

DIGITAL CATALOGUES - 3 tips to find more sources and references

The consultation of the digital catalogues of institutions such as the Royal Library, the State Archives and CegeSoma* is one of the first steps researchers take to reach an understanding of our history. Therefore, we give you three tips to find more references and digital sources in the catalogues of these institutions.

These tips are based on the first results of the MADDLAIN-project, a two-year research project that examines the uses and needs of the public of the three institutions in the area of digital access to the collections. The goal is to improve the digital services of the institution in the future.

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Tip 1: The digital catalogues do not only contain references but also digital sources

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Nearly all participants of the MADDLAIN User survey who consult paper sources confirm using the digital catalogues of the institutions to find descriptions and reference numbers. However, only 60 to 70 % of these persons also use the catalogues to consult digital sources. The majority of persons who only use the catalogues for finding descriptions did not know that the catalogue also provides access to digital sources.

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In the catalogues of the State Archives and the Royal Library an option can be ticked which enables the search of digital collections only:

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At CegeSoma this option is not available, but the major part of the digital collection consists of photographs and it is possible to search specifically on photographs by ticking 'Photo Library'•. In addition, several archive collections have been digitized and made available via a tree structure.

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The institutions also have separate platforms aimed specifically at digital collections.

Below we give a brief overview of the digital sources available to researchers studying the First & Second World Wars:

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* Press: The Belgian War Press and BelgicaPress (click BelgicaPress in 'advanced search')

* Archives: the digitized archives of CegeSoma; Archives 14-18 en Wallonie, les rapports de paroisses de la Guerre 14-18; les rapports d'activités du Comité national de Secours et d'Alimentation (Note: to have access to the former documents, it is necessary to register on the website of the State Archives)

* Publications: the Cahiers d'Histoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale; the Digital Library Belgica (click Digital Library Belgica in 'advanced search')

* Iconography: the collection photographique concernant la Première Guerre mondiale of the State Archives, and the Photo Collection of CegeSoma (click 'Photo Library' in 'search in'), the posters and tracts collections of CegeSoma

* Maps, floor plans, sketches and aerial images: Cartesius

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Tip 2: Enter your keyword also in the other national language or in the old spelling

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According to the MADDLAIN user survey, half of the Dutch speakers would never enter a French keyword in digital catalogues. Yet, due to lack of personnel, most of the sources are described in only one of the national languages. In some cases, keywords are linked to the descriptions in both languages, but the institutions do not pursue an active metadata policy and do not make use of methods such as Linked Data that enable the users to obtain the same results, regardless the language they are using. It is therefore important to introduce your keywords in both national languages so as not to miss any references.

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In some catalogues, such as BelgicaPress, the digital newspaper archive of the Royal Library, it can be useful to enter keywords in the old spelling, because the search is not made in the metadata but in the texts of the actual newspapers. In the example below, the researcher was looking for information on war monuments. She obtained five times more search results when entering the keyword 'gedenkteken' also in the old spelling:

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Tip 3: Do not limit your search to the digital catalogue. Consult also the paper inventories and the index card collection

Digital catalogues that make the collections accessible are very practical. We only have to enter a keyword and a mouse click later we know which bibliographical references we must consult to find the information we are looking for. Many researchers however do not know that putting metadata online for the whole collection

of an institution is a long-term project and that only in CegeSoma this task has nearly been completed. In the State Archives, the situation varies in the different repositories, but in some as much as 50 % of the collections cannot be searched via the digital catalogue. Paper inventories that are available in the reading rooms can also offer interesting avenues of research.

In the Royal Library for instance, not all references of the index card collection of the general reading room have been added to the digital system. The index card collection contains the references of all documents that were acquired by the Royal Library before 1985 and these references can be consulted on name of author or on subject. Through interviews with the library personnel, the MADDLAIN researchers found that approximately 20 % of the index cards have not been entered in the digital catalogue. The index card collection remains therefore an important search tool for researchers studying the First World War.

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