



DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE ROYAL LIBRARY, THE STATE ARCHIVES AND CEGESOMA

The results of a study on the digital needs and practices of the users



Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België
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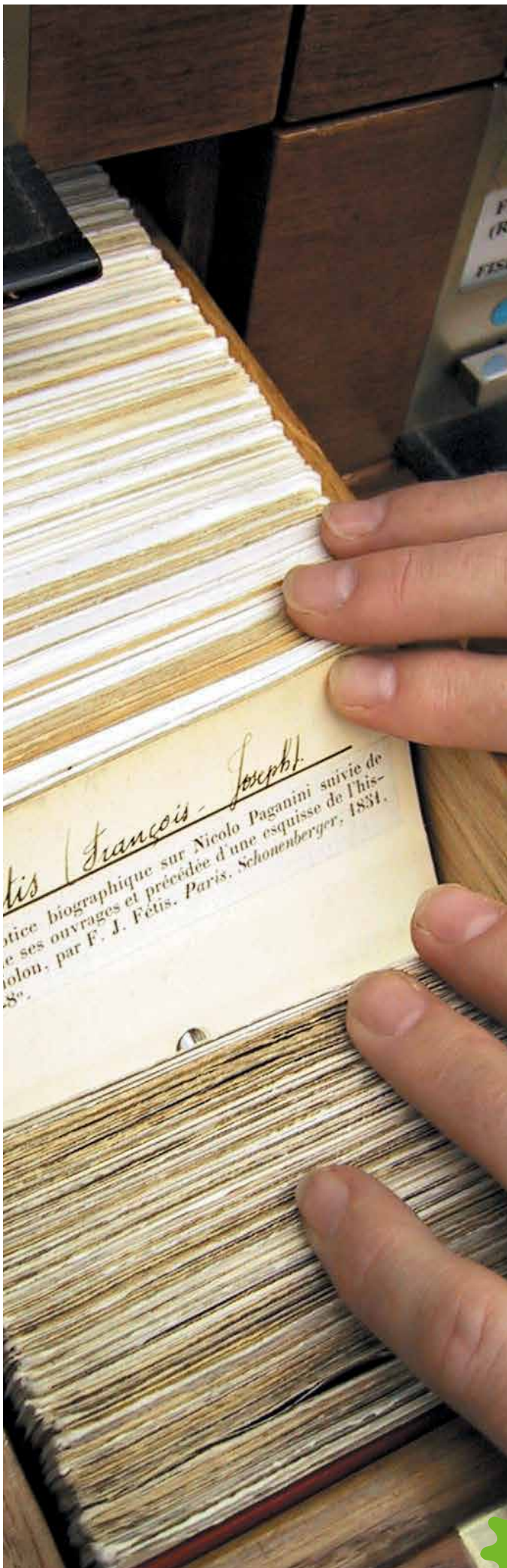


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The Digital Revolution

For several years now, the cultural institutions have definitely entered the digital era. From the outset, digital technology has created huge expectations. Digitisation would make for better conservation and would make knowledge available to everyone. Dematerialisation and compression would guarantee faster transmission. Technological progress has not only brought new opportunities for managing and valorizing the collections, but has forced the institutions to rethink their work processes, to gain new competences, to secure supplementary budgets and to reconsider some of their missions. Today, thousands of documents have been scanned and new technologies form an integral part of each stage of the production of knowledge: accessibility of sources, content analysis, conservation and valorization. Furthermore, the transition to digital meets a global mutation towards a more connected society, where access to knowledge becomes easier and where tools and sources are increasingly virtual. The huge changes that have come about through the digital era have been compared with those brought about by the invention of writing and printing.



The Need to Engage with the Audiences



In 2015, the Belgian State Archives, the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (CegeSoma) and the Royal Library have engaged in a partnership with the aim of carrying out a totally new project. The three institutions hold an important part of the Belgian federal heritage collections: more than 7 million documents in the Royal Library and nearly 300 kilometer of archives in the State Archives and CegeSoma. Over the last decades, the public visiting these institutions has changed considerably, both in its composition as in its practices. Apart from academic researchers and amateur historians, genealogists, notaries and government officials now visit the Archives. More and more students visit the Royal Library

and often use the reading rooms as places for studying as well as a means to access the collections. CegeSoma finally has received more media attention, as well as an increased interest from editors and exhibition venues within the context of the numerous commemorations organized over the last years around the two world wars. In each of these cases, digital technology has made the collections of these institutions accessible to a larger and connected public, possibly located further away, and certainly more demanding. A public also that has, in this era of new technologies, undergone a profound change in its way of life, of thinking, producing, distributing, consuming, discussing, working or travelling. With the aim of defining a plan of action and strategy that will meet as well as possible the ongoing changes in the practices and expectations of their readers with regard to digital access to information, the State Archives, CegeSoma and the Royal Library have, for the first time, given the users the opportunity to express their views.



A Protean study



The study organized by the State Archives, CegeSoma and the Royal Library was carried out within the framework of a research project financed by the Brain Programme of the Federal Science Policy between 2015 and 2017: the MADDLAIN project. This project was coordinated by CegeSoma, which since 1 January 2016 is the fourth operational direction of the State Archives. The MADDLAIN project has made it possible to gather a panel of experts and researchers with an expertise in IT, archive management, librarianship, data management, historical research and mediation tools. The goal of the study has not only been to provide data on the practices and needs

of the users in terms of access to digital information, but also to move the institutions forward in the management of methods and tools that will help them to acquire a more in depth knowledge of their audiences. Apart from the general study, two lines of research have been analysed: on the one hand the question of the mediation tools to facilitate the access to the collections and on the other the expectations of the university researchers who constitute an important target group of the three institutions. Two types of data have been used for the overall project: the navigation data of the users in the catalogues and websites of the institutions, and the non-structured or semi-structured data gathered via survey questionnaires and interviews. The users have collaborated extensively to our research. Nearly 2.300 of them have participated in our online survey in the spring of 2016. That the project has produced useful and relevant results is due in large part to their contribution.





One Audience... Several Audience

The survey carried out by the State Archives, CegeSoma and the Royal Library questions only the present public of the three institutions. This is a largely Belgian public, in the reading rooms as well as online. The majority among them consult the State Archives, CegeSoma and the Royal Library for personal reasons (studies, family research, administrative procedures, etc.), but their profile varies from one institution to another. At the Royal Library and CegeSoma, researchers (professional or amateur) and students constitute the largest group. They are between 18 and 55 years old and hold a university degree (or are still studying). Then there are the journalists, editors, teachers, or persons conducting research on their family history. At the State Archives, students and researchers come second to genealogists (of whom a large part are French) who generally have lower levels of education and who are mostly more than 55 years old.





Towards new practices?

« Access » and « Communication » are the two key words that emerge from the results of the study carried out for the MADDLAIN project. The tools and means of communication used by the readers of the three institutions may have progressed considerably in the digital era, but the users have not basically adapted their needs in relation to the fundamental missions of the institution. Access to the collections is undoubtedly the first reason why users come to the State Archives, CegeSoma and the Royal Library. Activities such as workshops, publications, exhibitions or audiovisual productions only come second in the priorities of the persons interviewed.

In the survey, the question of « Access » has been considered for the paper collections as well as for digitized documents. In both cases, it would seem that the users combine several methods to access documents, by searching the digital catalogues as well as the paper inventories. The professional researchers specify that they apply several strategies in their search for information: key words, hierarchical tree, quotes, cascading research, information updating, contacts with experts, etc. The majority of the users profess satisfaction with the digital catalogues. The search engines are indeed used extensively: 20,000 single

visitors each month for the State Archives, 10,000 for the Royal Library and 2,000 for CegeSoma.



Nevertheless, the results of the survey underline several improvements that could be made. The principal points of dissatisfaction concern the unclear ergonomics, the too complex general structure, the difficulties for inexperienced users, the inadequate or incomplete description of documents and the lack of communication with regard to the documents that are entered, or not, in the

catalogue. The survey has revealed another important element concerning the access to the collections: the wish of the researchers to study the original source. Their contact with the reading room has nevertheless changed over the last years, and some of them refer to the changes in their working conditions (time-consuming administrative tasks, precarious contracts) that result in a need for an efficient management of their working time. Thus, they try to make their visit to the institutions as efficient as possible by making a detailed preparation based on the information available online but also by taking photographs of documents or entire archive funds that they will then process later.

The third lesson we learn from the survey concerns the problem of access to the documents: the majority of the users understand that not everything can be digitized and be available online. They do however ask explanations with regard to the underlying technical procedures, the choices made in terms of digitization and also to the potential restrictions with regard to copyright or privacy protection. In general, the users feel that once the collections are digitized, they should be openly online available. Only a minority has called on the digital reproduction services and only few are prepared to pay for the use of them. However, a larger part of the users would be prepared to make a financial contribution in the context of a crowdfunding campaign if this would allow the digitization of a fund which has hitherto not been digitized. The expectations also concern specific types of documents: civil registers, notarial archives, the press and the photographs. A majority of users would also participate in crowdsourcing projects with the aim of improving the quality of the available metadata.

The question of communication is also a key question in the results of the survey. In general, the users ask for more transparency and more explanations with regard to the collections, their availability online or in the reading room, their level of description in the catalogues or paper



inventories as well as the digitization projects. The users often claim to be poorly informed and the answers to the questions in the survey reveal that a number of complaints originate in reality in a manifest lack of information or in a lack of awareness of the available facilities. In spite of the tutorials and explanations available on the websites of the institutions, the navigation data have revealed that less than 5 % of the users actually go to these pages. The excessive fragmentation of the information, its complexity and the lack of well-adapted communication tools has a discouraging effect on the users.

Several suggestions have been made to address this problem, such as information sessions for specific groups, frequent email alerts with regard to recently entered data, clear and comprehensive mediation tools available on the website of the institution (videos, images, brief explanations), specialized guides to sources to help researchers or the possibility to contact the personnel of the institutions (chat, forum, video conference, etc.).



Conclusion ?

The overall results of the study carried out by the State Archives, CegeSoma and the Royal Library will be available from 1 November 2017 as raw data, analysis reports and graphic overviews. Each institution has also initiated an internal process of reflection to define the short and medium term digital strategies based on the conclusions of the survey.

The partners of the MADDLAIN project

The State Archives
www.arch.be

The Centre for Historical Research and Documentation
on War and Contemporary Society (CegeSoma) (DO4-Archives de l'État)
www.cegesoma.be

The Royal Library of Belgium
www.kbr.be

Département des Sciences et technologies de l'Information et de la
Communication (Université Libre de Bruxelles)
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