

The State Archives meet the Universities on the Theme of Digitisation!

Since 2015, the State Archives have begun a process of reflection on the digital access to their collections, among other things via the Brain project MADDLAIN carried out in collaboration with the Royal Library. Among the audiences that were studied, the university researchers are one of the priorities of our institution. It therefore seemed useful to reunite the heads of department of the State Archives with representatives of the different history departments of the Belgian universities to exchange ideas on their respective needs. Feedback on a study day with many debates organized on 5 February.

Some forty participants from different Francophone and Flemish universities, as well as from the State Archives, have met on 5 February to reflect together on the digital challenges of our institution.

The objective was to examine the specific needs of researchers, who are a key group of users among our public, before defining the broad lines of action of the institution for the next years in the digital field. After a brief presentation of the results of the MADDLAIN project and the digital tools available at the State Archives, the day continued around different participatory workshops.

These workshops were organized around three themes:

- 1) The digitized collections of the State Archives : Do the present digital collections meet the expectations of the university researchers? What are the priorities of the researchers in the next years in terms of digitization of archive collections of the State Archives? Do the digitization formats meet the needs of the researchers in the context of the 'digital humanities? projects?
- 2) The digital access to the collections : Does the online catalogue of the State Archives meet the expectations and needs of the university researchers? How can the present catalogue be improved? Is collaboration in the context of crowdsourcing projects a potential option?
- 3) The virtual research environments in the State Archives : Do researchers expect the Archives to make other digital tools available, particularly tools for the processing and analyzing of data, collaborative tools, etc.? What are the possible ways of collaboration between the Archives and the universities for the implementation of ?digital humanities? projects?

The organization of this kind of study day proved once more extremely useful, because such meetings allow to establish and maintain an indispensable dialogue between the State Archives and its users. It not only offered all participants the opportunity to express their needs and expectations but it also presented specific collaboration avenues for the next years.

In the previous years, the State Archives have focused on the parish registers and civil status documents that are in particular demand with the genealogists. These documents are also used by historians, but other collections equally deserve to be digitized.

Among these were mentioned the inventories, files and indexes created by the producers of archives that complete the inventories made by the archivists, the thematic guides made by the State Archives, the iconographical documents, the cadastral sources that are mainly of interest to an international public such as the African archives.

Besides the collections that are a priority for digitization, the digitization methods have also been discussed. For instance, it appeared that a number of researchers were in the habit of photographing the documents in the reading room with the aim of studying them at home. But the bad quality of the reproductions and the problems concerning the metadata linked to these digital files advocate a real collaboration with the State Archives. This could be by making digital equipment available in the reading room that could be used by the researchers after a brief training course, either in the context of a PhD or a history seminar, using funds kept at the State Archives.

During the workshop on the question of the access to the collections, many suggestions were made on the search tools, such as Search and Pallas. These concerned mostly the way in which the search results are presented, the search options that were proposed and the kind of tools offered to the readers. These suggestions are all the more useful as the State Archives will start the modernization of its search engines this year.

In general, the researchers prefer a number of different search methods: search by keyword such as

Google, contextualization of the funds in a hierarchical tree, possibility to narrow a research by specific fields (date, repository, etc.)

A particular effort should be made in terms of ergonomics on the display of the results by offering among others the possibility to file them according to different criteria for each researcher. Finally, the communication on problems of multilingualism or synonymy in the keywords, as well as on the use of the search engines via mediation tools easily accessible via the different catalogues seems to be a priority of the researchers.

The last workshop was dedicated to the virtual research environments. As was shown by the results of MADDLAIN, researchers do not really use the existing collaborative research platforms, because they prefer to work in an environment that they are used to and which is directly adapted to their individual needs.

Thus, they use different tools according to their specific needs: a data storage (Office suite, Google Drive), document sharing (Dropbox, Google drive) and communication (blogs), reference management (Zotero, Tropy, XNconvert) or also specific analyses linked to the type of research (ArcGIS, Q-GIS, Nodegoat, Gephi, etc.).

The participants consider the State Archives' primary mission to make a maximum of funds available for research, to ensure their structuring and description with stable and coherent metadata so that they can be used in their own virtual research environments.

Most of them have mentioned the importance of improving the current search engines with more tools: user profile, listing of the results to a variety of criteria, possibility to order online, etc. Finally, to ensure the development of a policy with regard to the digital humanities, the universities stress the importance of the quality and modeling of the data.

The goal should be the creation of interoperable databases to create links to other platforms outside the institution (Wikipedia, Wikidata, Wikisource, other Linked Open Data, platforms of other partner institutions, ?).

If you want more information on the contents of the debates, a complete report is available [here](#).

Florence Gillet
23.2.2018