Thematic Portals: Tools for Research and Making the Archival Heritage Known

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Abstract

The authors explain how the newly created *thematic portals* can be used to facilitate digital research in Italian state archives.

Keywords

Thematic Web portals, Italian State Archives, digital research.

The pleasure of archival research is subtle but gripping. Documents enable us to arrive at the wellsprings of historical deeds and misdeeds, opening up new pathways of knowledge and offering fresh insights into the world around us. It is a matter of tracking down countless and sometimes apparently insignificant traces of memory whose patient reconstruction powerfully stimulates the curiosity and acumen of scholars, and prompts them to consider the events in question from constantly shifting viewpoints. But it is crucial to adopt the right approach and ask the right questions. Archives give answers only to those who know how to seek them, which means those who are not in danger of losing their way in the vast labyrinth of documents and of never finding what they are looking for. For that reason we must always bear in mind that records reflect the order given to them by their creators. In the course of their existence and in the management of their activities, all institutions, bodies and private individuals produce documents that obey the 'constraint of common purpose, as encapsulated in the performance of the functions of the body or individual' from the very outset.[1] The *corpus* of material therefore reflects the logical order imparted by the creator to its records 'in the attainment of its purposes or the performance of its functions'.[2]

To give just one of the many possible examples: the archives of composers reflect not only the birth and performance of their musical works, but also the entire constellation of interests and passions that make up their creative, cultural and human cosmos. The archives of Giacinto Scelsi[3] thus bear

witness to his music and the particular form it took,[4] but also to his world as a whole, from his private and family relations to his intellectual interests in literature, poetry, esoteric cultures and philosophy. In cases where this order has been lost as a result of external contingencies, the archivist's duty is first and foremost to reconstruct it, to restore the original structure imparted to the material by the entity that produced it. It is precisely this principle, known in Italy as the *metodo storico* or principle of provenance, that transforms a shapeless mass of paper into an archive, an organic complex where every single document finds its logical place thanks to a cogent and necessary nexus that links it indivisibly with those before and after.

The substantial difference between a library and an archive lies also in this. The former is born out of a choice prompted by individual interests, which may lead to the books being arranged on whatever criteria are adopted to make them easier to find (author, subject matter, format). Archives are instead formed as a logical consequence of the activities of a public or private subject with no prior act of volition. The performance of any activity whatsoever necessarily entails the production and preservation of documents that are organized and kept in such a way as to serve the purposes involved. Archival records lose all meaning once removed from their original context. In the case of an Italian police department, for example, mixing up the records of reports and investigations with those of the departments responsible for passports, foreigners and personnel would result in a jumble of unusable, meaningless material. It would be impossible to tell whether a photograph was of the victim of a crime, a wanted person or someone renewing his or her passport. One of the fundamental principles of archival practice is, therefore, that records must be kept in their original order and that this must be restored in the event of disruption for any reason.

To embark on archival research it makes no sense, therefore, to ask what material there is on this or that person or event, because the documents are not arranged by subject matter but in the order given to them by the physical or legal person involved in the concrete performance of their activities. The question to be considered for anyone applying to an archive is what agencies or persons may have produced or received records on the subjects of interest. Essential assistance is provided by finding aids such as guides, inventories and indexes. As rightly pointed out by the illustrious archivist Filippo Valenti, these are not 'hooks for fishing' but 'compasses for orientation'[5] within the archival series of possible interest, together with the useful advice often available from the archivist on duty in the reading room. These tools therefore help to guide investigations and clarify the questions to be asked of the archival documents.

The introduction of new technologies in the archival sphere has obviously led to a radical change in research, as archives are increasingly conceived as entities capable of providing information online. The digitization of entire archival series and making inventories available on the Web has

made access to sources much simpler and enables everyone, in theory, to perform searches without physically going to the repository. The large-scale digitization projects carried out by the Italian state archives over the last few decades have led, for example, to the most precious part of the Italian archival heritage, namely Diplomatic fonds from the seventh to the seventeenth centuries, including parchments and seals, being made accessible online.

While the possibilities for research have therefore multiplied exponentially, the difficulties of orientation and decoding the information have also increased enormously. The development and spread of IT and the internet have led to a proliferation of databases and information systems resting on substantially different criteria. Many bodies holding records have constructed separate systems that are completely independent of one another, which has inevitably led to fragmentation of the archival heritage. Though far more accessible than in the past, that heritage is being broken up and necessarily offers a partial reading of the subjects examined.

For example, many Italian state archives[6] digitized the property records in their possession but using different systems and criteria, thus making it impossible for the user to combine the information obtained from different archives due to the differences in the languages used. The benefits offered by the new technologies in this way risk being obstructed primarily by marked diversification of approach and hence the availability of a variety of databases constructed on reciprocally incompatible criteria that had to be consulted separately in the absence of any centralized management.

Where an information system did exist to link materials belonging to some specific category – ecclesiastical records, regional or state records, records regarding a particular historical period such as the twentieth century, and so on – these proved to be devoid of any connection with one another and made it impossible for the user to know, for example, whether the records regarding particular people were only held in their personal archives or also in public repositories.

Albeit belatedly, the General Directorate for Archives[7] has endeavoured over the last decade to give better direction to this process, taking advantage of IT potential on the one hand and acting on the other as a catalyst for information present on completely different supports and information systems. The action carried out jointly with the Central Institute of Archives (ICAR)[8] has focused on the identification of integrated forms of communication and mediation to achieve degrees of interoperability and mutual interaction that were previously missing.

This led to the birth of the National Archives System (SAN)[9], conceived as the sole channel of unified access to the Italian archival heritage present on the Web, enabling the user to access archives of heterogeneous nature, both state and non-state, regardless of the systems to which they belong. The function of linkage is provided by the Catalogue of Archival Resources

(*Catalogo delle risorse archivistiche*, CAT-SAN), which contains the standardized descriptions of repositories, creators and archival complexes transmitted to the SAN by the various associated systems through tracing systems and protocols of exchange. It should also be emphasized that in order to guarantee the uniformity of access points, rules have been developed for the homogeneous denomination of records creators (bodies, persons and families).[10] It becomes possible in this way to establish links between creators present not only in the various archival systems but also in databases containing bibliographic or museum-related resources, thus building bridges between contiguous universes of information and helping to demolish the barriers that still divide archives, libraries and museums.

A further step forward is offered by the creation of thematic portals within the SAN to combine the online documentary material on specific themes. This again marks a radical change that may appear at first sight to contravene a key tenet of archival orthodoxy, namely that material should not be aggregated on the basis of content, thereby according priority to the subject involved. These thematic portals are not, however, intended to put forward an anachronistic 'Peronian'[11] approach and replace the principle of provenance with the principle of pertinence. The documentation must, of course, always be related to its creator and not to the subject matter involved. It is, however, the very use of IT that makes it possible to identify spheres and sectors within which material on the same theme can be gathered together even though produced and held by different bodies. We regard this as providing important assistance especially for users little skilled in archival research, who are thus provided with a mass of information on clearly definable fields of investigation that will unquestionably facilitate their approach to the documentation. It is no coincidence that the primary function of the thematic portals is dissemination, making it possible for a public consisting not only of specialists and experts to approach a broad range of documentary, iconographic, photographic and audio-visual sources regarding a specific theme online and furnishing more effective tools to help them in their research.

The portals are, therefore, intended to give visibility to a rich and varied archival heritage structured around subjects capable of arousing broad interest and highlighting at the same time the great work performed by the archival institutes, which all too often remains unknown to the general public. The focus on dissemination is demonstrated by the fact that the portals offer access not only to archival resources but also to an abundance of information presented in their various sections so as to set the purely archival material in its historical context.

The thematic portals also grant users access to a large number of digital resources, including reproductions in digital form of documents and writings, as well as iconographic, audiovisual and photographic material, and objects that make browsing more attractive for those unskilled in archival research.

Designed primarily to introduce non-specialists to the complex archival universe, these resources should not be regarded as galleries of decontextualized images, as they are all linked to the archive or series in question. Hence the archival bond between the various elements of an archive is in no way dissolved in the thematic portal, but rather recognized and highlighted as part of an organic whole. It should be noted, too, in this context, that all the digital objects are gathered together in the SAN Digital Library and presented from there in the associated portals by means of tags ensuring a correct path.

At the same time, the priority accorded in the construction of the portals to themes like music, enterprise, fashion and architecture reflects the desire to make available to users not only archival documentation in the strict sense, but also an extraordinary variety of elements showing that in addition to enormous masses of paper archives, and especially those of the twentieth century, include a wealth and variety of film, sound recordings, sketches, model figures, technical drawings, posters, playbills, and musical scores of which general users are probably wholly unaware. While archival materials were once primarily on paper or even parchment, all that has of course changed and archives now include a whole variety of items such as photographs (e.g. from police files and newspapers), audio recordings (e.g. of interviews conducted during judicial investigations) or films (e.g. of conferences in the archives of political parties and matches in the case of soccer teams).

Finally, the portals perform an important function of aggregation that manifests itself in different ways. First of all, by virtue of their markedly interdisciplinary character, they highlight the collaboration under way between various departments of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo: MiBACT), each of which normally tends to go its own separate way. One example is the cooperation with the General Directorate for Performing Arts (Direzione generale per lo spettacolo dal vivo) in creating a network of archives of opera houses and symphonic music, the content of which, duly described and digitized, will be channelled into the portal of music archives and thus help to enhance awareness of an archival heritage offering a reconstruction of the history of Italian classical music since the nineteenth century. The portals also connect many praiseworthy initiatives launched at the local level but in danger of remaining isolated and detached from one another if they are not gathered together in a national container capable of linkage and coordination. Moreover, they include an extraordinarily diverse range of documentary typologies that, when addressed in accordance with their respective descriptive standards, make it possible to reconstruct the mosaic of sources, spread over countless bodies, that include not only archives but also libraries and museums. This unifying function enables the thematic portals to overcome the high degree of fragmentation

that characterizes Italian cultural heritage and bridge the gap between contiguous universes regarded all too often, even in the recent past, as sectors divided by insurmountable barriers.

Scholars using the thematic portals can thus explore different fields making it possible to follow interdisciplinary pathways based on integrated and coordinated content of use both to the specialist and to the general user.

The nine thematic portals currently accessible on the Web are listed below with some practical information.

- *Portale degli archivi per non dimenticare*, www.memoria.san.beniculturali.it. Designed to preserve for future generations the memory of acts of terrorism and organized crime that have taken place in Italy since 1946 through documentation of use to historians who refuse to accept any conspiracy of silence.
- *Portale degli archivi d'impresa*, www.imprese.san.beniculturali.it. A portal of company archives tracing the history of Italy's industrial development since the nineteenth century.
- *Portale degli archivi della moda*, www.moda.san.beniculturali.it. The portal contains data drawn from the survey of fashion archives carried out in several regions under the supervision of the Archival Superintendencies together with description and digitization of various articles – clothing, footwear and accessories – from the archives of some of Italy's leading fashion houses.
- *Portale degli archivi della musica*, www.musica.san.beniculturali.it. Limited at the moment exclusively to the twentieth century, the portal provides access to some 200 musical archives held in over 60 different repositories.
- *Portale degli archivi degli architetti*, www.architetti.san.beniculturali.it. Portal designed to protect and promote a heritage of great importance exposed more than others to the risks of dispersal and dismemberment due to the fragility of supports, the frequent extrapolation of images and drawings from their document's physical context, and the poor state of preservation registered in particular for private archives.
- *Portale degli antenati*, www.antenati.san.beniculturali.it. The portal of ancestors presents descriptions and digitized reproductions of vital records dating from the Napoleonic era and the period prior to Italian unification held by the state archives, which make it possible to reconstruct not only the history of individuals and families but also the social history of Italy at the time.
- *Portale del territorio*, www.territori.san.beniculturali.it. The portal constitutes a unified tool of access to all the digitized cartographic material and property records produced by the state archives.
- *Portale carte da legare*, www.cartedalegare.san.beniculturali.it. Born out of a project launched by the General Directorate for Archives in 1999,

the portal is designed to safeguard the records of former psychiatric hospitals subsequent to their definitive closure so as to preserve the cultural content of this material and avoid its destruction and loss.

- *Portale Verdi on line*, www.verdi.san.beniculturali.it. One of the initiatives launched by the committee for celebrations to mark the bicentennial of the birth of Giuseppe Verdi, the portal gathers together the major sources of material on the composer held in numerous public and private institutions. Thanks to collaboration with the Central Institute for the Union Catalogue of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic Information (ICCU) and the Centrale Institute of Archives (ICAR), the portal is also linked to the musical area of Internet Culturale (http://www.internetculturale.it), the information system of the General Directorate for Library Heritage, Cultural Institutes and Copyright (Direzione generale per le biblioteche, gli istituti culturali e il diritto d'autore). It thus acts as a bridge of connection between the archival and library information systems and provides users access to content from these two great storehouses of information, created in different times and on different criteria but today capable of communicating with one another and permitting a cross reading of their data. The repercussions of this have proved extremely positive not only for musical sources but also for all the fields − like cartography, fashion, and architecture − of interest not only to archives but also to libraries and museums.

The thematic portals ultimately constitute the response of the Italian Archives Administration to the difficult challenge of radical renewal, a response that calls consolidated practice into question in the attempt, risky though it may be in some respects, to facilitate access to our archival heritage. They provide tools of education for schools and universities, presenting a vision of the archival world that is no longer self-referential but responsive to a broad and diversified range of users. Drawing on modern technologies, they develop an innovative rethinking of traditional methodological approaches, which are respected in their substance but made more flexible and user-friendly for a public not necessarily accustomed to a hierarchical structuring of information. These features make it possible at the same time to move beyond clichés and prejudices about archives, which are to be regarded no longer as heaps of dusty paper but as cultural institutions playing a full and active part in the world of today.

Notes

1 Giorgio Cencetti, "Sull'archivio come *universitas rerum*." *Archivi*, 1937, no. 4: 7–13.
2 *Ibidem*.

3 For more information on Giacinto Scelsi (1905–88), a major figure in twentieth-century Italian music, and his archives, visit www.scelsi.it (the site of the Fondazione Isabella Scelsi, founded by the musician himself in 1987) and the Portale degli Archivi della Musica, http://www.musica.san.beniculturali.it.

4 Scelsi's compositions were born out of free improvisation recorded by him on over 1,500 magnetic tapes. The improvisations were taken down by assistants on paper and then corrected and revised by the composer.

5 Filippo Valenti, "Un libro nuovo su archivi e archivisti." *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato*, 1989, vol. 49, no. 2: 425.

6 The Italian State Archives hold the records of the central and peripheral organs of the states existing prior to national unification and those of the peripheral organs of the Italian state. There are currently 102, one in every provincial capital, together with 34 state archives sections located in cities that are not provincial capitals but possesshistorical records of particular importance. The Central State Archives in Rome hold the records of the central organsof state (ministries) as well as those of now extinct public bodies with functions at the national level.

7 In accordance with the provisions of the Code of Cultural and Environmental Heritage (*Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio*, D.Lgs. 22 January 2004, no. 42) and the guidelines of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo), the General Directorate for Archives (Direzione generale per gli archivi) is responsible for the preservation, protection and utilization of the national archives (http://www.archivi.beniculturali.it/index.php).

8 The Central Istitute of Archives for a detailed overview of the responsibilities of this body, see its institutional website http://www.icar.beniculturali.it.

9 The National Archives System or SAN was inaugurated in December 2011, but the need to connect and integrate the different information systems was felt as early as 2004–05. See "Verso un Sistema Archivistico Nazionale?" *Archivi & computer*, monographic issue, edited by Stefano Vitali, 2004, no. 2 7-15; Francesca Cavazzana Romanelli, "Sistemi informativi archivistici. Quale messa in forma della memoria documentaria?". *Scrinia*, 2005, 2–3: 19–34.

10 For these rules (*Norme italiane per l'elaborazione dei record di autorità archivistici di enti, persone, famiglie* - NIERA EPF), see www.icar.beniculturali.it, the institutional website of the ICAR, which has a working group responsible for developing a SAN authority file on the basis of the authority records of the associated systems.

11 Developed by the archivist Luca Peroni, who worked at the Milan Archives from 1798 to 1832, the 'Peronian' method involved archival arrangement in terms of subject matter in accordance with the encyclopedic approach of the period.