

DIGITISE OR PERISH?
THE CASE OF THE BIBLIOTECA IsIAO IN ITALY

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Acronyms

BNC – Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale

D.P.R. – Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica

IIA – Istituto Italo-Africano

IsIAO – Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente

ISMEO – Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente

MiBACT – Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo

MIUR – Ministero dell’Istruzione, della Ricerca e della Ricerca

Introduction

As the end of the Millennium was perceived as the beginning of a new era – and fairly so, considering all the major historical conjunctions – the surprisingly fast and non-stopping technological development was the winning horse everyone was betting on. Even archivists and historians saw in the expanded possibilities of the digital world the solution for several, if not all, issues. Just to name a few, the running out of storage place, the geographical boundaries and the paper decay. Moreover, the digital opportunities would have enhanced the performance: faster consulting, more access and the inclusion of different form of records. The concepts of a “digital cornucopia” and of a “democratic revolution” are part of the contemporary expectations. Do they translate in actual practices and special treatments of the digital information?

The digital era has opened many doors to several fields. Nevertheless, theorists of library and archival science still struggle with what digitised and digital records may signify both in the present and in the future. The matter of digitisation is far from being accomplished in the archival world and questions about its relevance are still expressed in the current debate. My questions revolve around the importance of digitisation, assuming that it is an essential task to address for archivists at this time. However, digitisation is not the final goal for archives and it should represent just a tool to reach new opportunities for researchers and the public. To mimic Jacques Derrida’s expression, the *digital* “archive fever”¹ has positively encouraged institutions and organisations to invest in ventures and digitisation projects. Yet, as usual with fevers, the symptoms eventually fade away and we are left reflecting on what has happened so far. The illusions of digitisation as a definitive solution make way for more in-depth considerations on its factual problems: for instance, digital documents are not in any way permanent and can also disappear (sometimes without even leaving a clear trace) and the costs for keeping them are, still to these days, legitimately high. If the digitisation process is expensive, it will not be easily prioritised. Is this what happens in Italy, where funds to cultural enterprises are often missing?

This thesis sets off with a brief first chapter about the modern debate on digitisation, pointing out a few recurrent themes on its benefits and its reasonable limits. Believing in the potentiality of the digital platform translates in several actions and considerations. Notwithstanding, the “simple” digitisation process cannot be the solution and the antagonism it sometimes still receive is understandable in the light of all the issues encountered so far by both theorists and archivists. I would

¹ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, *Diacritics* 25, No. 2 (Summer 1995): 9-63.

argue that practicable strategies do exist indeed, even though they are unlikely to develop in a short period. The digital world – however not new nor unknown to the majority of people – is still mysterious when the focus proceeds into looking at the effects and problems arising in the interactions between human beings and the virtual life. A revolution in perspectives that is affecting the information flow the most. The change archivists and users are attempting to make should start, therefore, at the bottom of it all. What are the characteristics of an archive? How can they be conveyed on the digital platform? One may even ask whether all traditional principles and values are to be applied in the first place.

In the second chapter, I emphasised on the concepts of access and accessibility by exploring the ways through which digitisation can prove desirable for both the users' community and the archives themselves. I am convinced that the greatest accomplishment for digitisation and the digital platform is the possibility of presenting information, services and opportunities in a unique and unbelievably open stage. These same notions of openness and democratisation are addressed since access is not granted everywhere for everybody and accessibility means more than just “entering the (archival) digital space”. Yet, one cannot easily deny that improving measures of access and accessibility is part of the original goal for the archives, sensing that preservation is pointless without arranging a proper strategy to welcome researchers or general users and enable them to engage with the archival holdings. I also ensured as fundamental claim the belief that digitisation is advantageous not only for the users but also for the archives. To say that in a few words, archives – in their analogue and digital form – are spaces (not always free of controversy) where the community can confront its history and the narration that has been made of it.

Taking the story of the Biblioteca IsIAO (Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, tr. “Italian Institute for Africa and Asia”, re-opened in 2019) as a case study, in the third chapter, I intended to bring to the surface the struggle of Italian archives to maintain their position not only in preserving history but also in making it accessible. A struggle that becomes particularly real in the case of the IsIAO. Not only has it been closed for seven years and moved under the administration of the Rome BNC (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, tr. “National Central Library of Rome”) to stay alive, but it also has reduced its accessibility to the minimum. Upon further investigation, the repository is limiting to researchers by only being open roughly five hours in the mornings of just three days of the week (Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays); users are allowed to examine just two volumes per time and only in the study room; and no loan service is active at the moment. A better understanding of these measures allows investigating the theme of access and availability. What the archive is providing, whom it is providing services for and what are the activities to expand are imperative

questions to define the renewed interest in the material of the Biblioteca IsIAO. The better way to gain knowledge about the perception and prioritisation of digitisation has resulted remarkably into the opportunity of creating and forwarding a questionnaire for the members of the staff. I then proceeded with a qualitative analysis of their positions, connecting once again the responses to the archival theory.

The comprehension of theoretical limits and the encouragement of effective – hopefully efficient – practices are fundamental features of my research. The potentiality of the digital platform, as well as the struggles of understanding it, cannot pass by undetected or underestimated. When confronting the case of the Biblioteca IsIAO, I witnessed all the efforts put by the professionals into the revitalisation of the archive. In this thesis, I conclude that prioritising digitisation and securing a strategic approach to the digital platform support the very preservation of the archives. The archivists are indeed considering digitisation projects as means of survival for the damaged material and as dynamic tools for researchers. In this scenario, digitisation represents a glimpse of hope and takes the Biblioteca IsIAO a few steps further from where it re-started.

Research Question and Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how digital platform affects archival preservation from an archival perspective. This research explores the advantages and disadvantages connected to digitisation projects. More specifically: what is the main advantage of the multi-layered platform that is the digital world? Since the hypothesis of this thesis is that there also disadvantages to digitisation, I will ask the following question: which problems do archivists face while planning to digitise part (if not all) of an archive? These questions are necessarily integrated into the specific case study, since the implications go beyond theories about digitisation for archives. In this regard, my research question connects to the Biblioteca IsIAO in Rome, closed by government decree many years ago and recently reopened to public after a long struggle led by some Italian academics. Can digitisation help the revitalisation of the archive? Does modern preservation call for precise strategies in the digital platform?

In this thesis, I argue that digitisation represents a part of the re-organisation strategy of the modern archives, especially of those that struggle with granting access and accessibility. My analysis includes both a scrutiny of the literature existing on this topic and a practical analysis using mainly questionnaires. Therefore, the structure is missing a separate section for the historiography of digitisation for archives and for the material. This choice is the result of the theoretical approach I used to examine the matter of digitisation and the features of the digital platform in the archival field. The literature review can indeed be found in the first and second chapters, as I discussed the various standpoints coming from theorists and historians throughout the text. Consequently, the primary sources appear different as well. What has been studied on digitisation becomes primary in this sense and the responses of the questionnaire offer major insights. Then, with the third chapter, I intended to present the position of the Biblioteca IsIAO and its programs of recovery through the lens of archivists working with the advantages and disadvantages of digitisation. The questions were created upon the persuasion that digitising is crucial for access. The case study of the Biblioteca IsIAO works as an example for the possibilities of digitisation, which I highlighted in the previous chapters, and proves the directions that archivists are taking towards the digital platform.

In addition, I have consulted documents produced by the IsIAO in the period before the closure. There is not much accessible online, but I have found a report following the activities of the

institute in 2008.² Letters and petitions demonstrate the aftermath of the problematic decision and the following passionate appeals³.

My plans to envision the archival holdings of the Biblioteca IsIAO and to interview the staff working at the reactivation program have been abruptly cancelled due to the outbreak of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. As for many of my colleagues, the acquisition of primary sources proved complicated. For instance, I was not able to visit the archive and produce any video recording of interviews as I designed to do. Nor could I benefit from the opportunity of talking freely to the members of the Biblioteca IsIAO, a useful aspect for a qualitative research. Instead, to reach the professionals, I have been suggested to create a questionnaire and send it out to the staff. Unfortunately, the temporary closure of the Biblioteca IsIAO prevented me from taking a closer look at the material of the archive, at what is planned to be digitised, at the catalogue and so on. The absence of such specificities provoked a slight inconvenience for the results of my research.

The research essentially translated into a broader enquiry on digitisation and its effects on the archives. The questionnaire incorporates, therefore, general questions to the professionals as well as issues related to the recent re-opening of the archive. Albeit missing a significant part of qualitative interviews (in my case, talking directly to the professionals and visiting the archive), I am convinced that the questionnaire and its results have shed a light on the potentiality of digitisation.

² <https://issuu.com/isiao/docs/attivita2008>.

³ Petitions have been sent to the then President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano. See Marina Lo Blundo, "L'IsIAO rischia di chiudere. On-line una petizione al Presidente Napolitano", *ArcheoBlog*, July 30, 2008, <https://archeoblog.net/2008/lisiao-istituto-italiano-per-lafrica-e-loriente-rischia-di-chiudere-on-line-una-petizione-al-presidente-napolitano/>.

The construction of the archive and digitisation

1.1. An ongoing debate

Digitisation and the digital platform do not affect just the archive in its physical and conceptual entity. What the common imagery has depicted for centuries as a dusty, dark and hardly accessible space becomes open, airy and “a click away” from the sources. The impact on the historians, as well as on other (even amateur) researchers, is just as much impressive. Those who rely on digital documents or objects (both digitised and digital-born) for their research are more likely to bypass browsing and working systematically – which are the bedrocks of every archival research⁴. The fear of losing the contact with the original artefacts has conducted some scholars and intellectuals to question the new methods in the digital world. To quote Charles Jeurgens’s dilemma with digitisation and digital items, the “scent” of the archives appears to be vanished and users have access to this information by directly engaging with the information medium.⁵ However, it is part of the debate whether there is an actual “scent” in the first place, or if it is a crucial element of the archival research.

At first, academics mostly agreed on the idea that what is digitised was but a mere copy – a tool at its best. Canadian philosopher of media theory Marshall McLuhan stated: “we shape our tool and thereafter our tools shape us”⁶. In this sense, the digital “surrogates” rightly enter in the space of existence and influence our understanding of the archives. Then, if we settle on the consistent *status* of the digitised documents – and this is yet to be fully accepted or encouraged – the next issue for theorists of the matter regards the changes and the challenges in the historical and archival research. It is not always fruitful to focus on the disadvantages of the mutated relationship between the sources and the researcher’s approach. Certainly, the belief that something gets lost in the process of digitisation is true not only from a practical point of view (i.e. transferring the documents from papers to bits risks to misplace or lose information), but also from a methodological perspective, which slowly affects the perception of what records look like and how researchers can interact with them. As early as 2009, for example, the authors Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell published a book

⁴ Jenny Newell, “Old objects, new media. Historical collections, digitization and affect”, *Journal of Material Culture* 17, No. 3 (2012): 287-306, 289.

⁵ Charles Jeurgens, “The scent of the digital archive. Dilemmas with archives digitisation”, *BMGN Low Countries Historical Review* 128, No. 4 (2013): 30-54, 33.

⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

symptomatically titled *Total Recall*⁷, suggesting (and expecting) that there will come a future where everything can be recorded and digitally preserved – even better, searchable. Conversely, such a statement as “history will be consumed electronically”⁸ horrifies some archivists and users when they realise that projects of digitisation might result in throwing away the original and physical documents. Yet, the possibility of an easier de-cluttering is a sensible matter and an undeniable opportunity offered by electronic versions in place of material archives. In the academic debate, digitised collections experience ambiguous role and position. They are not fully part of history; neither are they just “back-ups” of archival and historical documents. Nor could they be, since making the digital versions accessible is not always a simple task. Creating metadata or employing software and hardware – as well as teaming up with the IT staff – are part of the many issues of digitisation, often including high costs of maintenance and a careful interest.

Funding and money issues constitute a primary aspect in the life of the archives and institutions. Especially in the administration of cultural enterprises (i.e. libraries, museums, archives...), governments fail to keep up with the most elementary necessities and end up even cutting down the resources⁹. Therefore, discussing about digitisation projects might occur contemporarily as an interesting (yet challenging) solution and as a constant struggle. As it is, I look at the latter as the hypothesis that most likely describes the situation in Italy in comparison to some other Europeans or international countries. For example, as an Italian student in the Netherlands, I had not just a few problems accessing records of the Italian archives from abroad. Indeed, the obstacles I encountered prompted this type of questions. I also tried to resonate with the situation through points of view that perhaps can go past the sole economic or financial motive. Nonetheless, the point of the case study of the Biblioteca IsIAO starts significantly from the problem of missing funds.

The IsIAO, a non-profit public institution by definition, was established in 1995 in his final version¹⁰. It pursued the mission of promoting cultural exchanges between Italy and nations in the African and Asian continents, as well as many other related activities: financing archaeological expeditions, teaching languages and preserving scientific and didactic journals. In conclusion, it worked not only as an archival institution but also as an educational and inter-connecting centre. It saddened many intellectuals and academic users when the Institute was closed in 2011 (effective in

⁷ Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell, *Total Recall: How the E-memory Revolution Will Change Everything* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

⁸ Bell and Gemmell, *Total Recall: How the E-memory Revolution Will Change Everything*, 6.

⁹ Cultural and environmental enterprises figure in the most affected areas by funding cuts in Italy. See graph in Marco Rogari, “Tagli alla spesa, ecco i ministeri più colpiti dalla clausola da 2 miliardi”, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, May 5, 2019, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/tagli-spesa-pubblica-ecco-ministeri-piu-colpiti-clausola-2-miliardi-ABOQ29tB>.

¹⁰ The story of the IsIAO dates back to the first decades of the Twentieth century, for it has been created by merging two existing institutes. More details in the third chapter.

2012) – precisely because of financial difficulties. The matter is a complicated one and the decision was a consequence of several stages that already undermined its means of survival. The ministers reported the administration board of the IsIAO to count on more money than they could actually use¹¹; but, at the same time, the public funding had already decreased of forty percent in 2008, leaving the institute with a financial aid so inadequate that could hardly pay for the employees¹². Finally, a new fund allowed to re-open the archive in 2019 – but a large part of its functions and services has not been brought back alive with it. The Biblioteca IsIAO is clearly the only survivor, and those who worked on its re-activation have made compromises. The cost of gaining back the library and the reading room meant renouncing the autonomy of a place of its own and an independent administration, consequently falling under the direction of the National Central Library of Rome. In conclusion, the Biblioteca IsIAO came back as a mutilated version of the past institute. A rebirth, nonetheless. Even better, a mission that has saved documents and material that have been kept in boxes for years, risking to be eventually scattered and forgotten. Doubts and problems are still arising to these days and staff and users are both dealing with the system that allows the viewing of archival material. Hence, the issue of preservation and maintenance matches with that of accessibility.

In the discourse about accessibility nowadays, a significant question regards whether digitisation can improve and enhance the form of an archive, a library or a museum of sort. The answer is obviously positive as technology and online services have proven useful in multiple ways already. Nevertheless, we have seen that some detractions still exist. Of course, it does not mean that digitisation and the use of digital records are inherently negative and superfluous. Such a cynical consideration – if it at all exists – should be considered no more than a nostalgic approach to the ideal of archival research and documents. However, digital access connects to various other matters. Who grants access? Who does actually have access? Is access enough to conduct an historical research? The current debate has often proposed accessibility in the digital world as a mean to a more open space. But is the opposition between “close” analogue archives and “open” digital archives even true? Scholars have argued that believing that the digital world is the threshold for an even and all-comprehensive way of accessing knowledge is more optimistic than credible.

As early as 2003, Roy Rosenzweig criticised the blind enthusiasm for the “abundance” of information and unlimited access¹³. By stating that “the simultaneous fragility and promiscuity of

¹¹ In particular, the closure of the IsIAO was the result of the cuts wanted by the minister of Economy and Finance Giulio Tremonti in 2008.

¹² Riccarda Gallo, “L’IsIAO non è l’araba fenice”, *Il Manifesto*, July 7, 2017, <https://ilmanifesto.it/lisiao-non-e-laraba-fenice/>; Riccardo Rosati, “La chiusura dell’IsIAO, un crimine culturale con molti colpevoli”, *Totalità.it*, April 14, 2015, <https://www.totalita.it/articolo.asp?articolo=6985&categoria=6&sezione=1&rubrica=>.

¹³ Roy Rosenzweig, “Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era”, *The American Historical Review* 108, No. 3 (June 2003): 735-762.

digital data requires yet more rethinking – about whether we should be trying to save everything, who is ‘responsible’ for preserving the past, and how we find and define historical evidence”¹⁴, Rosenzweig pointed out the ambiguity of the digital platform as a space where limits are vague and permanence is elusive. If the goal of digitisation and digital creation is to preserve the past and the present for the future, then the technical problems facing digital preservation as well as social and political questions about authenticity, ownership and preservation policy need to be confronted immediately¹⁵.

These opinions are not diminishing the contribution of the digital sphere, but are attempting to show the dynamic and not always transparent condition of digital documents. A bittersweet conclusion that appears to be the relevant beginning to discuss about digitisation not only as a technical solution, but also and especially as an essential task to be addressed by archivists and historians – altogether with sponsors and organisations. In this sense, my research intends to reveal how the staff of the Biblioteca IsIAO and academics – i.e, users that worked closely with the institute (equally before and after the closure) – perceive the projects of digitisation: both generally (as workers and users) and specifically to the IsIAO situation.

¹⁴ Ibid., 739.

¹⁵ Ibid., 746.

II

Access and digitisation

2.1. Archives and access

Access and accessibility to archival material have not always been taken for granted by researchers and users. In the Code of Ethics of 1996, the sixth principle for archives states, in fact, that “archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival materials and provide an impartial service to all users”¹⁶. The same policy has been re-affirmed by the Universal Declaration on Archives of 2010, which identifies one of the vital roles of archivists as making the records available for use, and pledges that archivists will work together in order that archives are made accessible to everyone (while respecting the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users)¹⁷. Back to the Middle Ages, visiting the archives and consulting the records were not simple activities and people were mostly required to pursue official and approved researches in order to gain access. Curiously, the words used to describe many archives at the time might confuse. *Loci publici* does suggest, indeed, a quite broad availability, which did not reflect any concrete permission. Hence, it appears that “public” was referred essentially to the nature of the documents preserved there, mainly legal acts and contracts¹⁸. As for one of the first open access archives in Europe, for instance, it is relevant to mention that Revolutionary France in 1794 proclaimed the right for citizens to have access to public archives. Consequently, the notion that research in archives was a civic right was increasingly recognised throughout all of Europe – even in such conservative countries as the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia¹⁹.

It is important to clarify that for centuries the word “archive” has acquired different nuances of meanings. In the broader sense, every institution, family or individual is capable of producing archives. They can include documents and records that are still in use or needed by those who created them, thus maintaining an active status; oppositely, they are historical archives, whose mission is to preserve past items for several purposes. Considering them as passive or closed spaces is, therefore, erroneous. Even more precisely, historical archives belong to the category of cultural heritage. As

¹⁶ International Council on Archives, Committee on Best Practices and Standards Working Group on Access, *Principles of accessing to archives* (2012): 3.

¹⁷ Ibid..

¹⁸ Michel Duchein, “The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe”, *The American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 14-25, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

such, national or local institutions and laws have the job to safeguard their existence. Is the existence of an archive enough? By reading the principles mentioned earlier, we can assume that the focus on the access to the archives has played a great role in defining the function that they hold in the present.

The rhetoric we inherited from many thinkers has influenced the public to believe in the archive as the physical and metaphorical place of the collective memory, which can be retrieved through what Michel Foucault called the “archaeology of knowledge”²⁰. Archivist Jeanette Allis Bastian is convinced that identity is about collective memory and history²¹. Essentially, the archives serve as tools of preservation, construction and transmission. Acting as a “passive repository” is just one of the various functions of the archive. Especially for the National Archives around the world, it is fair to assume that some sort of symbolism is investing their identity. The concepts of culture, remembrance, safety, neutrality and knowledge mix and generate an aura of sacredness, which is powerful enough to convey a message of truth and immaculate justice. Nevertheless, activists in the spheres of archives and research have long found out how wrong and dangerous this assumption might be²².

It is not my intention to go further into such matter of social justice (and injustice), but it is here mentioned to prove two important factors. The first one is that the archive is a complex and active organism. Indeed, it follows precise rules and hierarchies that have the role of making the structure and the content clear – and therefore readable. For example, such principles as those of provenance or original order have been formulated to prevent the records from being distorted or manipulated. The second refers to the capacity of making the archive searchable – and therefore accessible. The theme of accessibility, as anticipated, has been central in discussing the potentiality of the digital world for archives.

A preliminary caution requires distinguishing between the two words that I have quite mistakenly used as interchangeable. Access and accessibility belong to the same sphere of meaning and they address altogether the questions of openness and utility. However, access is referring naturally to the possibility of entering an archive; while accessibility is an additional, but not less essential, act of service provided by the archive and the archivists to grant the users the means to consult the records. The principles quoted at the beginning of the chapter certainly highlight both of the purposes. Still, the common practices might vary from case to case, archive to archive. A different

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

²¹ Jeanette Allis Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost its Archives and Found History*, (Exeter: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 3.

²² See Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice. A south African Perspective*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007); Verne Harris, “Jacques Derrida Meets Nelson Mandela”, *Archival Science* 11 (2011): 113-124.

approach to the public, concerning the actual entrance and the possibility of consulting the records, depends on the system of the archive's construction, the types of collections it preserves, the number of staff working on-site and the financial dispositions. The National Archives, generally speaking, can appear to be open for a longer time and to allow every user or researcher to use a variety of collections. For example, the Public Records Act (1958) in the United Kingdom requires that material is made public and accessible after a certain time²³. On the contrary, smaller or rarer archives might apply distinct rules.

The case of the Biblioteca IsIAO, for example, is an unfortunate one. Born in 1995 by merging two previous organisations (one created in 1933 under the Fascist regime and one in 1906)²⁴, the institute has preserved and enhanced the use of extremely important documentary heritage for Africanistic and Orientalist studies, consisting of volumes, periodicals, manuscript, maps and photographs. Until its closure in 2012 – a result of a government cut on funding – the IsIAO had its own location and management. Following the recent re-opening in 2019, the Institute became a branch of the National Central Library of Rome and it had to adapt to new directions, which surely resulted in a stricter arrangement of the opening times and the availability of the records. The President of ISMEO (Italian Institute for the Middle and the Far East) and Biblioteca IsIAO Adriano Valerio Rossi has assumed that the situation is not likely to change in the first years due to a lack of a significant extension of space and funds. While being aware that these conditions are not unique in the world of archives, it is important to point out that restrictions have a first and problematic impact on the access. Hence, does it appear that the role of preservation for archives is primary, whilst access comes second? In these regards, the improvement and prioritisation of accessibility through digitisation might offer a special opportunity.

2.2. History, Memory and Society on the digital platform

Once the connection between digitisation and accessibility has been set in the contemporary world, another issue can arise. Up until now, we have attempted to define the existence of archives and their role of preservation as a function for users and, ultimately, society as a whole. The preservation of cultural heritage and national history are arguably social goods, but the government sometimes lacks initiative for a leading role²⁵. Still, the digital platform has caused the declining of state-based

²³ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/legislation/public-records-act/>.

²⁴ More details in the third chapter.

²⁵ Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era", 752.

boundaries and post-national digital archives are becoming a new normality. How is the society settling with the notion of history and memory in the digital form? If History is considered as a positivistic category for “what happened in the past”, Memory establishes a more biased connection with the subjects that engage with it.

For the individual, Memory is the faculty of recollection and remembrance: it involves not only facts and events, but also impressions and (mis-)interpretations. Remembering and actively processing the information represent major differences from the other animals. Psychologists consider the act of remembrance fundamental for the human beings; blindly relying upon it can be dangerous, however. Nonetheless, Memory is part of the self and the subject can learn, more or less effectively, how to engage with it. Needless to say that not every part of one’s Memory is controllable – it would be abnormal otherwise. Lingering into a naïve and rather popular similarity, both the individual and the society have produced a past (History) and a narrative of it (Memory). Poetically enough, the archives embraced the “myth of the creation” of the community’s memory long ago and it is unlikely that anything will dismantle that idea. For it is not a mistake to say that such a favourable position has to be protected, even through times of change. Creation, preservation and circulation of memory, history and knowledge are the cornerstones of the archival institution – no matter how important or small it is. The need to believe in these categories and to act upon them has survived to these days, but rethinking their position becomes inevitable when the digital world multiplies those meanings.

The category of “digital society” encompasses a rather intuitive notion for us (i.e. the westernised, technology-centred society). First, it assumes the existence of a group of people living in a more or less ordered community, sharing similar levels of understandings. In the past centuries, societies referred to groups of individuals delimited by distinct factors: were they geographical borders, religions, status... Although such circumstances are still suitable to determinate different groups, the opening of the digital world has swiftly re-shaped the perimeters of the “social space” and redefined the very concepts of centre and periphery indeed. The “digital revolution” has been and still is a major topic for study and research. Conventionally, it began anywhere from the late 1950s to the late 1970s with the adoption and proliferation of digital computers and digital record keeping that continues to the present day²⁶. The mention of record keeping in a digital form is not accidental. How a society maintains its records and makes them available might represent the key points to how history and memory are perceived. Not only, but it also expresses the values and uses that are encouraged. For example, in the case of an ancient manuscript, the sense of sight, originally combined with the

²⁶ Steven E. Schoenherr, *The Digital Revolution*, 1999, <http://audiolabo.free.fr/revue1999/content/digital.html>.

sense of touch, makes way for the sole employment of vision through the digital platform. Whether this change is to be considered radically negative, positive or even drastic, is still to be decided. Nevertheless, the reality of this transformation affects the preservation and accessibility of records and makes it a matter worth discussing.

On a digital platform, information and knowledge appear loosely ready to be consulted, either merely viewed or deeply inspected. This grade of attention does not convincingly expose the difference between an analogue record and a digital one. Both can be superficially observed or strongly investigated. In the very first place, what differs is the way we access that same content. It is important now to make a disclaimer. Most people relate the idea of digital content to the Internet connection and online presence. Of course, digital electronics is a discipline born before the advent of the Internet, but the birth of the so-called World Wide Web has enhanced the performance of the digital world. Even more so, if we think that, from the past decade, the opportunity of staying connected and online has turned to something more than just a possibility, becoming a real and persisting state of being. Hence, to put it as simplistic and obvious as possible, it changed everything. The choice of copying or transferring the records of an archival institution on the digital platform and consequently, most of the times, through online access has also modified the relationship of the society with the information gathering. The possibilities of widespread Internet use have also stimulated substantial developments in a variety of applications, such as electronic commerce, distance education, electronic publishing, digital libraries, and virtual communities²⁷.

The different way of accessing records does not stand solely in the materiality of the action, but it also regards the society's mentality and approach. Nowadays, every element that has any connection to the Internet is associated with speed, which means that everything is presumed to be ready to use and consult. "The time is now" and patience rarely figures in the digital user's quality. A similar expectation has influenced the users' behaviour towards what they can find on the digital platform. The conviction that almost everything should be available online is rather widespread²⁸. Therefore, I would argue that the first departure from the analogue standards lies in the theoretical and practical processes behind access and accessibility. In other words, the expectations of people engaging with digital material refer mostly to the possibility of consulting material that is easily available through online research.

²⁷ Rob Kling, "Learning About Information Technologies and Social Change: The Contribution of Social Informatics", *The Information Society* 16, No. 3 (2000): 217-232, 217.

²⁸ Caitlin Patterson, "Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age", *The American Archivist* 79, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2016): 339-370, 347.

A second issue regards who these users are, who is entitled to enter the archival space and how the digital agenda led to a democratisation of the archive's availability. Admittedly, the belief that the Internet is a platform that flattens the social backgrounds of the users is common. Studies have proven that this phenomenon was happening especially at the early stages of the web revolution. The basic principles of the web were the same for everyone – as long as there was an Internet connection. Once on the platform, the first impression is that of a no man's land, where anyone can see, write and explore whatever they want. It seemed like a playground for users to navigate without limits and boundaries. A possibility that could be beneficial and dangerous at the same time. The democratisation of technology, that is the increased access to use and purchase technologically sophisticated products, has been the opening key to the democratisation of data, as well as of information and knowledge. Public libraries have been called “the greatest force for the democratization of knowledge or information”²⁹. The same applies to archives, even though it does not sound innovative that public spaces, like libraries and archives, hold such a power.

Whether the effects of the democratisation of knowledge are favourable to the overall education of users is questionable however. Opening a non-material space undoubtedly offers easier and immediate access in comparison to a physical place, which cannot avoid the usual problems of limited times, places and availability. It is then reasonable that a more diverse and assorted part of the population can take advantage of the online system. The openness of the public archives did not instantly translate to an intense flow of users coming from eclectic backgrounds. The general portrayal of archives as “a dark, windowless room hidden somewhere in a basement”³⁰, where only odd and quite aged people can find some sort of interest, has not helped to appeal to outsiders, or rather individuals who view such spaces as strictly created and arranged for academics or researchers. Stereotypes about archives and archivists are abundant as well. We have already mentioned the most persistent ones, namely the “dust” and the “age”.

As early as 1983, in the reports from the first round of “State Needs Assessment Grants”, Bill Joyce of the New York Public Library affirmed that “lack of public understanding and regard leads to underfunding of historical records repositories and underutilization of their holdings”³¹. Such a statement does shed a light on how society's perception of the archival work has indeed an impact on the State's policies, investments and recognition of it. However, the allegedly existing democratisation of knowledge and access to a variety of information through the Internet had and still

²⁹ Danny P. Wallace and Connie Van Fleet, “The Democratization of Information?”, *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, No. 2 (2005): 100-103.

³⁰ Patterson, “Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age”, 340.

³¹ David B. Gracy, “Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution”, *The American Archivist* 47, No. 1 (Winter 1984): 7-10, 8.

has the ability to change these dynamics. The presence of a much more accessible space might be essential to the survival of the archives in the modern world and might guide the organisations to a change of perspective on funding and expenses to apply for those institutions. Nevertheless, this evaluation relies on the assumption that a partial, if not total, digitisation of records and the following digital and online access will grant a majority of users to take the initiative to use the archives themselves. An aspect not to be dismissed, however, is the social and technical dimensions of access to information in digital libraries and archives.

Connecting the existence and value of the archives to the access and use by individuals might result in a rather materialistic point of view. But what is the archive if no one checks its records and investigates the histories and memories deposited there? Without dwelling into the “if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” philosophic question, it is not arbitrary to claim that the archives have somehow a lot to do with the sense of unperceived existence and unknown. The holdings of an archive can be mysterious and pass by undetected if no one pays attention to them. However, we should not forget that the archivists, making choices and organising the material, also and primarily are part of the archive. Such an obvious, yet unreferenced, indication prompted David B. Gracy to write an article on *The American Archivist*, soliciting other archivists “to draft a statement ... on the importance of archives to and in society” and “serve as a clearinghouse of information and ideas”³². Indeed, it is the archivists’ job to re-evaluate the role of that same institution they work in. A task that appears to be necessarily attended in the digital revolution. The risk of falling behind, of becoming obsolete (even more than it is already presumed) is not to be underestimated.

Again, it is worth challenging the archivists to consider, with a renewed interest, the digital platform as a space of maintenance and access, as well as of sharing and spreading. Even better, such a practice as the one of digitisation is capable of improving some features for the people engaging with the archival holdings – whether it can help them to enter the archive across geographic boundaries or it can provide the “zoom-in” function to make the record clearer and easier to examine. However, some theorists are on a completely different page. The question if the archival institution, as they have come to know it, still makes sense in the world of bits and dematerialisation is still open. As Randall Jimerson wrote, archives may “become quaint anachronisms in a world of instant data communication, high technology, and rapid change”³³. According to such theories and ways of

³² Ibid., 9.

³³ Randall C. Jimerson, “Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society”, *The American Archivist* 52, No. 3 (Summer 1989) 332-340, 333.

thinking, technology and digital expectations can get in the way of the “archival identity”, as Jimerson puts it.

The issue gets more complicated when Internet hosts digital born content. Despite not being part of this thesis, understanding some of the problems concerning digital born material can help to identify the ambiguity and potentiality of the digital platform. For instance, Christine L. Borgman, who wrote a book about the evolution of information infrastructure, came to the point of describing the digital library as “an extension, enhancement, and integration both of information retrieval systems and multiple information institutions, libraries being only one. The scope of digital libraries’ capabilities includes not only information retrieval but also creating and using information”³⁴. Therefore, the digital world bears innovative features that can improve users’ approach to the archival material. Concerns about such an optimistic view have been existing from the beginning and the community is still debating about the pros and cons. It is not a simple goal indeed. Since the time and efforts required to digitise records are massively high, archivists generally agree that most archival records will not be digitised for quite a time³⁵. Indeed only a tiny fraction of the world’s primary resources are available digitally.

Total digitisation of archival material is not the endgame of any institutions, at least not for the immediate future. Now, digitised archives are ideally representing a complement and not a replacement of the analogue archives. What projects of digitisation are attempting to bring on the table is that a portion of the archival holdings can be – and perhaps has to be – digitised. To cut expenses, to gain some storing space, to make records more accessible or to give them a new life. Reasons to digitise and prioritise this task during decision-making boards are numerous and diverse since they can also apply to different levels of archival organisation, taking the matter of digitisation to each and specific case.

In this “digital” picture, that is a picture where users have the privilege of finding and obtaining documentation quite freely in comparison to locating it through analogue means, the role of the archivist has been frequently questioned within the same academic community. Ivan Szekely titled his article rather intuitively and symptomatically evoking such fears³⁶. The figure of the archive professional encompasses multiple functions, which are easily recognisable in the physical archival space: 1) retrieving documents and ensuring their veracity; 2) appraising the ones that are in line with

³⁴ Christine L. Borgman, *From Gutenberg to the Global Information Infrastructure: Access to Information in the Networked World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 48.

³⁵ Jeurgens, “The scent of the digital archive. Dilemmas with archives digitisation”, 46.

³⁶ Ivan Szekely, “Do Archives Have a Future in the Digital Age?”, *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 4, No. 1 (2017): 1-16.

the archive's specialisation and defining those lines in the first place; 3) coherently describing the records, thus respecting the principles of original order and provenance; 4) making the archival holdings searchable through indexes, finding aids and professional guidance. All of these roles and duties, although essential, are already undetectable to some users welcomed in the physical archives. Perhaps it has something to do with the perception of the archivist as a figure that works "behind the scenes". Additionally, users entering the archival space directly online rarely even take into consideration the roles of the archivist, causing a "dematerialisation" not only with the holdings but also with the figures working to make them accessible.

This power of invisibility is the strength and weakness of the archivist. Seen as the "hidden hand" at the back of the shelves, the archivist's job looks impartial and trustworthy. Yet, it becomes dangerously optional on the digital platform of the Internet. When the archivist, whose role is a guarantee to the authenticity of the archival holdings, is not recognised, the truthfulness fails to be granted. Nevertheless, users and archivists are likely misled by the simple and reiterated charge against the implementation of the digital archive's space, namely the "superficiality" of the online research. The probability of a superficial approach through an uncontrolled research is high indeed. Claiming that "users may fail to recognise the hand of the archivist in the information they receive"³⁷ is not far from the truth. Those who rely on online finding aids or access to documentation are more easily doomed to "bypass" the archivist, making the "invisible hand" even more invisible to the eye of the common users. Sometimes, the archivist's support is unnecessary. This is mostly a result of the researcher's behaviour on the digital platform. Since the hierarchy of a set of archival material can be disrupted by the process of digitisation – hence leading to the loss of original order and provenance – researchers are autonomously engaging with the documents. The risk of running into unreliable digital material increases online. Even worse, it appears that online users do not care much about the source of the information nor if they can trust it. I would argue that superficiality is the most problematic issue from a user's perspective. However, this obstacle has been existing since the birth of the Internet, a free and unsupervised space for many. Luckily, in the most recent years, the use of the Internet and the online approach have been subject to investigation in various disciplines³⁸. Furthermore, the risk of falling into online traps and fake news has been exposed and authorities are attempting to stress on more conscious use of online information, both towards companies and

³⁷ Patterson, "Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age", 343.

³⁸ The "digital lifestyle" permeates more and more disciplines every day. See Srisakdi Charmonman and Natanicha Chorpothong, "Digital Lifestyle and the Road Ahead", *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on eBusiness*, November 19-20 (2005): 21-28.

towards individuals. It is true, then, that a “digital consciousness” is growing, allowing users to discern what is verified and what not. Or, at least, to start question it more often.

What is the obstacle from the archivist’s point of view? We mentioned that the traditional role of the archivists could be endangered by the expanding of the digital space, in particular of all the expectations and necessities that occur with it. The very word “archive” has evolved in the digital words to indicate data that has been stored. For example, it is found as a folder’s legend on computers and smartphones, even though it does not correspond to the conventional and historical meaning³⁹. It might still refer to stored documents (or data), thus indicating “virtually any collection of information”⁴⁰. Therefore, archivists need to re-define the digital and online archive into specific lines, like its analogue counterpart. The same operation does apply to the figure of the archivist. Should archivist be trained as computers, software and digital engines experts? Similar questions have been asked in the archival field⁴¹. It is clear indeed that a danger for archives and archivist in the contemporary pursue of digitised collections is to lose any grip to what rules and requirements an archive should follow, even if said archive appears to exist also “offline”. One of the first concern regards the employment of the IT staff in the process of digitisation. It is arguably evident that such a necessity is unquestionable unless archivists become software engineers themselves. However, a stable and fruitful partnership between the technological part and the archivists is to be promoted. Some members of the archival staff, for example, have complained that the creation of software or data implementation can result arbitrary in the hands of the IT teams, leaving the archivists without fair means to work with the digitised records⁴². The main issue of the archivists appears to be that of translating the traditional values (such as the principles of provenance and authenticity) in the digital world. Without any doubt, the quality of the software plays a huge role in providing archivists with tools that can help to create that same nest of information and properties of the analogue version.

A better and efficient operative software needs a lot of funds to be constructed and used. Money is, in fact, one of the most restraining issues for digitisation projects and commission boards have rarely permitted to face such a huge expense. This happens also for the unstable nature of the digitised item itself. The digitised material does constantly need care and maintenance costs, most of the times it can charge even more than the analogue corresponding record. However, strategies to

³⁹ Stefano Bellucci, “The Role of Archives and Archivists in the Contemporary Age in Ensuring the Transmission of Collective Memory” in *A Usable Collection*, ed. Aad Blok, Jan Lucassen and Huub Sanders (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014): 434-441, 435.

⁴⁰ Patterson, “Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age”, 344.

⁴¹ Glenn Dingwall, “Digital Preservation: From Possible to Practical” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil, and Terry Eastwood (2017): 135-161, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 151.

contain this problem do exist and those who advocate for digitisation are willing to focus on the long-term benefits of having digitised records in the archives.

The most important revolution in the digitisation process has been the creation of metadata, which can be roughly described as the most authentic identifiers of the record. They allow giving information on the status of the document, such as its provenance, its position, the context and the format. In an attempt to define the different ways of describing digitised records in the digital world, Jinfang Niu created the distinction between a “vertical view” and a “horizontal view”⁴³. The first one indicates the practice of using an abstract and conceptual order, which describes records that conceptually belong together in archival finding aids. The latter, instead, treats electronic material as just one position of the records’ existence, thus focusing on the necessity of making explicit the relationship between the analogue document and the digitised record. Additionally, archivists are invited to focus also on the management of informative connections between the digital records and their corresponding metadata. This call might appear needless or redundant. Jiu is stressing on it, however, because sometimes, at a technical level, the pieces of information are stored separately. She concludes attesting as essential the use of metadata for the order of electronic records because they can provide the archives and the archival finding aids with a hierarchical structure of descriptions (similar to the one existing in the analogue world) and interlacing attributes of folders and files. Seemingly, the job of the archivists needs to evolve altogether with the new theories and practicalities regarding the digitisation of records and, in general, the digital world.

2.3. Archivists and users: benefits and problems

In this discourse, it is also interesting to mention the archival different perspectives on the record’s existence, which originated in the only-analogue era but helped to define the digitised and digital holdings as well. The life-cycle perspective describes the three stages of an archival set of documents: it is born as active (i.e. the organisation producing it requires to use it), it becomes “inactive” in a second moment and it eventually, once the organisation is closed, is destined to disposal. Therefore, the archivist’s hand is operating during the third phase, which is the storing one. Such a perspective has worked just fine with normal and analogue records, but it seems too static to embrace the layers of the digitised and digital material. This approach has slowly been replaced by the continuum theory, which enables digitised versions of records to exist in a more fluid process and performance. The idea

⁴³ Jinfang Niu, “Original order in the digital world”, *Archives and Manuscripts* 43, No. 1 (2015): 61-72.

of a *continuum* is beneficial to define an archival method that focuses on the activities through which the material is defined, and not uniquely on the records as objects. The continuum theory incorporates the four dimensions that the sociologist Anthony Giddens has studied: create, capture, organise and, specifically to the matter of access, pluralise⁴⁴. The latter is the phase where the information is deployed beyond the organisation itself.

Many theorists for recordkeeping informatics have found this dynamic concept extremely important. Gillian Oliver also points out that understanding the “continuum” process means realising that the focus for archival holdings is gradually shifting⁴⁵. In the analogue world, the location represents the primary factor and principles as those of provenance and original order are the logical outcomes for such prioritisation. The paradigm shift, however confusingly it appears, is proving that the archival environment in the digital era has been balancing around the concepts of access and accessibility. Nevertheless, scholars like Oliver are not ready to opt for one concept over the other. More conveniently, they request archives and archivists to adopt a combination of perspectives that can help to bring into practice that same re-conceptualisation⁴⁶.

Digital curation can perhaps sum up all the issues that archivists need to face if they want to prioritise digitisation or digital-born material. Sure enough, for some individuals, digital records and online presence symbolise the advent of a less demanding or binding way of keeping records. In just a few words, there is the belief that the digital environment could ease many worries of the archivists’ job, for example, by granting unlimited storage space and unrestricted access (neither following specific timetables nor space boundaries). Nonetheless, these reasons express just a superficial approach to the study of digital curation. The most important effect of digitisation projects, as well as other digital augmentation’s designs, is that the digital environment can and wants to achieve more. Actually, the concept of digital curation does not concern only the act of preservation, but it also serves as a possibility of adding values to the preserved objects. We might say that the digital world is calling for the active management of its records’ data, contrarily to the analogue preservation, which has been the result of rather passive management. The choice of how to, where to and if preserve the digital holdings is rather now, not later.

Theorists and archivists have both questioned what aspects can improve through digital curation could mean in the practice. In connection to the theme of access and accessibility, the invite to engage with the community and make it part of the digital archive creation could represents an

⁴⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (London: Polity Press, 1986).

⁴⁵ Gillian Oliver, “Managing Records in the Current Recordkeeping Environments”, in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil, and Terry Eastwood (2017): 83-106.

⁴⁶ Oliver, “Managing Records in the Current Recordkeeping Environments”, 92.

option for the future. I have been wondering, in fact, for whom digitisation was carried on: archives or users or both? Whom does the digital enterprise benefit the most? Of course, it is extremely natural to see the benefits from the users' perspective, since it is only better for them to have the possibility of consulting archival holdings from whichever place in the world and at whatever time they please. However, some concerns about what type of research it can be conducted by using digital material have already been expressed. In particular, a few scholars have underlined the necessity to be fully in contact with the records to maximise their value and to not risk losing any aspect. Charles Jeurgens has been advocating for the so-called "scent" of the archive, which, in an episode he reports, has resulted to be essential to accomplish an accurate and authentic examination⁴⁷. Of course, as we have already said, the change into a digital version can either enhance or deteriorate some of the peculiarities of a specific record. For this reason, digitising all the material of an archive is rather inconvenient, even dangerous in some cases. Thus, digitisation should be the result of an accurate and attentive decision.

At this point, it is fair to highlight that selecting what to digitise is a critical and yet necessary responsibility for those archives that are involved in digitisation projects. The two alternatives that promptly came to my mind are related to the previous question on whether these enterprises are arranged to help the archival institution or the community. For example, the choice could fall on a collection of records that are endangered in the archives, thus providing a digital copy available on the web without the risk of corrupting the original. This option is based on the idea that a digitised record can work as a "back up" of the analogue counterpart and archivists can benefit from it since it facilitates preservation. Another line of action, for example, can turn in the users' favour. Archivists can decide to digitise part of the material that most users happen to request. In this way, multiple users are granted access to those records and the material can be browsed at the same time.

However, these two options both reiterate the idea that digitised records are only copies that allow the originals to be accessed and investigated more efficiently. What we want to highlight, though, is that digitisation can represent a mean to improve and enhance the archives' faculty of creating and opening knowledge and memory. For instance, the projects of digitisation can give more space to those collections that have been less considered or are not well known to the generic public. Opening them through digitisation can bring them to new forms of attention. This case is fundamental to give digital archiving the status and identity it deserves. Without any doubt, digitisation is a function, a tool and it should never be a goal. It can be sided to the regular analogue archives and help

⁴⁷ Jeurgens, "The scent of the digital archive. Dilemmas with archives digitisation", 30.

them to avoid some problems, like that of storage space or rare and unique archival objects. Still, claiming that digitisation is just a secondary mean is reductive.

Digitisation is a rather new frontier that can always be improved from a technological perspective. What has to change is the mentality behind that. If more archives and archivists start using it as a way to expand some collection or different systems, as well as to provide new tools for better accessibility of content and information, digitisation might gain a respectable authority. Being positive towards the digital world is a matter of understanding all the opportunities that can come with it, while still being aware of all the adverse aspects. In this case, professionals have the task to manage the problems from various perspective, learning that each case needs specific decisions.

III

The case of the Biblioteca IsIAO

3.1. Brief story of the IsIAO in the Italian context

In the past decades, the general situation for archives, and especially for Italian archives, has been transitioning. The introduction of new technological methods and information technology (IT) has then produced a variety of effects, from the first enthusiastic responses to the recognition of practical difficulties. As early as 1967, Italian archivist Leopoldo Sandri was condemning the aristocratic concepts of the archival services, too often grounded on the assumption that the material would keep the same form in eternity, while also persuading that said material was fated to a different kind of recordkeeping procedure⁴⁸. It would appear that, a few decades later, Italy is at a similar position, stuck at the crossroad, tied to the usual analogue standards but appealed by the fascination of digital opportunities. In an article about dematerialisation and State archives, Gilda Nicolai emphasised on the general loss of structure and refined techniques, which have worsen with the practice of the digitisation for documents and competences, causing technology to legitimise the negligence of other archival activities (such as classification and organisation strategy)⁴⁹. On closer inspection, the “evil” that the archivist is exposing in the title lies not so much in the digital sphere as in the dissolution of the archival perception and traditional meaning.

The lack of interest in testing new solutions has led to a separation and yet an unproductive coexistence between the analogue and digital worlds. While a cooperation of new instruments with the foundations of the archival science is to be pursued, archivists have long mistakenly forgotten to engage with recent developments. The archival resource is a cultural resource and it needs attention from specific figures. Those same archivists that have underestimated the power of combined features, they have inevitably put IT staff in charge of archival operation. Still, the advent of digitisation has also prompted a resurrection of prior activities that some archives had left behind. Then, the digital platform could be a fresh start for a structural reform of Italian archives, whose prominence and reputation faded consequently to laws that undermined the tasks of organisation and document management in favour of those of preservation for research purposes. Let it be clear that

⁴⁸ Leopoldo Sandri, “L’archivistica”, *Rassegna degli archivi di Stato* XXVIII, (1967): 411-446.

⁴⁹ Gilda Nicolai, “Archivi in dissolvimento: un ‘male’ che viene da lontano”, *Officina della Storia*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.officinadellastoria.eu/it/2019/01/10/archivi-in-dissolvimento-un-male-che-viene-da-lontano/>.

all of these functions are essential parts of the archive's construction and maintenance and that the implementation of digital practices could help re-schedule and prioritise their role. In conclusion, archivist Gilda Nicolai calls for a wide-ranging project, which encompasses all the modern challenges onto the original archival dimension.

The status of Italian archives is questionable in the analogue world as in the digital one. A first look at the State's outlays for archives is possibly explicative of the efforts that are (not) made for their prosperity. Financing state-based and public projects has proved difficult and rather problematic. This is a recurrent aspect for many cultural enterprises in the country since funds appear to be neither high nor steady. Accordingly, when it comes to mention Italy's contribution in the European arena, the budget offered to the archival institutions seems unsatisfactory. The marginal position occupied by archives in the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities plays a role also in the perception of these institutions. While libraries and museums, despite facing similar problems, enjoy a highly respected position among the public opinion, archives are far from being even understood and respected as a collective patrimony. It is not odd to find people even bewildered by the unfamiliar term⁵⁰.

Archivists have long protested and wished for a change in the matter of preservation and accessibility once the digital platform entered in some practices. In Italy, the law 428 (D.P.R) of October 20th 1998 has set the first foundation for digital regulation⁵¹. It was also a step to reach a new model for documents management, which could enable a simpler and more effective public action, based on the control of proceedings and on expanded access to information⁵². The need for the archives will, indeed, continue to exist in the future. Therefore, prioritising digitisation in the modern practices does help advancing the archival methodology as well. In his article, Ivan Szekely is convinced that protecting the archives' status and promoting their digital growth is an "institutional responsibility". He wrote:

The institutional responsibility and public work of archives fill an essential social, legal, and public administration need that would argue for their reinforcement, development, and modernization, rather than their scrapping.⁵³

The case of the Biblioteca IsIAO intends to prove how financing digitisation is not a mere goal. Again, digitisation presents the tools to support the archive's integrity, both as a place to access

⁵⁰ Patterson, "Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age", 340.

⁵¹ Nicolai, "Archivi in dissolvimento: un 'male' che viene da lontano".

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Szekely, "Do Archives Have a Future in the Digital Age?", 14.

information and as a space of preservation. In particular, the re-opening of the archival holdings of the IsIAO has profited by the ongoing projects of digitisation. But what is the Biblioteca IsIAO?

As we already mentioned, it is the official temporary title of the material that has been saved after the closure of the institute in 2011-2012. It was established in 1995 to maximise national initiatives and resources by merging the previous Italian-African Institute (IIA) and the Italian Institute for the Middle and the Far East (ISMEO). The former date back to 1906; the latter was created by Giovanni Gentile (Italian philosopher and Fascist politician and academic) and Giuseppe Tucci (Italian explorer and historian) in 1933 under the Fascist regime. Its activity continues in the wake of the institutes from which it originated, promoting Italy's cultural relations with the countries of these two continents through international conferences, exhibitions, publications, archaeological excavations, restoration sites and historical, linguistic and philological research projects. On the presentation page of their website, it is pointed out that the forced closure happened in 2011 because of a change of attitude for national politics. The IsIAO, it is told, stopped receiving funds by the government because the politics of the time no longer regarded "culture as a useful tool for pursuing diplomatic and economic advantages"⁵⁴. This shift in perspective has certainly affected the status of archives, libraries and museums, which suffered from abandonment by part of the audience. By reading the statistics reports of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, the flow into institutional archives has declined slightly between 2011 and 2017 (last available year)⁵⁵. From 292.686 users, both Italians and foreigners, that consulted archival material in 2011, the number decreases to 262501. However, the investigation detects a rather larger problem when it looks at the number of management fees for these same years. They go from a little bit more than 20 million in 2011 to 12 million in 2017. The numbers have significantly dropped by almost a half. Therefore, the case of the IsIAO has been one of the many archives that have received fewer funds throughout the years.

The problems arose when the subsidy went completely missing and the archive of the Italian Institute for Africa and Asia needed to be shut down. The material was considered extremely precious on the Italian and international level and many academics and staff worked to save it and preserve it for the future. Since 2015, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation has been actively involved in guaranteeing the reorganisation and inventorying of the former IsIAO Historical Archive, making use of the scientific collaboration of the University La Sapienza of Rome. This hard work and constant engagement have eventually borne its fruits in May of 2019, when the archive of

⁵⁴ Biblioteca IsIAO, <http://www.ismeo.eu/biblioteca-isiao/>.

⁵⁵ MiBACT – Ufficio Statistica, http://www.statistica.beniculturali.it/Archivi_di_stato.htm.

the IsIAO and all the other collections previously held there were given a new life in a special compartment of the National Central Library of Rome. The choice of migrating an independent archive with special tasks and goals into a bigger and highly hierarchical institution has likely been dictated by financial reasons. As for now, for example, the Biblioteca IsIAO is providing access, although limited, to its archival material. Still, it appears to have lost its role of cultural mediator and it does not have the funding to organised archaeological enterprises or propose intercultural exchanges.

The role of the archive as the institution that is part of the creation of memory through preserving and collecting pieces of knowledge and information seems to have been put aside. Again, this result reveals that the perception of the archive is indeed devalued by both the public and the institutions. It does not mean that the archives are being degraded and forgotten, but especially that some of their purposes and expectations are no longer considered fundamental. The passivity of the archives, however, hides a very active process in the case of the new Biblioteca IsIAO. Between 2011 and 2015, when operations to re-open the archive started, professionals have worked relentlessly to gain the privilege – or better, the right – to make such an important and unique material available again for researchers.

At this point, it might be interesting a brief description of the archival holdings preserved in the Biblioteca IsIAO. It has over 200.000 volumes, 2.500 periodicals of which 500 are ongoing (to 2012), manuscripts, woodblock prints, maps and photographs. The website divides this material into four main sections. Two of them are defined by the content, namely the African Section and the Oriental section. The first one was established altogether with the Italian Colonial Institute, in 1906. The second one is continuing the work of a previous institution called ISMEO (Italian Institute for the Middle and the Far East), founded in 1934. It is necessary to mention that ISMEO survived to these days and has been taking care of the Biblioteca IsIAO once it has been re-opened in the National Central Library of Rome. The other two categories include different types of material and formats. The Photographic Collection, which has been largely inherited from the Italian Ministry for Africa, brings together not only official material, but also interesting photographs by individuals (such as missionaries and military personnel, travellers and anthropologists...). The Map Collection holds about 3.000 maps, mostly inherited from the Cartographic Service of the Italian Ministry for Africa, established in 1914 with a documentary function within the ministerial structure. All these records and holdings are of inestimable value for pursuing and presenting the knowledge of Italy's relationship with its past colonies and its international expeditions. Furthermore, IsIAO produced important publications throughout the years. *Africa* (published quarterly from 1947 to 2009 in Italian,

English and French) was an international periodical aimed at promoting research and practical collaboration between Italian and African scholars; it supported contributions from the foremost Italians and overseas African studies scholars, ranging from history to political and juridical institutions, ethnology, archaeology and anthropology. *East and West* (published quarterly from 1950 to 2009 only in English) gave space to researches conducted in the field of the Far East countries studies and it mostly reserved a place for topics of religions, rituality, history and society. The possibility of producing own journals is special and not to be underestimated by the archival institutions. It is certainly an opportunity that can benefit principally specialised archives, which have academics and researchers using that same material that the archives can offer. And, here again, the issue of money and funding is unfortunately second to none.

In this case, also, digitisation as an auxiliary project could represent an extremely important and worth-discussing occasion. The Biblioteca IsIAO has indeed put effort and capital in a few projects of digitisation, especially regarding the collections of photographs, which are very suitable to be digitised⁵⁶. Furthermore, the two journals mentioned earlier are available in digitised versions on JSTOR (the famous online digital library founded in 1995). The institution, therefore, is not far from this digital reality. Even better, the digitisation can help the archive to maintain and promote its material. This is particularly true for the IsIAO's current situation. The institution has restricted timetables for access to its record since the re-opening in 2019. The possibility of viewing digitised versions does stand as an improvement for the archive. However, the institution needs financial aid for such a project and a deeper investigation inside what the Biblioteca IsIAO is able to prioritise is indicative of this factor.

3.2. Why the Biblioteca IsIAO?

The opportunity of conducting interviews with members of the Biblioteca IsIAO and ISMEO has been an extremely interesting experience to understand the challenges of this archive and its approach to digitisation. The President of these institutions, Professor Adriano Valerio Rossi, granted me one first insight. He explained that the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) offered a financial aid to be granted yearly. Of course, they had to divide the budget among multiple and diverse areas. To name a few: staff members and professionals; purchase or acquisition of material, especially those numbers of journals that were left out during the year of inactivity (most specifically, from 2010

⁵⁶ President said that MIUR provided the Biblioteca IsIAO with slightly more than 200 thousands euro for the whole revitalisation program.

to 2017); restoration of manuscripts; other urgent expenses. A small part, President Rossi said, went into a project of digitisation for the “admittedly much more used material”, which was also posted on the theca of the National Central Library of Rome.

Nonetheless, the President also underlines that money can cover just a few parts of the expenses. He expressed the need to obtain a specific funding to put into practice more plans for digitisation. In this regard, the Biblioteca IsIAO is pursuing the idea of presenting, together with other institutions in the area of Rome, a project related to the digitisation and automatic recognition of photographs from African archaeological records. Such an attempt, which can take time to be defined and give results eventually, is significant for the incentive of digitisation to actively engage with the archive. Prioritisation of digitisation, however, appears to be far from achieved in the Italian archives’ landscape. Those archives and institutions that are trying to move in such direction need attention and support. Investing in digitisation is important to help the users’ community and bring new people into the discovery of the archives. Moreover, it could serve archives and archivists with creating a more accessible space.

I have mentioned earlier that the plan of researching in the field of digitisation in Italy was prompted by my personal experience with studying in the Netherlands in the first place. Certainly, a few experiences cannot prove anything and cannot offer a proper understanding into the world of archives, funding and digitisation projects. However, they did make me think about how easy it was for me to rely on and expect digitised versions. The situation appeared even more particular since my colleagues, coming from all different countries, did not struggle with the same problems. And so, I realised that the fact that I was researching documents and records in some Italian archives did make a difference indeed. Investigating the perception of digitisation in Italy allows a few considerations. First of all, I intended to establish whether such a difference had been dictated by my personal and slightly inconvenient experience. Had other people come to a similar conclusion? Even though the possibility of bringing this large topic on a national scale could have been interesting, I found a more specific case through which I could attempt to analyse the phenomenon, namely that of the Biblioteca IsIAO.

The choice of the Biblioteca IsIAO is significant because some projects of digitisation are already occurring among the other archive’s activities. They are seen as an instrument to make the collections more accessible while contemporary being able to preserve the records better and for a long-term future. What appears to be a common thread in the digitisation discourse and in the digital world as an essential resource, is that the expenses planned to improve the creation and the availability of digitised records are not so high in the long run of keeping an archive active in the present and the

future. The Biblioteca IsIAO, for instance, struggled to maintain its repository open to researchers. And, once it was eventually closed, a large amount of material was stored as it was, doomed to be involuntarily neglected. Up until now, many records have not received a precise description worth of an archive, making difficult to research in it. A travail, in this regard, is also represented by the lack of a digital catalogue, which would allow a skimmed investigation of the archival holdings of the Biblioteca IsIAO, at least. This occurring is but rare in the contemporary world, where digital catalogues – however superficial and unstructured – are usually provided.

3.3. Conducting interviews

The topic of the interviews was a combination of access issues and the struggles of digitisation, both in general and in the specific case of the Biblioteca IsIAO. The results show that overall the projects of digitisation are, indeed, taken into consideration by the staff and the Institute and that the benefits of making digitised copies of the original versions are regarded as highly necessary. It also appears that the vulnerable position of culture and education in the Italian establishment has been a major problem. Especially for those institutes and organisations that manifested the need to improve and develop their role. A role that is important for citizens as well as for workers. The digitisation project itself can represent just a first step of a larger program for users and staff's formation. Therefore, it is not enough to gain funds to purchase technological machines or functional items. The change stays in the growth of awareness in the use and the potentiality of the digital world. The need to educate people, more or less specialised, to engage with online access and sources is not secondary. A shared point in the interviews was the lack of spaces for this kind of activities and experiences. Admittedly, a better understanding of the digital platform goes hand in hand with a society that does not disregard or puts aside such an urgent matter.

I distributed the questionnaire (see Appendix 1 for the original Italian version) by contacting the President of ISMEO Adriano Valerio Rossi. While getting back to me with valuable insights about my research, he also sent me the answers given on a voluntary basis by three members of the staff, who are currently and actively working in the archive. The questionnaire counted twelve general questions – some of them included sub-questions that were related specifically to the case of the Biblioteca IsIAO. The two initial questions regarded the role of the interviewees in the archive and their approach to the material, if used. They come from diverse backgrounds, allowing my research to encompass three different points of view on the matter of digitisation, access and opportunities for the archives and, particularly, for the Biblioteca IsIAO. Federica Olivotto and Lorenzo Dechlich are

two members of the ISMEO and first line participants for the revitalisation project of the Biblioteca IsIAO. The former graduated in Asian Languages and Culture, while also being appointed librarian by a post-degree diploma; the latter is a researcher for the History and Philology Studies of Islamic Culture. They are both running many activities for the reconstruction and reactivation of the archive. This process includes researching the origins of the holdings, creating archival descriptions of the records, restoring the damaged records and so on. Furthermore, the Institute's administration board is considering, as we said, to engage in more digitisation projects, and they are attending this challenge as well. The other professional figure I interviewed is the researcher in History and Anthropology, Stefano Maltese, who works at the Biblioteca IsIAO as a librarian and archivist. He stated that an essential part of his job is to promote accessibility of the historical and unique material held by the Biblioteca IsIAO.

As for the interviews, I adopted the open-ended questions methodology, which does not provide participants with a predetermined set of answer choices, instead allowing them to offer responses in their own words. Although the qualitative research's results cannot be projected to the entire population, but represent only the opinions of those respondents included, the data appear to give more diversity than would be possible with a closed-question or forced-choice survey measure⁵⁷. The advantages of this methodology for the case of the Biblioteca IsIAO are evident, for open-ended questions may yield more candid information and unique insight and combine with the participants' precedent experience. The interviewees had, then, also the possibility of explaining their agreements or disagreement with a certain question, of expanding the meaning of some categories and of taking a comprehensive look at the topic being studied. I expected the three professional to indulge in both professional and personal opinions, to guarantee an investigation on their perspectives as librarians/archivist and as users.

Through my questionnaire, I have witnessed the perspectives of three professionals, who are putting their effort in the reconstruction of a part of the old archive of the IsIAO. The project, which they have been working on for a few years, has resulted in the opening of the temporarily called Biblioteca IsIAO in September of 2019. The limited funds on which they can rely has been no reason for them to imply that digitisation projects are not a priority in that situation. On the contrary, the application of the digitisation projects on the archive's holdings is regarded as an essential task to speed up the reconstruction of the archive itself. Consistently with the fact that the staff is still operating on largely neglected material, a common point in several replies was that the organisation is still a "work in progress". A point that has struck me for its simplicity: even though the archive

⁵⁷ Mike Allen, *Survey: Open-Ended Questions*, The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods (2017).

exhibits a few limitations (such as the opening hours of the reading room or the number of records that can be consulted), at least some of them are to be ascribed to the recent re-opening of the archive and not to a categorical restricted system. Nonetheless, the very president of the ISMEO, Adriano Valerio Rossi, showed some scepticism on a rapid progression of the situation. As for this period of adjustment, then, the three professionals have stated that digitising the material of the Biblioteca IsIAO is a convenient and valuable option.

What I did not consider, however, is that this situation is planned to be temporary, especially in regards to all the other activities that the staff needs to begin or refine. Activities that do include the material most of the times. There is a consistent part of the records, in the case of this project, that is lacking information and descriptions, thus missing in the archive's catalogue. Clearly, this primary necessity is taking the professionals' time and efforts. The presence of a well-structured archive and, consequently, a well-structured catalogue is not to be underrated since it is essential to grant accessibility to the public. Still, the catalogue they are creating and improving at the moment appears to be exclusively paper-made and not available online. Users can exclusively consult it in the reading room. If digitisation of catalogues or indexes is an important aspect for access in the contemporary times, archives should work on creating one to allow users a primary investigation of the material. On the website of the Biblioteca IsIAO, a disclaimer informs that the archive is not granting this opportunity yet. I find it to be another reason for the staff to prioritise content on the digital and online platform.

3.4. Answers and possible solutions

When conducting interviews for a qualitative research involving such broader themes as those of access and digitisation can be, it is likely to receive responses that explore further first assumptions. Thus, the researcher has to work with answers that sometimes do not match with the theories they had in mind or with criticism to the question itself. This clarification notwithstanding, I obtained stimulating consideration from the three interviewees. Albeit being it a written interviews, I intend to reveal my findings into a less structured and more flowing discourse on access and digitisation, connecting them to the theory discussed in the previous chapters. I created the questionnaire (see Appendix 1 and 2) following a thematic scheme. I will then proceed highlighting the macro-topics with no particular order.

I confess that I feared that the values of “tradition” and “authenticity” played an influential part in Italy’s minor concern with digitisation projects in comparison with other European countries. A nation, Italy, which boasts a great and valuable heritage and is proud of its antiquity, uniqueness and originality. The opposition between original and copy, however useful to distinguish the multiple versions, relies also upon the idea that History is one and cannot be replaced. Even though this is not to be condemned, the three professionals that I interviewed took a strong position by claiming that dwelling in that kind of antagonism was sterile and unproductive, while also making the digitisation’s goal even harder to achieve and to promote as a fundamental step for many fields, including a history-related one, namely the archive. According to what they expressed in the interviews, the values of originality and uniqueness do have a meaning in the choice of digitisation, but they did not hold them accountable for Italy’s negligence towards the augmentation of the digital sphere. One of my theories relied indeed on the belief that Italy’s great and noble past, as well as Italians’ perception of the materiality of History, could hold an important role in the dis-trust and dis-engagement for anything digital. Despite being it naive and impulsive, I did feel that asking a question in this regard could unveil a few (national) biases. None of the three professionals did recognise, however, any significant factor related to such assumptions.

Although it has not been supported by their responses, I would still believe that the Italian education leans more towards tangibility and physicality. It may also be rooted in the poverty of technological expectations. What is Italy’s main issue with digitisation? It appears that the primary failure in the Italian system, as reported also on the ISMEO website, is the lack of interest in – or better, the reduction of – funding cultural projects. Culture and formation, which are now demanding to be actively promoted in the digital world, are constantly put in a secondary place, if not even below that. Technology and digital approach need to be improved not only in the matter of digitisation but also at the very bottom of it. Methodology, criticism and reliability have to be taught in the digital context, to establish a starting place and a community capable of using and developing those same materials and approaches that it wants to achieve. Additionally, the abundance of information and material can produce counter-productive tendencies if users of the digital platform are not trained to critically engage with them. The policy of digitisation, therefore, should include multiple spheres and goals, starting from educating users to acquiring specific technologies that can not only preserve the records but also augment its functions and accessibility.

Federica Olivotto and Stefano Maltese have pointed out that such limited access is inevitable to sustain and manage the organisation of the archive, the creation of inventories and the implementation of other side-projects. And they do not gloss over the importance of looking at this

situation with a long-term perspective on the future. All these activities are, in fact, absolutely vital for the preservation of the material and its future accessibility. Moreover, the users are constantly taken into consideration and the staff works to support their researches. At the same time, however, the three professionals manifested their concerns. They are undoubtedly aware that these limitations could have been prevented, or, at least, reduced, by the availability of digitised records online. In this way, for example, the materials that need to be described or restored could still appear on the digital platform, ready to be consulted by users. This is a good argument to bring digitisation as essential for the archives and their relationship with the community of users. Digitisation, therefore, appears to be an exchange between the archive and the audience. It obviously helps the users to have unlimited access to the resources; but it is extremely important for the archive and the archivists, who can work with the records without causing any delay or inconvenience to the researchers.

Unfortunately, it occurs many times that digitisation is put in a secondary position and it is not considered an urgent matter. We already stated, and so did the staff, that funding is a consistent and substantial issue, which archivists cannot easily avoid. However, Federica Olivotto attempted to make clear that digitisation also comes with questions, doubts and problems. Digitising with more or less refined technological tools could just mean “creating a digitised copy”, which is – in its most essential sense – no more than a version of the record that can be seen on a digital platform. This, of course, is and cannot be enough for an archive. Archives need consistency, organicity and respect of the order. Digitisation, despite being a tool for archives, becomes a part of the archive itself when the final ambition is the creation of a “digital archive”.

Digitisation, for example, can represent an occasionally offered service for the users’ community⁵⁸. It does happen, actually, that a record (mostly paper documents or photographs) can be digitised and sent specifically to a singular researcher or a group of users that requested it. The Biblioteca IsIAO, for example, offers a self-service of digital reproduction through the ERMES platform⁵⁹. In this case, one could think that there is no need to attach any particular information to the file, because it is not part of the archive in its digital form. This claim, however, does not apply to a properly arranged digitisation project, for that would become part of the archive itself. It means, then, that the digitised versions of an archive’s physical records need the same respect and treatment as the analogue forms. The digital catalogue, as Federica Olivotto said, is but “a mere and unorganised box” if not arranged and used as an *archival* digital catalogue. The formation of an archive – being it “analogue” or “digital” – follows rigid rules and practices. Consistent properties like composition,

⁵⁸ Taking a picture or scanning can be examples. See also the *Optical Character Recognition* tool.

⁵⁹ http://www.bnrcm.beniculturali.it/it/2240/biblioteca-isiao-_sala-delle-collezioni-africane-e-orientali.

organisation and description are required to defend and preserve a coherent and intelligible hierarchy of information. A passage from an article by Terry Eastwood captures how interrelations are fundamental in the archive:

The second cardinal characteristic of archives is obliquely suggested in the phrases “an organic whole” and “the organic bond.” The idea that the whole body of documents are bound together by a process governed by “fixed rules” posits that archives are characterized by the relationships of their constituent documents with their producer and among themselves. The documents of so-called organic archives were said to have “a structure, an articulation and a natural relationship between parts, which are essential to their significance ... Archive quality only survives unimpaired so long as this natural form and relationship are maintained”.⁶⁰

Only this accuracy, inherited by the nineteenth century traditional view, can appropriately grant the retrieval of correct information. Consequently, a project of digitisation starts when all these bonds are being taken into consideration – and sometimes they are discovered in the meantime. What the three professionals have proudly highlighted is that the process of digitisation could positively help archivists to acquire missing knowledge on those parts of the holdings that have been left untouched. Digitisation works in this case as a booster and a reason to improve some activities, such as that of information retrieval and record description. It strikes me to see how going past the theoretical aspects and into the practical sphere can sometimes overturn the perspective. What is possibly considered as an additional burden for the archive can, in fact, bring more benefits than anticipated. Again, this proves the many opportunities for the archive and not only for the users.

When it comes to deciding the records to digitise, the options can vary. With my interviews, I realised that the archivists of the Biblioteca IsIAO are inclined to use digitisation as a tool to preserve the material for the future. They especially focused on the significant contribution that digitisation projects offer to damaged objects and holdings. Moreover, all of them proved interesting perspectives in defining what digitisation means for the archive of the Biblioteca IsIAO. It is always good to remember that digitisation is not a universal mean of operation and that its role, aims and feasibility depend on such factors as the type of the material or the technological possibilities. Thus, digitisation becomes a variable process on a case-by-case basis. The material of the Biblioteca IsIAO, as we anticipated, includes mostly photographs about colonial Italy and excavations in Africa and Asia. The three professionals have agreed on the high chance for the material of the Biblioteca IsIAO to be entirely digitised since the physicality of the object is appropriate to this kind of projects. Photographs

⁶⁰ Terry Eastwood, “A Contested Realm: The Nature of Archives and the Orientation of Archival Science”, in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil, and Terry Eastwood (2017): 3-23, 8.

are, indeed, suitable for digitisation and the institution has already developed a few digitised collections.

Stefano Maltese briefly explained these two projects. The first one is based on a group of records that Professor Silvana Palma had previously ordered and classified in the 1990s. The holdings were composed of materials concerning colonial Ethiopia and Eritrea. The digitisation project proceeded fast and smoothly, thanks to the prior information gathering and organising. This proves that digitisation is not just the process of making records accessible online, but that it undoubtedly needs any specific knowledge that is usually applied to the holdings of an archive. The second contribution to digitisation is at the very beginning and is included in a major transnational project led by the Institute of Advanced Study of the University of Princeton. It regards holdings about Arab manuscripts and it is titled Fondo Dubbiosi after Emilio Dubbiosi (military doctor from 1918 to 1938 in Yemen). The most important task for archivists is to present projects that attempt to limit at least a few of the digitisation issues: in particular, the problems of integrity and information retrieval. Federica Olivotto, for instance, stated that the accuracy to the original record is estimated by the information successfully transferred in the digital version. Lorenzo Dechlich, on the other hand, said that what the archive has digitised is certainly a good starting point. Nonetheless, he claims that advanced researches on said digitised records cannot return the most refined information because “the metadata are not enough”. Furthermore, he said that it would not be possible for a researcher to rely solely upon the digital documentation. The reason is also that the “physicality” of *any* archival object, its actual material and composition, can always provide the researcher with important information.

Despite taking this legitimate position, Lorenzo Dechlich values digitisation for a further opportunity to deepen the description and classification of the records and granting access to all the set of primary information even while the originals are temporarily removed from direct consultation. Federica Olivotto specifies that the Colonial Photo-gallery of the Biblioteca IsIAO is particularly suitable for digitisation projects. However, the fact that photos seem to be more apt to the process is not enough for the archive. The project necessitates a careful and preliminary study of the records to allow access and searchability. In this regard, Stefano Maltese underlines that some of the photos are damaged and are progressively facing deterioration. Digitisation could then support the preservation of the original and its consultation. It appears, then, that a specific material can be more suitable for digitisation, but it does not change that information gathering and structural organisation are the priorities of the digitisation project.

Access, we said, goes hand in hand with accessibility. Accessibility means that all of the users can consult and experience the holdings in the best way possible. In regards of the Biblioteca IsIAO,

I have asked whether access to the public was limited to highly specialised researchers. Being part of the National Central Library of Rome, the material of the archive is open to everyone. Notwithstanding, a free opening can still result not entirely accessible to all the possible users. Starting with the absence of a digital catalogue, it can happen that the less experienced researchers would not be able to approach with the archival material in the first place. Furthermore, Stefano Maltese claims that the Biblioteca IsIAO, due to its rare and specific records, is a centre essentially consulted by a specialised public. However, the archivists are working on exploring and showing different sections that can be interesting for a larger audience. Expanding the knowledge of the history of Colonial Italy and, in general, of unique archival holdings has been recognised as an essential task for the archive. Nowadays, archives, alongside libraries and museums, might accept the leading role of manifesting culture and education through pieces of history. Of course, not all of the materials of an archive can match with this function. However, Stefano Maltese has stressed on it, persuading that digitisation does encourage this purpose indeed. For instance, they are collecting a group of travel logs and letters that are intellectually closer to a broader interest. This also sheds a light on the debate of democratisation, which is connected to online accessibility. It is an interesting factor that archives want to open their materials to a different type of experience, such as the digital one.

However, the risk of falling into a disorganised and over-abundant muddle of data and information has put archivists and specialised staff to work, intending to find the perfect way to combine broad and often uncontrolled accessibility with the structured and coherent form of an archive. Moreover, the digital platform can be left unchecked and unverified, giving “fake” records space to increase and proliferate. Therefore, the more archives and archivists reserve positive understanding of the digital platform, the more the digital space will gain order and control and the less will users be at the mercy of loose and potentially artificial information. Stefano Maltese said that, in the modern era, digital databases are fundamental and unavoidable. The digitised items have to preserve the footprint of the archival debate and organisation in the most transparent way possible. Hence, the values of transparency, intelligibility and searchability are essential to plan a digitisation project.

Another aspect is the possibility of arranging the disposal of analogue material once a digitisation project, which has produced a refined set of information embedded in the digitised item, is completed. While considering the topic as a fair point of debate among theorists and archivists, all three professionals have claimed that this type of program cannot exist in the case of the Biblioteca IsIAO. The material preserved in the archive is a *unicum* piece of history, whose physicality needs to be maintained and protected. Saving such peculiar items has been the priority of those who worked

in the reconstruction of the archive and disposing of said material would be pointless and dangerous. Nonetheless, they expressed that the nature and value of the holdings possibly call for a different approach. Federica Olivotto claimed that “it depends on the type of material, on the function and the intrinsic interest of the original”. She also added that the matter of disposal – and it is obvious – involves the number of existing copies. Lorenzo Dechlich stated that the materials of the photo gallery of the Biblioteca IsIAO cannot be thrown away even after digitisation because of their historical value. When considering other records, which are already suitable for disposal or elimination, the process of digitisation could be a mean of preservation through limited space and costs. Stefano Maltese framed the question in the larger topic of archival disposal, which is, in fact, an ongoing debate among specialists. He mentioned again the uniqueness of the holdings of the Biblioteca IsIAO. Earlier in his career, he has worked in archives in Ghana, where the digitisation of a specific material led to the disposal of the many original copies, except, of course, one – which represents the intrinsic historical significance of the object. In general, Stefano Maltese held a fundamental position in this debate. Specialists too often forget that digitisation is not an objective and settled block of processes, ideas and practices.

A precise and definite formula that can be applied to every situation does not exist. Digitisation, especially at the moment, cannot be universal in any sense. It is important to emphasise on the concept of a ratio, a guideline that archivists can follow, and not of an exact rule that works in every case. I believe that this is the fundamental argument when the topic of digitisation is discussed. Even though digitisation is not at the initial phase anymore, it still needs a better understanding, coming both from the archives and from the users. After all, the digital platform is still full of blind spots and researchers are invited to investigate the problematic aspects in different areas.

Sometimes digitisation has been accused of transferring part of the colonial power into such projects. Policies of acquisition and digitisation benefits countries with a massive colonial past as Belgium, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Recently in the Netherlands, historians addressed a new issue in regards of the archives of the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie). A symposium titled *Rethinking the VOC: Between Archival Management and Research Practice* (held in The Hague in 2017) has provoked the question whether digitisation means to move forward indeed⁶¹. The fragmentation of the VOC archives and the consequent different communities that were part of them led to the reconsider what access means in terms of communities’ collective memory and involvement. Michael Karabinos strongly asserts:

⁶¹ Michael Karabinos, “Decolonisation in Dutch Archives: Defining and Debating”, *Rethinking the VOC: Between Archival Management and Research Practice* (Den Haag, 2017).

If digitisation does not lead to increased access – and by this I mean beyond just physically offering digitised scans – nothing changes. Colonial archives would simply become digitised colonial archives⁶².

Access is also accessibility. For instance, the prioritisation of Dutch language cannot be the universal standard even in digitisation projects. Opening the VOC archives to the digital and international world requires that archival descriptions and inventories are written in various languages, “with complementary descriptions being written by impacted communities”⁶³. In this case, then, digitisation could prove itself an interesting tool for “decolonisation”, implementing accessibility to the records. However, decolonisation of an archive includes non-colonial actions, such as cross-national research and decisions.

Being born as a colonial archive itself, the Biblioteca IsIAO could also widen its international relations and connection through digitisation. This kind of collections (material about Asia and Africa) might also face the problem of being viewed not as crucial to national history, and thus are often given less importance. Once it was re-open, the matter of the uniqueness of the Biblioteca IsIAO became central. And in the names of such uniqueness, rarity and historical international values the institution is working to implement its preservation and accessibility, considering digitisation a primary tool.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid..

Conclusions

By analysing the responses to the questionnaire, this thesis has shown that the professionals of the Biblioteca IsIAO are convinced that digitisation is helping the reconstruction of the archive. Not only by efficiently supporting the archive's activities (such as restoring damaged records), but also by giving an additional opportunity to enhance the knowledge and the descriptions of the archival holdings. Digitisation is also desirable to maintain the archive accessible, presenting the opportunity to preserve records into a different and valuable platform. While having just three professionals answering my questions limits the generalizability of the results, the research clearly demonstrates how archivists are strongly endorsing digitisation projects – even if the budget is rarely abundant. Prioritising digitisation becomes then a fundamental step towards the preservation of the archives against the fear of perishing.

As we consider preservation, accessibility and knowledge the endgame of the archival institution, we must approach digitisation with extreme care. Archivists might say that the process of digitisation is the easy part of the project; the complicated part is dealing with the ethics and the new implications of the digital platform. The professionals that work on the revitalisation of the Biblioteca IsIAO are, of course, aware of the archival studies and theory on digitisation. Yet, they are involved in the actual activities and are then speaking of practices that go past the sole theoretical approach. The advantages and disadvantages of digitisation bear specific meanings if only are they connected to the archival holdings and regulations of the Biblioteca IsIAO, which represents a case among cases. Even though the users' flow into this archive is usually not high (usually seven or eight researchers in a day), access and accessibility have still proven to be the most profitable factor for diving into digitisation projects. Whilst, for instance, the staff is working on augmenting the descriptions, updating the catalogue or restoring damage material, researchers can take advantage of the digitised items since the originals are provisionally unavailable. This can be significant for the unique nature of the material and for the honourable mission of the ISMEO and the Biblioteca IsIAO, which are reactivating an archive of great value for the history of Colonial Italy.

Granting access for the present and the future is again the major benefit of digitisation and the reason why many archives are attempting to invest in this direction. However, some uncertain features might be disclosed only through a more practical analysis. My research has raised questions on what accessibility means and how it translates into the digital world. Online access is an improvement, but archivists must be aware that they may not be reaching all stakeholders (whether that is the

documented communities, researchers, creators, etc.)⁶⁴. Increased online access means that more people are exposed to significant archival materials and archives need to inform, or even work with, stakeholders to provide fair and equitable access. Not everybody can reach the digital world, however largely spread among people, in the same way and at the same speed.

The pandemic crisis caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 also provoked a few considerations. It appears particularly significant in Italy since the situation was and still is a testing ground for all things digital. It has triggered a chain of reactions for the rethinking of digital policies about access to services and resources, not only for entertainment reasons but also in the academic perspective. The virtualisation of the digital platform has incited again the debate about the generation gap existing in the use of digital tools, in the connection's speed and availability on the territory, in the difference of IT skills between the new and old generations and in the protection of privacy. Against this background, the digitisation in all its forms has figured as an essential practice to implement and not as an unnecessary vagary. It has also been able to shed a light on the goals, equalities and competencies that institutions, staff, users and people, in general, have not yet achieved.

Italian archives have supported students and researchers with digitisation services and digital access to their collections⁶⁵. Furthermore, the interactions through Internet and media is radically exposing everyone to alternative views of the world and knowledge⁶⁶. This situation inevitably revealed the importance of understanding how to approach digital information and experiences. My research sadly reveals also the risk of falling behind. It does not mean that the digital way is the only option. On the contrary, it is one alternative that for too long has been considered less important than it actually is. While it immediately fell under users' graces, as the Biblioteca IsIAO shows, digitisation in Italy has been missing a proper institutional strategy involving functions of formation and education into the digital world.

⁶⁴ Taylor De Klerk and Jessica Serrao, "Ethics in Archive: Decisions in Digital Archiving", NC State University Libraries, University Libraries News, Special Collection, June 1, 2018, <https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/news/special-collections/ethics-in-archives%3A-decisions-in-digital-archiving>.

⁶⁵ https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Comunicati/visualizza_asset.html_422536076.html.

⁶⁶ Ahmad Raza, A. Rashid Kausar and David Paul, "The Social Democratization of Knowledge: Some Critical Reflections on E-learning", *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal* 1, No. 1 (April 2017): 64-74, 69.

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Appendix 1 (Questionnaire in the original Italian language)

Giulia Giannini

Archival Studies

Leiden University 2019/2020

Questionario diretto ai membri del progetto di rivitalizzazione della Biblioteca IsIAO

Digitalizzazione e accesso

Scelta della Biblioteca IsIAO: data la sua storia, ritengo sia un buon esempio per trattare le difficoltà e le sfide degli archivi italiani (così come altre attività culturali) di mantenersi efficienti non solo nella preservazione del “materiale storico”, ma anche nel renderlo accessibile. In questo caso, la digitalizzazione potrebbe rivelarsi uno strumento di aiuto o un peso aggiuntivo. Se si trova in disaccordo o vuole approfondire, può lasciare un commento.

- 1) Che ruolo ricopre/ha ricoperto nell'attuale Biblioteca IsIAO?
- 2) Ha fatto uso dei materiali d'archivio della Biblioteca IsIAO per ricerche accademiche e non?
- 3) Sembrerebbe che gli orari di apertura della biblioteca e dell'archivio della Biblioteca IsIAO e le modalità di reperimento e consultazione rendano l'accesso ai materiali difficoltoso. È d'accordo con questa affermazione?
 - a) Se sì: è fatto a tutela del materiale (raro, pregiato o in condizioni povere...), per ragioni di budget (stipendio del personale, apertura della sala...) o per motivi logistici (spazio limitato...)? O altro?
 - b) L'accesso è pensato principalmente per studiosi con conoscenze pregresse o può essere sfruttato da utenti meno informati?
- 4) Considera la digitalizzazione un mezzo per aumentare le opportunità di accesso ai materiali e/o per gli utenti?
- 5) Considerando l'archivio conservato dall'IsIAO, ritiene che i materiali siano sempre fruibili digitalmente?
 - a) Se no: quali sono i materiali che resterebbero privi di alcune informazioni nella transizione?
 - b) Si affiderebbe alla sola documentazione digitale per fare ricerca?

- 6) I progetti di digitalizzazione possono risultare costosi (dispositivi, manutenzione...) e impegnativi (spesso non basta la copia digitale, ma bisogna aggiungere descrizioni, strumenti e metadati che la rendano parte integrante dell'archivio), eppure sono da molti considerati una necessità per l'utilizzo futuro. Digitalizzare va a favore solo degli utenti (facilità di accesso anche da remoto...) o anche dell'archivio (possibilità più economica di avere un back-up digitale che possa addirittura sostituire la versione analogica...)?
- 7) Reperire documentazione digitale online fa già parte delle aspettative dello studioso o dell'utente moderno. La digitalizzazione va di pari passo con l'agevolazione dell'accesso e della consultazione, aprendo la ricerca ad un pubblico più vasto. C'è un collegamento fra democratizzazione dell'accesso e ricerca accademica (dopotutto, non sono solo i materiali a fare la ricerca, ma anche le competenze e la pratica di chi le utilizza)?
- 8) Il materiale analogico è parte della Storia, mentre il materiale digitalizzato è una copia, che non potrà sostituire l'originale. È d'accordo con questa affermazione?
 - a) Il materiale digitalizzato può essere più o meno fedele all'originale (per es. la trascrizione di un documento scritto è differente dalla scannerizzazione...), ma può essere provvisto di strumenti che ne facilitino la consultazione (ingrandimento, ricerca delle parole...). Ritiene che questo tipo di digitalizzazione sia da implementare e migliorare?
 - b) Il materiale digitalizzato può prendere il posto dell'originale e diventare strumento per fini di rimozione di quest'ultimo, se ritenuto necessario?
- 9) Crede che la digitalizzazione sia essenziale per garantire l'accesso agli archivi nel presente e nel futuro?
 - a) Il materiale digitale si presta anche a risolvere problemi di accessibilità per persone che necessitano di strumenti aggiuntivi (disturbi di attenzione, problemi motori, di vista...)?
 - b) Gli archivisti dovrebbero acquisire competenze tecnologiche/digitali per far fronte a questa sfida?
 - c) Nonostante il materiale digitalizzato e digitale costituisca ancora una piccola porzione degli archivi, i cataloghi digitali sono ormai molto comuni. Ritiene che abbiano influenzato positivamente le modalità di ricerca?
- 10) Se non è possibile digitalizzare tutto (e, soprattutto, farlo in un solo momento), a quale collezione si dà la priorità? A materiali che possano servire all'utenza o a materiali di cui promuovere la conoscenza? O altro?
 - a) Nel caso della Biblioteca IsIAO, cosa si è scelto e si sceglie di digitalizzare? E perché?
- 11) Quantitativamente e qualitativamente, trova differenze nell'accedere a materiale digitalizzato negli archivi italiani rispetto agli archivi di altri Paesi europei?

- a) Se sì: quale potrebbe essere la motivazione?
 - b) Nel caso italiano, valori come tradizione, antichità e autenticità rendono più difficile credere nei progetti di digitalizzazione?
- 12) La riapertura della Biblioteca IsIAO è stata ottenuta a seguito di numerosi sforzi. Crede che favorire progetti di digitalizzazione possa agevolare l'archivio a garantire accesso alle varie collezioni e a smaltire alcuni costi?

Appendix 2 (Questionnaire translated into English)

Giulia Giannini

Leiden University

2019/2020

Questionnaire directed to the professionals working on the Biblioteca IsIAO reconstruction project

Digitisation and access

Why the Biblioteca IsIAO? Its history of closure and reopening makes a good example for manifesting the struggles and challenges that Italian archives (as well as other cultural activities) endure to be efficient not only to arrange preservation of heritage material, but also to make it accessible. In this case, digitisation might represent either an aiding tool or an additional burden.

- 1) Which post did/do you hold in the Biblioteca IsIAO?
- 2) Have you used archival holdings of the IsIAO for academic (or not) researches?
- 3) It would appear that the opening times for the archive and the procedure for locating and consultation are causing difficult access to the material. Do you agree?
 - a) If so: is it done to safeguard the material itself (rare, precious or damaged...), to fit into the budget (staff's salary, reading room...) or logistics reasons (limited areas...)? Or other reasons?
 - b) Is access conceived mainly for specialised researchers or can less informed users benefit from it as well?
- 4) Do you believe that digitisation is a mean to enhance the opportunities for access to material and/or for users?
- 5) In regards of the Biblioteca IsIAO, do you think that all materials can be used digitally?
 - a) If not: which types of material would lose information during the transition?
 - b) Would you rely on the sole digitised documentation for a research?
- 6) Digitisation projects can be expensive (devices, maintenance...) and demanding (the digitised version is rarely enough, but it requires descriptions, tools and metadata to become part of the archive), and yet they are considered a necessity for the future by many. Does digitisation benefits only users (distant accessibility...) or also the archive (low-cost possibility for digital back-ups, which could even replace the analogue version...)?

- 7) Finding online digital documentation is already part of the modern researcher and user's expectations. Digitisation goes at the same pace with improvement access and consultation, opening the research to a wider audience. Is there a connection between democratisation of access and academic research (after all, having access to the material is not the only thing for a research, but also skills and abilities of users are necessary)?
- 8) The analogue material is part of History, while digitised material is but a mere copy, which cannot replace the original. Do you agree?
 - a) Digitised material can be more or less true to the original version (for example, a transcript of a written document is different from a scan...), but it can also provide the users with services that ease the consultation (zoom, words search engine...). Do you believe that this kind of digitisation needs to be improved?
 - b) Can digitised material replace the original version and determine the disposal of the latter, if necessary?
- 9) Do you think that digitisation is essential to grant access to the archives in the present and in the future?
 - a) Digitised material is also appropriate to solve accessibility issues for users that need additional services (attention disorder, motor problems, sight problems...)?
 - b) Should archivists acquire technological and digital expertise to meet the standards for the new challenge?
 - c) Although digitised and digital material still makes up for just a small portion of an archive, digital catalogues are already very common. Do you think that they positively influenced the research method?
- 10) If it is not possible to digitised all the records (especially at once), which collections should be prioritised? Should the archive prioritise material used by the users' community or material that needs promotion? Or other kinds of material?
 - a) In the case of the Biblioteca IsIAO, what has been subject for digitisation?
- 11) Both quantitatively and qualitatively, do you find any difference in accessing digitised material from Italian archives in comparison to other European countries' archives?
 - a) If so: what could the reason be?
 - b) In the Italian case, can values such as tradition, antiquity and authenticity affect the "trust" in digitisation projects?
- 12) The re-opening of the Biblioteca IsIAO is a result of many efforts. Do you believe that supporting digitisation projects can benefit the archive to grant more access to the collections and lessen the expenses?