



**THE INFLUENCE OF ITC FACILITIES ON ACCESS TO THE
HISTORIC SOURCES AND KNOWLEDGE ON CULTURAL
HERITAGE** *(on the basis of historical sources on the multicultural and
borderland countries The Crown of Poland and Lithuania, from the collections of
Polish libraries and digital repositories)*

Katarzyna Zimnoch

University of Białystok, Information and Library Science, Poland

mailto:kzimnoch@tlen.pl

KEYWORDS

Digitalization, cultural heritage, bibliography, regions, Polish culture, local communities



The development of computer and communication technology and, more importantly, the constant increase in their availability led to an increase in the use of new forms of communication and distribution of information. This had significant influence on the functioning of libraries and new directions of their development. One of them digitalisation – putting all forms of documents and content in digital form. Presenting collections in digital form brought on a change in the quality of services in the field of preservation, storage and circulation of information. Therefore, changes affect circumstances in which books, information resources and libraries function. Electronic repositories of knowledge have started to appear along with other digitalisation projects.

The aim of the paper is to show the state of the art and digitalization of book history resources, as well as future research perspectives. IT gives researchers the chance to speed up the transfer of historical research results to the so called general reading public, especially students and teachers.

Electronic repositories have only recently started appearing in Poland. The main task of these repositories is to document and make scientific materials and teaching aids along with the most valuable historical cultural objects accessible to the largest number of people. The more frequent use of the above mentioned materials is caused by placing them in the electronic repositories. The reasons for this can be observed in easier access to those sources and in more efficient electronic form of preservation than print or manuscript.

Many important European digitalisation projects have appeared in recent years in Poland along with many national projects. Precise selection of publications, working towards completeness within given boundaries (chronological, thematic, geographical, etc.), as well as using the best standards for data presentation, should become a standard. Some of the major digitalisation programmes are those realised with the help of the Head Office of the State Archives and the Research and Academic Computer Network (Naukowa i Akademicka Sieć Komputerowa – NASK): *Pamięć świata (World Memory)*⁸, *Skarby kultury polskiej (Treasures of Polish Culture)*⁹ and *Miasta w dokumencie archiwalnym (Cities in Archival Documents)*. These services present archival documents and rare books picturing the achievements of Polish culture. The presented items are accompanied by very good, detailed explanatory scientific descriptions with complete subject bibliography. This presentation of the treasures of Polish culture can be an example of the development of Polish digital collections. Digital libraries are another direction of creating space for storing and presenting electronic¹⁰.

⁸ E. Stachowska-Musiał, *Program UNESCO „Pamięć Świata” i wkład Polski w jego realizację „Notes Konserwatorski”* [T] 6: *Zachowajmy przeszłość dla przyszłości...*, Warszawa 2002, s. 11-23.

⁹ <http://dziedzictwo.polska.pl/index.htm>

¹⁰ Software for digital libraries allows for the creation of special collections: research-educational, cultural heritage, regional, musical and maps.

The vital role in documenting and making the most valuable cultural objects accessible is played by all kinds of regional projects of digitalization, particularly those on multidimensionally diverse areas, such as Podlasie region. The multilingual and multicultural character of the Podlasie region is a result of settlement and changing political situation over many centuries and has a significant influence on the written output of a given area. One has to remember the dramatic political changes which took place in these lands. The constant movement of state borders, the occupant policy and numerous wars made the situation even more complicated.

Post-war borders divided the lands which have for a century been a single state. The new divisions separated researchers from their research materials on the areas they study. The division of lands which were earlier a single whole, along with the achievements of their inhabitants and their scattering caused many of these sources to become damaged, lost and treated very selectively. Therefore, only contributory works could be created, which did not reflect the whole of the achievements of given lands. Numerous regional associations attempt to protect what they can from destruction, join what was scattered and promote this information. Regional libraries have a lot to do in this field. They should take on the duty of finding, gathering, storing and presenting these materials. Through digitalisation they could join what was scattered, store and protect these materials, so as to prevent them from being lost again for other reasons and provide access to sources, which are for various reasons not easily accessible.

Modern technology is rightfully used to try and create a common virtual space where they could meet and function. Such regional or “community” libraries and digital repositories document and inform of the cultural heritage of a given area, while giving access to many materials which are often difficult to obtain. Furthermore these materials can be set in the context of cultural influence and later connections. Currently digital libraries add the most to these solutions, as their main task is to form a regional collection, gathering digital copies of regional publications and all documents concerning the region.

The Podlaska Digital Library was created in November 2006 and is co-created by the Consortium of Research Libraries of the City of Białystok¹¹. The Consortium cooperates with other research and cultural institutions in order to obtain valuable materials, which should be included in the digital library. The aim of the project is to create a digital collection of the most important cultural and research resources of Podlasie. The library contains mainly written documents of historic value, maps, images, regional writings on Podlasie, and the Łomża and Suwałki regions.

The overall number of publications in the Podlaska Digital Library by the end of 2008 was almost 4,5 thousand¹². It contains mainly newspapers, books, historic sources,

¹¹ <http://pbc.biaman.pl/>

¹² This data is based on the statistics of the Podlaska Digital Library: <http://pbc.biaman.pl/dlibra/pubstats> They cover the period from the creation of the library till November 2008



early prints, maps and musical printings. The most frequently used materials were: historic sources, books, maps, early prints and newspapers. Historic sources were used over 170 thousand times, which means that their presence in the regional collection is very important and needed. The library notes from around 3 thousand searches a month (May 2007) to over 11 thousand (March, October 2008). Simple search is used significantly more often. The overall number of visitors a month falls between 12 thousand (June-September 2007) to over 120 thousand (April 2008), which is also connected with the number of displayed documents.

The regional collection includes documents on Podlasie from the libraries in Białystok, Warsaw, Kraków, as well as Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia, mid-war and post-war local press, as well as digital copies of leaflets, posters, invitations, exposition catalogues and other similar documents concerning the region of Podlasie. By the end of November 2008 the number of documents in the regional collection was 3432.

By the end of 2011 the Consortium is planning to prepare a few thousand electronic publications. Every year precious documents of historic and cultural value will make up around 50% of the digitalised collection. They will thus be protected and at the same time available to a large number of users. It is estimated that the number of users of the Podlaska Digital Library since its creation could reach around 60 thousand within a year since its creation.

National and European projects are equally important, as they can show the heritage of a given region in a wider context or the connections between the regions. It is worth noting here the national project *Cities in archive documents (Miasta w dokumencie archiwalnym)* presenting documents from the State Archives' collections. These materials concern settlements which used to have cultural and economic importance in Poland. Podlasie is represented in this collection by Zabłudów, Białystok, Wasilków and Suwałki, which are farthest to the North. The project has met with great interest. Regional, coordinated initiatives could be taken up by regional societies and associations supported by local authorities.

Their accessibility contributes to better understanding of the cultural output of a certain region. There is however the question, whether all regional documents should be published. It seems that one has to bear in mind that repositories cannot be merely collections of random materials, as they are not only a source of specific information but also of selection criteria for other sources. Therefore, collections of repositories cannot become only a set of accidental materials. Their content – meaning, language and form as well as traces of use ought to reflect the character and uniqueness of the region.

Information space has to reflect the characteristics of a given land, its multicultural and multinational character. Both handwritten and historical documents concerning the region and contemporary works on local history and current affairs



should be presented in electronic form. In regional and local Internet collections the most crucial thing to do is to place local documents of historic value which were created in an 'organic' way, in the course of natural historic development of background of various cultures, both those still occurring in their home environment and those which once had left the place they were created in. And at the moment, due to the advantages of cyberspace, can get back where they belonged. Some of the most important regional documents are the Supraśl prints from 1695-1803 from one of the most famous printers of the Polish-Lithuanian borderlands. This printing house was renowned throughout the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Another document of major historic value is the Irmologion, a collection of liturgical songs written down in Supraśl in 1598-1607. Now this precious historic item is held in the Ukrainian Science Academy Library in Kiev. Using modern technology and in agreement with the library, which keeps the precious book and in cooperation with musicologists and specialists in Orthodox liturgical books, the Irmologion could venture back to its place of origin in virtual form.

Nevertheless, although the Supraśl monastery printing house and scriptorium have played a major role in modern history, nowadays they are almost non-existent in the virtual space of culture. Programmes concerning the digitalisation of historic sources could present the whole cultural context of their activity, thus showing the role of 'cultural institutions', which used to function in these lands.

Apart from the Supraśl prints knowledge repositories from the Polish-East Slavonic borderlands should include prints from Siemiatycze, published on the initiative of princess Anna Sapieha Jabłonowska, or the ephemera published by temporary, 'nomadic' printing houses. Along with early prints the Internet repositories could also contain inventories from historic printing houses and libraries, as well as newspapers from Białystok, which were increasing in number in the 19th century and are very difficult to obtain now.

The incoming monuments that under certain circumstances occurred in the presented environment, and played there particular roles, are also worth mentioning. Placing them in a digital collection is the factor contributing to better understanding of history and circumstances that are associated with creating connections between different cultures of the given region.

The most telling example is the 'Mineja Czetja', known (because of its place of safekeeping) as the Supraśl Codex (Codex Suprasliensis). This liturgical book, which was created in 11th century, was for many years kept in the Supraśl monastery in the borderlands of Poland and Lithuania, but its existence remained a secret until the 19th century, when Michał Bobrowski 'discovered' it during his research in the monastery library and informed the scientific society about it. It is one of the oldest and most precious relics of the Church-Slavonic language. The value of this book not only for the



region is exemplified by the fact that the Codex was included on the UNESCO “World Memory” list¹³.

Nowadays information on the Codex can be found spread over many websites. There is however no access to its text. Websites connected with Supraśl, the place the Codex took its name from and where it has long been safeguarded, there is no detailed information about it. There is very laconic information about it on the Uroczysko¹⁴ and monastery websites¹⁵. Digitalisation programmes could allow for a “virtual joining” of the Codex Suprasliensis, which is divided into three parts. The National Library in Warsaw has 151 pages, the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg has 16 pages, the Univeristy Library in Lubljana has 118 pages. Such a “virtually re-joined” Codex Suprasliensis would have to be accompanied by a reliable, though easily understandable commentary and reference to numerous scientific works, which have been written over the centuries about this exceptional book. Thus, what was impossible for decades, could be realised in virtual space.

Apart from writings of historical value, electronic repositories should also contain appropriate descriptions and connections, so as to create an image of various 'book institutions' as well as a visible range of their influence. This aim could be assisted by research conducted by historians from Poland and Lithuania, as well as Russia and Belarus.

Digital repositories are becoming a meeting place for users, sources and authors. Thus they become an element of the system of social communication. They are a space for communication. It has to be reminded here that electronic information is the most accessible for many social groups.

Digitalised materials in electronic archives can be used anywhere and any time, while it is still possible to work with the original handwritten or printed document. Thanks to digitalisation even unique documents can be available on the web to many users, who could not have got access to them before. This possibility cannot be provided by any of the traditional conversion methods, which protect the collection, but limit the availability of especially valuable or rare documents. Digitalisation of documents should not be seen as synonymous with making digital copies. The digital document should take over the whole system of the source. Furthermore, appropriate indexing of the work allows for quicker and full-text searching. Therefore electronic documents allow for efficient distribution of information, are ergonomic and readily accepted by users, while at the same time providing better protection for cultural goods.

¹³ <http://archiwa.gov.pl/memo/kodeks.html> oraz <http://archiwa.gov.pl/memo/kodeks.lista.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.uroczysko.pl/>

¹⁵ <http://www.monaster-supraski.com.pl>