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2 Suggestions for the LIBER-Workshop at ElPub 2016:

As architectural historian and musicologist I encountered several kinds of collections in my research work: First of all, we think of a collection, of course, as a corpus of objects located in a specific environment like a museum, archive or private institution. Usually, these collections have been built up in history with regard to certain interests of research, documentation or esthetic preferences. Of course, it is possible today to publish information about such collections not only on the internet, but to open their digital representations up, e.g., for comments or any research contribution, but also to connect them to other collections or to document their history. But there are also lots of collections we know about but that do not exist anymore: Their objects may have been sold, destroyed or lost in the course of history – but it would be possible to reconstruct these collections – at least: in parts – with digital means. And finally, every researcher in historical and/or esthetic fields, has his or her own „collections“ of material: digital photographs,notes taken in archives or bibliographical references etc. Only for the latter ones tools like zotero exist that can help to unite our forces to build up collections collectively and avoid multiple repetitions of the same work done by different researchers. In fact, this is what the www was invented for ...

(1) My first proposal for this workshop is the idea to build up a web portal comparable to that of the European archives: www.archivesportaleurope.net that would allow researchers as well as museums or other owners of collections to establish their own „private" or virtual collections of any of the above mentioned kinds AND open them up for collaboration. Of course, it should be fully searchable (except in the protected, „private“ spaces), record any changes with the clear name of the author and protect any information and digital object against illegal, unauthorised change and unethical usage.

But most of all: It should be as simple as possible – not only to use but also to develop further with the rapidly ongoing developments of the web and its basic techniques.

And this leads to my second proposal:

(2) Since I worked in different web-database projects sind 2000 and had contact with older ones, I more and more came to the conclusion, that the demands hidden behind the acronym „KISS“ – „Keep it simple, stupid!“, or, more friendly: „Keep it short and simple!“ – are INDISPENSABLE for any research project using digital methods. There is NO data format for which a preservation of more than 20, 30 or even 50 years can be assured. And this regards simple formats like .txt, .pdf, .doc, .jpg or any other kind of information put into one „document“. Vint Cerf, as the author of the TCP/IP one of the fathers of the internet, is working on a solution to this problem that he calls „digital vellum“. But every research project using digital means that I know of, does not restrict itself to the collection of such simple digital documents, but heavily uses databases, mostly with web frontends, and any kind of links (not just HTML/weblinks) to demonstrate connections, mostly between objects and bits of information inside the database. In advanced cases, these „bits“ of information are not even stored on the same machine or server farm anymore, but scattered all over the internet. How could a „digital vellum“ save them and their constantly changing state?

As you all should know: There is currently NO WAY to guarantee that these databases and other tools will still work in 20 years. But why do we invest time, money and research into projects that we may survive easily? Does it make sense to collect and store information about objects from collections in a form that will be outlived not only by the objects themselves but also by the authors of these information?

Should we shovel our work and, in fact, our life time – into the black hole of a „digital dark age“ that will not (or hardly) be accessible to future generations?

How long, e.g., will JavaScript-based portals like www.archivesportaleurope.net exist – and how long will URLs like

https://www.archivesportaleurope.net/directory;jsessionid=4877873C2E4590C3132CBA8D210454F7

be accessible? How long will the information hidden in such cryptic URLs and links in- and outside the database survive? What kind and amount of labor will be necessary to migrate these data and information, created by researches during years of work, onto new software, operating systems or hardware? If knowledge is linked information: How will its integrity be preserved? The experience with archives storing digital objects, e.g. video recordings, shows, that the preservation of such collections even today is a workload requiring more resources than a physical library of books. And these are usually simple storages of pyhsical media handled by robots, i.e. „flat“ storages of single digital objects. But: Every database used for research purposes is far more complex already ... Therefore, Vint Cerf's advice: „If you have images [or any other digital documents – B.K.] you really care about: Print them out!“ ... is simply NOT manageable, not even reasonable for contemporary research databases.

Therefore, every research project should be aware of these dangers not looming in a future „far far away", but „around“ the corner. We should, in every case, think very carefully about the preservation and usability of our work's results. And we shoule, especially, be very sceptical about all the ‚beautiful' and astonishing „bells & whistles“ that are used to „sell“ database projects financiers and users.

Without this kind of care, any digital represenation of any kind of collection will not be (re-) usable and no digital publication of this kind be available in the future. That's, at least, what can be concluded from experiences with such projects in the last 20-30 years. Why should we think the future will be better?