

Digital history and the politics of digitization

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Much has been, and is, made of the transformative potential of digital resources and ‘data’ for humanities’ and historical research. Historians are flooded with digital and digitized materials and tend to take them for granted, grateful for the opportunities they afford. As the late Roy Rosenzweig observed in 2003, historians “may be facing a fundamental paradigm shift from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance” (Rosenzweig, 2003: 739). Yet, if we accept that we do indeed live in a culture of abundance, that abundance is still rarely questioned and qualified, let alone contextualized in time and space. To put it simply: the question of why, where and how we can access what we can access is rarely posed.

Digitization, however, is far from neutral. In an academic world that increasingly privileges what is online, where “analogue” archives are sometimes even referred to as “hidden archives”, we need to start imagining what a world of historical scholarship based upon digital resources looks like. The online documentary record affects historical research and we need to understand how and in what ways our online evidentiary basis is constituted, a question that goes without saying for historians when dealing with “analogue” archives but is often ignored when digital resources are used. Indeed, there is a marked discrepancy between the use of digital resources by many historians and their lack of interest in how these are created and constituted.

Digitization first and foremost means selection. Archives, libraries, museums and other heritage institutions select materials to be digitized on the basis of a variety of criteria such as the preservation of fragile materials, easy access to collection highlights and/or often-used material, and the research value of certain collections (Economou, 2015). Legal and ethical questions can play a role too and, given the costs involved, the availability of funding, public or private, plays a key role in enabling digitization projects in the first place. Funding is not only influenced by the aforementioned criteria and concerns but also by memory politics and the way in which a given country’s or group’s past, or aspects thereof, resonate in public discourses and debates.

That is, if funding is available at all. Retro-digitization of heritage can be a luxury that many countries cannot afford. In this respect Barringer et al. have noted the “political and economic inequality between North and South, which has shaped not only the form and content of digital libraries, but also access on the continent to material about the continent”(Barringer et al., 2014). The point is well demonstrated by contrasting the European Union’s policies of promoting and financing digital cultural heritage¹ with the more limited resources that states on the African continent have, where privately funded endeavors such as the British Library’s Endangered Archives program acquire a relatively more important role (Kominko, 2015).²

In view of all this, the question becomes: what are the politics of digitization and what are its implications for historical research? Is the often-lauded democratizing potential of digitization also offset by risks, inherent in selection processes that might privilege the digitization of heritage

¹ Taking as a starting point the Commission Recommendation of 27 October 2011 on the digitization and online accessibility of cultural material and digital preservation (2011/711/EU): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:283:0039:0045:EN:PDF>. See also: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/policies/digital-cultural-heritage>.

² See: <https://eap.bl.uk/>.

corresponding to existing national master narratives, the availability of funding and/or the priorities set by certain research agendas? How does transnational heritage fit into this picture when most digitization projects are, in one way or another, nationally framed? And how does all of this play out globally?

When answering these questions, two things need to be taken into account. The first is the broader historical and technological context of heritage preservation and its politics. For instance, there are remarkable parallels to be drawn between the era of microfilming, as a new means of reproduction, and the current phase of digitization, from processes of selection, metadating practices and questions of accessibility, to the reasons for preserving analogue materials and utopian claims as to how research practices could, and would, change. Unlike the current era of digitization, however, the microfilm never succeeded in penetrating and saturating scholarly practices to the extent that digitization does.

The second is the role of the nation in processes of digitization and selection. As in the era of the microfilm, the role of the nation matters, and it matters a lot, contrary to some earlier scholarly predictions (Putnam, 2016).³ Around 15 years ago, for instance, Rosenzweig rhetorically asked: “If national archives were part of the projects of state-building and nationalism, then why should states support post-national digital archives?” (Rosenzweig, 2003: 752). Yet, even a cursory glance at the “about” pages and mission statements of many digital libraries and archives demonstrates that national concerns have far from disappeared when it comes to efforts to digitize the past. The existence of a supra-national digital resource like Europeana might seem to contradict this point, but it is very clear that part of Europeana’s mission is to promote and create a sense of common European heritage (e.g. Valtysson, 2012).

This paper will present the first findings of an ongoing research project. It is about the digital resources we work with as historians; in the first place with regard to what is being digitized, the sources and data, and to a lesser degree the metadata, notwithstanding the latter’s profound political aspects and effects, e.g. with regard to access (see, for instance: Fernandez, 2018). To avoid misunderstandings: it is not about the politics of digital humanities more broadly conceived; e.g. about addressing claims that it is incumbent upon DH to fulfil a political mission or become a more self-critical discipline by consciously investigating its own gender, diversity and other biases (e.g. Liu, 2012).

The paper explores the question of the politics of digitization by focusing on one specific dimension: the question of digitization and selection, and its implications for historical research, by using the example of the digitization of African heritage. It combines a theoretical, critical-reflexive approach with concrete examples and is structured as follows:

- Introducing the politics of digitization: why is this an important question? What politics are we speaking about? And how does this affect historical research?
- Scholarly context: A very short overview of the state of the art in DH literature, with a particular focus on what insights can be drawn from debates in the fields of heritage studies, information, archival and library science.
- Spatial context: How can we conceive of digitization within a global context? As an example, I will briefly discuss the state of digitization of European versus African cultural heritage and

³ This is not to suggest that digitization, especially when it comes to heuristics, cannot *facilitate* transnational history approaches, as recently argued by (Putnam, 2016).

pinpoint the major issues involved.⁴

- Analysis of the political dimensions of digitization of African heritage and selection criteria for digital preservation, using South Africa as an example.⁵
- Concluding remarks on the politics of digitization and its implications for historical research:
- Outlook: what can we learn from the examples provided, and how should we conceive of this question within a global context?

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⁴ For Europe, see the eNurate reports on the state of cultural heritage digitization available at: <https://www.egmus.eu/>. Statistical information on Africa has to be compiled from various sources. For a general discussion of digitization and the nation in relation to Africa see (Tanner and Kahn, 2014).

⁵ As mentioned, this paper derives from a bigger project with deals with various dimensions and contexts relevant to the politics of digitisation, not only the issue of selection. As for the latter, this main project will provide a systematic overview of how digital libraries/archives in a number of countries advertise themselves online and what selection criteria for digital preservation they use, which will be contextualised with information and data from these countries from, *inter alia*, the *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends*. For the purposes of the paper, I will outline this approach and then provide a couple of brief examples. The *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends* is “a web-based and permanently updated information and monitoring system of national cultural policies and related development”. See: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/compendium.php>.