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Engaging Users to Play with Digitised Cultural Heritage: How Gallica Interacts with Gallicanautes

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Gallica is the digital library of the French National Library. It has been online since 1997 and now offers free access to more than 3 million documents (books, newspapers, manuscripts, images, maps, musical sheets, sound records, etc.). In 2010, the French National Library established a social media strategy for Gallica, relying on a blog, a monthly newsletter, and an active presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. These different extensions of the digital library have been defined and designed in order to expose the richness of the digitised collections, to connect them with contemporary issues and topics, and to allow users to look at them with new eyes.

One of the French National Library's main concerns regarding Gallica's presence on social media is involving end users in the valorisation process. An important effort is devoted to acknowledging what users (who go by the names of Gallicanautes) already do with digitised collections. The multiplicity of uses that digitised collections trigger on the Web is tracked down and compiled. Compulsive users and specific communities (genealogists, WWI specialists, medievalists, ancient map aficionados, etc.) are identified and solicited. They are retweeted by Gallica's Twitter feed, asked to make albums for Gallica's Facebook page, invited to pin on Gallica's Pinterest boards. Gallica's blog and newsletter regularly focus on innovative projects that rely on digitised collections, such as <http://disquairesdeparis.fr/> (a website dedicated to history and geolocalisation of Parisian record dealers) or <http://memoloi.hypotheses.org/> (an academic research project detailing French patrimonial laws). A series of short videos has recently been shot with a few Gallicanautes, allowing them to explain why and how they use the digital library.

Involving end users also means encouraging new types of creative practices based on digitised collections. The team in charge of Gallica's presence on social media dedicates time and energy to leading by example when it comes to playing with Gallica. A good part of the posts published on Gallica's Facebook page, Twitter account or Pinterest boards involves imaginative applications, such as making paper toys out of 1920s patterns, building 3D printable globes, creating animated gifs with press photographs or medieval illuminations, or searching for lookalikes in 19th century portraits (cf. illus-



trations 1 and 2). Among the many initiatives that Gallica undertook these past years regarding creative use of heritage collections, three particular projects – #AssommoirLT, #ChallengeAZ and #MonBledDansCassini – have taught the French National Library how beneficial it can be for a cultural institution to imagine new ways to interact with its remote users.



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2.



Livetweeting a literary piece: #AssommoirLT

The #MuseumWeek is a worldwide cultural event on Twitter that took place in March 2015. Each day of the week was devoted to a specific hashtag (#secretsMW, #souvenirsMW, #architectureMW, etc). More than 2800 museums, libraries, and associations in 77 countries took part to the event, which made that week a highly competitive time for cultural institutions on Twitter.

Since Gallica is not a museum, it took part to the #MuseumWeek not by promoting the digital library itself, but by focusing on other institutions, mostly French, and by tweeting about Gallica's digitised resources regarding those institutions. Pictures of Orsay before it was a museum were shared, along with travel books from the 1920s explaining the whereabouts of French monuments, or old maps and plans of museums (cf. illustrations 3, 4, and 5).



3. The future Orsay museum like you (thankfully) never saw it.



4. To get around Paris in 1905, follow the guide!



5. Celebrate #Architecture MW day and build your own Eiffel tower...

When the #FamilyMW day came (a day when museums were supposed to talk about what they do for and with family and kids), Gallica concentrated on a famous scene from Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* – a scene where the hosts of Gervaise and Coupeau's wedding wander through the Louvre, make awkward comments about masterpieces, and get lost in the museum maze. The scene was livetweeted: Gallica's Twitter feed posted quotes from Zola's text and illustrated the tweets with the original manuscript available on Gallica (cf.

6. "We could go to the museum..."



illustration 6), or with images, photographs, and press drawings found in the French National Library's digitised collections.

The fact is that the #AssommoirLT operation got completely lost in the hyperactive flow of the #MuseumWeek, and hardly anybody noticed Gervaise and Coupeau's misadventures. Only one tweet (cf. illustration 7), showing a photograph of the Louvre, got retweeted many times, but it was probably because the picture was compelling to the many people who had been to the museum and were suddenly given the opportunity to see how it looked more than a century ago. It did not



7. "After strolling down the Rue des Petits-Champs, they arrived at the Louvre..."

generate any interaction, except for one tweet from a bookstore, the Berkeley Books of Paris (cf. illustration 8), who responds to Gallica's tweets on a regular basis.



8. Can I offer you a map for the rest of the trip?

The lack of visibility due to the astounding amount of tweets shared that day by thousands of cultural institutions does not explain the semi-failure of the #AssommoirLT operation. A lesson can be learned here: no matter how good an idea is, if it does not fit in the ecosystem that produces it, chances are it will neither work nor grow nor catch the attention. The concept of literary livetweeting has actually proven to be successful in other contexts such as #ReadTheHobbit, @ModernProust and @ProustTweet, or @IAM_SHAKESPEARE. But the fact that #AssommoirLT was a “top-down” operation (it did not invite users to participate) and the fact that it lacked the touch of humour that characterizes Gallica’s twitter feed (cf. illustration 9) explain why its followers did not pay much attention.

9.



Blogging about genealogy, for geneabloggers: #ChallengeAZ
The Challenge AZ is a French blogging challenge launched in 2013 by and for genealogists. It consists of publishing every

day of the month of June – except on Sundays – a blogpost on a topic that starts with the letter assigned to that day (A for June 1st, B for June 2nd, etc.). The French “geneablogosphere” – as it calls itself – is an organised and welcoming network with identified leaders and ambassadors, such as Sophie Boudarel, who coordinates the organisation of the Challenge AZ and hosts the blog *Gazette des ancêtres* (<http://lagazettedesancetres.blogspot.com/>).

When the Challenge AZ first took place in 2013, some of the dozens of bloggers who participated talked about Gallica in their posts – not necessarily in a very positive way, since the digital library’s search engine does not fit the expectations of Internauts who are used to genealogy databases. Fortunately, since 2013, many hours of work have been devoted to simplifying Gallica’s web interface (a new version of the website will be launched next fall) and explaining to the Gallicanautes the subtleties of its search engine when it comes to genealogy search. A review of all the Challenge AZ posts that concerned Gallica was published on Gallica’s blog after the first edition in 2013; a board on Gallica’s Pinterest account was devoted to the second edition of the Challenge AZ in 2014; and when the 2015 edition came along, it seemed natural for Gallica’s blog to take part like any other participant.

Each day of the month of June 2015, Gallica’s blog published a post concerning a specific resource that could be useful for genealogy search, or presenting genealogy bloggers who work with Gallica, or explaining how to maximize Gallica’s services and functionalities in a genealogy perspective. This ambitious project was prepared months in advance, as it involved different departments and entities in

the French National Library. A lot of time was also devoted – during the Challenge – to reading and commenting on other participants’ blogposts, replying to their questions and reacting to their remarks or suggestions. The U day (U as in *Une colle? On s’y colle!* or “You ask, Gallica answers!”) also offered an occasion to interact with Internauts who did not necessarily know Gallica and how to use it for genealogy purposes.

The results of Gallica’s participation to the Challenge AZ are not spectacular in terms of audience, number of retweets or shares on social media, and it could seem that the visibility acquired by the operation was not worth the amount of work and energy that was put into it. However, the quality of the dialogue that took place between Gallica and the other participants to the Challenge AZ (nearly 70 blogs participated in the 2015 edition) and the gratitude that these participants showed to Gallica are priceless and establish long-term landmarks (cf.

illustration 10 and 11). The project also helped promote Gallica’s beta version: many blog posts concerning digitised resources pinpointed new functionalities available on Gallica Labs and helped Gallicanautes become familiar with their future web interface.

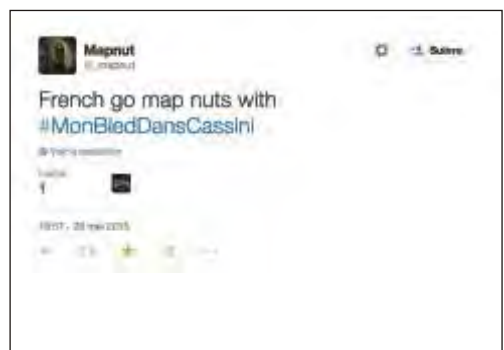
Going mapnuts: #MonBledDansCassini

The map of Cassini is the first general map of the kingdom of France. It was drawn between 1756 and 1815 by the Cassini family, and the French National Library has one of the rare hand-painted original maps in its collections. In 2015, this document (which consists of one general map and 180 different parts detailing French territory) was redigitised in high resolution and made available on Gallica.

Gallica shared the news on Facebook and Twitter and asked its followers to find their hometown on the map and to share it with the hashtag #MonBledDansCassini (or #MyHometownInCassini). People went literally mapnuts (cf. illustration 12). In 24



11. Great! Gallica’s blog gets on board for the #ChallengeAZ...



hours, more than 250 mentions of the hashtag were counted (cf. illustration 13 and 14) and the Gallica Twitter feed was not able to retweet all of the mentions. Some of Gallica’s followers even complained about the fact that their hometown was not on the map (because



13.



14.



France's frontiers have changed in 3 centuries); others joked about the fact that their hometown was on the fold of the map. The popularity of the hashtag caught the attention of the press: the newspaper magazine *L'Express* published an article about it and thus helped spread the Cassini madness on the Web.

This success can be explained in several ways. #MonBledDans Cassini combines an amazing historical document and a common fascination for maps with a powerful hashtag containing just the right dose of irony.

("Bled", originally Arabic, became a popular French slang word used to describe unknown and uninteresting places or villages.) But the core of the success relies on the fact that with this map and this hashtag, anybody who is attached to (and not necessarily born on) French territory can tell a story of his own, sometimes a very personal one, and share it with the world – as did hundreds of people in the month of June 2015.

The moral of the three stories told by #AssommoirLT, #ChallengeAZ, and #MonBledDansCassini might be that the more implicated the user is in the valorisation of heritage collections, and the more personal and emotional it gets, the more viral and effective it becomes. Cultural institutions in the digital age should not be looking for the buzz for its own sake, but they can only benefit from adopting the users' perspective on the tools and collections they offer to the public, and from actively involving users in the mediation process.