

Leonardo Musci, Archivi del Novecento: project in progress, software in evolution

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The BAICR Consortium is a non-profit agency set up in 1989 by five important cultural institutes: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana (so called Treccani), Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Istituto Luigi Sturzo, Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso, Società geografica italiana. The obscure acronym actually stands for Libraries and Archives of Roman Cultural Institutes.

In the early nineties BAICR promoted a network of private archives as a primary source to reconstruct the cultural, social and political history of Italian twentieth century. The basic ideas of the project – which was called "Archivi del Novecento" - were simple but were made innovative by their interaction:

- a) every archival collection is a piece of a complex structure, the richness and multiplicity of which need to be revealed through a correct system of description;
- b) twentieth century documents need a dedicated descriptive layout;
- c) the relations between the creators of the archives and documentary complexes can be described in a network in order to forge "virtual" links where material ones were broken by historical events;
- d) it is necessary to give more attention to the contents of archival collections beyond the traditional systems of arrangement;
- e) our mission is to create a work community of archivists who can share methods, syntaxes and terminology as a guarantee of cultural added value.

Relationships and networks of cultural objects exists in and of themselves, but needs to be brought to light. To establish connections between documentary sources and to make the archives "talk" to each other are ordinary aims of the researchers' work. Our goal was, instead, to improve the practices of archival and documentation operators in order to overcome deep-rooted tendencies to isolationism and identification with partial sources. In our field this means more opportunities to contextualise, shared descriptive practices, participation to draw up detailed rules, enrich the number of actual archival cases, using off-the-shelf tools rather tailor-made applications. Chief among these tools are the "open documents" issued by the working party on archival description issues as operating tutors for daily activities. These documents can be read and downloaded from the www.archividelnovecento.it website that provides further information on the project.

To carry out the above-described plan, BAICR and the Datamat company (from 2007 ElsigDatamat) have developed the GEA software, now running in the 4.06 release. From the beginning, the cultural agenda has governed the data processing project. Because we are a non-profit group, we do not have a commercial approach to the spread of GEA, although of course we need funds to invest in research. We are more interested in involving GEA users to the greatest possible extent in the sharing of archival guidelines (which are obviously related to international standards of description), because we conceive the application software as a device able to a) enhance the level of communication among archivists; b) fully represent archival relations (internal links in the collections; relationships between creators and archives; archival custody condition); c) promote public access to archival contents. I would underline that in 2005 GEA was adopted by the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, the Italian National Archives.

Following these principles, we are now working on a new GEA release, whose issue is scheduled for spring 2008. Among many novelties, I would point out that we intend to develop a multilingual version based on a standardised dictionary of archival terms: any users wishing to have the software "speak" his (non-Italian) language, will be asked to provide us a conversion table of archival terms in the desired language; in turn, we will undertake to translate all the technical messages displayed by the software. Special agreements will be made with institutions that will provide translations of the user's guide.

We hope that this evolution will allow a higher degree of standardisation and normalisation in archival description.

Another aspect that we consider very important is to widen the possibilities of searching the databases.

Although GEA observes the traditional methods of archival description and the international standards of description (ISAD and ISAAR) we have always believed that is useful and desirable to integrate the traditional archival finding aids (inventories, indices, lists) with other access possibilities, such as indexing by subject. It is important to underscore that the two systems are complementary rather than alternative to each other. A search carried out using semantic indices is complementary to the one that starts from the originator of the documentation. It is very important to be clear on this aspect both in order to avoid unnecessary wars of religion among experts in the same field and because supply-side differences also affect the type of public being addressed.

In the past the relationship between archives and indexing has been a source of doubt and diffidence, particularly because of the fear of betraying the specificity of the archival context.

On one side there emerged the fear that the discipline might regress to dubious practices of subject-matter lumping; on the other it was felt that tools developed in a library context could not be applied to archives without adapting them to specific archival requirements.

The goal of our project has been to fully explore the actual limits that might constrain the application of library indexing tools to archives. We are now at the end of a first major work phase of this specific project, which we call "20th century words. An archivist's thesaurus" and which we have carried out with the support of the Directorate General of Archives – Archival Documentation and Publications Service. The Thesaurus thus created can be consulted on our website at the page '900 Lab > Thesaurus.

Archivi del Novecento intends to be an articulated information system rather than a "mere" publication of computerised catalogues.

This information system must therefore be based on placing the archival data into a wider context so as to make it possible to:

- a) access directly the documents of which the records constitute the metarecords;
- b) place archival data in a wider context, integrating them with various kinds of sources outside the archive itself;
- c) place archival holdings in a wider pool of heritage artefacts;

Another planned evolution is therefore linked to this basic choice made by the Consortium. The challenge is to break out of the archival "corral", not so much to limit it but rather to fully place it among other cultural heritage and to allow papers to speak not just of what they say but also of where they lead us to. This means offering an audience that goes beyond the cultural professionals an integrated picture of the sources that can be tapped to answer research needs.

There is a growing awareness of the need to offer cultural content without too many barriers between different disciplines.

This pushes to attempt to begin a specific discourse for museum-archive integration, applicable to different contexts that range from industry to art, but also to institutes that hold evidence of specific historical events. It is necessary to further explore the relationship between objects and documents, particularly in the era dominated by imagery and the inherent risk of decontextualization. It seems best that this challenge be taken up by those who conceive culture as a locus for civic discourse accessible at different levels (professional, scientific and broadly "utilitarian" while also taking into account the costs that such operations imply.

To achieve this we are considering a GEA software module capable of being used in mixed museum –archive environments. In addition to tackling issues related to the coordination of different descriptive syntaxes of the individual items, this aspect will have to aim decisively at the web dimension in order to allow users to steer a personal "navigation" course amongst the collections.