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Autor: Doffey, Marie-Christine
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Libraries are helping to shape the digital future

Digitisation, electronic archiving, open data – three areas in which libraries are helping to shape the digital future. The basis for that work is their collections, both on paper and digitally born. Access to them is ensured by the use of standardised metadata.

I am sometimes asked for how long libraries will continue to exist. My standard answer is: “As long as people have curiosity, they will want libraries. As long as a society wishes to progress, it will need libraries.” By way of counter-argument, people always point to the internet, where supposedly you can find all the information or entertainment you need. Who, they ask, still wants to read printed books, let alone visit institutions from which you can borrow them?

If we examine these arguments in depth, we see that far from replacing libraries, the internet actually makes use of them. Conversely, libraries use the internet. To speak of symbiosis would be an exaggeration, because both could live without the other. But the exchange between the two domains has created something new, and its potential has not yet been exhausted. It is the publicly financed libraries that will ensure the new material is preserved over time; the private actors of the internet can change what they do or stop altogether from one day to the next. Libraries are there to guarantee that everyone will also have access to digital cultural heritage.



Marie-Christine Doffey,
Director

Online is increasing; demand for print remains

A lot of publishing is now online. At the end of 2015, just under two million domain names were registered under the .ch domain.² The collection of digitally born publications is the fastest-growing of all our collections – even though we only collect selectively. In 2008 – the first year in which we published figures for it – it comprised some 1400 publications. By the end of 2015 that had risen to almost 40 000 – many times the original number.

Compared with the almost three million printed books and nearly 900 000 volumes of newspapers and periodicals that number is still small, especially given that the collection of printed publications is continually growing. Over 12 000 new books were published in Switzerland in 2015, for example.³ Contrary to what might be expected, the figure is more or less stable over time. User demand for printed works remains strong. Surveys carried out by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office⁴ catalogued 44.5 million loans across all library categories in 2014, the majority of them involving printed documents. That is our experience, which we have to rely on due to the lack of differentiated data.

The physical collection guarantees the transmission of heritage

Why are so many printed items borrowed if the internet is awash with information?

One reason is undoubtedly that many people continue to prefer the printed version – of a book for example – over the electronic alternative. For as long as that remains the case, libraries should also offer printed works, provided they have the resources to do so. If they do not, they risk erecting new barriers to information. A second reason why printed publications are in such demand is that far from all of them are available electronically via the internet. Of the holdings in our General Collection, an impressive 12.1 million pages are available online; yet today, some ten years after we embarked on our digitisation programme, that is still no more than half a per cent of the total.

² <https://www.nic.ch/reg/cm/wcm-page/statistics?lid=en>, retrieved on 19.2.2016

³ See appendix to this Annual Report, available at http://www.nb.admin.ch/annual_report

⁴ <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/16/02/02/data.html>, retrieved on 19.2.2016

There is no replacement, then, for the physical collection – even if we regard it solely as an information storage medium. It is the only way of keeping the printed information accessible in its entirety. It is also the guarantee of its longevity: in comparison with electronic information, paper is relatively easy to preserve over time. A further aspect of physical collections is that they are often a cultural heritage that cannot simply be abandoned. Every book, every newspaper and every periodical is not just an information storage medium but an object which has meaning and value as such. A self-confident and self-aware society will not give up the ability to hand down at least one copy of every printed publication to succeeding generations.

Digitisation: opportunities and limits

That does not mean, however, that the works in these collections simply lie around until someone happens to come along and request one of them. The printed – or, to put it more generally – analogue collections, which in some cases have been built up over centuries, are one of the most important sources on which the internet draws. Manuscripts, incunabula, codices, books, newspapers, periodicals, images and sound recordings are being digitised and can be accessed at any time, anywhere the internet is available. They thus gain a public audience that they could never achieve as objects alone.

If libraries had more money, they would be able to place their documents online faster. Yet there is still no end in sight for digitisation in the foreseeable future. Complete digitisation is in any case at odds with the restrictions of copyright: protected works cannot be reproduced without the consent of the rights holder. The digital world is also less enduring than the analogue. Processes are improved, and expectations in terms of quality increase with them. We therefore have no guarantee that what was digitised yesterday will still be fit for purpose tomorrow. It is entirely possible that everything will periodically have to be digitised anew.

Libraries archive the internet

There is another reason why it is relatively difficult to preserve digitally born publications over time. Unlike digitised print products, they are not produced in accordance with uniform standards. That inevitably renders archiving difficult. As a result, digitally born information is in danger of disappearing irretrievably one day. In publishing almost exclusively in electronic form, the natural, technical and medical sciences run the risk of losing their history.

Libraries and archives are working to ensure that does not happen; the Swiss National Library is one of them. We are in constant dialogue with experts around the world with a view to advancing digital long-term archiving. In autumn 2016 we will be hosting one of the most prestigious international conferences in this field, iPRES2016.⁵ This is a good example of how supposed competitors – the internet and libraries – are in fact partners. It is the libraries – chief among them the national libraries – that have made it their task to preserve the internet (or at least parts of it) over time. At the Swiss National Library, for example, we and a large number of partners run Web Archive Switzerland, which archives websites of particular relevance to Switzerland.

The internet and libraries have for some time been exploiting each other's potential in the dissemination and preservation of information. Encouraged by a new medium, libraries have once again in their five thousand year history reinvented themselves, without abandoning their traditions. They have engaged with the society for which they exist and adapted to meet its needs. Those needs include the preservation of memory – including memory of the internet in its current form.

Open data enable new kinds of linkages

In the future, libraries and the internet will no doubt also be working together to connect information in new ways, by means of linked open data. Libraries do not just place their content online; they also open their catalogues up to web crawlers. This has the effect of making public the data generated by libraries themselves: the metadata, such as author, title, publisher, place and topic of a publication. When these are standardised, they can be easily linked with data on the same author, publisher or topic at other institutions or even from private individuals.

Above and beyond making its content and metadata available free of charge, wherever possible the NL also encourages their re-use. For example, it is involved in the Swiss open government data portal,⁶ publishes attractive images on Wikimedia Commons, the media collection of Wikipedia,⁷ and supplied its data for the cultural data “hackathon”,⁸ an experimental event for software developers. It is part of the Metagrid project, which aims to achieve the interlinking of a wide spectrum of resources for the humanities.⁹ The Bibliography on Swiss History has recently been linked to the portal *Rechtsquellen Online*,¹⁰ the collection of Swiss law source materials.

The full potential of linked open data for research has yet to be established. Improved linking of source materials via metadata undoubtedly makes research easier. But it is entirely possible that it will throw up new questions and new methods, leading to completely new insights. The future is open. Libraries are helping to shape it.

One person who felt passionately about the role and future of libraries was former National Councillor Christiane Langenberger. She became President of the Swiss National Library Commission in 2008. Christiane Langenberger passed away on 16 August 2015. Under her leadership, a library charter for Switzerland was created.¹¹ She was particularly concerned with the national coordination of library policy. We will remember her as its spiritus rector.

Marie-Christine Doffey
Director

⁶ <https://opendata.swiss/en/organization/schweizerische-nationalbibliothek-nb>

⁷ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Media_contributed_by_the_Swiss_National_Library

⁸ <http://make.opendata.ch/wiki/event:2015-02>

⁹ www.metagrid.ch

¹⁰ <http://www.rechtsquellen-online.zh.ch/startseite/uebersicht>

¹¹ <http://www.nb.admin.ch/org/organisation/03172/03205/index.html?lang=en>