

Uniqueness and Multiplicity: how digitization and new forms of digital access have affected the user interpretation of facts and data under communism.

A case study: the Radio Free Europe (RFE) Information Items Collection, Open Society Archive, Budapest – Hungary.

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1. INTRODUCTION – THE DIGITAL ARCHIVE.....	3
2. OSA AND THE INFORMATION ITEMS COLLECTION	3
3. THE END USER	5
4. METHODODOLOGY.....	5
5. ARCHIVAL PRACTICES AT OSA: INTERVIEWS TO OSA STAFF ABOUT THE INFORMATION ITEMS COLLECTION	6
<i>5.1 FEATURES OF THE COLLECTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>5.2 CATALOGUING</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>5.3 DATA MODEL AND DIGITAL REPOSITORY</i>	<i>7</i>
6. INTERVIEWS TO RESEARCHERS: THE RESEARCHER AS END-USER OF HISTORICAL ONLINE COLLECTION.....	8
7. CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS	10
8. AKNOWLEDGEMNTS.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY	12

1. INTRODUCTION – THE DIGITAL ARCHIVE

This research follows the path of a physical archival record through its transformation into a digital one and its consequent publication and access in an online environment.

Many scholars in the last years focussed on the challenges that emerge during the transition from a traditional to a digital archive¹, yet the rich literature is far from being exhaustive on this topic, as continuous technological changes and possibilities drive the theoretical discussion in new directions (for instance, the application of API – Application programming Interface – or Big Data technologies to archival collections)

Cultural institutions – Museums, Archives, Libraries and Galleries, have been affected by the innovations brought by the digital domain, taking advantage of the benefits (more visibility and accessibility, preservation of the originals) and trying to re-think at their institutional role in an evolving scenario.

This research took place at the Open Society Archive, Budapest – Hungary, and is based on one of their archival collections – the *Information Item Collections*.

The research questions involves three main subjects: the Archive – in its transition toward a digital archive, the end user – in this case a researcher or scholar; and the collection in discussion.

2. OSA AND THE INFORMATION ITEMS COLLECTION

In the shift toward a digital archive, OSA is experiencing both theoretical and practical transformations: on the one hand the possibility to present its collections online represents an invaluable step toward the democratization of the archive; on the other hand online accessibility forces the archivist to reconsider what in the analogue model was already settled. How will the metadata fields be displayed? How is it possible to remain as faithful as possible

¹ Among others, Eric Katelaar, Anne Gilliland, Terry Cook. Please see in the Bibliography section for more bibliographical references.

to the principle of provenance? How can the digital environment change the experience of the end user?

Within the OSA collection, the Information Items Collection represents both an interesting and challenging case study.

The Information Items had been produced by the News and Information service of Radio Free Europe in order to counter the information monopoly of the Communist official media. Although the project continued until the early 1970s, the current digital collection spans only over the period 1951-1956. Such documentation was supposed to be destroyed in the early 1970s since it could be perceived as intelligence collection, but parts had been preserved because of previous microfilming procedures at RFE². An ideal case study because it represents a coherent unit – thematically and temporally – and an invaluable source of information of life during communism in the east-block countries; moreover, the Information Items Collection considered for this research has been lately transferred on microfilm, probably for preservation issues. The microfilm collection contains documents between 1951 and 1956, impressed on 77 microfilm reels.

This collection represents a challenging case study as the interview practice took place within the context of the Cold War, where the Russian and the American blocks were involved in espionage and intelligence activities. Thus, this collection needs to be treated with caution, by placing it within its historical and political context; this doesn't mean that the information items have little historical value, but that their character can be misleading if not contextualised properly.

The complications brought by the features of this collection represent an extra challenge for the archive that decides to make these records publicly available. How is it possible to translate the complexity of this collection in an online environment? And more important:

² From the interview with Ioana Macrea-Toma, Research Archivist at OSA.

how is it possible for an archival institution to guarantee that the end user using these online collections is given enough contextual information?

3. THE END USER

The proposed research question wishes to shed light on an aspect that has scarcely been given attention. While a certain consideration has been given to the new possibilities offered by technological development such as new display possibilities, tagging, sharing and commenting online, very little attention has been given to the risk of misinterpreting online records. In fact, since the archival records have been digitised and presented online, they have been re- interpreted and displayed for a different form of access and environment.

However, while researching on this topic, I soon realized that I couldn't answer this research question without first focussing on the rationale behind the end user interpretation and shed light on the changed research practices. How do researchers incorporate digital resources in their research?

The end users – in these case researchers at the Open Society Archive - play an important role in this analysis, as they are the subjects who actually access the records both physically and digitally. Therefore their experience and opinion will be highly valuable for the definition of the research hypothesis.

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research is built upon desk and field research, examining how the end users approach both the physical and the digital archive.

The project has been shaped into two main parts: I first analyzed the main challenges that traditional archives face when moving toward a digital environment. In this part I examined how the Open Society Archive faced the ethical implications brought by the digitization of analogue records and the consequent online display of the *Radio Free Europe* Information Items Collection, respecting the uniqueness of the original collection and catalogue.

In the second part of the research I interviewed the OSA staff and researchers who in the past years accessed the Information Items Collection.

The interviews to the OSA staff aimed to retrace the “story” of the collection from its arrival at the archive to the online display and accessibility. The interviews to the researchers aimed instead to investigate the evolution of their research practices, considering that the collection in analysis is available both physically (on microfilms) and online.

In order to manage the bibliographical resources and the outcome from the interviews two tools have been particularly useful to my research: Zotero and Mindmap. The first is an invaluable resource to manage and annotate bibliographical records; the latter helped me in organizing concept and ideas.

5. ARCHIVAL PRACTICES AT OSA: INTERVIEWS TO OSA STAFF ABOUT THE INFORMATION ITEMS COLLECTION

In the following chapter are the summaries of the interviews to the Open Society Archive staff: these have been grouped according to the phase they represent in the elaboration of the collection, namely: features of the collection and historical background, original cataloguing of the collection, digitisation and metadata standardisation, data model and accessibility.

5.1 FEATURES OF THE COLLECTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Information Items Collection is an ideal case study for this research because it represents a thematically and temporally condensed collection (interviews to refugees from the eastern countries by Radio Free Europe, from 1951 to 1956) and because it is available both physically and digitally.

The Information Items Collection has been digitised in the context of the Hope Project³ of which the Open Society Archive is part.

The Information Items Collection is a critical collection to display in an online environment because of its controversial historical background that is difficult to reproduce in an online environment. Similarly, the collection itself presents epistemological limitations: the collection as an “archive of documents” has been decontextualized at the moment of its creation because of the inconsistent archival practices at RFE. Radio Free Europe was not an archive itself – these documents were collected because they served in the context of an intelligence operation.

5.2 CATALOGUING

During the cataloguing phase (and after the digitisation of the microfilms), the problems related to the inconsistency of the original cataloguing emerged: first of all, the rest of the Information Items Collection (records on paper) is catalogued according to the subject (subject filing guidelines of the Romanian unit), even if differences appear between the subject headings of different periods and different countries. Secondly, the information items on microfilms are ordered in chronological order and not according to the subject. The inconsistency of the subject headings in the document and the different cataloguing system in the microfilms created quite a few methodological challenges. Other inconsistencies appeared in the coding system of the Field Office Name and Field Office Code and this needed to be normalised as well.

5.3 DATA MODEL AND DIGITAL REPOSITORY

In order to present the collection online an internal Data Model was produced. The data model was created also in the context of the HOPE project and the metadata before being published on the projects’ portal had to be standardized and enriched according to the HOPE

³ http://www.peoplesheritage.eu/content/about_hope.htm

model. At OSA, an ad-hoc model was created for the digital repository mixing data models from archives and library models (EAD, MARC, ISAD).

Online, the collection description⁴ has been carefully recreated and there is a collection page where the historical and methodological context is given for the end user: among the contextual information are notes about language and multi-lingualism, country, temporal coverage and historical background information.

At the item level,⁵ in the creation note, a short version of the collection description is kept for better contextualisation. The Open Society Archive made an interesting decision to index the language in which the document is written and to keep the language of the title as second or alternative language. The records are searchable according to language, country and year.

In the case of missing title, this has been re-created by the OSA cataloguer according to the content of the document. The subject heading of the original records has been included in the “summary” field online; an extensive description of the “use condition” informs the end user of copyright statement applied to the record and agreed with RFE.

At the item level is also a link to the collection, which links the record to its original aggregation and vice-versa.

6. INTERVIEWS TO RESEARCHERS: THE RESEARCHER AS END-USER OF HISTORICAL ONLINE COLLECTION

Not all the interviewed researchers⁶ had the opportunity to see the information items online at the time of their scholarship at OSA (they researched at OSA many years ago); however they are enthusiast of the possibility to access the archival records online – they see this service as an improvement within the library service.

⁴ <http://www.osaarchivum.org/greenfield/repository/osa:484d852e-1334-4570-a2be-e41230b9e36a>

⁵ <http://www.osaarchivum.org/greenfield/repository/osa:72e3e900-5d9c-4675-b6ad-677f1b949154>

⁶ Five researchers were interviewed in the context of my scholarship at OSA in June and July 2013. On 15 sent letters, I received five positive feedback - the proportion is of 1/3.

A couple of researchers find very useful having the finding aids available online and thanks to this possibility the research of material became easier: online finding aids is something very valuable for their research practice.

The information available at the collection and items level are recognised as exhaustive and complete (only one researcher expressed the need to have more information on how to cite the collection).

However, the researchers point out a few features of the analysis on physical items that they can't meet in the online display: for example, the ability to compare records, which is something they consider essential for their research. Researchers indeed need to look closely to items and compare them with other items from the same or another collection. Another researcher points out the same issue, but proposes that the online environment should enable this possibility by creating a personal environment where the digital documents can be stored and accessed also in a second time.

In general, the historians researching at OSA consider online resources valuable. Some of them – as they conducted their research many years ago – didn't have the chance to access the documents online, others had this opportunity in more recent times.

However it emerged that the interviewed historians value the online accessibility of the records but don't discard completely the access to the physical and original records. Accessing the original records gives the researchers some benefits that their digital version can't give: the possibility to compare records, to have an overview and a contextual feeling of the collection. This research methodology gave one of the researchers the possibility to browse some documents that at first sight were not useful to the purpose of the research, but were recognised as important sources in a second time.

Finally, one of the researchers suggested adding a few functionalities to the OSA digital repository display: the creation of subject tags and the possibility for the researcher to add

tags himself (as for Parallel archive - <http://www.parallelarchive.org/>) would be beneficial for his research.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Among the findings of my desk research and interviews both to the OSA staff and to the researchers, it appeared that while on the one hand online accessibility of digital records represents a valuable resource for the researchers, on the other hand it introduces some risks that the archive and the archivists need to consider and prevent.

The main risk in presenting an archival collection online is the LOSS OF RELATION COLLECTION – ITEM and ITEM – ITEM. This might cause the loss of contextual historical information: in the case of the Information Items Collection the risk is that the end user won't link the digital records to the historical context in which the items were created, while this was extremely complex and controversial.

To prevent the loss of contextualisation of the digital records from its original historical context, archivists will need to be more active in ensuring that contextual information is linked to the digitized material and archives themselves will have to strengthen their ability to present context for their digital resources. They will also have to take an active role to educate their users in their research of archival records.

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