



Can online European documents be a valuable resource for the informal learning of adults? The cases of the Monasterium.Net and Topotheque portals in the coop project

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The two international portals, Monasterium.Net and Topotheque were created originally for making European historical documents available online, but they are also informal learning tools for students and private citizens as the experiences of the Monasterium Italy Group described in this paper show. Moreover, they also draw the citizens nearer to their cultural heritage and help to strengthen the consciousness of local communities and to integrate them in a wider European context.

Informal Education; Citizen Participation; Document; Photograph; History

Introduction

Making European historical documents available online with photographic reproductions and metadata is one of the exciting challenges of our century. Good examples in this field include major international portals such as Europeana (<https://www.europeana.eu/>) and Archives Portal Europe (<https://www.archivesportaleurope.net/>). In this context, it is crucial to experience the potential they have to create learning environments that are also useful for students and adults.

In this contribution I will discuss how two important international portals for documents, Monasterium.Net (<http://monasterium.net/mom/home/>) and Topotheque (<https://www.topothek.at/>), are highly effective as informal learning occasions for private citizens. This is a recent outcome based on many years of experience concerning the use of these portals in learning environments within university courses on Paleography, Diplomats and Archival Sciences (Ambrosio, 2010; Ambrosio, 2011; Ambrosio, 2012; Ambrosio, 2014; Ambrosio, Aiello & Falcone, 2012; Ambrosio, Striano, Freda, Fiorentino & Aiello, 2012; Falcone, 2014).

The background

These vast international portals are the result of ambitious projects. They have been set up through intense cooperative efforts on the part of the institutions involved and can only continue to exist if such support endures. Indeed, these institutions have to be committed to experimentation and research in order to ensure that their goals – the usability of the documents – keep up with the times. Moreover, they have to search for funding to carry them out. Often, all this can be achieved through a large institutional network.

Together with my didactics and research team located at the University of Naples, since 2007 I have been involved in one of these international networks which have the objective



of developing large document portals. This is ICARUS, the International Centre for Archival Research (<https://icar-us.eu/>). As part of the activities of ICARUS the group I coordinate is specifically concerned with describing and providing access to medieval documents in a digital environment, as well as with the promotion of digitization projects (Monasterium Italy Group, <http://www.coop-unina.org/south-italy-medieval-documents/>). We are particularly interested in medieval legal documents, written either on parchment or on paper. This interest has over time spread to twentieth-century photographs. I also teach courses in Diplomatics, the discipline concerned with the study of medieval documents, and in Archival Sciences, also using digital technologies. These activities have been supported by direct EU grants, from 2008 to 2013 as part of the ENArC project (European Network on Archival Cooperation; Falcone, 2014) and from 2014 to 2018 as part of the co:op-project (cooperation as opportunity. the creative archives' and users' network, <https://coop-project.eu/>). These projects have broad partnerships (11 and 14 institutions made up of archives and universities from various European countries) which play an active role in the Creative Europe Culture sub-programme. Nearly all our research and teaching activities end up on the Monasterium.Net and on the Topotheque platforms.

It should be noted that the digitization of documents for these portals has two aims; improved accessibility and improved publication of documents. Ensuring full access means encouraging research (fewer journeys, less money to invest) and encouraging democracy (anyone with internet access can inspect the documents and download them free of charge). Ensuring publication in a digital environment means offering texts linked to images, encoding the contents in a richer way and communicating the information in the documents using more effective procedures. Moreover, the tools available on the two portals make it possible to interact with other users.

During these years, the characteristics of these portals here described have prompted the writer to experiment their use in training activities aimed at university students and even, almost casually, at private citizens, outside the university classrooms.

Two case studies

I would like to present an example of our group's experience with these two platforms. This experience shows the practical opportunities they offer for educational activities directed to adults in the field of historical sources, Paleography, Archival Sciences and Diplomatics.

The Monasterium.Net portal

The experience stems from a critical edition of documents that come from the abbey of S. Maria *in Gruptis*, situated in Vitulano, Southern Italy. Despite these extremely traditional beginnings, the results have proved truly surprising. Based on a critical edition of documents from the abbey, published in 2013 (Ambrosio, 2013), I decided to publish the images of the parchment documents from the abbey's archive on Monasterium.net. The documents have partly been scattered over various conservation institutions but are now available in a virtual collection on the portal. The 'virtual archive of S. Maria della



Grotta' is now online (<http://monasterium.net/mom/SMG/collection/>) and its images are in good company since the portal contains about 800,000 images of other European documents, coming from a variety of archives from different countries (Heinz, 2009; Krah, 2009; Aigner, 2010).

If you access our collection you will find high resolution photographs both of the *recto* and the *verso* of the documents. Users can consult, elaborate, save locally or print images free of charge and can therefore use them in any way they deem appropriate as long as they comply with legal requirements. Below the area devoted to the photographs, users can see all the information and data that have been inserted to describe the document, ranging from the press-mark to the critical edition of the document, and including relatively complex archival descriptions. Access is currently provided by a search system. As well as making use of the data, users can also become editors themselves, although their contributions have to be approved by a moderator.

All this is contained in a collaborative MOM-CA archive which has been designed and developed by the University of Cologne. This software is based on an eXist-Database and on JavaServlets (<https://github.com/icaruseu/mom-ca/wiki>). Part of the software is the EditMOM-tool (Burkard, 2009; Burkard, Vogeler & Gruner, 2008), a web-based XML editor (Fig. 1) which adopts the Charter Encoding Initiative (CEI), an international encoding standard for historical documents (<http://www.cei.lmu.de/index.php>; Vogeler, 2004). Encoding can be done using EditMOM in an extremely rapid and intuitive fashion, with a few easy steps: select the part of the text that needs encoding using the cursor and choose the desired options from the dropdown menu, as can be seen in the following image.

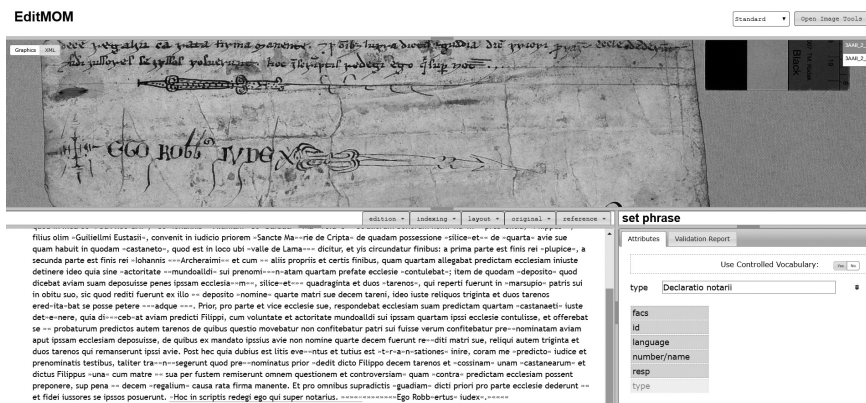


Fig. 1 Monasterium.net: The XML-Editor EditMOM

Each marking operation can also be further refined by entering additional data (which can be used, for example, to normalize names of people and places). Everything that is encoded can be found using search engines. Monasterium also provides an Annotation tool: this enables users to mark parts of images and link them to mark-up elements, make a comparison and modify parts of the extracted images, and publish the annotations on Monasterium. It is worth emphasizing that the system not only allows users to create a collection on the basis of a principle (whether historical, paleographic or archival) they



deem appropriate. As a Web 2.0 application Monasterium is also designed to accept various types of contributions from users (Burkard, 2007, Song & Lee, 2014). These contributions can be minimal, such as a single piece of data, bibliographic references etc. All this enables a kind of crowdsourcing. This crowdsourcing is carried out by people working in archives and universities involved in the projects and has not yet managed to attract a wider audience (Patt, 2015).

Once we had created the collection, on September 13th, 2014 we arranged an event to meet the community of Vitulano, the little municipality near Benevento in South Italy, where the abbey is situated. We gave a public presentation of the book and published the collection on Monasterium.Net. The mayor of Vitulano was invited but the event was also attended spontaneously by many local people, both elderly but also younger members of the community; as inhabitants of Vitulano they attended because ‘their’ abbey was the topic of the event. The beautiful images of the medieval documents in the digital collection captured the imagination of the public more than any printed critical editions could have done. At the end of the meeting the public expressed their gratitude very clearly: by taking care of the parchment documents and enhancing them within a European context, we have become involved in their own history, in their own lives. Over the following days, people from Vitulano who live in other parts of Italy contacted me to thank me and offer their own contributions, their own amateur research initiatives and their photographs of the abbey. The documents on the portal have been visited, studied and downloaded; local scholars have contacted us about the abbey and the documents on Monasterium.Net and have begun to use them.

In the meantime research activities continue to be carried out. In 2014 an international group, of which I am the coordinator, started creating a digital edition of the thirteenth-century parchment documents of the abbey with the help of MOM-CA (<http://monasterium.net/mom/SMG1200-1250/collection/>; Ambrosio, Schwarz-Ricci & Vogeler, 2018) and discussed the results at international conferences (Ambrosio, 2016 July; Ambrosio, 2016 October; Ambrosio, 2018). Simultaneously, there was a surge of local interest both in Vitulano itself and throughout the whole Vitulano valley. The abbey dominates the Vitulano valley and during the Middle Ages it had a role as a center of political, economic and cultural aggregation. Indeed, today it is still regarded by local inhabitants as a collective cultural reference point. Subsequently, clear signs of interest were displayed by the local council and spontaneously by inhabitants and local cultural associations. I was given honorary citizenship of Vitulano; the road going up to the abbey, which had almost been abandoned, was resurfaced; there was also an increase in the number of guided tours to the archeological site, and a documentary about the abbey was made. I realized that creating a virtual collection was having a real impact on the lives of people in the Vitulano valley.

The most important goal was another one: the citizens of Vitulano have come closer to a piece of their history and identity – their abbey and their documents –, seeing them from other perspectives, but they have also understood that this piece of history can deserve care and interest, even abroad, as it is part of a wider, European cultural heritage.

The Topotheque portal



In 2016 the inhabitants of the valley had the opportunity to also use the other platform we are involved in: Topotheque.

A more recent creation than Monasterium, the Topotheque portal is aimed more specifically at involving the general public. A topotheque is a virtual collection of contemporary photographs (20th-21st centuries) concerning a single locality (hence the name) and owned by private individuals. It can also include short films/videos and multimedia files and contains state-of-the-art indexing and geo-referencing tools. It is possible to tag details, objects, roads and people to allow wider access and to geotag the photos by including the perspective angle from where the photograph was taken. However, data is not entered by individual users but by topotheque keepers (Fig. 2). There are a maximum of 5 keepers for each topotheque. They act as intermediaries with the community that provides the photos and they often intervene in the selection of photos. Extensive involvement of users takes place using a specific online tool which can be used to ask questions and provide feedback about the photographs (Falcone & Migliozi, 2016).

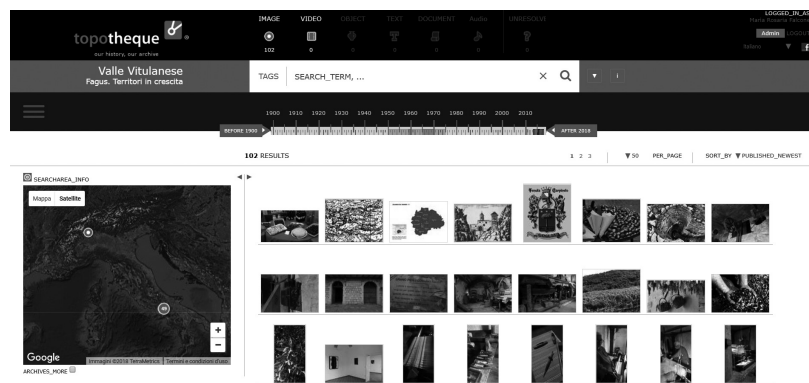


Fig. 2 Topotheque: the interface

Together with 'Fagus. Territori in crescita', a local association that takes an active part in some of the activities of the co:op-project (<http://www.coop-unina.org/topotheque-unina-fagus-collaboration/>), we have helped setting up a topotheque of the Vitulano valley (<http://vitulano.topoteka.net/>) and organized an event entitled 'Bring your History' (Schiavone, 2017). This is a public opportunity for the local community to bring their own records and historical evidence.

The association has collected photos from the population and has displayed them in an exhibition, marking the opening of the local art gallery. The public then attended a meeting where they were asked to take part in entering data online and in adding tags. Members of the public talked about their own personal memories, memories of other people, places, festivals and traditions that have virtually disappeared and which are portrayed in the photographs. Several elderly people even hummed songs in dialect that almost no one could remember. My group and I noted how their stories needed to be turned into reliable metadata which can provide an archival and historical context for the photos, thanks to the application of standards (ISAD(G), 2000) and thanks to the help of Anna Fuggi, an archivist who acted as the topotheque keeper.



Therefore owing to the topotheque the citizens of Vitulano have learned important lessons. They have felt strongly that part of their history, in this case the intangible heritage of the local community, is part of an international context and for this reason they felt more like European citizens. They also realized that they could play an active role in the construction of their history, providing and putting online their photographs, historical sources of all respect.

Conclusion

As I have said, the inhabitants of the valley feel a strong bond, typical of small communities, with significant sites, such as the abbey or the streets of the town which are regarded as important for their own history. They have also begun to express their feelings of belonging to virtual places which are now online, alongside physical places: the collection on Monasterium and the topotheque on Topotheque, which refer to parchment documents, people, traditions, and words which have partly been lost. Nothing exceptional up till now. These virtual places are situated in large virtual *European* spaces – the portals – enriched by similar experiences. This virtual and collective space is therefore not only available on the Web, but is also a European phenomenon. The inhabitants of the Vitulano valley have always been aware of this. The contributions on the project's social network presences, such as Facebook, and the emails sent to us by the local population clearly reflect the pride of taking their own history and memories into an international context. Thanks to a portal, the reaction of the inhabitants of Vitulano does not just mean passively conserving past values but feeling part of something that goes beyond the valley, the sensation of being European citizens. This ought to be a cause for reflection because it may go beyond the objectives we had set ourselves at the beginning.

In conclusion, our aim was to take documents out of archives in a safe, effective and rapid way so that they could become accessible with a simple click and become available to all, both to historians and to the general public. This is why we have digitized the documents and made them available on large online platforms. All this is perfectly consistent with the development strategies of the European Commission set up for the Creative Europe Culture sub-programmes designed to create a European cultural heritage.

But in doing these activities, we have realized that we can also achieve something else, the strengthening of our knowledge of history, of the identity of the citizens and of their awareness of being European citizens. The sharing on the web of these historical documents – veritable vehicles of memory – can lead to the construction of a shared past for Europe in search of its own history, culture and identity (Noiret, 2011, p. 16). While we wait for a European identity to become a positive force towards political unity in the future, I believe that international portals of historical documents have also made a contribution to this future.

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