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USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN ARCHIVAL PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF HUNGARY

Abstract

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of User-Generated Content (UGC) practices at the National Archives of Hungary, focusing on participatory approaches that actively involve citizens in archival processes.*

Methodology: *The study identifies and analyses three main domains of user contribution. First, it examines the role of volunteers in database construction, highlighting how civic participants contribute to the processing, transcription, and structuring of archival data. Second, it explores community-based acquisition practices, including thematic collection days and outreach initiatives through which individuals donate private documents - such as diaries and correspondence - for long-term preservation. Third, the paper investigates user contributions in the form of comments associated with digitized archival materials, through which users provide additional contextual information and assist in the identification of persons, places, and events.*

Results*: The paper demonstrates how these forms of engagement extend traditional archival functions by integrating lay knowledge into institutional workflows. Particular attention is paid to the impact of user contributions on metadata enrichment, accessibility, and the interpretative potential of archival records.*

Conclusions/findings: *The findings suggest that UGC-based practices significantly enhance the scope and depth of archival collections while fostering a more participatory and inclusive archival culture. At the same time, they raise important challenges related to data reliability, quality control, and the incorporation of user-generated inputs into professional archival standards. By outlining these*

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three domains, the paper contributes to broader discussions on participatory archives and the evolving role of users as co-creators of cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Databases, Namespaces, Archival workflow, User Generated Content, Volunteers*

VSEBINE, KI JIH USTVARJAJO UPORABNIKI, V ARHIVSKI PRAKSI: ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA PARTICIPATIVNIH PRISTOPOV V NACIONALNEM ARHIVU MADŽARSKE

Izvleček

Namen: *Prispevek predstavlja študijo primera praks vključevanja vsebin, ki jih ustvarjajo uporabniki, v Nacionalnem arhivu Madžarske. Osredotoča se na participativne pristope, pri katerih državljani dejavno sodelujejo v arhivskih postopkih.*

Metodologija: *Raziskava opredeli in analizira tri glavna področja sodelovanja uporabnikov. Prvo je sodelovanje prostovoljcev pri oblikovanju podatkovnih zbirk, zlasti pri strokovni obdelavi gradiva, prepisovanju besedil in strukturiranju arhivskih podatkov. Drugo je pridobivanje gradiva v sodelovanju s skupnostjo, med drugim s tematskimi dnevi zbiranja gradiva in dejavnostmi za vključevanje javnosti. Posamezniki v okviru teh dejavnosti darujejo zasebno gradivo, na primer dnevnike in korespondenco, za trajno hrambo. Tretje področje so komentarji uporabnikov ob digitaliziranem arhivskem gradivu, s katerimi prispevajo dodatne kontekstualne informacije ter pomagajo prepoznavati osebe, kraje in dogodke.*

Rezultati: *Prispevek pokaže, kako te oblike sodelovanja dopolnjujejo tradicionalne naloge arhivov z vključevanjem znanja uporabnikov v strokovne delovne postopke. Posebno pozornost namenja vplivu njihovih prispevkov na dopolnjevanje metapodatkov, dostopnost in možnosti interpretacije arhivskega gradiva.*

Sklepi/ugotovitve: *Ugotovitve kažejo, da vsebine, ki jih ustvarjajo uporabniki, povečujejo obseg arhivskih zbirk in poglabljajo njihovo vsebinsko obdelavo, hkrati pa spodbujajo bolj participativno in vključujočo arhivsko kulturo. Takšne prakse odpirajo tudi vprašanja zanesljivosti podatkov, nadzora kakovosti in vključevanja prispevkov uporabnikov v arhivske strokovne postopke. Z obravnavo treh*

področij sodelovanja prispevek dopolnjuje razpravo o participativnih arhivih in spreminjajoči se vlogi uporabnikov kot soustvarjalcev kulturne dediščine.

Ključne besede: *podatkovne zbirke, imenski prostori, arhivski strokovni postopki, vsebine, ki jih ustvarjajo uporabniki, prostovoljci.*

I CONTENUTI GENERATI DAGLI UTENTI NELLA PRATICA ARCHIVISTICA: UN CASO DI STUDIO SUGLI APPROCCI PARTECIPATIVI PRESSO L'ARCHIVIO NAZIONALE UNGHERESE

Abstract

Scopo: *Lo scopo di questo articolo è presentare un caso di studio sulle pratiche relative ai contenuti generati dagli utenti (UGC) presso l'Archivio Nazionale d'Ungheria, concentrandosi sugli approcci partecipativi che coinvolgono attivamente i cittadini nei processi archivistici.*

Metodologia: *Lo studio identifica e analizza tre ambiti principali di contributo da parte degli utenti. In primo luogo, esamina il ruolo dei volontari nella costruzione di banche dati, evidenziando come i partecipanti civici contribuiscano all'elaborazione, alla trascrizione e alla strutturazione dei dati archivistici. In secondo luogo, esplora le pratiche di acquisizione basate sulla comunità, tra cui giornate tematiche di raccolta e iniziative di sensibilizzazione attraverso le quali i singoli donano documenti privati – quali diari e corrispondenza – per la conservazione a lungo termine. In terzo luogo, il documento indaga i contributi degli utenti sotto forma di commenti associati ai materiali d'archivio digitalizzati, attraverso i quali gli utenti forniscono ulteriori informazioni contestuali e aiutano nell'identificazione di persone, luoghi ed eventi.*

Risultati: *Il documento dimostra come queste forme di coinvolgimento amplino le funzioni archivistiche tradizionali integrando le conoscenze dei non addetti ai lavori nei flussi di lavoro istituzionali. Particolare attenzione è rivolta all'impatto dei contributi degli utenti sull'arricchimento dei metadati, sull'accessibilità e sul potenziale interpretativo dei documenti d'archivio.*

Conclusioni/risultati: *I risultati suggeriscono che le pratiche basate sui contenuti generati dagli utenti (UGC) ampliano in modo significativo la portata e la*

profondità delle collezioni d'archivio, promuovendo al contempo una cultura archivistica più partecipativa e inclusiva. Allo stesso tempo, sollevano importanti sfide relative all'affidabilità dei dati, al controllo di qualità e all'integrazione dei contributi generati dagli utenti negli standard archivistici professionali. Delineando questi tre ambiti, il presente articolo contribuisce a un dibattito più ampio sugli archivi partecipativi e sul ruolo in evoluzione degli utenti come co-creatori del patrimonio culturale.

Parole chiave: *banche dati, spazi dei nomi, flusso di lavoro archivistico, contenuti generati dagli utenti, volontari*

I. USER-GENERATED CONTENT

UGC concerns any kind of content created by users of a memory institution or visitors of its website, so the word "user" in this context means a person, who is not the professional of the institution where the content is stored. It is a creative personal contribution, creating, correcting, enriching or commenting on a content (full content or metadata record) outside of professional work.

In the digital ecosystem, huge amounts of data are generated every day by users. In recent years, users are accustomed to being involved in the work of digital communities to support and achieve their goals (Saura, 2023). The concept UGC has been used since the early 1990s to describe content produced outside of the institutions. We can speak about its popularity since 2005 coincidently with the success of interactive web, and the ability of professional media to take advantage of the productivity of users (Bolin 2021).

The technical way of collecting information from the public is developing or leveraging existing user interfaces and communications networks to make it possible for large numbers of interested individuals to add information to our database (Terras, 2016, 4). However, effective crowdsourcing can supplement the everyday work of experts and lessen the personal costs of the institutions. Additionally, staff members collaborating with the public have a direct line of connection with engaged customers, having the opportunity to share their knowledge and receive feedback from the members of local communities (Longley 2026). Examining the concept of UGC in a broader perspective now we look at its role in the archival workflow. To clarify this approach, the three components of the term User-Generated Content - User, Generated, and Content - we should redefine them from an archival perspective.

	GETS SALARY	EXPERT	HAS A CONTRACT	TRAINED	IDENTIFIED
EMPLOYEE	×	×	×	×	×
VOLUNTEER/ PENSIONER		×	×	×	×
VOLUNTEER			×	×	×
CUSTOMER					×
SOMEBODY					

Figure 1: What is User?

Although, from a technical perspective, professional staff are also users of archival information systems, the term *user* is used in this paper in a narrower sense. It refers exclusively to individuals who are not employed by the institution but actively engage in its activities. This includes both volunteers and members of the public.

Volunteers contribute their time and expertise without being employed by the institution. They may receive certain non-financial benefits, such as free admission to exhibitions or public recognition, but they participate primarily as members of the community rather than as professional staff. In many cases, volunteers are retired professionals whose specialist knowledge represents a valuable resource for archival projects. Members of the public include archive users, library readers, museum visitors, genealogists, local historians, and other individuals who interact with cultural heritage institutions. In the context of this paper, both volunteers and members of the public are regarded as users because they contribute to archival work from outside the institutional framework. Customers can be educated or trained, though we are not sure about it, so for the institution they are not experts.

The *generated* component refers to the active contribution of users to the creation, enrichment, and improvement of archival information. Such contributions may include correcting and creating metadata, supplementing archival descriptions with additional contextual information, validating and improving OCR and HTR outputs, identifying persons, places, and objects in images, up-

loading transcriptions or other content, and supporting the training and validation of artificial intelligence applications.

The term *content* should be understood in a broad sense. It may refer to individual metadata elements, complete metadata records, translations, textual or audiovisual materials in either born-digital or digitized form, as well as analogue materials that are subsequently digitized. Content may also consist of user-generated additions to existing metadata, such as contextual information provided through crowdsourcing, or the enrichment of archival descriptions with external resources, for example URLs linking to related information. In cultural heritage institutions, content can further include creative contributions inspired by collection of items, as well as users' opinions, comments, and personal impressions.

Typical tasks of content generation are classification, linking and cataloguing objects, modifying or even correcting content; adding contextual details for documents, locating complementary objects to online collections, as it is usually done with physical objects too, helping to record oral history and preparing transcriptions or translations (Hedges, 2018).

Naturally, the growth of collections in all types of cultural heritage institutions has traditionally been supported by voluntary donations and by documents offered by private individuals, and this practice continues to play an important role today. Nevertheless, when analyzing UGC in its modern sense, this traditional form of content contribution should not be excluded from consideration. In the broader archival interpretation adopted in this paper, user donations may also be considered a form of user contribution to UGC practices as they represent contributions created by individuals outside the institution that enrich the collections and expand the available knowledge about cultural heritage resources. UGC practices, such as Collection Days, should not be understood merely as collection events, but rather as one of the most significant forms of UGC practice in archival institutions.

II. VOLUNTEER-BASED ARCHIVAL DATABASE CREATION PROJECTS AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF HUNGARY

Since 2021, the crowdsourcing-based programs of the National Archives of Hungary have represented an example of community-based archival enrichment. The primary aim of these programs is the creation of searchable archival databases,

in which volunteers actively participate in the processing of archival sources and the structured recording of related information.

This activity is closely connected to the concept of user-generated content (UGC), and more specifically to one of its particular forms, user-generated metadata (UGM). The contribution of volunteers does not merely increase the quantity of available archival data; it also creates new search possibilities, adds contextual information, and develops structures that improve the accessibility and usability of archival sources.

The program is based on the crowdsourcing approach, which is increasingly applied in cultural heritage institutions, where users are no longer regarded solely as recipients of archival services but also as active participants in the creation of value. The databases created through volunteer contributions demonstrate how community knowledge and professional archival expertise can complement each other in making archival sources more accessible and discoverable.

During the volunteer projects, structured data are manually extracted by volunteers from digitized archival documents, resulting in the creation of searchable databases. This process is based on human interpretation rather than automated data extraction: volunteers do not merely transcribe or enter information, but also interpret archival sources, identify the persons and geographical names mentioned in the documents, and link relevant entities to the authority files of the National Archives of Hungary.

Geographical names are linked to the National Archives of Hungary's geographical name authority file, with the aim of achieving comprehensive coverage and ensuring the consistent identification of places mentioned in archival sources. In the case of personal names, however, only a limited proportion of the identified individuals can be linked to the Personal Name Authority File for Notable Persons, as this resource primarily contains records of historically significant individuals rather than the general population. Nevertheless, linking these identifiable persons contributes to the standardization of names and enhances the possibilities for connecting archival data with other resources.

The processing takes place through a dedicated data-entry interface, where the digital image of the archival document and the structured data-entry form are displayed simultaneously. Volunteers record the information contained in the documents in a structured format, from which searchable databases are directly generated. The archival materials selected for processing typically contain lar-

ge amounts of person-related information - such as surnames and given names, dates and places of birth, places of residence, names of parents - making them particularly valuable for supporting genealogical and social historical research.

The work of volunteers creates genuine added value. The value of the generated metadata is enhanced by the fact that it is the result of a human interpretative process. When reading archival sources, volunteers do not simply record characters or fill in predefined data fields; they identify persons, places, and relationships mentioned in the documents, and make decisions concerning the standardisation of variant spellings, abbreviations, and historical forms of names. As a result, interpreted data are created that would be difficult or impossible to produce through automated data extraction methods alone.

At the same time, human interpretation also means that data are not free from potential errors. When working with handwritten sources, misreadings, uncertain identifications, or incorrect interpretations may occur. Therefore, the information recorded in the database should always be considered together with the image of the original digitized document. The coexistence of the source image and the generated metadata ensure transparency and verifiability for researchers: while the database facilitates searching and discovery, the original document remains the primary source of information.

The volunteer programme of the National Archives of Hungary provides a practical example of the participatory archives concept. The community is not merely a user of archival services but also an active contributor to processes that create additional value.

Community-based data enrichment should therefore not be understood as a replacement for professional archival expertise, but rather as a new form of collaboration between the archives and the research community. Volunteers contribute by processing large volumes of archival records and generating structured metadata, while the archives provide the data model, standardisation rules, authority control, and the professional framework necessary to ensure the long-term preservation, authenticity, and interoperability of the data. The resulting metadata do not replace the original historical documents; instead, they create an additional layer of interpretation and retrieval that facilitates access to archival sources and enables new forms of research.

Ensuring the quality of user-generated metadata remains one of the greatest challenges of volunteer-based projects. The volume of archival material selected for processing is so substantial that external volunteer participation is essential, while comprehensive expert review of every individual record is generally not feasible. Quality assurance is based primarily on sample-based review rather than complete post-processing verification. The review process focuses on identifying recurring error patterns, correcting systematic mistakes, and continuously improving the data-entry workflow. Where appropriate, repeated values are supported by controlled automatic completion in order to reduce manual input errors and ensure greater consistency across the database.

III. COLLECTION OF PRIVATE RECORDS AND DIGITAL SURROGATES

According to Sections 34(1) and 117(2)(1) of Act LXVI of 1995 on Public Records, Public Archives and the Protection of Private Archival Material, one of the fundamental responsibilities of the National Archives of Hungary is to collect and preserve private records of enduring historical value. Collection development may take place through donations, purchases (subject to the availability of financial resources), deposits, or the acquisition and long-term preservation of digital surrogates.

A primary consideration during the acquisition process is that the offered records-whether in their original form or as digital copies-should complement the existing archival holdings and enhance their documentary and research value. Accordingly, the National Archives of Hungary primarily collects the records of nationally significant families, associations, and organisations, the personal papers of prominent public figures, scholars, and artists, as well as documents relating to the history of the Hungarian diaspora.

In the case of privately owned records, however, collection development is not initiated exclusively by the archives. Owners and custodians of historical documents themselves play an active role in preserving cultural heritage. By donating personal papers, photographs, and other historical materials, or by making them available for digitisation, private individuals contribute to making sources that were previously accessible only within families or local communities.

In response to the challenges of the twenty-first century, the National Archives of Hungary has also placed increasing emphasis on the acquisition of digital surrogates. The appraisal criteria applied to materials selected for digitization are essentially identical to those used for the acquisition of original records. During the digitization process, high-resolution, distortion-free digital copies are produced, ensuring the long-term preservation of the information contained in the documents while allowing the original records to remain in the possession of their owners. In every case, the National Archives requires the owners to provide written consent specifying whether the digitized materials may be made available for research and published online.

This approach is closely reflected in the Europeana Collection Days initiative organised by the Europeana Foundation. The purpose of these events is to encourage members of the public to bring historical photographs, letters, diaries, documents, and other personal heritage materials for digitisation. During the events, archivists not only create high-quality digital copies of the submitted materials but also record their provenance, historical background, and the stories associated with them. The resulting digital collections enrich Europe's shared cultural heritage and provide valuable resources for research and education, while the original documents remain in the ownership of their contributors.

The National Archives of Hungary has participated in the Europeana Collection Days programme on two occasions. The first event, organised by the Archives on 15 September 2018 as part of the European Heritage Days, was held in cooperation with the Great War Blog, Fortepan, and Europeana. Entitled *Wars, Revolutions, Traumas: The History of the First World War, 1914–1918*, the event focused on privately held documents relating to the First World War.

Visitors were invited to present documents, photographs, letters, diaries, and other family records. In addition to digitising the materials, archivists interviewed the contributors to document the provenance, historical context, and family history associated with each item. This contextual information substantially increased the research value of the digital copies, preserving knowledge that would otherwise have remained inaccessible.

Whenever possible, documents were digitised on site and immediately returned to their owners. Larger collections were temporarily deposited for digitisation

and returned afterwards. In every case, contributors specified whether the digitised materials could be made available for research and published online.

The event clearly demonstrated the value of digital collecting. Many participants were reluctant to donate their original family records but were willing to make them available for digitisation. The submitted materials included wartime diaries, letters from the front, military portraits, family correspondence, photograph albums, genealogical records, and other personal documents. These sources provide insight not only into military history but also into everyday life and individual experiences during the First World War.

A total of twenty-one collections were presented and registered as twenty-six archival units, while six contributors donated their original documents to the Archives. More importantly, the event showed that public participation can reveal historical sources that would otherwise remain hidden in private ownership. Together with the personal stories shared by their owners, these materials significantly enriched the contextual information preserved alongside the archival records (Schmidt, 2018, 257–264).

Building on the experience gained from the 2018 Collection Day, the National Archives of Hungary organised a second thematic Collection Day between 21 and 24 July 2021 in Balatonfüred in connection with the 53rd Blue-Ribbon (Kékszalag) Sailing Race, in cooperation with the Hungarian Yachting Association and the Europeana Sport project. The event invited members of the public to present documents, photographs, diaries, correspondence, and other materials related to the history of the Blue-Ribbon race, Lake Balaton sailing, and Hungarian yachting.

As with the previous Collection Day, the submitted materials were digitised, accompanied by information on their provenance and historical context, and then returned to their owners. In addition to creating valuable digital surrogates, the event also resulted in the donation of several significant archival collections and a set of yacht plans by the Hungarian Yachting Association to the National Archives.

The event demonstrated that the Collection Days methodology can be successfully applied beyond family history and wartime heritage. By combining community participation, personal interviews, and high-quality digitisation, the pro-

gramme enabled the Archives to document and preserve previously inaccessible sources relating to Hungary's sporting heritage while engaging communities that had not previously related to archival institutions.[3]



Figure 2: Colonel Károly Kratochvil (1869–1946) with soldiers on the Russian Front, 1916.



Figure 3: László Vida beside a searchlight on the Russian Front, 1917.

[3] The photographs are part of László Vida's First World War collection. The owner presented the collection at the National Archives of Hungary's Collection Day on 15 September 2018.Reference Code: HU-MNL-OL-X 10815-50.-5.

IV. USER CONTRIBUTIONS THROUGH ONLINE COMMENTS

In addition to volunteer database creation and Collection Days, the National Archives of Hungary also supports user participation through online comments. On selected databases available via the Databases Online portal (*Adatbázisok Online*), registered users are able to submit comments related to individual records. These comments provide an opportunity to correct information, contribute additional knowledge, or share contextual details that are not contained in the original archival description.

One example is the database titled *Hungary's Military Losses During the First World War*. Here, users can supplement the existing records with family knowledge, biographical information, or corrections based on personal research. In this way, the comment function serves not only as a communication channel between users and the Archives but also as a mechanism for generating new knowledge that may enrich archival descriptions and support future research. [4]

Figure 4 and 5 illustrates the user interface of the *Hungary's Military Losses During the First World War* database.

Users can search for or browse the names of soldiers and display the corresponding records in the database. When viewing an individual record in the National Archives, "*Hungary's Military Losses During the First World War"* database, users have the opportunity to submit additional information or suggest corrections. They may also upload photographic documentation or other supporting materials to substantiate their contributions. The arrow indicates the link through which users can contribute supplementary information.

[4] https://adatbazisokonline.mnl.gov.hu/adatbazis/a-magyar-katona-aldozatvallalasa-a-nagy-haboruban

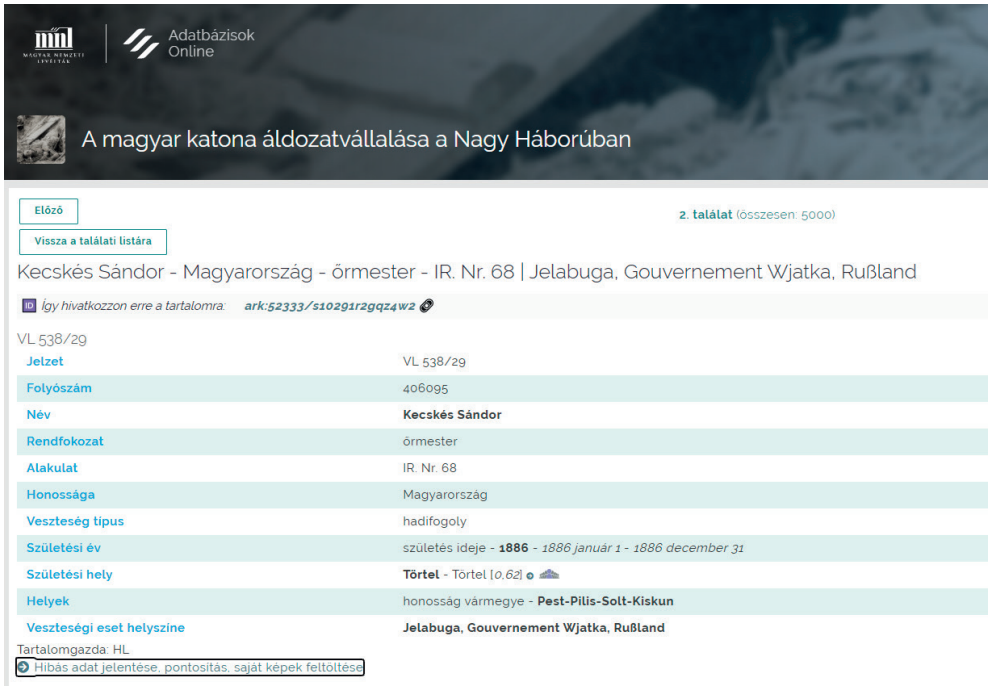


Figure 4: the online submission form that allows users to provide additional information or suggest corrections to individual records

This way the customer has the possibility to add or correct information to the database.

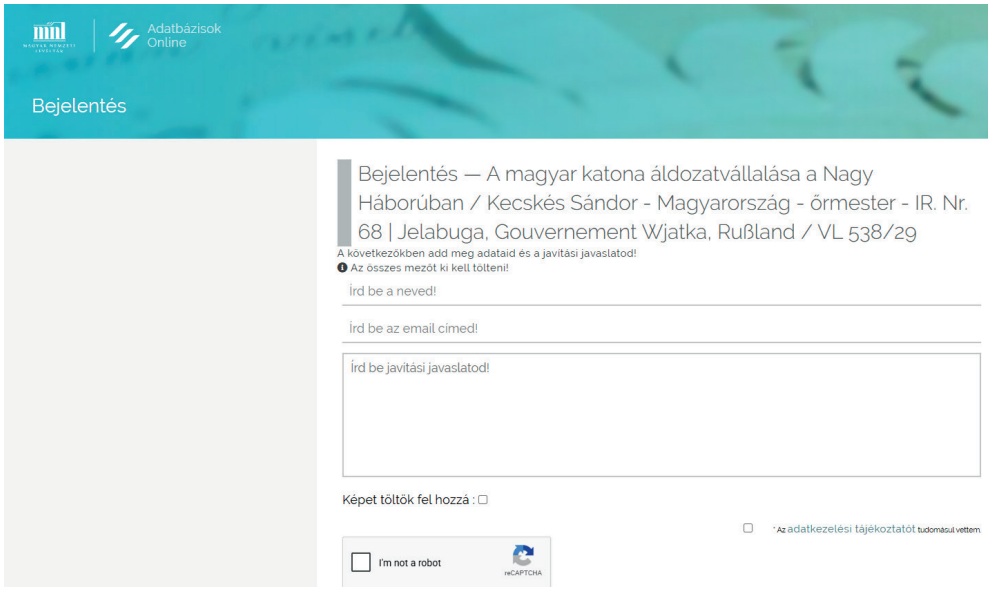


Figure 5: The possibility for the customer to add or correct information to the database.

In every case, the submitted information is reviewed by an archivist, who verifies its accuracy and, where appropriate, incorporates it into the archival database.

V. EVALUATION

The success of UGC projects depends largely on providing participants with meaningful and engaging opportunities that can be completed through accessible and user-friendly platforms. Decisions concerning the transfer of family documents to archival custody are often made by family members or heirs, for whom it is important that materials created within their family become part of the shared cultural heritage. The knowledge that documents originally created for private purposes can be preserved, made accessible for research, and contribute to society's understanding of the past strengthens family identity and pride. In this sense, the contribution of private records represents not only the transfer of historical sources but also the transformation of personal and family memories into publicly accessible cultural values. Equally important is the expression of appreciation in various forms. Long-term participation is also encouraged when involvement provides rewarding experience while allowing participants to gain knowledge and a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Although the three forms of user-generated content presented in this study differ in their methods and objectives, they are driven by similar motivations. Volunteers participating in database creation contribute to improving the accessibility and discoverability of archival sources through the generation of structured metadata. Users who submit comments and corrections share their personal knowledge in order to refine and enrich existing archival records. Contributors to Collection Days preserve family documents and memories while making them accessible for research and the wider community. In all three cases, users become active partners in the creation, enrichment, and preservation of archival knowledge, demonstrating that participatory archives are based not only on technological solutions but also on the willingness of communities to contribute their knowledge, memories, and expertise for the benefit of society. At the same time, these initiatives strengthen the visibility, public profile, and social recognition of archival institutions by fostering closer relationships with existing users and engaging new communities that might not otherwise interact with the archives. This is

particularly important because archives have traditionally been less visible to the public than museums and libraries. By actively engaging users through participatory initiatives, archives can strengthen their public profile, broaden their audience, and position themselves alongside museums and libraries as accessible and community-oriented cultural heritage institutions.

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SUMMARY

The concept of User-Generated Content (UGC) has been developed primarily within the museum sector and the broader field of digital cultural heritage, where it generally refers to content created, enriched, or shared by users outside the institution's professional staff. Although the concept has been applied less frequently in archival literature, it offers a useful framework for examining the growing role of public participation in archival work. At the same time, its in-

terpretation requires some adaptation to reflect the specific characteristics of archival institutions. In the archival context, user contributions extend beyond the creation of digital content in the traditional sense. They also include activities such as creating and enriching metadata, correcting or supplementing information associated with archival records, identifying people, places, or events, and donating private archival materials: including diaries, photographs, letters, and digitized documents. Consequently, this paper adopts a broader interpretation of UGC, encompassing not only user-generated digital content but all forms of meaningful user contribution that enhance archival description, interpretation, and collection development.

Typology: 1.04 Professional Article