Jevgeni Zolotko
One Day of the State Archivist Life (EKKM, 2011)
Installation from substance produced in the course of
decomposition of different printed text materials
5 × 9 × 3.5 m

ESTONIAN MEMORY INSTITUTIONS IN THE DIGITAL TURN

A correspondence interview with MARIN LAAK*, the senior fellow of the cultural history and literary research working group at the Estonian Cultural History Archives.*

In 2013, Estonian Government passed the development plan Culture 2020 that foresees massive digitizing in memory institutions: namely, according to this plan, the most valuable part of all Estonian cultural heritage should be digitized by 2018. What is the national aim of this programme? What are the strategies for approaching such a changeable and complex subject?

The idea of digitizing the entire cultural heritage reminds me of Lenin's plan to electrify all of Russia in the early days of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The idea is zealous but the scale is unfathomable. Setting development plans, as was the case at the Ministry of Culture with the development of Estonian culture until 2020, means painting in pretty bold strokes. In theory, the development plan should come with a comprehensive document called 'operational programme'; I think this has not been discussed yet, or at least not on such a wide scale as was the case with all the ideas that hopefully made it into the development plan.

Digitizing our cultural heritage is not a novel issue in the circles of memory institutions; it has been on the agenda for the past ten years or even longer. Estonian memory institutions have been and are co-operating quite well and are more or less up to date about each other's activities. Yet I am surprised that there is no mention of digital or other developments of the online field in the Human Development Report,[1] and also for the Estonian media, issues of digital cultural heritage are often not considered newsworthy, even though there has been continuous and wide-ranging 'digital action' in memory institutions. The portal Digiveeb (www.digiveeb.kul.ee) has presented this work to the public for years under the aegis of the website of the Ministry of Culture, although the updates are probably not the quickest – a lot more is actually being done!

This is the background to your question, to demonstrate that the 'digitizing all of cultural heritage' did not just appear out of nowhere.

The operational programme of the development plan Culture 2020 was organized by the Digital Heritage Conservation Council, an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, and since a change of its membership in 2014, it has become extremely active. In December 2014, the document 'The Operational Programme of Digitizing Cultural Heritage 2015–2020' was composed; a document of more than 90 pages that details the plans for the coming years for all types of heritage (documents, publications, photographs, films, objects, and art). The 'Digital Cultural Heritage' development plans have actually been compiled since 2007, and the current one is the third. Once it's completed, the plan is to release a third of Estonian cultural heritage for digital use, which

1. The chapter on the development of Estonian cultural space in the 2015 Estonian Human Development Report (www.kogu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/EIA-2015.pdf) features a sub-chapter titled 'Digital culture as part of Estonian cultural space in 2004–2014: current state and forecasts', written by Marin Laak and Piret Viires. Note of the editors.

The Estonian National Library is one of the largest memory institutions in Estonia. The pompous limestone library building was constructed between 1985 and 1993, designed by Raine Karp. Memory institution is an organisation maintaining a repository of public knowledge, a generic term used about institutions such as libraries, archives, museums, sites and monuments records (SMR), clearinghouses, providers of digital libraries and data aggregation services which serve as memories for given societies or mankind. (Wikipedia). Photo: Andra Aaloe.

means information on 1.3 million records in databases. A term 'open data' has been taken into active use, which means electronic availability on many levels, from metadata to full texts.

Digitizing (or digitalizing) – what is actually meant by the word? What are the founding principles of digitizing?

Digitizing has truly become a common concept! However, from the point of view of the digitizers, it denotes a whole complex of activities, from coming up with a concept of what to digitize to bringing each specific record out of the repository, scanning it and, of course, returning it to the repository. One of the criteria of selection is certainly the rarity and usability of the record, which endangers its physical survival and often necessitates its restoration before scanning. Once a rare 'object' has been repaired and scanned, it is followed by the writing of its metadata and its insertion into databases. This is the most labour consuming stage and can take as much time as all of the preceding steps put together, but it is also the most important section because it determines the further life of the record. If we don't know something exists, we can't use it; we cannot access information, even though the file may exist on a 'disc' or 'stick' somewhere.

It has to be taken into account that digitizing of any kind is a very expensive and time-consuming activity. The expense also depends on whether it is a film, audio, printed document, item or handwritten record. In the scanning process, a large master file and smaller user copies are created, However, the large files require an extremely powerful server and/or file repository, where digitized holdings are constantly being re-saved for security reasons. Talking about the technical specifications would be another story altogether!

How do digital archives broaden the possibilities of users today?

Speed is the main thing but again, the concept is important here. What does 'a digital archive' mean? There are even two or three options here. You must ask whether it is an electronic database, where you merely see that the film, song, correspondence, book etc. exists in a museum, archive or library. You will see the entry, and you can use it to order the original, but you have to go there in person. Another option is ordering a digital copy of what you require. For example, libraries offer the paid service E-Book on Demand (EOD). You can request a digital copy of public domain books – the limit here is 70 years after the author's death. The third option is to hope you get lucky and the item you are interested in has already been digitized and made available, or you can adjust your interests so that you can use previously digitized materials.

In the last case, we cannot really talk about broadening – quite the opposite. However, digital availability certainly makes any kind of use quicker and easier. The spatial dimension of usability and the chance to alter, recreate etc. are also added. A more correct answer would require mentioning the chance to process extremely large volumes of data extremely quickly. A telling but realistic example: a whole hall of the sheet catalogue of the 19th century library of the Imperial Tartu University fits on a single memory stick! But again – in order to extract information from these virtual filing cabinets and make a search, every single scanned sheet must be described with metadata in the electronic database.

I am certain that the future of the digital cultural heritage also depends on how fast we can turn the data hubs, compiled on the level of single units, into networks of semantically linked information – this is also the direction the world is currently heading towards.

When we copy a record – or to be precise, the part of the record that can be made into an entry that is readable in the digital world (image, sound, text, metadata etc) – into a new (digital) format, will this digital copy take on a life of its own? Will it be converted into a new format when the technology evolves or do you go back to the source? In other words, is digitizing the creation of a new object or will it always be dependent of its original, the physical record in a physical archive?

The answer is that it does take on a new life and at the same time it doesn't. A master copy that matches the original is made in the course of digitizing, and it is kept safely in a digital repository and will be converted if necessary, when new formats appear. As of now, we still don't know how, because it is a worldwide problem. There is intense and active work going on across the world to come up with options and solutions. On the other hand, we all remember the strange large discs, and now also the small discs, that cannot be used anymore and require special devices for accessing files. Until recently, a requirement applied to digitizing cultural heritage that all files had to be copied in three different places, one of which was a CD or a DVD. By now, these requirements have been replaced by cloud storage, for example. However, the digital availability of a past document, above all, provides a convenient option to quickly find the object you're interested in and to get to know its contents. Whatever follows that is up to the individual.

Is the layer of more recent heritage that has no analogue form still legible in the future, considering the rapid development of the world of technology? For example, is it possible that the works of a certain period that can be experienced only with certain technology will become almost entirely illegible in the future? Take, for example, the family albums: I can see photos that were taken a hundred years ago, but I cannot access my CD albums from ten years ago. Is there a chance of an archive of software and hardware, an archive of user interfaces that could be used to access old formats? In other words, how is the long-time preservation and availability of digital entries ensured in the context of rapidly changing digital platforms? Do we have to print out the family photo and stick it in an album?

Here, a distinction should be made between a large memory institution and the personal sphere. The former should have these things thoroughly figured out and under control, so to say. New software and updates are also mostly built to be able to instantly read and convert older formats. I have not heard of a software archive, but hardware archives have existed for some time now and are functioning, and not just as an exhibit at the Estonian National Museum; it mostly concerns the audio-visual world, sound and film. Yet – retro comes back into fashion in waves and old vinyl records are in use again for some years now. The rule of all new media is to originate from what came before and improve on it. For an example, soon you can probably communicate with the new vinyl record players via computers. However, it is more a question of a change in the consumer habits of a culture: are the family albums browsed together or is it nicer to look at them on your mobile by yourself and even on the street? But one can still print photos; you still get power cuts and batteries still run out!
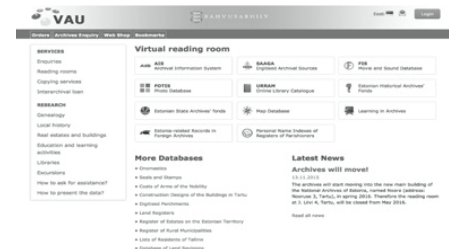
For example, the databases of the Estonian National Archive (RA) units are assembled in the Vau virtual reading room. (www.ra.ee/vau). The establishment of web-based archival services in 2004-2005 led to an explosive growth of clients using the archive. It is estimated that over one hundred times more visits to the archive are carried out today than ten years ago; 99,3% of the visits begin and end with the web.

A A web camera is live-streaming the building process of the new main building Noora for the Estonian National Archives in Tartu (find the link in www.ra.ee). Noora will host in the future also regional archives from Haapsalu and Kuressaare, and also the Tõnismäe street archive in Tallinn. With the popularity of virtual gateways for archive services, there is no reason to keep the regional centres running. Image: Screenshot 9.01.2016 at 16:44.

Estonian television and radio heritage is preserved by Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) archives. See www.arhiiv.err.ee.

The conversion of physical cultural heritage into binary code has its problems; where does the dust, the dirt of centuries, texture, the ageing of the material, decay, tactility, smell go? In other words: what happens to the temporal and spatial quality that often determines the value of the object – its growing age, the lifecycle of the object/material itself? Is the record of a digital archive like a photo in an album, a stopped moment in time, where the object will always remain in one moment, age? Or perhaps the real material, the physical record can continue living its life – crumble, disintegrate, get dusty, decay?

This question already answers everything! The original remains the original and it must be taken good care of. However, whether we should value smell, crumbling paper or scratching in itself depends on the receiver and how he or she intends to use it. Does poetry tell us more if we smell the lines on the paper that carries them? Do people need some other kind of information to understand the text? In addition to the words, can the visual text be converted, and translated into another language or media? These questions are already in the realm of philosophy, from reception theory to phenomenology.

Lets go back to the plan in Culture 2020: 'The more valuable parts of cultural heritage will be digitalized…' Doesn't this task in itself contain a philosophical contradiction? How will it be decided what constitutes 'the more valuable parts'? Will the decision about what is valuable made today still be valid tomorrow? What happens to what today is considered the less valuable part of cultural heritage if no access is granted to it? Today is a particularly right time for asking this because it seems the world and the foundations of world change with each day.
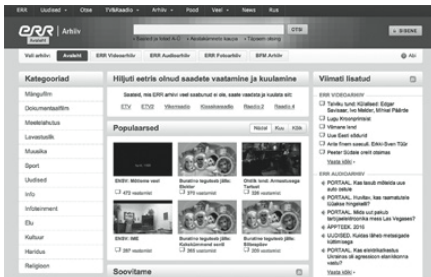
This is the most difficult question for me also and I suppose there is a fair share of a catchword about it. Cultural 'value' can be proved somewhat by being a classic: we value canonical works and knowing them is part of being educated. Moreover, they are works that are the pillars of the historical continuation of our cultural memory, where our national identity has settled over generations.

But why make judgments at all? In order to implement the operational programme of digitizing our cultural heritage, a decision was made to organise the selection of materials according to clearly defined content, which I consider to be the right course of action. For example, the criteria for making a selection from the millions of different records of documental heritage, i.e. manuscripts, correspondence etc., is time. A decision was made to begin massive digitizing with the materials from the era of the Republic of Estonia and to digitize collections as completely as possible. Another criterion is the needs of the field of education, which is also a long road. Converting heavy schoolbooks into PDF format is not enough to allow talking about an 'e-schoolbag'; it is more of a metaphor.

I think it is important to constantly acknowledge that the current digital turn is not merely so-called practical, but cultural. Our cultural practices, everyday habits, learning methods, and communication have changed. It is important to take these changes into account in any educational and pedagogic activity. There are multiple problems here and things work a lot more slowly here, as the processes are long. It is important to come up with learning tools that match today's technical possibilities, which unfortunately evolve extremely quickly, but do so in a way that the young retain skills for reading-using-watching older culture. So they won't drop the pencil!

Distinguishing what deserves to be preserved from everything else that will be cast on the 'scrapheap of history', i.e. the subjective area of responsibility of historians, archaeologists – and perhaps politicians – and writing it through history and its related problems (particularly from the aspect of memory and the plurality of simultaneous historical narratives, the democracy of memory) has been discussed for decades in disciplines dealing with history and memory. We can read in the Estonian Human Development Report that 'when selecting objects from the huge collections of the Estonian memory institutions, the priority is given to those related to Estonia: by 2020, there are plans to make available as open data the materials concerning the formation of the Estonian state, from the national awakening in the 19th century to the annexation of the Republic of Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1940'.[2] Setting this kind of a task sounds like a clever plan to perpetuate again – this time digitally, as befits an e-state – Estonia as something that has always existed (especially when the new digital history, freely available to us as open data, begins with the National Awakening). So what we really want to ask is this: does this process consciously take into account the developments in historical discourse towards the democratisation of history and the move towards a plurality of narratives?

It is difficult to answer this question but it is very good to raise this issue. The plurality of documents and the availability of source materials also enables a plurality of narratives, it is a question of interpretation.

One of the unsolved problems of the digital world, however, is the issue of copyright and delicate personal data; perhaps the greatest contradiction lies here and would deserve a separate article on its own. The 'sharing' so characteristic of the new media culture conflicts with laws hailing from the 19th century, changing them varies according to states, but it is cumbersome everywhere.

From the standpoint of history, the plurality of narratives is currently based on the theory of the new cultural history, which is based on the personal and experienced stories of the individual. One could name the life stories of Estonians that are now collected in many places. However, how many of them should be made available to the public? Every written story, even when it's written as a 'story about history' or 'story of history', is still an interpretation. It is important to publish the sources they are based on.

Lets go back to the museum, the archive and physical space and the spatial expressions of the digital collections. We have museums and archive halls – the rooms of memory institutions, and traditional user interfaces. If the content of a memory institution reaches our computers wherever we sit and the new heritage manifests itself spatially as server parks, then what happens to the museum, the archive hall? The library? What will be their function? Holding exhibitions to highlight connections in the vast layers of information? Organising information? Or focusing on the material that is physically tangible, fragrant, changes and becomes worn out? Who is the curator, who is the user?

I would like to introduce the concept of new media in addition to the digital: we have a new media culture, new media art, and we have cyber literature. In the environment of the new media, we can show semantic connections between different units and knots, but they may not be all in the same computer, instead they are spread across the world; for example, we can link the materials from the archives of various memory institutions *[story contd. p 24]*

2. Laak, M.; Viires, P. 2015. *Digital culture as part of Estonian cultural space in 2004-2014: current state and forecasts. Estonian Human Development Report 2014-2015.* Tallinn: SA Eesti Koostöö Kogu, p 231.

to create new meanings. The semiotician Ziva Ben-Porat has called these clusters of 'texts' linked to meaning new cultural units that zigzag all around us as a network. The computer culture is increasingly evolving to mimic the processes of thought and connections in the human brain.

Libraries and museums can take that into account when they are putting together their exhibitions and of course you can use all kinds of machineries to present a vast amount of information, including audio-visual material and facts. However, even in that case, the work on making connections remains the most vital. The museum and the library of the 21st century will remain a centre of creating new knowledge, but by creating and developing these centres, we can keep up with the latest thinking in science and the opportunities offered by technology in visualising this knowledge. All of this is much more than the 'old' opportunity to switch a film on or off at an exhibition.

As a result of digitizing, access to the materials of the past will increase. Will the new extensive flood of old information that will arrive into use via digitizing now on a massive scale obliterate the present completely? In creative work, for example. Is anything essentially new being made at all or is it all just quotations and copying in new technological formats?

Everyone will probably answer this question totally differently. No one can force anything on anyone; life is happening around us one way or another. Let us worry about the future instead! Whereas these previous times are collected, maintained and preserved thanks to analogue media, these digital cultural channels, SMSs, e-mails, voicemails, connections, links, posts, comments, forums, Facebook, tweets etc will disappear, remaining only in the moment when 'Send' was pressed. From the viewpoint of cultural history, culture seems to break and end… I would like to call on everyone to collect, log, save, and print the present, which is happening anyway!

When it comes to quoting, post-modernism was left behind years ago, around the time when memory institutions began systematically digitizing cultural heritage. As a counterbalance, a new wave of radical new conservatism, thick novels and sentimental poetry appeared in literature, for example. I see a distinct connection here and it is quite the opposite! After all, creative culture is always springing back rather than allowing itself to be moulded.