

From Family Memories to Digital Archives – Europeana and the Educational Value of its Digital Collections

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Abstract

Mass digitisation of the collections held by GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) provide the users with huge historical, cultural, linguistical informational resources in digital format, which are more and more used in educational activities all over the world. The paper describes the experience and the outcomes of some non formal educational projects and activities associated with the creation and re-use of the digital archives *Europeana 1914-1918* and *Europeana 1989*.

Keywords: *educational values of the digital archives, crowdsourcing projects, students engagement, digital informational resources*

1. General Context

It is a fact that we are increasingly living in a *digital* reality which shapes every important aspect of the daily life – and education is one of them. For the 12-18 years old generation – the digital born generation – the daily life is crossed all the time by virtual experiences and the learning process should be adapted to this situation in order to be more efficient.

Mass digitisation of the archives, heritage and documentary collections of all types has produced a huge amount of digital informational resources which are available for reuse in the teaching activities and are actually increasingly used in education.

The Europeana Foundation which develops and harvests *Europeana* - Europe's Digital Library, Archive and Museum, has always been interested in reusing its rich digital archives for educational purposes. From this point of view, its most successful projects - *Europeana 1914-1918* and *Europeana 1989* provided the digital archives which are the most used in the educational field.

2. The *Europeana 1914-1918* Archive and the educational activities developed with some Bucharest Romanian Students

Europeana 1914-1918 – a project which originated in a 2006 University of Oxford's idea and first started in 2011 in Germany (1), aimed at collecting letters, family objects, photos and other memorabilia dating from WWI time and privately held by Europeans in order to be digitised and then added to the Digital Archive *Europeana 1914-1918*.

During the time, this *WWI Europeans'Archive* gathered more than 10 000 interesting family stories most of them unpublished before and more than 100 000 digitised pages in text, image or audio format.

By bringing together in January 2014 this dataset with two other digital archives built during the *Europeana 1914-1918 Collections Project* (400 000 WWI items digitised from the collections of some of the most important European libraries) and *Europeana EFG 1914* (bringing 660 hours of films and audiovisual materials from WWI time) it has been created the biggest digital Archive dedicated to WWI from the world – harvested by the website www.europeana1914-1918.eu (2).

This impressive digital archive has been used in the educational process even from the beginning of the project, British Library managing to create an interesting educational website offering learning resources dedicated to WWI (3).

Also in Romania all the four collection roadshows organised during September 2013- August 2014 within the *Europeana 1914-1918* project in Bucharest, Cluj Napoca, Sibiu and Orastie have added an impressive amount of digitised material to this Archive.

The Romanian *Europeana team* of this project has organised together with Romanian students from several Bucharest schools and Colleges some activities in order to use these WWI digital resources for educational purposes.

A series of workshops and meetings regarding World War One and *Europeana 1914-1918* Archive have been planned in April 2014 during the '*School Otherwise Week*' with students of the 'Ion Neculce', 'Gheorghe Lazăr', 'Ion Luca Caragiale' National Colleges and the 'Titu Maiorescu' Secondary School being involved.

The students from 9-12 grades have tried to recreate the atmosphere of those times using mainly the Romanian digital resources offered by the *Europeana 1914-1918* website (but some of them have also used French and English documents).

They have written essays about World War One related family stories, characters or aspects which they have found on *Europeana 1914-1918* website.

The Romanian essays and presentations they have written tried to describe not only the historical perspective on the events but also to emphasize the human reactions to those events.

Some of the prize awarded essays were (4):

- The Story of Dumitru Nistor;
- Queen Maria of Romania and First World War;
- Artists in wartime;
- Children in wartime;
- The moral support of the home families for the soldiers;
- Medals and medals recipients in The Great War;
- The story of Iuliu Bologa;
- A story about the Romanian Scouts;
- A Prisoner in Russia.



Figure 1. The presentation of Dumitru Nistor 's Story, Europeana CC BY SA

The French and English teachers together with their students also found inspirational resources among the impressive French and English archives of *Europeana 1914-1918*, the students having in this way the possibility to test and enrich their foreign languages knowledges searching the archives on specific themes: the artists' daily life in war time, the daily life of the children and soldiers a.s.o.

A History teacher from the 'Ion Neculce' National College described the *Europeana 1914-1918 Archive* from the historian but also from the teacher point of view (5):

'The *Europeana 1914-1918* archive contains first hand resources of exceptional documentary value, because they come from the descendands of the people directly involved in the war like the officers, the soldiers and their families.

It is all about a lived history, where scientific information goes hand-in-hand with sensitivity, the sense with the sensibility.

Every piece of historical information is filtered by the personal experience of the storyteller so that objective and subjective, general and particular are melting together in a multifaceted view.

The perspectives on the events are dramatic, heroic and tragic. War has created special and unusual situations at which people reacted in unexpected ways. Values and attitudes like humanitarianism, dignity, tolerance, critical thinking are to be remembered above all.

Besides the adversities in which history positions people, the human values remain perennial.

The website invites to meditation, cognition, analysis.

The resources are accessible both to the amateur and to the scholar and they bring history closer to simply people as personal experiences are easier to understand and remember by the public than the scholarly treatises. In a reverse way the historian is advantaged too, as he can find a huge research material previously unknown before. The website offers lessons of life to both younger and older people.

The activities developed together during these workshops were highly appreciated both by *Europeana* team and the Bucharest students, with the children being satisfied for learning more about the *Great War* directly from the soldiers' diaries and their family's documents. The digital resources are to be found usually in image and text format (sometimes even audio format) in this archive therefore having a greater impact and being more attractive to work with.

3. The *Europeana 1989* Project and the engagement of the young generation during its development in Romania

If in the case of *Europeana 1914-1918* project the educational activities concerned mainly the searching and the reuse of the digital informational resources already harvested in this archive, a different approach was chosen in the case of the *Europeana 1989* project in Romania where the involvement of young generation was established and planned even during the creation of this digital archive.

So, at the *Europeana 1989 Collection Day* event from the 19th of December 2014 developed at the Faculty of History of the Bucharest University (6) the entire team in charge with digitising and introducing the digital records into the archive was composed of young people (students in their last studying year, PhD's and PhD's candidates, young researchers in History) which weren't born at the time of December 1989 events or were too young to remember anything from those events.

Besides, 14 students from the 'Ion Neculce' and 'Jean Monnet' National Colleges in Bucharest took part at the event, helping the digitising team in writing the stories, recording them and introducing the digital data into the *Europeana 1989* Archive.

In this way the entire event had a profound educational aspect, facilitating the exchange of informations and the interaction between generations, the young people having the opportunity to find out about what happened in December 1989 and about the atmosphere of those times directly from the participants of those events.



Figure 2. Students recording the testimonies of the participants of the 21 December 1989 events Europeana CC BY SA

All the participants have been impressed by the story of some young heroes who died for their freedom and ideals, but also by the story of the Romanian teacher Paul Popescu died in December 1989 Revolution who wrote a few time before those events a poem full of forewarning and bad feelings:

“I don’t exist. I was alive once
When water wasn’t gathered between banks,
Outside was dark and in the waves
The Uncreated floated.

I am tired. I leave you now
For other better worlds!”

The students and the Europeana team listened carefully the touching testimony of a librarian who faced the huge destructions from the Central University Library in Bucharest on 22 and 23 December 1989.

Here is a fragment revealing her feelings when she saw her workplace almost completely destroyed:

“In the morning of 23rd of December I reached the center of the town very difficultly, brought by somebody who stopped his car at my requests. (...) I climbed the steps near the Crețulescu Church and saw with my own eyes the cruel reality. Beyond the tears who filled my eyes I could see in front of me an *amputated building* “screaming” hopeless: Why ?

I hurried up and got inside the building of the library. The military tanks were still in front of it. I met with several colleagues. It was so horrible everything what had

happened!!! Broken-hearted, together with a colleague, Sorin I climbed on the 1st floor. There were no more banisters. From the reference room only the walls remained. That was the case, in fact, for all the reading rooms. In the storage rooms, there were still some shelves remained as some skeletal vertical strange appearances and as a remembrance of what had been until yesterday, BOOKS! I went along with Sorin and got a tricolour flag, we cut out the Communist coat of arms with a razor blade and then climbed the steps without banisters up to the dome of the building.

We have put this Flag of the Romanian Revolution where once there was a clock which was completely burned!”

All in all the Collection Campaign proved to be a very interesting experience for the young participating people. The warm human emotion passed on together with the real historical facts by the direct participants or by their families, offered a more persuasive and vivid image of those events giving them the power of true and real testimonies more powerful than any academic presentation.

In fact, one of the students who took part also at the *Europeana 1914-1918 workshops* described extremely well what she felt during the *Europeana 1989 Campaign* and found similitudes to describe both the soldiers and heroes and the events:

‘By taking part at the creation of the *Europeana 1989 Archive* I felt that in a way „I wrote History”. Everything was so touching!

And the poem written by Laurence Binyon – *the Poet of the Great War*, fits so well to the hundreds of young Romanian heroes died in the December 1989 events:

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them...*

Anyhow, it seems we never learn from the past...”

4. Some conclusions and outcomes

1. Teenagers are always more delighted to do their homeworks and find the informational resources they need for learning *on the internet*, as they usually spend a lot of time in this virtual environment. The informational resources they found in the GLAMs’ big digital archives are diverse (image, text, audio or audiovisual) and of good quality turning the learning experience into a more attractive one, an experience which stimulates imagination and creativity.

And the experience is more successfully as it is realised within large groups (in classrooms for instance) where the collaborative working and the team spirit is stimulated.

2. The big archives like *Europeana 1914-1918* and *Europeana 1989*, being pan-European, can offer a global image on the events allowing the pupils to see them in a larger context and to better understand the traumatic experiences faced by all Europeans

during World War One (no matter which side their governments were on during the conflict) or to understand the Eastern Europeans' life during the communist totalitarian regimes – a so similar experience.

By putting together all these memories in One Big Archive a global and comprehensive image of the historical events is being offered with the possibility of comparing the context and the specific situations.

3. It is now a common fact that users of all ages prefer accessing information online and they like to find digital informational resources *in full text* format and of a good quality allowing the reuse of these resources in different ways (for learning, researching or entertainment)

In this sense, libraries (together with archives, museums or galleries) should be in the front line in offering trustful and good quality digital resources.

4. In this sense, the managing team of the Romanian Academy Library – the place where the *Europeana 1914-1918* project has been launched in Romania and where the first Collection Campaign took place – recognised the necessity of the creation of a modern educational platform where the rich digital collections held by libraries to be put together in order to support the modern educational process.

As a result, the Romanian Academy Library is one of the initiators of the *DigiEduCult* platform (7), together with the National Library, the Central University Library of Bucharest and the Ministry of Education and Research created with the above mentioned educational purpose.

5. A basic rule regarding the audience development in the cultural field (and not only) states: '*Be always there where your public is!*'

In a similar way, GLAMs and other heritage institutions should adapt their strategy and activities to the new global informational context and *to be there where the daily life of their users takes place, preparing digital informational offers suitable for information, learning and research in the ways these activities are being undertaken now.*

References

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