



# To be or to appear? The *hidden archives* in the digital age

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# Archives on line

The adoption of digital technologies for Archives is not future but a present issue, inevitable, a good occasion:

- to enlarge archives' users target
- to give new challenges to the profession

Anyway, we believe it is necessary to focus:

- what it is involved in creating/publishing on line archival descriptions/content
- what does it mean for users the access to remote sources

In this paper we'll try to put in evidence some of those issues, from almost two points of view...



# Hidden collections and Archives



Lisa Spiro (CLIR-US) in a recent study on Archival Management Software proposes ICT as the only way to expose to users “hidden collections”: this approach imply that what is not on line is hidden? Is it necessary to appear (on line) to be?

Digital tech should not hide source systems oneness, not entirely perceivable/reportable *via* WWW.

Thus, digital tech may “re-write” documents history, up till the changing of their content/value (see invented archives...)

Our attention must focus on the deep evaluation of digital sources systems criteria.



## What strategies?

The **archival digitalisation** surely must be supported, but we should ask: digitasing what? Selection strategies are essential.

We need to favour **finding aids systems**, rich of informations about documents' context as well as their content. Those systems bring positive effects both to historiography and to Archives.

Digital environments should bring to surface real archives, avoiding the risk of the supporting the “digital laziness” of researchers, the illusion that *Internet offers everything*



# Digital sources of our present

Another important issue is the destiny of **contemporary sources**, most digital born with all the included risks.

Those open a new outlook as regards their retrieval and access and new finding aids, probably internal to sources themselves.

What will be our present's sources?

- web sites / pages
- on line authored contents / documents
- auto/narrations (Blog), conversations (Forum, Chat, ...)
- micro-contents (tags, short comments..)



# The users point of view

Who are present online information systems' **users**? History scholars or something more?

We assist, for example, to the increasing of genealogists or of the learning/teaching use of archives... No more *obliged to know about ancient offices* but *invited to learn about them*

**User experience feedback** is an added value, to be well managed to enhance systems: the 2.0 attitude was always applied in traditional reading rooms, why losing it in digital environments?

**Some techniques:** data mining, comments, social tagging, folksonomies, sharing and discussion tools, widgets...



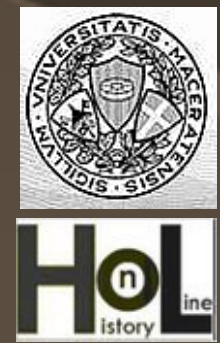
## Digital objects and re/sources

From a more technical point of view, we now build any system based on the digital object *paradigma*: but what is it?

An information, a narration, a document, a copy, an interpretation, an abstract, a collection? And more: a source or an access tool to sources? We may say **a re/source**?

Usually, it must be composed by a data object and a cluster of metadata, but this is not enough to build a good system.

Online systems select, aggregate, elaborate, present, connect: they are the essential field where to give to any single resource all its information potentials



# Document and context in digital network environments

The global success of the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative and the OAIS model support the present tendency to item-based, horizontal systems (Europeana..), with the risk of losing the rich set of meta/sub/context informations and connections.

A risk especially for archives on the web: from history granaries to historical informations *shopping malls*?

Metadata standards offer mandatory elements to create, describe, aggregate, manage and preserve digital resources. This way, some connections are granted. but the Web creates automatically new links and new contexts. We can't forget it when we conceive resource systems...



# Archives *uses*: browsing vs. searching

Archives' uses (online and onsite) could be divided in 2 main types:

- **users who have a research plan:** they love to browse archives, verifying their theories on document systems. They are good finding aids readers, interested in archives creators, include and exclude search paths, can appreciate the lack of records as an useful information. They know that archives need time (**browsers?**)
- **users who look for specific records:** they have no theories, want just quick results (content) and don't want to read complex finding aids. They would love **miraculous fishing tools (searchers?)**



# Browsers vs. Searchers (or a step beyond?)

Online, we sentence our users – left on their own - to *break up* complex structures to find what they need, or to use textual research tools (more or less advanced, but always syntax-based).

How to face the increasing use of searching tools instead of browsing content, preserving serendipity opportunities?

We may *post-classificate* historical archival descriptions and adopt descriptive logic and ontologies to give additional (and automatic) meaning to descriptions, creating a third dimension, over documents (horizontal) and relations (vertical)



## Conclusion: who will govern the change?

The digital challenge press us to go further our disciplines (History, Text studies, Archives, Libraries) but not losing our special skills and traditions

Anyway, humanity studies need a consistent increase of ICT competences! We must work together to efficient strategies for the creation and management of digital re/sources systems.

**Information science** can't be just the field of engineers but those who know how to manage structured informations must be involved (let's go one step forward “informatica umanistica” or “ICT applied to...”)



**Thank you for your attention!**

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