The Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence: Research in a Multilingual and Transnational Archives

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ABSTRACT

The Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) is a centre dedicated to the archival preservation and research on the history of European integration. In close cooperation with the Archives services of the EU Institutions, the HAEU preserves and make available to research the archival holdings of EU Institutions. Also, the Archives promotes research on the history of the EU Institutions, raises the public interest in the process of European integration and increases transparency in the EU Institutions' work. Established following a decision by the European Communities in 1983 to open their historical archives to the public, the HAEU opened its doors in 1986. As part of the European University Institute, it is located in the historic Villa Salviati in Florence, Italy. The internet era and the modern information society have profoundly changed the research behaviour at the HAEU, in particular due to its unique character as transnational and multi-lingual archives. As central access point to EU institutional archives it is part of a network of more than 50 EU Institutions, Bodies and Agencies and seeks to respond, in close collaboration with its partners, to the challenges of the digital age. This paper outlines some key projects in terms of coping with research in an online archival database, the necessity to standardise and harmonise archival description, the added value of standardised vocabularies and the digitisation and online publication of paper archives.

Key words: The Historical Archives of European Union, HAEU, research, access, use, standardised description, archival vocabularies

L'Archivio storico dell'Unione Europea a Firenze: la ricerca in un archivio multilingue e transnazionale

SINTESI

L'Archivio storico dell'Unione Europea (HAEU) è un centro dedicato alla conservazione archivistica ed alla ricerca sulla storia dell'integrazione europea. In stretta collaborazione con i servizi archivistici delle istituzioni europee, l'HAEU conserva e rende disponibili alla ricerca le raccolte archivistiche delle istituzioni europee. Inoltre, l'Archivio promuove la ricerca sulla storia delle istituzioni europee, aumenta l'interesse sul processo di integrazione europea ed accresce la trasparenza nel lavoro delle istituzioni europee. Fondato seguendo una direttiva della Comunità Europea nel 1983 in modo da aprirne gli archivi storici al pubblico, l'HAEU ha aperto i battenti nel 1986. Come parte dell'Istituto universitario europeo, è situato nella storica Villa Salviati a Firenze, in Italia. L'epoca di internet e la moderna società dell'informazione hanno profondamente cambiato i canoni di ricerca presso l'HAEU, particolarmente a causa del proprio unico carattere di archivio transnazionale e multilinguistico. Come punto d'accesso centrale l'archivio istituzionale dell'UE, fa parte di una rete di più di 50 istituzioni, organi ed agenzie europee, e cerca di dare risposta , in stretta collaborazione con i propri partner, alle sfide dell'era digitale. Il presente articolo delinea alcuni dei progetti chiave per far fronte alla ricerca in un database archivistico online, alla necessità di standardizzare ed armonizzare la descrizione archivistica, al valore aggiunto dei vocabolari standardizzati ed alla digitalizzazione e pubblicazione online di documenti archivistici.

Parole chiave: Archivio storico dell'Unione Europea HAEU, ricerca, accesso, uso, descrizione standardizzata, vocabolari archivistici

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Zgodovinski arhiv Evropske unije v Firencah: raziskovanje v večjezičnem in transnacionalnem arhivu

IZVLEČEK

Zgodovinski arhiv Evropske unije (HAEU) je center namenjen arhiviranju in raziskovanju o zgodovini evropske integracije. V tesnem sodelovanju s posameznimi arhivskimi službami institucij EU, HAEU hrani in za namene raziskav zagotavlja dostop do arhivskega gradiva institucij EU. Arhiv spodbuja tudi raziskave o zgodovini institucije EU, dviga javni interes za proces evropske integracije in povečuje preglednost pri delu institucij EU. Ustanovljen je bil na podlagi sklepa Evropskih skupnosti leta 1983, HAEU pa je svoja vrata za javnost odprl leta 1986. Kot del Evropskega univerzitetnega inštituta, se nahaja v zgodovinski vili Salviati v Firencah v Italiji. Doba interneta in sodobna informacijska družba sta korenito spremenila raziskovalno vedenje v HAEU, zlasti zaradi njegovega edinstvenega značaja nadnacionalnega in večjezičnega arhiva. Kot osrednja točka za dostop do institucionalnih arhivov EU, je del mreže več kot 50 institucij, organov in agencij. V tesnem sodelovanju s svojimi partnerji se skuša uspešno spopadati z izzivi digitalne dobe. Prispevek opisuje nekaj ključnih projektov na področju poizvedovanja v spletnih arhivskih podatkovnih zbirkah, potrebo po standardizaciji in uskladiti popisovanja arhivskega gradiva, dodano vrednost standardiziranih geslovnikov ter digitalizacijo in spletno objavo klasičnega arhivskega gradiva.

Ključne besede: Zgodovinski arhiv Evropske unije HAEU, raziskovanje, dostop, uporaba, standardizacija popisovanja, arhivski geslovniki

1 Introduction

The Historical Archives of the European Union is the official home for the historical documents of the European Union Institutions, Bodies and Agencies. More than six kilometres of paper archives are preserved at Villa Salviati in Florence.

The great majority of documents housed at the HAEU come from the European Parliament, the Commission, the Council, the Court of Justice, the European Investment Bank and the Court of Auditors. In line with the 30 years closure rule for historical archives of EU Institutions, the archives available in Florence cover the years since the Schuman Declaration of 1950 establishing the European Coal and Steel Community until the mid-1980s[1].

The Archives is also home to more than 160 deposits of private papers from eminent European political leaders, pioneers in the European integration process and relevant EU officials. It also hosts a unique collection of archives of pro-European movements and associations and other organisations with a European scope, such as the European Space Agency and the European Free Trade Association (*for more see Historical Archives of the European Union, 2015*).

2 The challenge of a diverse research community

The HAEU operates an archival reading room in the historical premises of Villa Salviati in Florence. The reading room hosts approximately 800 research sessions with 140 new registrations of scholars every year. Researchers on site consult 6.000 archival items, mostly paper files, microforms or digital copies, per year.

As transnational European archives, the HAEU registers a large geographical diversity of researchers. While the frequency of on-site visits has been stable over years and varying between 600 and 800 sessions, the Archives has seen an important growth in the consultation of its online database that hosts the archival descriptions and inventories[2]. In a timeframe of five years, from 2011 to mid-2016, the HAEU hosted a total of 3.538 research sessions in its reading room with researchers originating from 25 different countries. The top ten countries of origin were Italy (943 visitors), France (626), Germany (576), USA (305), Netherlands (191), Greece (185), Luxemburg (135), China (86), Japan (83) and Poland (76)[3].

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1. The Archives is ruled by Council Regulation (EU) 2015/496 of 17 March 2015 amending Regulation (EEC, Euratom) No 354/83 as regards the deposit of the historical archives of the institutions at the European University Institute in Florence, at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32015R0496.

2. To access the archival database online: http://archives.eui.eu/

3. The other countries were: Belgium, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Great Brit-

The picture is even more diverse when looking at the web statistics of the Archives. In 2015, 278.484 website visits were registered. 192.141 of these visited the website in order to consult the online database and inventories of the Archives. The visits arrived from 151 countries. The top ten countries differ from the on-site research behavior. Online research from the UK and from Belgium made it into the top ten, while China and Japan dropped out of the top list[4].

3 Focus on digital access

Due to the large geographical spread of the research community taking an interest in the holdings of the Archives, concentrating on user presence in the reading room and the production of traditional inventories is not sufficient. Therefore, the Archives developed a strong digital strategy with the online availability of archival inventories and digital copies of archival material for consultation becoming a high priority. Since 2005, the Archives has had an online database for its archival descriptions and since 2008 an average of 1500 paper files have been digitised per year, mainly for consultation, but also for preservation purposes (*On how online databases and digitisation changed academic research and the archival narrative, see Manoff, 2010*).

More than 14,000 archival files have been digitised and are accessible either directly through the online database or are made available online on individual request. Until 2012 microfiche or microfilm copies were produced for preventive preservation, this activity has been stopped in 2013 to focus and expand digitization and online access. Also the EU Institutional archives services started with digitization programs for institutional holdings. A consultation copy of these digital files is nowadays either stored in Florence, or on EU Institutions' web-based storage systems, and then made available to the public through the HAEU online database. As file formats for digitization, PDF/A is used for long-term preservation and compressed PDF with OCR for online access[5].

4 The archival database: browse and search archival holdings online

Ten years after going online with its first archival database, in 2015 the proprietary system was replaced by an in-house development. In addition to browsing the archival holdings, an open source search platform SOLR, based on Apache Lucene was installed and configured in order to enrich the search and retrieval within the online database. The search engine indexes all levels of descriptions, from the fonds level through the series down to the file and item level. Results are structured by relevance. Authority records are displayed on top of the results, followed by fonds, series, files and items. Besides keyword search and advanced search, the engine allows for faceting by all relevant descriptive fields, such as fonds, description level, date, language, etc. (for more on SOLR see Learn more about SOLR, 2016).

The HAEU also hosts 600 interview recordings and transcripts originating from a series of European oral history projects, more than half of them relating to the history of the European Commission. The interviews were inventoried and described and are searchable within the archival database[6].

5 Use of international archival standards

To respond to its role as central entry point to historical archives of EU institutions, the HAEU seeks to apply a coherent approach to structure and contents of its archival descriptions in compliance with the International Standards for Archival Description ISAD(G) (*2000*) and for Archival Authority Records ISAAR(CPF) (*2004*).

The HAEU is coordinating a network of eight EU Institutions that deposit their archives in

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ain, Ireland, Norway, Rumania, Portugal, Spain, South Korea and Sweden.

4. Top ten online consultations came from: Italy (12.001), Germany (2.230), United Kingdom (1.693), Belgium (1.523), United States (1.454), France (1.335), Spain (1.221), Netherlands (723), Luxembourg (602) and Poland (437).

5. PDF/A is recognised as electronic document file format for long-term preservation by ISO standard 19005-1: 2005, see: http://www.iso.org.

6. The oral history programmes comprise seven projects on European integration, two of which referring to the European Commission from 1957 to 1986 and one referring to the history of the European Space Agency, see: http://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history/.

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Florence. Due to the new EU Regulation 2015/496 of 2015, the deposit in Florence has become compulsory for all EU Institutions, Bodies and Agencies (with the exception of the Court of Justice and the European Central Bank who may voluntarily deposit). This network is therefore growing to include also more than 40 EU Agencies.

A common approach in archival description is paramount to produce quality research in this multi-faceted archival environment. In 2013, the EU Inter-institutional Archives Group, where common archival matters of EU Institutions and the HAEU are discussed, introduced a project of establishing common guidelines for archival description[7]. The coordination of the project and the drafting of the guidelines are handled by the HAEU.

The guidelines issued of this process are based on the international standards ISAD(G) and ISAAR. For the data export and import structure and language, the EAD/EAC encoding framework was chosen. The mapping between EAD and ISAD(G) elements are based on the SGML/XML syntax for data interoperability, and direct export and import of descriptive records between EU Institutional archives databases and the central HAEU database are part of the project (*See Encoded Archival Description Official Site, 2016*).

6 Harmonizing and standardizing archival description

The HAEU has been operating since 30 years and has accumulated more than 170 archival collections. The core part of the collections came from EU Institutions and has been described by the archives service of the respective Institution with additional elements added in Florence. The descriptions of more than 160 private archives have been prepared by HAEU archivists. In 2015, the HAEU started a project to look at all the various authority records for the collections held at the HAEU with the view of harmonising and standardising structure, style and terminology used.

Archival authority records were first introduced at the HAEU in 2005. The fields used broadly covered three of the principle areas of the ISAAR(CPF) (*2004*) standard: the identity area (ISAAR 5.1), the descriptive area (ISAAR 5.2), and the relationships area (ISAAR 5.3). The differences detected in the archival authority records, the diverse application of the archival standard ISAAR(CPF) (*2004*), the individual archivist's touch and style and the difference of cultural backgrounds and schools of the international team of archivists, were considerable. Controls on content, style and relationships had been infrequent.

Inconsistencies were also found in all terms used in the descriptions. Different terms were used for the same body, depending on the language the authority record was written in. Also, the name of the institution had changed over time and terms had become obsolete. The source of the term and the personal style of the archivist lead to the usage of full terms or in other cases just of acronyms.

Regarding names of persons, some used the full, some just the first letter of the first name. In various descriptions the first name was omitted completely and in other cases acronyms were used for both, first and last name. These inconsistencies lead to difficulties in finding documents through free-text search in the database.

Another principle challenge of implementing standards was the international setting of the HAEU and the EU Institutions and the use of different languages. A significant number of descriptions are in French, others are in English, Italian and in German.

Guidelines were prepared for EU Institutions and for use within the HAEU to harmonise the structure and content elements of archival descriptions produced by the various archives. By this common practice the EU Institutions provide a coherent presentation of their archival materials. Also, the common description practice facilitates the digital data transfer from the Institutional databases to the HAEU's database.

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7. Website of the EU Inter-institutional Archives Group at: http://ec.europa.eu/archival-policy/archives_com/interinst_arch_group_en.htm.

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7 The use of standardized vocabularies

During the review of the authority notes of the HAEU also the use of standardized terms and of thesauri was considered. The terms chosen for this study were those relevant to the research areas of the HAEU: Personal names, Corporate names, Geographic names, and Headings. 'Heading' covers important historical terms related to the collections held at the HAEU, which do not fall into the other three categories, mainly treaties and historical events.

It was then decided that the first time a term would be used in an authority record, the full authorised name should be used. These changes were inserted in the existing ISAAR notes along with the revision and standardisation of contents and style of the records.

Various existing thesauri were assessed on their potential use for the HAEU and EU Institutions, namely the Library of Congress Authorities (*2016*) and the European thesaurus EUROVOC (*2016*) managed by the EU Office of Publications in Luxemburg. Both thesauri could be applied within limits, particularly when it comes to relevant historical and technical terms. The following thesauri were considered relevant and will receive further attention in the course of the project: the European Union Metadata Registry Named Authority Lists (*2016*), the multilingual EUROVOC thesaurus (*2016*), the Virtual International Authority File (VIAF) and finally the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names (2016).

As part of the project, collaboration is being established particularly with the EUROVOC team to seek ways of cooperation and the use of the thesaurus for archival description in EU Institutions and the HAEU.

8 Conclusion

As transnational archives, the HAEU is facing a variety of challenges in responding to researchers' needs. Particular challenges are the multilingualism, and the geographical and thematic spread of research projects. The internet and information technology tools provide solutions to enhance and refine documentary research in archival holdings, but at the same time necessitate a sophisticated, harmonised and standardised approach in description and online availability of inventories and digitised archival materials.

The international standards for archival description and for encoding of archival description provide important tools for improving research and inter-operability between archival databases. This is particularly pertinent for the HAEU as coordinating member of a transnational and multi-lingual network of archives services across Europe.

To provide refined search opportunities in archival databases, the use of standardised methods and vocabularies is indispensable, and while libraries have gone ahead in developing thesauri and controlled vocabularies, in the area of archives, and even more in the field of trans-national archives, this remains work in progress.

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SUMMARY

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