

Centennial of the Great War: heritage digitisation plays its role in the commemoration

The First World War marked a dramatic entrance into the 20th century. Transmission of this historical event to younger generations: many initiatives have been started nationally as well as internationally. One of them was realised by the Belgian Royal Cinematheque in the *European Film Gateway* project, and consisted in digitising, restoring and making available all Belgian films on the Great War. Those films come from RTBF who gathered testimonies and sources related to that period and digitised documents. Another institution participating in this project is the French National Library who also collected sources from over 100 locations in the French territory.

From revolutionary warehouses to public libraries

At the end of the 18th century, as the French Revolution was raging, Abbot Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire (1750-1831) fought the vandalism of the revolutionaries and tried to preserve the sources, the art works and the knowledge collected by abbeys and aristocracy. He encouraged “the public to respect national sources, which are common property (...) All scientific and artistic monuments should be watched over by every good citizen. “At that time, works of architecture were not protected at all. That was different for books and art works which were conserved in revolutionary warehouses established in each province. Archives, museums, public libraries, all direct descendants from these depots, built their collections during the 19th century, sharing the common heritage to the people. A greater awareness was born in 1921 when the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation appeared. This institution, which became UNESCO in 1945, aims to preserve, share and transmit heritage in both a material and immaterial way (since 1997).

Tracking down the traces of the First World War

Museums and libraries already housed many documents and objects related to the First World War. The 100th anniversary of the Great War represents a good opportunity to collect vast and unique collections from personal archives to complement and enrich the collections of renowned libraries and museums that already hold this type of material: correspondence between soldiers, souvenirs, diaries, photos, trench journals, etc.

Faced with a growing number of sources, their fragility and unique character, it seemed a difficult task to make this cultural heritage available to a large audience; this is especially the case for private collections whose copyrights are owned by the families.

Digitisation provides the solution with a double advantage for cultural institutions: long-term preservation of the original source and distribution of knowledge. Digitisation campaigns had to be well planned, reflecting the technical requirements as well as the expected results.

Digitisation campaigns

Since the mid-90s in the framework of European programs, two different digitisation approaches can be distinguished, mainly based on costs aspects. The first consists in digitising a maximum and large number

of pages in a short period of time. The main goal for this mass digitisation is to obtain the digital copy of the original material, thus avoiding deterioration caused by frequent handling. This approach rarely involves a content enrichment. Most of the time, the purpose is just to get an image of the original.

The second approach goes way beyond a simple dematerialisation; it meets the objectives of cultural institutions: preservation and distribution of knowledge and content. The number of digitised materials are rather small due to high costs. The focus is on quality and enrichment through added-value processing. Produced images should carry information about the physical characteristics and provenance of the original artefacts, they can be processed with image enhancement solutions for better readability... We can apply them OCR with very high quality rates and add descriptive and contextual metadata.

The role and importance of metadata

Beyond a simple image retrieval and online availability, content enrichment through OCR or indexing enables the users a full text or advanced search. Metadata describe a document and enhance the digital copy with complementary information: author, title, dates, place, keywords, links to other documents... Those different descriptive levels are used in the catalogues of large digital European libraries (Gallica, Belgica, Europeana, ...) and other search engines. On the site *The Belgian War Press*¹ (Cegesoma), for instance, searches can be made on texts of clandestine or secret journals, whereas on the site *Mémoire des hommes*² digital documents and information coming from the French Ministry of Defence can be retrieved.

Avoiding the digital black hole

Cultural institutions' digitisation projects related to the commemoration of the centennial of the Great War help to preserve a common memory. One should consider the longevity of digital data. How are they preserved, can they still be retrieved in 30 years, are files still readable? The answer lies not only in the physical support but also in the format of the digitised files. A good solution relies on the strict compliance with standards established under the auspices of working groups. The requirements of these standards are based on high quality and regular updates. They avoid ambiguity and ascending incompatibilities. Their strict usage is pertinent to avoid software and format obsolescence. Last but not least, usage of standards allows long-term preservation of information.

The First World War changed the twentieth century. Digitisation of documents plays an important role in the preservation of cultural and historical memory. It isn't just copying an image, it is more about text processing, indexing and metadata addition that enhance the document and contextualize it. Digital documents will preserve the testimony of one of the deadliest conflicts in history, by making available the memories to a large audience and future generations.



Philippe SCHWEITZER
Account & Project Manager, Numen Europe

¹ <http://warpress.cegesoma.be/>

² <http://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr>