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“Reti Medievali”: An Initiative of New Communication of Historical Knowledge

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“Reti Medievali”: An Initiative of New Communication of Historical Knowledge

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Reti medievali was started in 1999 as a joint research project of five Italian universities, completely home-made by researchers. The Reti Medievali (RM) project offers text, working tools and analyses of historiography and aims to be highly informative. RM authors and users needs for information and correlated editorial organisation are described.

Introduction: Reti Medievali (RM)

I am going to speak about an on line publishing initiative I started in 1999 with some colleagues of other Italian universities (professors Pietro Corrao, Roberto Delle Donne, Stefano Gasparri and Gian Maria Varanini). I think that this experiment can be characterized as home-made: with all the advantages and all the disadvantages that this dimension involves. Just for this reason, my participation in this round table will perhaps contribute to clarify the point of view of scholars who intend to employ new technologies of communication in order to bypass the organizational and economical barriers that condition the traditional press channels of communication of historical knowledge, and in order to favor a wider distribution of personal publications. The quest for innovative alternatives disclosed by the digital press, raises in fact new problems for scholars who decide to become personally engaged in the preparation and in the editing of this new means of publication.

RM contents

First of all, I will illustrate –in a general way– our publication and the results we have obtained till now, in order to offer an idea of the contents and the shapes in which it is articulated. Its title is *Reti Medievali. Iniziative online per gli studi medievistici* (Medieval Networks: online initiatives for medieval studies)¹. It is a cooperative initiative between

¹ URL: <www.retimedievali.it>

five major Italian universities (Florence, Naples, Palermo, Trento and Venice), initiated in 1999, which brings together online resources for medieval studies with a wide context, emphasizing the qualitative selection of material. In fact *Reti Medievali* [RM] is a set of web pages that analyses and promotes the use of computer techniques in the study of medieval history. The editors are teachers and scholars from the five participating universities.

The RM project plans to be highly informative by offering texts, working tools and analyses of historiography, along the lines of present-day European and Italian research and teaching practices. We also operate a selection of materials and texts submitted to the peer-reviewing. This project aims to create an on-line community of medieval scholars of unrestricted specializations, and to encourage institutions and individual scholars to experiment with the potential offered by new communication technologies².

RM is gradually developing integrated projects: it is an electronic journal, a resource archive, a digital library, an information bulletin, a place for multi-media and cyber-space teaching experiments and a historical archive. The project is divided into six main sections. *RM Journal* contains debates, hyper-text essays and multi-media experiments, reviews, working-paper proposals, up-to-date bibliographies and web-site information³. *RM Repertory* is a structured and critical overview of the basic resources for a broad spectrum of medieval studies; it will present new material as it becomes available on-line⁴. *RM Library* publishes on-line texts concerning the fields and problems of current medieval research, becoming the first specialized library of this kind⁵. *RM Calendar* supplies information on international meetings, seminars, congresses and historical or archaeological exhibitions in the field of medieval studies⁶. *RM Didactics* presents teaching materials and experiences connected to the use of on-line multi-media technologies⁷. *RM Memory* is a sort of dictionary of scholars, of past and present works, as well as of important current problems in historiography⁸.

A section called *RM News* highlights the new input of the different sections, so as to simplify consulting the site⁹. We also send a monthly newsletter of updating materials via e-mail to a large Italian and international address book¹⁰. We also offer an English version of home and introductory pages of every sections¹¹. RM is in fact multilingual: texts are written in the authors' original languages (obviously in Italian, but also in French, German, Spanish and English). Every section and every page is totally free access and full-text.

RM authors/users

RM was started by a group of scholars who felt uneasy with the current fragmentation of historiography and research. Though it could be looked at as a source of growth, this

² Cf. also <http://www.dssg.unifi.it/_RM/RM-Home.htm>

³ URL: <http://www.dssg.unifi.it/_RM/rivista>

⁴ URL: <<http://www.rm.unina.it/repertorio>>

⁵ URL: <http://www.lett.unitn.it/_RM/biblioteca>

⁶ URL: <http://www.dssg.unifi.it/_RM/calendario>

⁷ URL: <http://www.dssg.unive.it/_RM/didattica>

⁸ URL: <<http://www.rm.unina.it/memoria>>

⁹ URL: <<http://www.rm.unina.it/novita>>

¹⁰ The newsletter is also published on URL: <<http://www.rm.unina.it/novita/Nov-archivio.htm>>

¹¹ URL: <http://www.storia.unifi.it/_RM/RM-Homenglish.htm>

fragmentation may cause an increasing lack of communication among the various medievalist sectors, as well as between these and other fields of historical research. The promoters recognize the need for a critical re-evaluation of traditional research and the objectives of current activities. RM hopes to intervene in the areas where the most interesting developments have occurred in Italian and international medieval studies of the last decades.

RM's challenge is to experiment fully with the potential of all new telematic and cybernetic communication systems, mostly unexplored as a community initiative. The promoters want to change the general opinion about the low scientific value of current electronic publications, encouraging an active involvement in the now undeniably global transformation of research practices and language. We believe it to be worthwhile, therefore, to pursue this service, to offer a meeting place open to all and a site for the development of new methods of communication among Italian and international medievalists.

In effect, we are receiving growing scientific acknowledgments from many interlocutors in Italy and several European countries. The statistics of contacts to RM are encouraging. In the first year of publication (may 2000-april 2001) we have registered approximately 100,000 contacts, with a monthly average at the eve of 2001 of approximately 12,500 opened pages, which indicates a trend of approximately 150,000 contacts for the current year¹². Readers are obviously mainly Italian, but with meaningful quotas of readers from the German linguistic area, from France, Spain and Latin America. Maybe, the multilingual prospect is rather penalizing if one considers that the majority of English speaking readers are mainly monolingual: in fact, we register rather few readers from England and from the USA. The analysis of data, moreover reveals an interest that characterizes RM as a working set of web sites (contacts happen mostly in the working days, with a drop in the summer and in vacation time), with a public articulated in a nucleus of specialists (teachers, researchers, PhDs and students) and in a galaxy of readers not specialist, but amateurs of the Middle Ages (a category of readers that we consider important for our initiative).

RM architecture and organisation

Our initiative is also physically dislocated on several servers: currently on those of the history departments and the faculties of letters at the universities of Florence, Naples, Trento and Venice, and, in a near future will be dislocated on that of Palermo, too. We aim at a better distribution of the editorial job and at giving a reticular dimension to the initiative. For the input of data and documents, each server is assisted by young editors who add to their proficiency in medieval history the competence in computer science required to carry out the job of digital editing¹³.

It is evident – first of all to us who are the editors of RM – that our publishing initiative, the way it is organized at present, has homemade characteristics. As I said, this has doubtless advantages: control of every phase of the work, lack of any publishing mediation, control of the costs, prompt updating, and so on. Nevertheless, initiatives like ours – born spontaneously in groups of researchers and in scholarly communities – will have to face many important problems in the near future. Among which I indicate four, at least.

First of all is the necessity to choose: whether to maintain direct control of every publishing phase (a possibility that a medium such as Internet offers like no other up to now

¹² Cf. statistic reports in every section's home page (click on icon at bottom)

¹³ Cf. the board of editor's page: < <http://www.rm.unina.it/redazione/Red-Redattori.htm>>

ever could), or to delegate the technical aspects to a specialized publishing staff?. When we put RM on line, Firenze University Press did not yet exist. It is evident that we shall have to find some sort of collaboration with the latter, because its staff will be able to supply a very important technical and editorial support. But, I ask myself if, as an example, the eventual adoption of the publishing FUP logo won't in a certain measure condition the reticular pluralism of our initiative, seeing that it was conceived as a collaboration between more athenaeums and also that it is strategically dislocated on more servers? This is a question I am asking.

Another relevant issue is the preservation of our publication. I do not refer as much to the technical aspects of safeguard and duplication of information, which we think we shall be able to face by means of techniques of mirroring, as to the legal aspects of certification and guarantee of authenticity. The recent agreement between the University of Florence and the National Library of Florence for the voluntary deposit of digital scientific publications represents an important occasion in order to guarantee these scopes¹⁴. But in this case, too, I ask myself: how could aspects like the updating, review and speed of information be guaranteed? This is also another question I am asking.

A third issue, that derives in part from the previous ones, concerns the metadata of identification of the content and the bibliographical classification of the electronic publications. I'm not an expert on the subject, but, as an editor of an on line publication, I perceive the emergency to deal with the problem. Anyhow, in this case, too, I raise a question: must initiatives like ours that were born spontaneously outside of the traditional editorial practices by force be condemned to lack a bibliographical identity unless they accept to be filtered through a publishing house? It would seem to me a serious case of marginalization, not to say of discrimination.

Finally, the issue of protection of the rights of intellectual property. I confess that it is a kind of problem I do not perceive to be quite as dramatic as it appear to all the publishers, for obvious economic reasons. From the start the RM policy has been to guarantee free access and with no charge full-text reading, without limitations of any economic sort. This policy is surely suggested by the home-made nature of direct editors of the scientific community that we represent and of our initiative. I ask myself if it would have been the same if we had passed through the mediation of a publishing house. This is another open question concerning the relationship between scholarly communication and academic presses.

¹⁴ URL: <<http://www.unifi.it/e-press/accordo.htm>>