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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AT THE HISTORICAL ARCHIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION - FROM INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS TO SYSTEMATIC DIGITISATION

Abstract

In the 2015 amendment of the EU Archives Regulation 354/83 of 1983 on the opening of EU institutional archives to the public, the EU took an important step forward towards modernisation of its archival services, by introducing a new and systematic archival digitisation policy. Since then, all EU institutional archives, prior to their opening to the public after 30 years, are systematically digitised and made available to the public in digital format. This new digital focus of EU institutions corresponds to the general digital agenda of the EU, in this case as regards the cultural heritage sector. The digitisation policy has since then been embedded in the institutions' yearly work programming and budgeting following a formal policy approach. The new digitisation policy poses the traditional dilemma between conservation and communication of fragile archival heritage objects and gives an answer in a new way, pending between the danger of hypermnnesia on the one hand, and transparency and enhanced research opportunities on the other. The digitisation policy requires a new evaluation of the main questions of archives on conservation, retention, documentation and valorisation.

Key words: digitization, archival records, European Union

1 INTRODUCTION

In 1983, the institutions of the European Communities, now the European Union, decided to open their archives to the public. One year later, the European Commission signed an agreement with the European University Institute in Florence to establish the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) at the Institute.

Since 1986, the year this Archives opened its doors, it has received yearly file transfers according to the 30 years closure rule for EU historical archives. These files are selected, treated, described, and prepared for long-term preservation by the producing institution in view of their opening to the public. Under the principle of 'deposit' in Florence, ownership, and the main responsibility for the archival selection and treatment for these archives has remained with Archives Services established for this purpose in each of the producing institutions.

Based on Council Regulation 354/83, the Archives have become a specialised and centralised archives centre on the history of the European Union and its institutions, and generally of European integration. Its mission is, therefore, to collect, preserve and make accessible the historical archives of EU institutions, bodies and agencies, and to collect papers of individual actors and organisations that have contributed to a united Europe. Through the opening of the institutional archives, the HAEU raises the transparency of EU institutions and promotes research on European integration using primary archival sources.

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The contract of 1984 was replaced in 2011 by a Framework Partnership between the Commission and the EUI, which emphasised, for the first time, digital access to the archives. Then, in March 2015, the original Regulation of 1983 was amended and the new Council Regulation (EU) 2015/496 revised not only the financial and legal framework of the Archives but redefined its mission in response to the new digital information society:

“(11) The institutions and EUI should, where possible, make the historical archives available to the public in digitised and digital form, so as to facilitate their consultation on the internet.” (cit. Regulation 2015/496, preface)

The amended Regulation prioritises digital access and obliges the institutions to deposit the original documents accompanied by digital copies for consultation. Only the Court of Justice and the European Central Bank continue to deposit their archives in Florence on a voluntary basis.

2 THE DIGITISATION OF ARCHIVES

Traditionally, archival documents were available for consultation only on-site, in a dedicated reading room. On request, and rather exceptionally, users could obtain copies of certain documents or single pages of documents of particular relevance; these requests added costs for production and dispatch via mail.

Only with the arrival of the digital era and the internet as a network for information sharing, however, did the system for the production and sharing of copies of original archives change. Different methods for the online consultation of documents evolved without the need to physically consult these papers in an archival reading room (Dryden, 2014, p.65).

“Providing access and preserving the archival material for future generations are part of the archival institutions’ mandate. Currently, the new technologies offer many possibilities to them in order to support these goals. Digitization is one of these possibilities and through it, archival institutions can create virtual reading rooms, making their material available online, and enhancing access vial local networks and/or through the Internet, especially for users that cannot physically visit their premises.” (cit. Bountouri, 2017, p.29).

While the possibilities of new digitisation tools seem without limits, archival institutions must bear in mind various risks and challenges as regards the access to and preservation of digitised copies of original archives. The European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA) recognised the fascination of the broad range of opportunities on the one hand, but also saw risks, in particular on the long-term preservation of the digital copies placed on unstable media (Weber & Dörr, 1997, preface).

The Archives have accepted the new digital tools to serve the following objectives: better preservation; increased access to archival holdings; and the possibility to take advantage of public and private financing opportunities for digitisation projects in the area of cultural heritage (Moss & Currall, 2004, p.124-126).

Copying archival material to improve the preservation conditions of the original is a long-standing practice in the Archives, since well before the digital age. At the same time, digital copying is certainly not the best method for preservation, due to the short lifespan of digital media in time. Nevertheless, it is often used as justification to launch digitisation campaigns of originals whose preservation status is considered at risk. This argument has been particularly successful when coupled with the fact that digital copying allows for online access to the copied materials, thus eliminating the need for travel and costly archival consultation visits (Kemp, 2015, p.57).

The other argument supporting digital copying is the extension of access to information and knowledge through holdings made available online, 24 hours a day, seven days a

week. These documents are also accessible to more than just one researcher or educator at the same time, and can be searched and retrieved using search engine technology. This raises the issue of the need for professional archival description, a sound metadata policy and the systematic publication of inventories online.

Finally, the online holdings also promote the public image of archival institutions. Digitisation activities become part of the regular activities of Archives, for which they may obtain public and private financing, human resources and technical equipment (Borghi & Karapapa, 2013, p.11-13).

Relevant actors consider digitisation to be not only a better way of managing information, but also of managing cultural heritage in general. In 2010, and in reaction to various massive digitisation projects, such as the Google Books initiative in 2005 and the World Digital Library of UNESCO, the EU established a European expert group on digital innovation, tasked with determining how to better represent cultural heritage online. The report "New Renaissance" gave a series of recommendations, establishing the new platform *Europeana* as the digital reference point for European cultural heritage, and promoting private and public investments in the digitisation of cultural heritage (Purday, 2012, p.2-4 and Bideran, 2017, p.143). *Europeana* was conceived of as a cross-cultural and multilingual digital access point to the collections of museums, libraries and archives in Europe. Its aim is to regroup digital memory, improve its accessibility and promote the visibility of the cultural institutions therein (Borghi & Karapapa, 2013, p.1-4, and Hacken, 2013, p.309).

Archival institutions participate in digital strategies even though they were reticent in the beginning, concerned with potentially shrinking numbers of visitors in their reading rooms. On the positive side, going online has created a new link between cultural institutions and the digital world, redefined and created new points of contact with the public, and stimulated the development of new communication strategies (Schafer, 2011, p.102).

Another benefit has been the democratisation of access to people beyond individuals with the possibility to consult items physically in reading rooms. The collectively shared memory across institutions raised the sense for responsibility and adherence amongst the broad public (Schönherr-Mann, 2014, p.16-24). The connection between the document, its description, and the algorithms for search and retrieval creates a structure for a short moment. Of course, while the access to documents is more democratic, there are limits due to the massive amounts of information and the ever changing structures and hierarchies of their presentation (Faßler, 2014, p.31-32).

Another issue to consider is that, in the growing mass of documents online, the role and distinction of the institutions of provenance become more and more unclear. If everything is online, it is no longer important for the user where the original is located. This gives space to new types of organisations: digital memory institutions, for example, aim at raising digital access to and the visibility of specific thematic or chronological holdings, which are not their own (Kirchhoff, 2008, p.251-255).

Various such platforms have been construed in the past years on national or regional levels in Europe. On the European level, the most important initiative is the Archives Portal APE, which promotes archival holdings from local, regional, national to international institutions under one European roof (Kirchhoff, 2008, p.263).

Finally, another common issue in larger archival digitisation projects and in particular the online availability of digitised holdings is the question of copyright. Large-scale digitisation projects cannot guarantee a document-by-document control as regards the copyright of the material contained. Archives, therefore, often apply a risk management approach looking at factors such as the date of the material and what is known on the property of rights, the market value and in consequence the probability of litigation (Dryden, 2014, p.67-81).

3 THE DIGITISATION OF THE EU HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

With the establishment of the Historical Archives of the European Union at the European University Institute in Florence in 1984, the EC/EU had decided not to create a central historical archives service with an institution, but to deposit their archives in an academic institute with the status of international organisation. The 1983 Regulation already obliged the institutions to prepare microfiche copies of original documents for consultation purposes:

"The historical archives shall be accessible in copy form. However, the institutions may release the originals of the documents or records if the user shows a special and duly substantiated interest." (cit. Regulation 354/83, article 1.5)

Our Archives' practice of creating copies was a response to different needs. The first was to provide internal research opportunities to EU officials once the files were physically transferred to Florence. The second reason was that each institution reserved the right in the Regulation to provide research services for their own holdings to external users in a dedicated reading room. A final point was the security aspect, in that having copies could be useful in case of the loss or degradation of the originals.

In addition, the Archives in Florence had started to digitise selected private papers on the basis of their specific preservation conditions or how much they were in demand for consultation. In some cases, depositors specifically requested receiving a digital copy of their archives. In 2008, the HAEU started the digitisation of its first private holding, the private papers of Alcide De Gasperi, the first Italian prime minister after World War II.

The experience of the HAEU, along with those of a growing number of digitisation projects in archival institutions over the globe since the mid-2000s led EU institutions to reflect on a more systematic approach towards digitisation. With the amended Regulation of 2015, the EU institutions took a much more ambitious decision to digitise completely and systematically all documents, prior to their shipment to Florence and their opening to the public. This was a new approach that entailed massive digitisation of historical archives for online access.

"Wherever possible, the institutions shall make their archives available to the public by electronic means, including digitised and born-digital archives, and facilitate their consultation on the internet." (cit. Regulation 2015/496, article 9.1)

The central and single role of the HAEU is to ensure the most complete and efficient access to the historical documents of all institutions, with inventories and other finding aids available online in digital format. The digitisation activities of the institutions and those of the HAEU concerning private archives are complementary. The Inter-Institutional Archives Group (IIAG) serves for exchange on holdings being digitised and for co-operation to ensure that partners in the group follow similar standards and techniques, respecting data protection and other applicable rules.²

In its annual work programme, the Archives in Florence outlines the holdings it plans to digitise and receives consultation copies or access to these copies hosted by the European institutions, in order to make the copies accessible to the public. The access to the original is limited to exceptional and justified needs, such as exhibitions.

2 Regulation (EC) 1049/2001 on public access to documents <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2001/1049/oj>>, Regulation (EC) No 45/2001 on data protection, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2001/45/oj>>, the GDPR Regulation (EU) 2016/679 <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>>, and finally Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 on data protection by EU institutions <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1725/oj>>.

4 TOWARDS THE DIGITAL FUTURE

Digitisation moves the document, its content, structure, context, medium and format from a rather stable support to a highly sophisticated digital environment. The digital sphere is, by its nature, contrary to the idea of the longest possible preservation in the best conditions. The principle of the inseparable relation between information and support that held true for centuries has grown obsolete with reformatting through digitisation (Chun, 2011, p.18-19, Weber, 2008, p.26). That is why the solutions for information security, access, readability, reliable storage and interoperability need to receive major attention when digitising archives (Regimbeau, 2015, p.5-9).

With the "shift from boutique to bulk digitization" (cit. Miller, 2013, p.522), the expectations towards archives have grown immensely, on the side of the depositors and on the side of the public that requests full availability of collections online. The selection of archives and the justification to digitise will need continued attention: digitisation is never the final objective, but rather the means to a predefined end, driven by stated goals of a digitisation project (Weber, 2008, p.30-32, Moss & Currall, 2004, p.127).

With digitisation, researchers contact Archives less and less when looking for documents; they instead expect to find the document directly online. The Archives, therefore, must be pro-active and present on the internet in order to guide and assist the users in the new digital environment. Its methods will continue to be the appraisal, selection and description of fonds. While metadata, controlled vocabularies and thesauri are work-intensive to produce, they continue to be the guides towards archival documents, and are also so for search engine technology, ranking and faceting (Trinkaus-Randall, 2013, p.16, Moss & Currall, 2004, p.129-131).

In the digital world, the role of the archivist moves from the guardian of cultural heritage to promotor and facilitator of transparent and democratic access (Weber, 2008, p.26). The ongoing COVID pandemic has further pushed the Archives towards the digital sphere. Users who can not reach the reading rooms physically call for the online availability of documents. In response, the Historical Archives of the European Union has therefore launched its new "Digitisation on Demand" service.

This new service, which allowed researchers to continue with their research projects even under the strictest COVID restrictions, has been extremely well received by users. While it has meant significant additional work for the HAEU staff, and requires additional technical resources, the introduction has been smooth and successful.

With the EU's 30-years closure rule for archival documents, the HAEU has recently started to prepare for the digital-born archival environment by implementing a digital long-term preservation system. In the first phase, the ingest into the system concerns mainly digital copies of paper archives and of audio-visual materials, however, the first purely digital archives have been deposited. These open yet another chapter in the voyage of the Historical Archives of the European Union towards the preservation of and access to digital-born archives.

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