



BOBCATSSS 2010 @ Parma, Italy

Dates: Monday 25th, Tuesday 26th, Wednesday 27th January, 2010

**Bridging the digital divide:
libraries providing access for all?**

Once upon a time in the West (and East)
“A short evaluation of Bobcatsss up till now”

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Dear participants,

First of all I am very grateful that the organization committee has invited me again to say a few words.

Secondly I apologize that I do not speak the English language so fluently, certainly not when you compare my pronunciation with that of our colleagues from Great Britain or other countries where English is the mother tongue. Besides that my voice is a little bit hoarse or husky (caused by smoking too much and drinking whiskey!), the Dutch language and accent is entirely different from the English language, especially from what we called Oxford English.

Fortunately for the most of you, I suppose, you are not forced to listen to a speech in Dutch, which could be a possibility if some historical events would have another outcome. Few of you, except perhaps my Dutch friends, know that in the 17th century the British and the Dutch fought each other many times, luckily only at sea. *Note: at that time football does not exist, so we compete each other (once in 4 years) by wars* there were 4 of such sea wars. We won two of them. The second war ended by a victory of the Dutch admiral Michiel de Ruyter who defeated the British fleet at Chatham. In the negotiations, followed by this victory, we forced the English (amongst other things) to give us Suriname. (A country in the north of South America, at that time full of rich natural sources). In exchange of that, we were willing to give the English “Nieuw Amsterdam”. (Which is now called New York).

Suppose we had not done that and assuming that the USA had been developed in the same directions as what will be the case nowadays, than the Dutch language would be world spread and had perhaps replaced the English as a world language.

As this is not the case, do pity me and praise yourself that you are not obliged to listen to a crazy language (in which the letter g is pronounced as ggggg).

Enough of that let us talk about the creation of Bobcatsss. Each of you has heard about a phenomenon in life, called the midlife crisis. Those participants (especially those belong to the male sex), who are older that let us say 45, have experienced it already or are in the middle of it. (*Note: if not, I like a drink with them during the reception!*)

One of the symptoms of this midlife crisis is that you want to go back to and or renew your youth, anyway to the time that you were full of energy and ready for all kind of challenges. Change is the key word, so for many of these midlife crisis people resulted this in a new job, a new house and sometimes also in a new partner. In the beginning of the nineties I was around 50 years old. I had already started a new relationship (*sorry for becoming so personal*) and because of that moved to a new house. The only thing that had to be done (by myself) was

trying to change my work (which, at that time, was mainly lecturing and doing research). I had to find new challenges.

Except these personal changes, all other kind of developments in the world took place, e.g.: in education (*less emphasis on big lectures and more emphasis on supervising working or project groups*); in the world of libraries (*from mainly lending books to active delivering of all kind of information, by more and more using information technology*); and of course (and most important of all) in the world of politics and economics (*the fall of the wall in Berlin, the disappearance of communism and , as consequence of this, the obtaining of independence for many states in Eastern Europe.*)

So, in the beginning nineties, the time had come to do something with these changes, especially with all the possibilities of being easily in touch (without any former objections) with colleagues (*lecturers, students and people working in the information industry*) from Eastern European countries.

Within the Faculty of Economics and Information (nowadays called the Institute of Media and Information Management) of the University of Amsterdam, we had just started a new study course, called "Information management and business topics".

In this new course we wanted to teach the students how to deal with and or to manage e.g. processes of information. Instead of learning only all kind of theories (by *reading books, articles or by searching the internet*), it was our intention to develop management and organization capabilities, by giving the students the opportunity to work together in all kind of real management projects.

One of the big projects I thought students had to do was organizing a conference, in which also other students would participate from other universities. If possible, this had to be done in cooperation with an other university from abroad Based on former contacts we had within the University of Budapest, as well within the National Library in Hungary, we asked them if they want to be partners in organizing a conference. As you all know, from the history of Bobcatsss, they agreed, however under the condition that the conference would take place in Budapest.

So a group of about 25 students started preparing the first Symposium by dividing themselves in 4 subgroups:

- A. a group charged with the selection of papers (and responsible for the contents program);
- B. a group responsible for sponsoring and finances;
- C. a group doing the public relations (including editing); and
- D. a group busy with the organization (facilities, accommodations, equipment, travel etc).

Each group was headed by an elected student and guided by one of our lecturers. The 4 student group leaders formed together the project management group, chaired by a student project leader (elected by the 25 students). This project management group was supervised by me. During the first five years, starting for the first time in 1993, Amsterdam and Budapest did organize the symposium, and always based on the same structure. Of course each year another group of students of Amsterdam had to realize the job. (*Note: all students wee in the third or fourth year of their study*) Because of growing experience and because of the publicity the symposium got during these first 5 years, the symposium did attract more and more students (and also professionals) from different universities, not only from Europe but

also from the new world (*sorry, by using a term coming from the wine industry*). Highlight was the fifth symposium, in which we succeeded to attract around 400 participants (of which around 300 were students) and had at the opening amongst others the President of Hungary, the Dutch Ambassador, the director general of the Council of Europe, a commissioner of the EU, the secretary general of IFLA. After being in charge of the Bobcatsss symposium for 5 years, we thought that one of the other original founders of Bobcatsss had to take over. The Royal School of Librarianship in Copenhagen was willing to do that and did organize the symposium in 1998 (*also in Budapest*).

Before I will give a short comment on the development of the various symposia, let me mention first what we agreed at the first symposium between the representatives of the participating universities, which were in order of the Bobcatsss acronym: Budapest, Oslo, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Tampere, Stuttgart, Sheffield and Szombathely. The Bobcatsss principles were part of a letter of intent, signed by all the university representatives.

Bobcatsss starting-points (principles)

1. Each year there will be symposium, to be organised by students and mainly meant for students.
2. All universities involved (especially those who signed the letter of intent, but also those who are willing to co-organise a symposium in the future) are obliging themselves to send as many students as possible *Note : in any case in a relation of 1 lecturer to 2 students.*
3. To promote the symposium the organising universities must use their network to invite as many other universities which have faculties of information and or librarianship, and also professionals working in the field of information etc.
4. The symposium has to be organised by (at least) two universities of which one is hosting the symposium. The students involved in the organisation must give as much as possible the opportunity (by e.g. giving them financial support) to visit the foregoing symposium to give them enough impressions for their own preparations. *Note: adding advantage: more or less a guarantee that a lot of students (of 4 universities) are participating.*
5. To give extra motivation for students in joining the Bobcatsss organisation group, the involved students must give enough study or credit points. *Note: the best solution is that, within the study curriculum, the organisation of Bobcatsss is an important part of a management course.*
6. As long as there will be big differences (regarding economic circumstances) between West and East European countries the symposium has to take place in one of the Eastern European countries. Because of that a university in the “West” has to cooperate with a university in the “East”. *Note: students (and staff) of Eastern European countries have therefore more possibilities to participate, because of less travel – and accommodation costs.*
7. The symposium has to be held on a low budget level. The symposium fee (especially for students and actually also for young professionals) must be as low as possible. This applies also for the costs of (hotel) accommodations, selected by the organisation committee.
8. One of the most important principles of the symposium is to create an atmosphere by which participants (again especially students) get enough opportunity to be in touch with each other. *Note: for this reason organising universities are asked that social and cultural activities will be an important part of the program (e.g. reception, cultural evening and parties, and not to forget the presence of what I always called **a Bobcatsss pub.**)*
9. The theme of the symposium must be in line with actual developments in the field of information science. It will be chosen by the 2 universities involved. It is also up to them

which criteria will be maintained for selection of papers. Note: presentations of papers (especially those for workshops) sent in by students are to prefer.

10. Universities who want to organise a symposium must propose this in time (at least 2-3 years in advance). Those who already had a partner university (West/East) are more or less certain that they might do the job. Agreed was that Amsterdam together with Budapest would organise the symposium for the first five years. Most important reason for that was to get Bobcatsss on the rails.

The name Bobcatsss was chosen, not only because it is a nice acronym of the founding universities, but it is also the name of a wildcat, living e.g. in the Northern European countries and very well known for its aggressive character. Because of the image of especially libraries and librarians (!!!) this could be the start of a big change.

The results up to now

The symposium in Parma is as everybody knows the 18th time that the symposium has been organised. I never had thought in 1993 that Bobcatsss would exist that long. Of course I, and not only me, but also the other founders of Bobcatsss, hoped it would be.

Due to the fact that A'dam did organise the first 5 symposia, by which a certain continuum was assured, and also because of the enthusiasm of the participating universities, especially those who took several times the initiative to organise the symposium after A' dam (e.g. Stuttgart, Oslo and Copenhagen), the Bobcatsss symposium became well-known not only in Europe but all over the world. One other guarantee for the survival of Bobcatsss was that Euclid (after 10 years of existence) was willing and prepared to adopt the symposium. When I formally left the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, because of my work for the European Union, we got more or less the guarantee that there was an official organisation, like Euclid, whose responsibility it was to realize each year again that two universities in cooperation with each other would do the job. Bobcatsss in itself was, to tell you the truth, an informal organisation without any real authority. So we were glad that Euclid took the formal responsibility. **There was, however, one very important condition of our side, namely that Euclid would maintain the original principles of Bobcatsss.**

Where all the symposia did took place?

In alphabetical order we can mention the following cities: Bratislava, Budapest (7 times), Krakow, and Porto (*), Portoroz (Slovenia), Prague, Riga, Tallinn, Torun, Vilnius and Zadar (Croatia) and now of course Parma (*). I dare to say that all the symposia were a success. Of course sometimes a symposium was more successful than some other ones, because of a better organisation or due to a better contents program (workshops good lectures and keynote speeches) or perhaps because of a very good social program .*Note: one of the very important conditions for a successful symposium was and is if the two universities involved do cooperate with each other very well.*

Each concerned university had experienced how difficult it is to communicate with each other during the preparation work. Let me assure you that we did know that from the start, but it was and is in my opinion one of the management jobs students had to cope with. Quite often you could say that some frustrations occur within the communication between the two universities, but let me assure (especially those universities who are doing the job in the future) that at the end these frustrations disappeared during the symposium itself.

The longer Bobcatsss exist, the more experience universities got, the more the Bobcatsss symposia became well known. One of the results of becoming well known is that, over the years, more and more students and universities did participate. The last symposia did attract about 350 participants, coming sometimes from more than 30 countries.

All together, up till now around 90 universities and (counting from my memory, which I hope is still good) also around 50 professional institutes (varying from national boards till libraries and or institutes of information) did participate. All the world continents were represented and more than 100 countries.

In all these years more that 6000 people did come, of which I think nearly 2000 came more than one time. Apparently some participants (former students, infected by the so called Bobcatsss virus) like the Bobcatsss event so much that they regard the symposium as part of their annual holiday program. In this regard the symposium is for many former participants a possibility to renew old friendships.

The last year (Porto*) and also this year (Parma*) are different from the previous years. For the first time the symposium took place in a West European city. **This deviates from one of the Bobcatsss principles that the symposium must take place in Eastern European country.** I do not know if the economic situation within Europe, thanks to the fact that most concerned countries are now member of the European Union, has been changed so much that it does not matter anymore. I hope so, but it would be good anyway to evaluate, by checking where most of the participants are coming from and also by doing some research in this regard.

Let us please not forget that there are countries in East Europe, which did participate in the first Bobcatsss symposia (countries like Bulgaria, Rumania, Ukraine, Russia), which we did not see (hardly) anymore the last 5/6 years. As Bobcatsss must be possible for everyone I really hope that we all do our utmost to involve these countries again. One of the most important conditions therefore is that the Bobcatsss symposium stays on a low budget level and easy to travel to. Sufficient (*how difficult this is nowadays*) sponsoring and getting support from e.g. local and governmental authorities is for this reason part of the main targets of the organisation.

Finally I want to say something about the involvement of some Western European countries in the organisation of Bobcatsss, or to put it straight in their lack of involvement. Despite the fact that these two universities were part of establishing Bobcatsss (*I have said it at former Symposia*) it is surprising that Sheffield as well Barcelona never candidates themselves to be one of the universities for taking part in the organisation. Fortunately Liverpool and Manchester (*on behalf of Great Britain*) are now being active in the Parma Symposium. I really hope that from now on more students of Great Britain (and also Ireland) will come to Bobcatsss. As Barcelona is concerned, we are still waiting for the sunrise over there. Porto and Parma as two Western European cities, not belonging tot the original founders of Bobcatsss, did already the job (*and a marvellous one*). So I would say come on Barcelona, candidate yourself. If you can win The Europe Football Cup several times, you must be able to organise just one Bobcatsss symposium.

What to say about the Parma symposium

During the Porto symposium in 2009, professor Anna Maria Tammaro volunteered on behalf of her faculty at the University of Parma to organise the Symposium in 2010. The reason that she volunteered had everything to do with the fact that Euclid unfortunately did not have candidates. The moment that Manchester and Liverpool (and also Zadar) promised her that they would give as much as possible any support, she said yes I will do it. Comparing with former universities involved in the organisation, she (thus also her team) had much lesser time for preparations (especially time you need for getting enough financial support etc). Taking into account such a short time, I cannot blame Parma that their information on the web came sometimes rather late Nevertheless everything was ready in time and not only that. From the start up till the end (at Wednesday night) everything (in my opinion) was going smoothly. The location (at the university) was well chosen and good equipped. Comparing with some former Symposia, the various workshops en presentations did attract a lot participants (especially students, hallelujah), despite the fact that the symposium had lesser registrations than in former years. *Note: around 200 coming from 22 countries of which 7 are East European countries. Quality is however more important than quantity.*

Very important for a successful conference are the catering, the social events and receptions. Again in my opinion the Parma symposium belongs in this regard to one of the best. As I have attended all the Symposia up till now we had never such good food and so many drinks as in Parma: it did not stop. *Note: as a real follower of Epicurus and addicted Bobcatsser you could not have better.* It is difficult to say if the contents were all right. As organisation you are entirely dependable from the presentations of other universities and institutes. So if some presentations were perhaps weak (*note: I visited more than 25 IFLA conferences and believe me quite often very weak papers/speeches were the case*) we have to blame ourselves and not the organisation.

What made Parma such a success was also due to the very social and friendly approach of the entire Bobcatsss organising team: from early in the morning till late at night the members of this team were willing and able to help you. **All together Parma I can say, from the bottom of my heart, you all did a wonderful job.**

Let me finish by saying that I am really glad that I founded Bobcatsss 18 years ago. Being invited every year by the organisation gives me the opportunity not only to meet old friends but also being a part of a new generation, which keeps me young (for ever!!) Because of that I hope to visit many Bobcatsss symposia in the future, just like all the other participants who are infected by the virus: once a **bobcatsser, always a bobcatsser.**

Thank you very much for your attention!