary space with written and audio-taped testimonies, a series of conferences and published works, a "summer school" for students, etc); "Institute for the Investigation of Communism Crimes"-IICC (governmental institution, recently constituted, having the mandate to dress the map of damages and responsibilities); " National Council for Studying the Secrete police Archives " CNSAS [<http://www.cnsas.ro/>] (institution where Romanian can consult their personal files and verify if the persons that run for public positions have cooperate with the political police); "The Memory Review" [<http://revista.memoria.ro/>] - periodical dedicated to testimonies and to analyses on life in the Romanian gulag; "Suffering Memorial"- TV series, presenting, since 1990, interviews with victims

and torturers; dedicated collections of some publishing houses- as the series "Trial of Communism" appearing at Humanitas; articles appeared in daily press, eventually in permanent headings- like the "History of Communism"- in the National Diary newspaper.

The multitude of actors playing on this front, have yet to coagulate a coherent and efficient action. I discussed with the coordinators and animators of the respective institutions (Ana Blandiana, Marius Oprea, Ticu Dumitrescu, Claudiu Secasiu, Lucia Hossu Longin, etc) to see how could we cooperate to ameliorate the situation. Apart the mentioned socio-political problems, they all invoked the rudimentary equipment, the informational infrastructure at their disposal being in total disproportion with the huge documentary space and communication network that they are supposed to build.

Having been asked to conceive plans for ameliorating some web sites (CNSAS) or organising new ones (IICC), I have analysed the situation of worldwide analogue projects. Some efforts and realisations dedicated to the reflection of genocides committed against Armenians [<http://www.armenian-genocide.org>, http://www.theforgotten.org/site/intro_eng.html], Cambodians [<http://www.yale.edu/cgp/databases.html>], Jews [<http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Holocaust/>, <http://www.yadvashem.org/>]- are impressive. The web sites with this profile in Eastern Europe are however in an incipient state: (Hungary [http://www.rev.hu/index_en.html], Czech [<http://www.mvcr.cz/policie/udv/english/pripady/index.html>], Germany [http://www.bstu.bund.de/nn_710332/EN/The_Law/the_law_node_en.html__nnn=true stazie], Bulgaria [<http://www.geocities.com/decommunization/English/Main-eng.htm>], Estonia [<http://www.historycommission.ee/>] Poland [http://www.ipn.gov.pl/index_eng.html], Russia [<http://psi.ece.jhu.edu/~kaplan/IRUSS/BUK/GBARC/buk.html>]). In spite of the existence of interesting sites that approach the theme of genocide in general [<http://www.preventgenocide.org/punish/> and <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide.htm>] or that of human rights defence [4] and of some theoretical contributions [13], I am obliged to note that little has been done for the scientific progress of this application domain of databases and digital libraries. Can this delay prove that the subject is not interesting or, on the contrary, it reveals a cause for maintaining the public away from a "delicate" theme?

2.2 Undertaken actions and researches

The discussions and studies mentioned above have convinced me that a portal is necessary for signalling the pertinent actions of involved interveners and supporting efforts coordination and the correlation of informational structures. What incited me to act was the encounter with Cicerone Ionitoiu, a former political prisoner that, after 16 years spend in prisons, made impressive efforts to bring the destiny of his suffering colleagues into public attention, publishing tens of works on this topic (an example in [14]).

Starting with his works, I launched, in November 2004, a web site [15] dedicated to the diffusion of testimony-documents that permit the comprehension of the phenomenon and the formulation of an indictment. It implied a lot of work- the starting sources (books, newspapers and documents) having to be manually re-edited or scanned, converted into text (with OCR instruments), corrected, transformed in html or pdf format. I wish to thank the volunteers that helped us, the authors that gave their consent and the editing houses that provided us CDROMs of recently published works, allowing their free access through the Internet. I primarily mention the generosity and abnegation of the "Masina de Scris" editing house, that helped us to publish [<http://www.procesulcomunismului.com/marturii/fonduri/ioanitoiu/default.asp.htm>] the online version of the monumental encyclopaedia (in 12 volumes) elaborated by Mr. Ioanitoiu: "The victims of communist terror: arrested, tortured, incarcerated, murdered"- a dictionary organised on letters (only the letter P, for example, holding the description- in short bibliographical files- of 10 000 victims' destinies...).

In addition to the central archive of digitally formatted documents (relating thousands of abusive arrest cases, murders, diabolical tortures, riot repressions, armed resistance fights in the mountains, religious persecutions etc), the actual site contains a bloc of bibliographical records (short descriptions about pertinent information appeared in books, newspapers, TV shows etc), a group of dialogue forums, a guest book and a chronologically-organized summary. For security reasons (we have already been forced to change a hosting service due to massive DDOS attacks aimed at our site) the accessible online version does not contain the database and the dynamic elements necessary for its exploitation through the web server. The static public version is obtained periodically from the dynamic site- that we administer in a private space.

The plan for organising a new version allowing the involvement of the wide public in the development of the digital library and of the afferent informational space- that I will expose below- starts with this dynamic site, private for the moment. It will try to valorise the results of my research in the area of organising knowledge management and propagation systems, after a prolonged study on the explanation phenomenon, synthesised in my PhD thesis [16]. Starting from the principle enounced in the thesis, I have studied new formulas as the evolving orchestration of "communities of practice" established emergently on

Internet or as the "free information wave propagation"- coordinating the development of some prototypes. I have then conceived the architecture of distributed instruction systems (the last [17] aiming at the construction of a middleware facilitating the inter-operation between Canadian service providers and pedagogical resource repositories). At the foundation of these systems I have placed [18], the indexing of all elements (persons, documents, activities) relative to a unique semantic reference system. Using "competence equilibrium" services (see my communication in the Knowledge management track), I have developed [19] cooperation and assistance formulas that can improve the physiology of the informational community. The application of these formulas in the organisation of the space for the valorisation of the digital library- leads to the specifications exposed below for the SOMCRAC project (Space for the Organisation of the Memory on the Communist regime's Abuses and Crimes).

3 SPECIFICATIONS FOR THE SOMCRAC CONCEPTUAL ARCHITECTURE

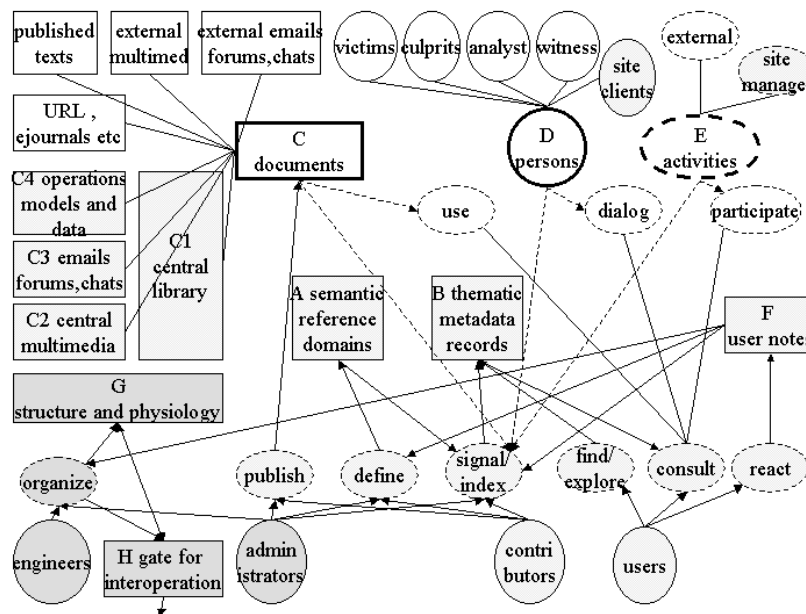


Fig. 1. The system behaviour

A Constructing the specific ontology. The reference systems that stand at the foundation of the indexing system used in the descriptive metadata files (bibliographic records) will be organized (by SOMCRAC administrators, cooperating with contributing users) as ontologies [20], structuring the notional space (in which intervene victims, culprits, witnesses, events, aspects, repairing actions etc.) And this, on one hand, to increase the pertinence of the retrieval operations and, on the other, to obtain a synthetic and expressive modelling of the problem space explored by the community and explained by documents. The continuous modification of the ontology will however require perfecting the mechanisms for updating the reference already made, relative to prior versions (see the analysis of this problem in [21]).

B Organizing the metadata bibliographic records and their indexing on the ontology. The main semantic aggregation instrument [22] of the information space organized through the site is the bibliographical (metadata) records bloc (database) that synthetically signals documents, persons and activities related to the site's subject (CRAC). For external elements (persons, activities, printed or electronic texts, etc), these records have a guiding (bibliographical) character. For the elements comprised in SOMCRAC management space, the metadata records equip the document repository and the person and activities directory. The semantic characterisation of an element is done (by administrators cooperating with contributors) by indexing it on the reference domains (A).

C Managing the digital document bloc. The digital document (textual or multimedia) library is at the core of the SOMCRAC system. Apart the central archive's collection (C1-C2), continuously enriched through publishing (by the site's administrators or contributors), we include here the data resulting from emergent collective activities (email, chat, forums) or from the operations orchestrated through procedural scenarios ("functions"- see explanations in [23]). The presence of a document's version in the SOMCRAC central library depends on the agreement with its legal owners and can raise other problems (privacy, transparency, liability, repudiability, etc). In case the document remains external, but is recorded in the B bloc and can be

accessed on the Internet starting from its record, SOMCRAC acts as a portal for the access of an extended digital library, distributed and administered at various addresses.

D,E Organising the expertise and activity space. The B block's records can signal not only actors and events of the past to recover, but also planned actions (projects) of the community, or persons that can participate to them or can support other participants (collecting testimonies on the Internet, validating them by authoritative institutions, collectively constructing the indictment, coordinating repairing actions etc).

F The users' actions and annotations. The system's users will dispose of refined retrieval and navigation mechanisms for exploring the bibliographic record bloc C and the document library B. Once the interesting element found, it can be consulted (use- in the case of an on-site or external document, dialogue- for a support person, participation- for an activity). Afterwards, the user can perform annotations- an important direction for extensions of the informational space (the management of which is a subject in itself). Starting from the notes, a corrective feedback can operate, at the level of the elements' description (indexing), of the reference documents' organisation or even of the space's structuring.

G.H Organizing the space and the inter-operation gates with various systems and institutions. The reengineering, or more exactly the continuous engineering, of the space's evolution [24] is the task of system engineers and administrators, that must take into account the users' observations and the restrictions imposed by the conservation of compatibilities. Special attention will be allotted to the gates for external relations (translations in other languages, semantic coordinate translation in the case of different ontologies, etc).

4 CONCLUSION: AN APPEAL

It wish the project exposed (proposed) in this paper, stir the interest of some institutions and colleagues, who could contribute to its realization, by getting involved or by offering strategic and scientific suggestions. The success of this attempt would mean the combined resolution of an important moral problem and of an interesting scientific one- showing the social utility of using digital libraries and applying action-research and pragmatic web approaches. After a first promising resolution [25] the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe responded to the report [26] advanced by Mr Göran Lindblad (on 25-01- 2006) in a disappointing way [27]. However, the document, admitting that "the fall of totalitarian communist regimes in central and eastern Europe has not been followed in all cases by an international investigation of the crimes committed by them" and that "the awareness of history is one of the preconditions for avoiding similar crimes in the future" will "hopefully encourage historians throughout the world to continue their research aimed at the determination and objective verification of what took place". I hope this project will stimulate the passage from words to facts.

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Note: The extensive reference list, determining the overflow of the 5 pages, may be easily shortened, if necessary.