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# Rethinking the Digital Divide: New Developments in East-Central Europe

Zsuzsanna Varga

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## Introduction

- 1 In the recent years, the World Wide Web has been an essential source of teaching and research material in Western humanities academia, with scholarly work becoming increasingly dependent on access to digital resources in historical, literary and art historical studies. The availability of these essential resources has allowed us to raise and answer a range of new questions and explore new dimensions. The progress seems to be unquestionable within the republic of letters, but it is worth asking ourselves if the assumption about the general nature of these developments still holds. Using Warschauer's concept of the 'digital divide' in a geographical sense, my research sets out to explore the state of scholarly digital content production in some East-Central European countries. What developments have taken place? How do they compare with Western digital conditions and what projects or strategies are afoot, intended to catch up with the developments in more advanced digital economies? Comparing digital content production Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic to developments in Western Europe and North-America, my project will identify those efforts that aim at bringing these developments in line with state-of-the-art developments. The current, introductory part will consider Hungarian production as a case study, while the Slovak and Czech developments will be examined in the larger-scale project.

## The international background: the three stages of development in Western Digital Humanities

- 2 First, it is useful to summarise the major steps in scholarly digital content generation in the humanities, while deliberately ignoring otherwise immensely useful crowd-sourcing efforts. This overview of digital content creation takes the United States and some Western European developments as indicators for state-of-the-art scholarly digital content production as they have dictated the pace of such development.
- 3 Humanities content production, for the present exploration, can be divided into three different stages:
- 4 The early 1990s saw the creation of small databases created by a joint effort between libraries and individual academics. To use Lorcan Dempsey's useful summary:

Creation happens in a digital environment, with an interest in the process, as well as the products, of research and learning. Libraries increasingly support the creation, curation and discoverability of institutional creations (research data, preprints, scholarly profiles, academic profiles, digitized special collections, etc.). The university wishes to share these materials with the rest of the world. (338)

1. These attempts often intended in intervening in the existing canon of knowledge and were tinged with a liberatory potential, when "the web seemed an unfettered space that allowed the scholar direct control of what would be digitised and how it would be presented" (Earhart 311-312). Important North-American examples could include *Voices from the Gaps: Women Writers of Colour*. These small-scale and static resources cover non-canonical texts, with some added teaching resource content. In Europe, the uncovering of, and doing justice to, previously silenced textual traditions, was less on the agenda. Here, creators were libraries, focusing on the digitization of out-of-copyright primary texts considered part of the national heritage. This can be as seen in *ABU: la Bibliothèque Universelle* (288 texts by 88 writers, dated 2002); which is a good example of a small static databases that display national treasures.

2. The emergence of large-scale supranational projects represented a milestone around 2005. These included the Google-driven mass digitisation projects and similar mass digitisation originating from individual libraries such as *Gallica*. These generic digital archives continue to serve as aggregators of digital content based on out-of-copyright material, enabling multiple users to access an unimaginable amount of material, thus significantly differing from *ABU* in scale. Simultaneously with this, the small individual project focused databases continue to be generated, often required by the funding bodies of scholarly projects, and some of these include university library special collection. The New York Public Library's Berg collection (*The Victorian Manuscripts from the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection*) exploits the manuscript holdings of this prestigious collection.

3. The third, most recent stage concerns the large-scale development of reference sources, such as *NiNes* for Victorian literature or *Nordic Women's Writing Project*. These bio-bibliographical projects do not simply provide more information about their broadly conceived subjects, but also the endless possibility of searches, enabled by the denser interconnectivity between chunks of data. These projects enjoy national or major institutional funding; they last several years and are usually created by a complex collaboration between large groups of academics and research libraries.

## Digitising in Hungary

- 5 The Hungarian digitisation of out of copyright primary sources significantly lags behind in the volume and complexity of digital production: though digitisation started in the late 1990s, it has continued at a slower pace. Rather than starting from a librarian-academic collaboration (a running theme in Western academia), libraries and state knowledge institutions have acted as agents behind the production. The institutions engaged with digitisation can be divided into three different categories: 1. University libraries, 2. Other national bodies, 3. The National Széchényi Library.

### 1. University Libraries

- 6 The four major universities rank as follows in terms of scholarly digital content production:

#### Debrecen University Library<sup>1</sup>

- 7 The Library, which is also the second legal deposit library of Hungary appears the most ambitious, with the content covering:
- national collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century periodicals,
  - local periodical collections 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,
  - digital monograph collection of 31797 items (mostly out of copyright)<sup>2</sup>
- 8 A collaboration between academics and libraries exists in some, though in a rather rudimentary form. The textual studies research group has produced a thematic cluster of books, focusing on the language renewal movement, which is, however, digitised versions of analogue printed editions of the same topic.

#### Szeged University library<sup>3</sup>

- 9 Its digital book collection covers 253,790 records, but this also contains links to EBSCO books, rather than just their own digitisation. Practically, it is impossible to establish how much is the library's own digitisation, or the basis of selection.

#### Pécs University Library<sup>4</sup>

- 10 The collection contains approximately 570 documents with no obvious collection development principles, including 19<sup>th</sup> century political texts (out of copyright) and also current books in the service of teaching.

#### Eötvös Loránd University Library<sup>5</sup>

- 11 This collection contains 28,065 items, with a mishmash of different materials and with no clearly articulated principles. The collections include digitised incunabula, 19<sup>th</sup> century periodicals and other mixed material.

### Further examples

- 12 Other universities, like Corvinus University (Budapest) or Pázmány Péter Roman Catholic University (Budapest) have either no digitisation or the projects is not available to the public. Another highly regarded university, the Debrecen Calvinist academy has only 11 texts digitised, some transcribed, some image-based archives
- 13 The material examined can lead us to the following conclusions:
- the digitisation of library collections is small scale
  - material is mixed, and can include special collections material (incunabula etc.) and also contemporary teaching material
  - the collection development principles are not discernible
  - the scholarly input; the added value provided by academic librarians or by academics are not discernible
  - collection statements are missing, hence it is particularly difficult to understand the genesis, character and rationale of the projects.

## 2. Other national bodies digitising material

### Hungaricana portal

- 14 It covers the digital content of 150 organisations, including the Library of the Parliament, Budapest Archive. The content of *Hungaricana* can be examined on the basis of the original library or collection holding the material, e.g. The Library of the Parliament. The books are listed by author.
- 15 **DIA Digital literary academy** covers contemporary and recent Hungarian literature, normally within copyright otherwise also available
- 16 The shortcomings of these collections are very similar to the difficulties listed under the university libraries.

## 3. The National Széchényi Library and its digitisation

- 17 The National Széchényi National Library has been involved in digital content production since 1999, creating a suite of a digital text archive available on the website of the library. These include the Hungarian Electronic Library (MEK, 1994 -or 1998-), currently covering 19,596 monograph documents and the Electronic Periodical Database (EPA), currently covering 3823 titles. The library also has a collection called OSZKDK (OSZK digital library), whose content is not described on the site, but a personal visit suggested that this is the site for electronic legal deposit items. The site also contains thematic pages with some digitise primary material and several images around topics like theatre history etc.
- 18 A quick survey of digitisation initiatives in Hungary (university libraries and the national library) offer some important conclusions about the state of affairs. These observations can be listed as follows:
- libraries are making several efforts to digitising some of their analogue textual holding
  - library digitisation efforts are small scale projects,
  - digitised content: includes rare books, archival documents like manuscripts, locally relevant material

- information or metadata about the digitised material: collection development principles are not articulated in collection statements and cannot easily be inferred
- retrieval possibilities are limited by the low level of metadata: metadata allows known item search, but browsing is more likely to be impossible, and complex known item searches are very limited if not impossible
- interoperability between separate collections is non-existent. This also appeals to the site of the National Library, despite the fact that there are at least three separate collections of texts.

## Visions for the future: New national developments on the Hungarian front

- 19 A succession of Hungarian governments has launched digitisation initiatives and major plans over the last twenty years, including smaller yet comprehensive preservation projects such as Bibliotheca Corviniana. These initial projects focused on the triad of collection-preservation-display.
- 20 Most recently, the Digitization Strategy for Public Collections (2017-2025; Közgyűjteményi Digitalizálási Stratégia (<https://mandadb.hu/>) introduced ideas, with a view of making the digitising of the national heritage more dynamic, focusing on the most frequently used, most valuable and most fragile documents. The plan is that by 2020, 50% of the total digitisation should be completed. Digitisation strategy focuses on four institutions that play the role of disciplinary aggregators:
- library aggregator: National Széchényi Library
  - museum aggregator: National Museum
  - archival aggregator: Hungarian National Archives
  - moving image: National Film Archive
  - additional aggregator: Forum Hungaricum, which will aggregate content from church-related holdings
- 21 The function of these aggregators will be **digital content creation, digital content preservation** and access (only partial, depending on copyright). Access will depend on copyright legislation. These aggregators will use the search interface called the Nemzeti Adattár Project (NAP, National Database project), enabling searches through the aggregators.
- 22 As library aggregator, the National Széchényi Library will increase the rate and output of its own digitisation, with the help of new purchases of new state-of-the-art technical equipment, the library is expecting to produce 10 million digital images per year. To this, they also expect to receive another 10 million images from other sources. The details of this enterprise are currently unclear.

## Initial conclusions and observations

- 23 It is apparent that Hungarian national bodies have taken an interest in developing a digitisation strategy, covering not only printed material but also other media. It is indicated that a large-scale digitisation of existing analogue is planned (although the strategy remains unclear about the selection, priorities, rights and other aspects of digitisation). There are several questions that still need to be answered, including the

metadata provision for the material ( significantly influencing searchability), the interoperability of the digitised objects, and the conversion of existing digital objects to enable the use or reuse existing digital materials. The Digitisation Strategy for Public Collections does not cover these aspects, but it will be useful and productive to continue to observe the practical manifestations of this strategy in order to assess its use in the service of the progress of digital content production.

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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

My proposal offers to take account of developments in the digitisation of out-of-copyright textual material in East-Central Europe. Taking Western European digitisation as the norm and indicator of directions, my paper will argue that digitisation in East-Central Europe is behind, but there is an increasing awareness of the need to make large-scale investments. The Hungarian case argues that it the National Széchényi Library is expected to lead the progress, and further research will provide comparative data about the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Based on project description information retrieved from the site of knowledge institutions, as well as policy documents communicated and held by professional bodies, I will attempt to assess the short-term developments and point at the pitfalls of these projected developments.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** digitisation in East-Central Europe, national and university libraries, digital divide, national initiatives, collection development principles, metadata provision, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary

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