

# The Digital Archive and the Politics of Digitization

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Much has been, and is, made of the transformative potential of digital resources and historical data for humanities and historical research in recent years. Historians in the global North are flooded with retro-digitised and born-digital materials and tend to take them for granted, grateful for the opportunities they afford. As the late Roy Rosenzweig predicted already in 2003, historians “may be facing a fundamental paradigm shift from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance” (Rosenzweig 2003: 739). Yet, if we accept that we do indeed live in a culture of abundance, that abundance is still rarely questioned and qualified, let alone contextualized in time and space. To put it simply: the question of why, where and how we can access what we can access, and how this affects ‘memory’ is rarely posed.

Few historians would deny that archives or libraries are repositories of carefully selected and curated collections and thus far from neutral: “No archive is innocent”, as Elizabeth Yale wrote (Yale 2015: 332). By the same token, the digitisation of historical sources, is far from neutral. In a research environment that increasingly privileges what is available online, where traditional archives are sometimes even referred to as ‘hidden’, and ‘old-fashioned’ browsing is replaced by surgical discovery, we would do well to start imagining what a world of historical scholarship based upon digital resources looks like. Just as the differences between ‘analogue’ sources and their digital, yet equally material, representations are easily overlooked, so too changing modes of access to digital sources are rarely scrutinised for their consequences for historical research. In sum, there is a marked discrepancy between the use of digital resources by many historians and their lack of interest in, or understanding of, how these are created and constituted.

Archives are neither repositories nor *purveyors* of ‘memory’, as so much contemporary discourse would have it: more accurately, they provide (part of) the raw material that feeds into its construction. The ‘archive equals memory’ equation obscures the role of *mediation* in the process of turning archival materials into reconstructions of the past, and the manifold ways in which this influences ‘memory’, be it individual or social/cultural.

Increased access to retrodigitised sources does not imply completeness, even when mass digitisation is concerned. Many materials are not, and will never be, digitised. Indeed, digitisation first and foremost means selection. GLAMs select materials to be digitised on the basis of a variety of criteria. These include the preservation of fragile materials, easy access to collection highlights and/or often-used material, the research value of certain collections and academic research agendas. Memory politics, public discourses on the past, and the articulation of a country’s imagined ‘national’ identity are of similar importance while legal, ethical and copyright frame and constraint digitisation strategies. Given the costs involved, the availability of funding, public or private, plays a key role in enabling digitisation projects in the first place (Zaagsma 2013).

As digitisation entails a selection of already selected analog materials, historians find themselves facing old questions pertaining to new and unfamiliar digital environments. How do digital resources shape the historical themes, topics and debates that can be researched and how might they influence research agendas more broadly? In what ways do they enable us to address new research questions and venture into new research avenues that challenge existing master narratives? Can they facilitate research into transnational histories when most digitisation projects are, in one way or another, so often nationally framed? In sum: what are the histories that we can and cannot tell with digitised cultural heritage, and how could we as historians best navigate the challenges that are involved in using them? What, then, are the politics of digitisation and what are its implications for historical research?

There are many aspects of digitisation that can be considered “political”, from selection for digitisation to modes of access to broader questions about ‘infrapolitics’. None of these is specific to our digital age and historical context is crucially important. Digitisation is only the most recent technological option for heritage preservation and reproduction, which has a history that dates back to the invention of the microfilm in the late 19th century, and the first uses of photography for research purposes in the early 20th. Similarly, the politics of heritage and the political dimensions of heritage preservation, as well as the relation between archives, social memory, knowledge and power have long been discussed by historians, philosophers, archival scientists and heritage scholars. And as long as archives have existed, the question of access has been key in determining *who* writes history.

In this paper I will discuss key parameters of the politics of digitisation within a broader historical and global context with the aim to encourage further debate on its implications for historical research.

In the first part, I will outline the global dimensions of the politics of digital cultural heritage with a particular focus on developments within and between Europe and Africa, framed within the broader context of the politics of heritage and its preservation and recent debates about ‘postcolonial digital humanities’ (Risam 2019). In the second part, I will discuss the history and current state of digitisation in Europe and Africa. Here I will partly draw upon the the IFLA/UNESCO Survey on Digitisation and Preservation that was conducted in 1998, at the dawn of the era of (mass) digitisation, and the web archive of the accompanying IFLA/Unesco Directory of Digitised Library Collections (2002-2006), as well as recent global and European digitisation surveys.

In the European Union area, cultural heritage digitisation is inextricably linked to strengthening a sense of European identity and embedded in a digital agenda that “seeks to optimise the benefits of information technologies for economic growth, job creation and the quality of life of European citizens” (Commission Recommendation 2011). Supranational projects such as Europeana and Time Machine both frame themselves as contributing to a European common identity and history. In the latter case, a video created as part of a marketing campaign explicitly suggested Europe was at a turning point in its history and the Time Machine project would act as savior of a mythical occidental European enlightened past and enabler of a common history (Time Machine Trailer 2019). In Western Europe, where digital resources are comparatively plenty, debates about the effects of digitisation on historical scholarship are relatively muted. In Eastern Europe and Russia, however, the politics of digital heritage are of greater scholarly concern within a context where historians face increasing political pressures, if not active censorship and obstruction (Golubev 2021).

In Africa, digitisation should be seen within a postcolonial context where the geographical overlap between 'nation' and 'state' that many assume in Europe, is absent. In this respect, Kahn and Tanner have pointed to the complex interplay between digitisation and (post-colonial) nation-building and national identity in post-colonial (South)Africa and plead for "build[ing] digital collections that reflect an indigenous African identity, not an imagined Westernised one" (Tanner and Kahn 2014: 125). They follow Premesh Lalu, who earlier argued forcefully for a "politics of digitisation that will expand what can be said about the history of liberation struggles in Southern Africa" (Lalu 2007: 42). The latter points to the much broader context in which digitisation in and within Africa should be situated: North/South relations, the involvement of public and private parties, questions of access, privilege, ownership mix in complex ways which have created distinct concerns that have variously been described as 'digital imperialism' (2000s), the 'complex of the digital savior' (2010s) and appropriation of the discourse on 'endangered archives' (Chamelot, Hiribarren and Rodet 2020).

As will be clear from this very short outline, heritage is highly political in nature, and this is no different in the digital realm, where the struggle for 'memory' and the past increasingly takes place. This plays out in both the global North and South, a division that has some explanatory value when assessing the availability of resources for digitisation and the effects of colonialism yet should not obscure significant internal variations. While (mass) heritage digitisation is most advanced in Western Europe, in terms of scale, even there not everything is, or will ever be, digitized. What is digitised, however, shapes the stories we can tell about the past. This is of course similar to the general question of what heritage is preserved and how that affects historical research and engagements with the past in general, yet 'digital' enhances and amplifies these impacts in various ways, which will be discussed in the second part of the paper.

In order to perform a more structured analysis of the *process* of digitisation and its political dimensions, I will expand upon a scheme proposed by the sociologist Richard Harvey Brown and the librarian Beth Davis-Brown in their seminal 1998 article 'The Making of Memory'. In their analysis, the Browns explored four ideological and political functions of archival and curatorial work "as these are understood by professional librarians and archivists in the United States" and argued how and why these also constituted "deployments of power" (Brown and Brown 1998). These functions are easily transposed to the digital realm:

Tab. 1

Political dimensions of archival and curatorial work (Brown and Brown 1998)	Digital equivalents
<b>Collections are allocated</b> to different depositories, libraries, or archives in the name of efficiency in avoiding redundancy = allocation of control.	Which institutions digitise and control digital collections? What infrastructures and data frameworks are used?
<b>Collection development</b> refers to decisions concerning what is and what is not collected, what is merely stored but not catalogued (and hence made intellectually accessible), and what is thrown.	What is digitised and why? What is metadated?
<b>Cataloging and classification</b> refer to the organizational and intellectual description of what is held. Whose schema will be used?	How is it classified and how is it metadated?
<b>Circulation and access</b> refer to decisions about who gets to see what, and this is shaped in part by the classification system or categorical order.	How is access provided and mediated?

The paper will conclude by highlighting the paradoxical situation we currently face with regard to digitisation and the state of 'memory' in both the global North and South. It might be increasingly common to describe non-digitised heritage as 'hidden', but that label suggests digitisation as a miracle cure which can solve the issue. The real problem, however, is that much of our cultural

heritage can not even be discovered digitally through institutional collection databases. In Africa, this problem has even more dire consequences as Chamelot, Hiribarren, and Rodet recently pointed out: "There is now a greater risk that archives which have not been previously classified and inventoried will be lost because the slow work of digitization projects monopolizes the time of many archivists" Chamelot, Hiribarren and Rodet (2020). More attention should therefore be paid to (online) cataloguing before digitisation, in the case of materials where neither is done, as well as to linking online archives to catalogues/ descriptive information about offline resources. Cataloguing is a fundamental precondition for enabling access to heritage and without the ability to even find out about important archival holdings online, the question of whether they are digitised or not becomes moot. This is especially true in historical research where knowledge about the materials that exist and could be part of one's evidentiary basis is a key aspect in framing research designs, and where justifying the choice of materials that are to be used in a given research project, whether these can be found online or offline, an essential step before the actual research even begins.

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