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Digitisation of Old Prints and Archival Collections of Monastic Provenance in Church Theological and State Libraries as a Chance for Sustainable Development [1]

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Theological old prints and archival collections are the pride and joy of every monastic and state library. They are of interest primarily to professional theologians, book and church historians, bibliologists, museologists, but also amateur bibliophiles. Due to their uniqueness and importance for human culture, they are priceless and closely guarded in the mentioned libraries. Thanks to the digitisation of old prints and archival collections, it is possible to study and view them without leaving home or the workplace.

According to Riley (2024, 33), there are two important components for digital libraries: technologies of the internet and web, and community-based society, which “are so closely knitted that it is hard to think of them separately in the digital environment as technology needs users”. In Polish literature on the other hand, “digitisation is understood as the technology of making collections available and the process of creating digital libraries” (Szymański 2015, 189).

[1] This article is based on a presentation given at the BETH Sarajevo conference in 2024.

The role of digital libraries and archives is the preservation of knowledge, and democratising information access by providing better access to archival and library materials via IT networks. This enables education and lifelong learning support, as well as a community building, communication, and collaboration platform. Digital libraries supplement the existing resources, support popularisation of library and archive collections, and can merge archival and library materials that are physically stored in different locations, for example in different institutions, even outside the country's borders (Krawczak 2012, 80; Dowgiało 2023, 104; Riley 2024, 34).

Thanks to the digitisation of library inventories and catalogues, especially those from the 16th to 18th, and even 19th centuries and old prints and making their availability on web platforms, it has become possible to read them on your own computer and smartphone anywhere in the world, even in your own home. Thanks to this, you don't have to go to archives and libraries, which are often many kilometres away from your place of residence or work, especially in the case of foreign archives and libraries. The time saved thanks to this can be used more effectively for the so-called processing of source material, namely its analysis. In the case of personal arrival at a stationary archive, that is to say not online, you can use their resources only during the hours they are available to readers. This causes the stress, of whether I will manage to use all the sources I need. If it turns out that I did not have enough time, I will have to come there again instead of using more time for the aforementioned, more detailed analysis of inventories.

Now, the cost of travel to libraries and archives is often expensive. Researchers from universities receive money (in Poland, most often as part of grants) for source queries in archives and libraries, from which they finance travel to them. However, independent researchers who are not associated with universities and scientific institutions, do not have such funds and must cover the costs of their research, including travel to archives and libraries, from their own financial resources. Sometimes this even limits the scope and accuracy of queries, and sometimes result in the lack of answers to important questions. Digitisation and making the materials we are interested in available on the Internet come to the rescue in these scenarios. Digitisation of valuable old documents allows for faster access to them (Król 2005, 174).

Therefore, we must agree with Hannie Riley (2024) that

[...] One of the most profound impacts of digital libraries is the democratisation of information [...] Digital libraries help to level the playing field, providing equal opportunities for education and research, and encouraging informed decision-making. This widening access bridges the gap in information disparity and supports educational equity, enabling students and researchers from diverse backgrounds to have high-quality information and resources (35).

Libraries and archives, understood as information institutions, help create an information society (Król 2005, 170).

According to Strzelecka and Sulejewicz-Nowicka (2022, s. 34) and Król (2005, 173), old prints published online make it easier for researchers to conduct comparative, textual, and editorial research. They allow for drawing conclusions regarding geography, topography, languages, the activities of their creators and producers, editorial and typographic features of individual printing houses, and the characteristics of their publishing production, tracing the course of, for example, political, economic, and philosophical movements and ideas.

Digitisation and placing documents in digital libraries cannot end the work on them. In activities of a cultural, scientific and informational nature, it is necessary to take into account collections placed in digital libraries, which are beginning to take over the role of the reader's place of first contact with documents (Fischer and Michalski 2018, 134).

The digitisation of library inventories and catalogues and old prints improves research in the field of historical disciplines of contemporary book studies (Król 2005, 174). After all, one of the roles of the digital library is promotion by providing resources from various fields of study in one accessible platform. This fosters collaboration and innovation (Riley 2024, 39).

On the other hand, Król (2005, 170, ref. 4) seems to be worried that a book in digital form is no longer a book because "it loses the bond with the strictly defined

character of the original version and becomes merely its online publication.” There are changes in its structure, often in the linguistic-pregnant layer, diacritical marks, and different aesthetic values appear in the form of files: “When digitally converted into newly published written texts, they are often mutilated”(Król 2005, 170, ref. 4).

Placing a given object (a book or handwritten document) in a digital library, creating a digital backup, serves to protect it, both against theft and the destruction caused by the passage of time or human activity. (Dowgiąło 2023, 104; Krawczak 2012, 79; Strzelecka and Sulejewicz-Nowicka 2022, 33;). Therefore, digital libraries play an important role in preserving knowledge for future generations (Witczak 2012, 107; Riley 2024, 34). It is therefore necessary to preserve old printed materials for future generations “[...] by ensuring safe conditions for old collections that should no longer be made available in the traditional way” (Król 2005, 174).

On the one hand, digitalisation is about protecting the material form of the most unique and valuable collections, and on the other hand, it opens access to collections that are particularly protected. Objects that have so far been viewed by a narrow group of specialists and researchers are now available to a wide audience – the academic community, Polish and foreign scientific and cultural institutions, and all interested parties. From the perspective of users of platforms [...], digitisation enables quick access to source materials. From an international perspective, this is important for research on cultural heritage, conducted jointly by research centers from different countries (Strzelecka and Sulejewicz-Nowicka 2022, 34).

Increasing number of archives and libraries, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic scan their collections at the request of readers and send them by e-mail to the interested party. Thanks to this, you can use the collections made available on the Internet in libraries and digital archives on your own computers anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

Digitising an old print or manuscript protects them from destruction or theft. Placing them in a digital library and publishing them on the Internet contributes significantly to the democratisation of access to the information contained in them: everyone can now view and read them. It also facilitates global scientific research on the digitised texts contained in them. It is a sustainable development in access to knowledge and scientific research on old prints.

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