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Preservation and Access: two concepts, one goal—the work of the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA)

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Introduction

Preservation is a must for continued access. This more or less sums up the views underlying the creation of the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA) in 1994. The ECPA was founded by a group of librarians, archivists and scholars out of concern for the fate of the millions of books and documents threatened by acidification and embrittlement. It was modelled after the US Commission on Preservation and Access (CPA), which has since become a programme of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). The CPA has been successfully campaigning for about 15 years, in the USA and abroad, to raise public awareness of preservation issues and to place the topic on the agenda of politicians and decision-makers. The ECPA acts as a European platform for similar activities, by disseminating information and stimulating discussion and exchange of experience. Its aim is 'to foster, develop and support European collaboration among libraries, archives and allied organisations, in order to ensure the preservation of the published and documentary record in all formats and provide enhanced access to the cultural and intellectual heritage'.

Although the direct inspiration for establishing the ECPA was the critical situation of relatively recent paper collections in archives and libraries throughout Europe, this founding statement shows that the Commission does not restrict its work to one format only. The modern collections held by European institutions constitute the accumulated knowledge of science and scholarship and are an indispensable resource for a continuing tradition of academic research. For the ECPA, the primary concern

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is that the intellectual content contained in these collections is saved for future use. This problem extends to all carriers of information, not only paper, but also more recent ones like film, tapes and disk—some of which decay even faster than nineteenth-century paper. The challenge lies first and foremost in the preservation of the massive amounts of information represented by modern collections, which requires a fundamentally different approach than the preservation of single items.

The changes in orientation of preservation work over the years shows that to address this situation adequately and creatively, one needs to think of preservation in terms of an activity taking place at all levels of the institution, as ‘a process to be managed, not a problem to be solved’,¹ with the aim of ensuring optimal access for the long term. The work of the ECPA focuses on the area where preservation and access meet, not in opposition, but as complementary aspects of collection management. The title of the Commission reflects the fact that preservation and access are inextricably entwined, so that one could even speak of preservation *for* access.

Organisation

The ECPA has a board of 14 members representing universities, academies, libraries, archives and the world of publishing, and is unique in bringing all these groups together in one European platform focusing specifically on the preservation and access of the documentary heritage.² The members of the Commission and their institutions have committed themselves to actively supporting ECPA projects, acting as intermediates between the European and the national/regional level. In addition, the ECPA co-operates with international and European organisations for librarians and archivists that have special committees for preservation activities. Co-operation with the Division on Preservation of LIBER (Ligue internationale de bibliothèques européennes de recherche), the IFLA-PAC Programme (Programme on Preservation and Conservation of the International Federation of Library Associations) and the European Programme of the International Council on Archives, has created partnerships to combine professional expertise with the organisational and administrative framework the ECPA can provide.

The secretariat of the Commission, based at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam, actively collects and disseminates information all over Europe through an extensive mailing list, and maintains personal contacts with a network of active specialists in many different countries. Constant and direct input from experts is considered essential to carry out the programme successfully, to provide feedback on the content of activities, and to make sure the right direction is taken. The role of the ECPA is that of a facilitator that aims to support the preservation community in realising its own objectives; directly, by acting as a partner in specific projects; indirectly, by impressing the need for wide-ranging preservation measures on a wider audience. By promoting the concept of preservation as a necessary and integral aspect of collection management, the Commission hopes to contribute to a climate in which such measures are taken as a matter of course and are easier to implement.

Dissemination of information

The primary activity of the ECPA is the dissemination of information. The website the Commission created in its first year <<http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa>> has now

expanded in various directions. First of all, it is a general gateway to preservation information offered by numerous institutions and organisations, with a calendar of meetings and events and information about new publications. With the support of the Raphael Programme of the European Community, a much more extensive directory of information on preservation activities in Europe has been added over the past 2 years. This 'Preservation Map of Europe' is a fully searchable database offering information on preservation work being carried out in institutions and organisations in all European countries. The information is continually updated and expanded. As use of the internet is not equally widespread in all European institutions, a paper version will also be made available.

The ECPA website includes a virtual exhibition on damage to books and paper, which presents shocking illustrations of quite common types of damage, with basic explanations. This exhibition is aimed at an audience of non-specialists and is publicised among institutions to encourage them to provide some information on preservation on their own sites and to link to the exhibition.

The latest addition to the ECPA website is a presentation on iron-gall ink corrosion, which was developed in co-operation with a group of institutions in the Netherlands involved in research on ink corrosion. Here, too, many examples can be seen of such damage, but the site also includes in-depth articles and an extensive bibliography on research on ink corrosion.

The way the website has been set up shows that the target audience for ECPA activities is not only the preservation community, but also a much wider circle of librarians and archivists that have an interest in preservation but do not necessarily have expert knowledge of the field, and even a general public of users with an interest in older materials. The same philosophy underlies the ECPA publication programme. To date, eight reports have been published on preservation-related topics, varying from mass de-acidification to digitisation of photographs for the internet. The reports usually take the form of surveys of research that can help people decide about practical applications, or case studies that show how things can be done—and, most important, how they should *not* be done. These publications find their way to institutions all over Europe; on average, about 800 copies of each report are distributed. Their publication is undertaken in co-operation with the CPA, in Washington, to ensure optimal distribution on both sides of the Atlantic.³

The ECPA also tries to identify existing publications that have so far only reached a specific group and that can be translated or re-issued for a wider audience. Moreover, the Commission has undertaken the distribution of all reports published independently by the CPA in the years before the ECPA was established, and of the relevant RAMP studies published by UNESCO.

Raising awareness

It has always been one of the aims of the ECPA to involve users, and especially scholars and scientists, in the preservation debate. It is, after all, their work that will suffer if valuable information becomes inaccessible through deterioration of the carriers on which it is stored. As they benefit from optimum access, it seems only logical that they should take an interest in the problems faced by institutions holding research collections, in keeping them safe for future use. Their involvement could be crucial, in helping librarians and archivists to decide priorities in their preservation programmes, by making recommendations about the kind of materials that should be

preserved, and about the formats in which this should preferably be done. If researchers know what is at stake, they might also support preservation efforts by putting pressure on governing bodies to pay attention to the problem and to make funds available.

Unfortunately, very few researchers are aware of the risks threatening the resources for their work. This is something they have to be told about. A first step in this direction was the publication of a booklet, written in an accessible and engaging style, sketching the problems of keeping collections safe for the future.⁴ The Dutch edition ran to several thousand copies and met with considerable acclaim in the library and archive community. In 1998 this publication was awarded a prestigious prize for publications in the library field. A French translation has meanwhile been made, and negotiations are underway to publish this in co-operation with organisations in France. The possibilities for an English edition are also being explored.

The ECPA hopes to continue this line of activity in the coming year by producing a similar publication dealing with the preservation of photographic collections. The intention is to work on this project in partnership with institutions in other European countries, to ensure that editions in several languages can be published and that dissemination can be effectively realised at the national and regional level.

Photographic collections

The reason for the present surge of interest in photographic collections is not hard to fathom. Many photographic collections are now reaching such an age that their conservation has become a matter of urgency, and the motivation to protect them has become stronger with the growing appreciation of photographs as a valuable part of our cultural heritage. With the advent of digital media, it has become possible to combine powerful search facilities and scanned images, providing a level of access that simply did not exist before. In addition, for internet applications, photographs are more attractive as raw material than text. Photographs have a direct appeal for large groups of users and lend themselves easily to educational use. No wonder, then, that many institutions are eager to digitise (part) of their photographic collections.

The ECPA is a partner in one such digitisation project—European Visual Archive (EVA)⁵—which has as its aims to explore the requirements for digitisation of photographic collections and for an open classification and search system. The role of the ECPA in this project is to collect information on digitisation of photographic collections in European institutions. A questionnaire sent out at the end of 1998 to archives, libraries and museums yielded 130 responses, and a preliminary report presenting the data collected has now been written. The ECPA will use the information gathered as the basis for a more extensive report discussing digitisation of photographs in the framework of preservation, which is scheduled for publication in the second half of 1999.

Training

Training is often mentioned as a high priority by preservation experts, and over the years the ECPA has developed, in co-operation with the LIBER Division on Preservation, the Public Record Office of the UK, and the Marburg Archivschule, a

European programme for training that focuses on preservation policy and management. The decision to focus on aspects of management originated from a preliminary workshop held in Amsterdam in 1996, when 15 experts explored training needs. From the discussions, it emerged that in all European countries there are highly qualified experts who are familiar with the current debate on preservation and know what they would like to do; the difficult part is to translate this into action, which can only be done if there is sufficient understanding of the need for preservation programmes.

In many institutions, however, preservation is still regarded as an activity quite separate from other work and as the exclusive responsibility of a conservation department. It is often difficult to gain wider support for measures perceived to be in the preservation domain, as these measures are often felt to conflict with other targets that have to be met. To raise awareness of how activities may affect the life-span of books and documents, basic training should be provided. At the same time, the management of institutions should be made to realise that an insistence on meeting short-term targets—like the production of a certain quantity of photocopies within a certain period of time—may result in long-term loss. It should be explained to them how preservation relates to other tasks, how it can be managed in the context of the main goals of the institution, and how this will benefit the institution as a whole in the longer term.

To bring about this change it is not sufficient to be an expert conservator. One needs to be able to negotiate, to write project proposals, to set priorities, to cost and plan the various stages of a project, to convey to other departments what their role is, and to convince the director of an institution, perhaps also funding agencies, that this work needs to be done and needs to be done in a certain way. To formulate a preservation policy is a first step, but to implement it through procedures and projects is quite another and requires managerial and organisational skill as well as expert knowledge of preservation issues.

The training programme that the ECPA has helped to realise is meant to 'train the trainers'. It is eminently suited for a European approach, as it is aimed at key figures in larger institutions who can learn from experience gained in similar institutions. They can then take the work further at a national and institutional level, in whatever way is most suitable for their specific situation.

The first European summer school on preservation management was organised by the Marburg Archivschule in 1997. In 1998 the Open Society Archives in Budapest organised a 2-week Summer university on preservation management, and in July 1999 the Public Record Office of the UK and the British Library organised another 1-week course. In Finland a programme is being developed for the Nordic countries, and the ECPA is trying to find partners in France and Spain for preservation management courses in those countries in 2000 and after.

To support training efforts at the national and institutional level, training materials should be made available in national languages. A considerable number of practical guidelines and basic texts are available in English (and some in French and German) that are relevant for a large audience of librarians and archivists. However, for many, reading a text in a foreign language is an obstacle. Translation of basic materials is therefore of paramount importance for most European countries if training at a national or institutional level is to succeed. The ECPA has supported several smaller and larger translation projects, for instance in Hungary, Estonia and Rumania, and will continue to do so whenever possible.

Conferences

To offer those involved in preservation work the opportunity to discuss experiences with colleagues from all over Europe, the ECPA has, in partnership with institutions, organised two major conferences. The first one, organised with Die Deutsche Bibliothek, took place in Leipzig in 1996 and attracted 160 participants from 30 countries. The theme of this conference was 'Choosing to Preserve' and the papers presented dealt primarily with policy issues and the choices that have to be made in developing a preservation programme.⁶ From 19 to 21 April 1999 a similar conference, with around 140 participants, took place in The Hague, hosted by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, national library of the Netherlands, and co-organised with the ECPA and IFLA-PAC core programme. Here the discussion centred on the theme 'Preservation Management: between policy and practice'. The speakers were experts actively involved in very different preservation projects, ranging from storage and description of large-size documents and maps, to the development of a mass de-acidification plant. Interestingly, most speakers underlined the management components of the projects they are engaged in. There was a strong emphasis on aspects like training, personnel management, finances and budgeting, planning, and public relations. A pro-active approach to prevent damage rather than cure it afterwards is becoming more and more accepted, but in spite of a high level of activity it remains difficult to formulate a general preservation plan for the medium to long term, on institutional as well as regional levels. The proceedings of this conference will be published by the end of 1999.

Preservation of digital materials

When the ECPA started its work in 1994, it still seemed possible to discuss preservation in terms of more or less 'conventional' carriers of information—paper, parchment, photographic prints, film, tapes. Since then, the digital hurricane has hit archives and libraries at full blast and threatens to sweep them off their feet. For preservation, there are several questions to be considered. One is the life-span of the digital carriers themselves, which can be studied by materials scientists. Although this is a comparatively concrete problem, it is complicated immensely by the variety of components used and the constant introduction of new ones. This often means that recommendations for the use of a specific type of carrier cannot be made on the basis of sound testing at the moment it begins to be used in practice. This effect of running after the facts is further exacerbated by the rapid development of hardware, which makes it doubtful that a carrier used today will still be current tomorrow. At the moment, anyone with a sense of the rate of change in this field knows that it is risky to commit valuable information to any type of CD-ROM or tape if one wants to be certain of access over the next decades, rather than the next few years. Yet decisions cannot be postponed to a later date when all will be clear—for, will it, ever?

For information originally created in digital format, there is the additional problem of the myriad of programmes used that will all, without question, be superseded by others. Strict adherence to present standards would help to reduce future problems, but even so it is unclear to what extent backwards compatibility and timely migration will be able to guarantee long-term preservation of data and full functionality.

The uncertainty in this field is particularly frustrating for institutions committed to keeping their collections accessible for decades or even centuries. Digital data must

be dealt with now, whereas with conventional carriers there was at least some time to work on policy decisions. The preservation community must concern itself with matters previously outside its sphere of activity in order to be able to combat practices that do not seem to pay due attention to considerations of longevity. The demand for information and guidance in this area is overwhelming; whenever the ECPA announces the publication of a new report dealing with matters digital, requests for copies flood in from all sides. Long-term access to digital materials will therefore remain high on the agenda of any organisation concerned with preservation.

Digitisation: an opportunity for preservation?

Another, related issue, is the widespread adoption of retrodigitisation—ie digitisation of sources already existing in paper or other formats—and the need it has created to redefine the balance between preservation and access. First of all, because of the obvious value of (retro)digitisation for access, it is hard to keep up interest in the enormous amount of materials not in digital format, which are unlikely ever to be digitised. This is a huge category of records that must be cared for even at a time when digitisation absorbs a substantial part of resources. Experts must keep hammering away at the fact that for preservation purposes, conventional measures such as microfilming, for instance, are sometimes a more rational choice than digitisation, for material that is consulted infrequently.

Secondly, the debate on the exact relationship between preservation and digitisation is still in the process of taking shape. An unbounded belief in the possibilities of digitisation may lead to a strong emphasis on the value it has for preservation. It is true that when people consult virtual information on a screen, the real books and documents, in theory, need no longer be made available to them, which limits damage to these materials. On the other hand, it has also been reported that users who come across digitised versions become interested in seeing the originals or obtaining prints of photographs, for instance. This may increase rather than decrease handling of the originals, and the benefit for preservation may be less clear than it seemed at first sight.

Yet increased accessibility of collections through digitisation may also have a favourable influence on preservation, in that more users become acquainted with the materials held by archives and libraries and may better appreciate the need to keep them safe for the future. The role of digitisation in gaining public support for preservation may prove to be an important one and can perhaps be compared to the effect created by the widespread dissemination of reproductions of works of art, which has familiarised many people with their cultural heritage.

Finally, compared to resources available for preservation, funding possibilities for digitisation projects are in many cases quite liberal. In practice, digitisation projects often include tasks that fall under the headings of conservation and preservation management, which may thus profit from resources allocated to digitisation. Experience shows that the actual scanning is often the most straightforward part of the digitisation project: preparation, organisation and documentation take up the bulk of the available time, and preservation work is often done in the process. Materials to be digitised are taken off the shelves, which offers an opportunity to do conservation work where needed, to repack materials, review storage conditions, etc. Catalogue descriptions are often insufficient for searching digital files, especially for photographs, prints and documents, for which item descriptions do not always exist. When

documentation is created or refined at this point, preservation information on the individual items can be added relatively easily, thereby turning the system into a valuable tool for surveying and planning preservation work. In this sense, any digitisation project is potentially a preservation project.

The role preservation has to play will have to be redefined, and it may well benefit in the end from new developments, provided that the chance is seized to combine seemingly opposing requirements into coherent policies. Preservation experts should engage in the digitisation debate in order that chances are not missed, and so that the best decisions are taken. This is a task for the ECPA—providing information and creating opportunities to conduct this debate in a constructive and inspired way.

Conclusion

In the 5 years of its existence, the activities of the ECPA have taken shape. What has been done so far will be the basis for future work. The ECPA will continue as a clearing house of information, will concern itself with training, workshops and conferences, and will promote the need for preservation whenever possible. Much has been learned over the years about the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of a European platform. Because of the cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe, and because the ECPA is a small organisation, it can never presume to reach every archivist and librarian in Europe. A European organisation like this ultimately depends for its success on its network, on active representatives from large institutions who carry the work forward in their own countries and on professional associations that are in direct contact with their constituencies. In its turn, the ECPA can provide a framework and a level of interaction which places individual initiatives in a larger perspective so that they can mutually support each other. The ECPA exists to help the preservation community to do what it wants to do, and with its support, the ECPA intends to continue well into the next millennium.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. T. Peterson, 'Putting records first to make them last', in Y. de Lusenet (ed.) *Choosing to Preserve. Towards a co-operative strategy for long-term access to the intellectual heritage* (Amsterdam, 1997).
2. In 1999, the members of the ECPA Board were: Pieter J.D. Drenth, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences/Free University Amsterdam (chair); Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (vice-chair); Fernanda Maria Campos, National Library of Portugal; Philippe Bélaval, Direction des archives de France; Inge Jonsson, Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities; Michel Jouve, Agence Socrates France; Eric Ketelaar, State Archives of the Netherlands/University of Amsterdam; Birger Ljungström, Munksgaard International Publishers; Adam Manikowski, University of Białystok; Geoffrey Martin, University of Essex; Jack Meadows, Loughborough University; Trudy Huskamp Peterson, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; Hans Rütimann, Commission on Preservation and Access; Margarita Vázquez de Parga, Informática El Corte Inglés, Madrid.
3. A full list of ECPA publications is available from the Executive Secretary, ECPA, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, PO Box 19121, 1000 GC Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
4. Gabriëlle Beentjes, Mariska Herweijer, Yola de Lusenet, Karin Scheper and Paula Witkamp, *Weten Geweten Gewist Bedreigde wetenschappelijke collecties in archieven en bibliotheken* (Amsterdam, 1997).
5. EVA is a joint project of the Antwerp City Archives, London Metropolitan Archives, Telepolis Antwerp, Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information (NIWI), Gesellschaft für Multilinguale Systeme (GMS), European Commission on Preservation and Access, funded by the INFO 2000 programme of the European Union. See <<http://www.eva-eu.org/>>.
6. The proceedings of this conference were published as Y. de Lusenet (ed.) *Choosing to Preserve. Towards a co-operative strategy for long-term access to the intellectual heritage* (Amsterdam, 1997).