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Project Periodic Report

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Scientific representative of the project's Coordinator:

**Dr. Conny Kristel
Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen -
KNAW
Research
Herengracht 380
1016 CJ Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 (0)20 523 3840
Fax: +31 (0)20 523 3888
E-mail: c.kristel@niod.knaw.nl**

Project website address: <http://www.ehri-project.eu/>



Summary

Project context and objectives

EHRI aims to support the Holocaust research community by providing (online) access to dispersed sources relating to the Holocaust and by encouraging collaborative research through the development of a Virtual Research Environment (VRE). To achieve this by 2014 twenty organisations from thirteen countries – research institutions, libraries, archives, museums and memorial sites – are working together to build this infrastructure.

EHRI will help researchers overcome one of the hallmark challenges in Holocaust research – the distributed and dispersed nature of the research materials. Holocaust research relies on a huge variety of archives – more than most other fields of historical research. Holocaust-related archival material tends to be fragmented and scattered all over the world, making access complicated, if not impossible, as well as very time-consuming. The value of an online portal lies in the ease of access to such dispersed resources, whereas the advantages of universal access to them are obvious. Recently, it was reported by the Spiegel

<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/ns-polizeibericht-ueber-judendeportation-in-duesseldorf-entdeckt-a-832335.html> that the German historian Bastian Fleermann found a missing document on the online portal of the Wiener Library, one of the EHRI partners. The document provided insights into the shocking apathy of German police forces in Düsseldorf during a deportation transport of Jews to Minsk. How the document ended up in London is unknown, but with the online portal of the Wiener Library Bastian Fleermann only needed a simple set of keywords to find it. The same record can already be found in the current mock-up of the EHRI portal with a stable citable URI.

With EHRI, researchers will not just be able to find records of the Düsseldorf police force, but also from the transport authorities as well as ghettos and camps in Belarus.

Building on integration activities undertaken over the past decades, EHRI aims to transform the material available for Holocaust research into a cohesive body of sources. Beyond this unique attempt to bring collections together, EHRI activities range from stimulating new research methodologies and an analysis of research needs, to appropriate contextualisation of the various resources, and research support. EHRI also assesses relevant e-Science standards and technologies to provide a state-of-the-art VRE for advanced online access to these sources.

EHRI provides researchers with new opportunities to engage with the wider scholarly community and to intensify dissemination activities to society at large. Next to improving online accessibility, the project also offers access to stimulating research facilities by enabling researchers to work on-site in a number of leading institutions. EHRI organises summer-courses on Holocaust research and promotes a Europe-wide approach, encouraging local research endeavours to link up and address new questions, share information and continually raise awareness among successive generations.

Work performed and main results achieved

Networking

Simultaneously to the start of EHRI in November 2010, the EHRI website was also launched in order to offer general information and opportunities to connect. EHRI was met with high expectations all over the world. To involve the Holocaust community in EHRI a clear communication and dissemination strategy dividing target groups in a number of circles of relevance and accessibility has been worked out. EHRI has a large number of target audiences with a variety of interests: First of all, a diverse scholarly community that consists of historians, archivists, social scientists as well as digital humanities specialists. Secondly, EHRI can be of high interest for memory institutions, museums, as well as for educational purposes, for government agencies and the general public. An infrastructure consisting of

diverse communication instruments is in place. Over 700 contacts have been organised in a database and issues of a regular general newsletter have been published.

An important step to facilitate involvement has been developed through the "Hub" (www.ehri-project.eu), offering the EHRI community the opportunity to register through the website and to publish user profiles. Networking and sharing of information in "community groups" are seen as requirements for EHRI in order to build a strong foundation of user support and knowledge of user requirements. It is envisaged that the Hub is the initial focal point for all information, discussion and training and a first step towards the EHRI infrastructure offering access to Holocaust sources and collaborative research tools.

Research guides and methodological renewal

For the integrated EHRI infrastructure, work has started on trans-institutional research guides to support users who work on specific Holocaust themes. They will serve as information-rich gateways for researchers, providing them with unified and well-structured access to information about archival collections physically located in different archives in several countries. Tools and strategies have been developed to combine data on the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto and the Jewish communities in East-Central Europe during World War II. Key resources have been identified and an outline of the functionality and users' interactions within the EHRI portal have been created.

Online access and a new generation of collaborative research tools enable the development of novel research themes and methodologies. EHRI also facilitates exchanges between experts of various methodological subfields of Holocaust documentation and creates networking activities around them. So far two interdisciplinary workshops have been organised with the participation of experts in various fields. In the two fields addressed – documenting the names of Holocaust victims and photo documentation on the Holocaust – we have begun to forge contacts between experts, which carry on beyond the workshops.

Training

To stimulate methodological innovation in the field of Holocaust research, we have started to develop a training programme focusing on an overview of methods, sources and on-going research. Based upon an examination of both training needs and existing training programmes, a programme of four "summer courses" is being prepared. The curriculum focuses on issues of fundamental importance to Holocaust research by using concrete examples, for instance in order to explore the difficulties inherent in certain types of sources and problems that have been central to historical research. The curriculum will place special emphasis on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe.

Eastern Europe

Our networking activities especially concentrate on Holocaust researchers not yet attached to major research networks, and on Eastern Europe in particular. Expanding the network of partners in Eastern Europe and engaging local audiences and potential users is key to the success of EHRI. Since the end of the Cold War much of the archival riches of Eastern Europe have come to light, which enables an integrated approach to the history of the Holocaust as a European phenomenon. Involvement of Eastern European partners is thus essential to EHRI's success.

Privacy issues

EHRI has identified the general and specific judicial and ethical questions linked with privacy and the integration of personal data in the infrastructure. We have started developing a common policy and a handbook for the network, including guidelines for institutions and researchers to comply with the relevant privacy legislation. As the integrated (meta)data will be stored in the Netherlands, a notification with the Dutch data protection authority is required. The notification procedure, including the drawing up of the necessary forms and

specific regulations, is nearly finalised. If necessary, notification with other data protection authorities than the Dutch will be pursued.

A sustainable infrastructure

EHRI's networking activities aim at ensuring that networks, tools and services will be sustained and developed after the end of the project. International collaboration has to be consolidated and intensified and Holocaust research must continue to profit from the improving accessibility of key collections and services. The EHRI platform and services have to become sustainable both organisationally and financially. Creation of firm ground on which EHRI can build has been the main result of the first few months of this effort. A next step involves setting further priorities for strategic partnerships to achieve sustainability by the end of the project.

Transnational access

One of EHRI's main tasks is to facilitate transnational access to existing infrastructures for Holocaust research. Offering access to these existing infrastructures is a key activity to support and stimulate scholars, especially junior academics, postdocs, PhD candidates with limited resources and researchers from Eastern Europe. A call for applications for 2012 was issued and circulated widely. Overall 75 applicants from 22 countries submitted a proposal. An international panel of experts has selected 12 researchers on the basis of the excellence of their research proposals for a fellowship during 2012 at five top-Holocaust archival and research institutions. EHRI has high expectations of research which is facilitated in this way.

Joint research activities

An effective and efficient research infrastructure requires in-depth knowledge of user requirements. As nothing comparable to EHRI has ever been undertaken, this task is even more important. Specific knowledge is needed on the current state of Holocaust research and practises of Holocaust researchers as well as research use and management of archival materials. Substantial effort has been invested in surveying and interviewing researchers as well as archive experts at partner sites. 280 researchers have responded to a web survey and fifteen in-depth interviews have been held. A user advisory panel has been installed. From the interviews and survey information gathered at partner sites it has become clear that an effort is needed to assist archives to enhance monitoring user practises and collect statistics for benchmarking. Good progress has been made towards the meta-analysis of surveys and trends in the digital humanities. The results of this analysis will provide a firm foundation to identify functional specifications for the EHRI portal and VRE, connecting closely to the requirements of users and the development of digital research practises.

Investigating collections

Perhaps the key task to reach our first milestone has been the investigative work undertaken into the collections of Holocaust related materials. Based on a thorough definition of the Holocaust and of what constitutes a "Holocaust relevant archival collection", around 1,500 institutions have been identified.

National reports have been compiled. They provide a general overview of the history and archival situation in a large number of countries in an easily accessible format. The reports will be published online starting in the summer of 2012. The reports provide a brief general history of World War II (statehood; German rule/influence) and Holocaust history (size of the pre-war Jewish community, an estimate of the number of Jewish victims), and secondly a description of the archival situation (organization of archives and legislation) and on institutions that hold Holocaust-related archives. Lastly they provide the state of research of EHRI on the country.

Furthermore, a collection-level evaluation is taking place on a country by country basis, for which criteria have been developed to enable selection of key collections, infrastructures and services. A first selection of about 200 key archival institutions has been made. These institutions are currently being surveyed with respect to the services and infrastructures they offer. The outcome of this survey is of key importance for the creation of a functional structure for a database of metadata. These metadata should enable the actual integration of collections and development of services to access them, based on content-related and technical criteria. All metadata produced are in accordance with ICA's ISAD(G) and ISDIAH standards. ICA-AtoM is the software being used to facilitate the data gathering to the agreed standards. In this first period, EHRI has succeeded in drawing up a general framework that gradually will be filled in during the course of the project.

Thesaurus

A major requirement of offering access to Holocaust sources is a basic subject thesaurus through a multi-lingual, well-defined and controlled set of keywords. To determine the nature of the thesaurus and to establish guidelines for its management, we used existing information from institutions that operate Holocaust-related thesauri as well as from professional literature. The thesaurus will be based on existing standards, primarily concurrent to ISAAR and ISO. A preliminary "controlled vocabulary" was assembled. The terms were divided into several "Top Categories", and a tree was built for each Top Category in which the topics are presented in a hierarchical and associative manner.

We have determined general requirements for a software application that would allow us to manage and publish the thesaurus as a community resource. The TemaTres application was selected for the purposes of building the subject terms tree. We have currently assembled approximately 900 subject terms and more than 2,600 so called Authority Files (700 organizations, 80 events, 500 personalities, 1100 Sites and 290 countries and administrative districts). All entries are currently being enhanced and processed.

Data model and metadata registry

EHRI has defined a strategy to integrate all metadata on collections into a metadata registry. This will enable integration of data from heterogeneous collections, and discovery and use of content from distributed collections. A first version of a data model was approved enabling description and exchange of (meta)data. The data model allows for assembling all metadata in a central metadata registry. EHRI will provide metadata connectors that collect and translate the metadata from the collections to the standardized metadata. Furthermore the data model will take into consideration cooperation and interfaces with other infrastructures such as DARIAH.

A state of the art report evaluating existing metadata models and standards has been written. The report describes available data integration strategies and technologies. It also covers the main architecture models for integration of distributed data: distributed query, harvesting and notification, and protocols used in their implementation. Linked data as a model for exposing and interlinking structured data from distributed sources is also presented. Finally the report discusses two relevant topics for the construction of data integration infrastructures: the mapping between different metadata schemes and the role and implementation of controlled vocabularies. Furthermore the report provides an overview of the state of the art of integration technologies from EU sponsored projects mentioned above.

Virtual Research Environment

Evidently the creation of a data model and metadata registry also has to connect closely with the work on the portal offering a virtual research environment (VRE) and integrated central services. We have cooperated closely on defining the architecture for a collaborative VRE, where researchers can access resources, meet, discuss and share findings with other researchers. Our VRE state-of-the-art report outlines the current technological landscape of

scholarly portals and VRE's. It comprises both theoretical considerations about relevant technologies as well as their practical applications. In addition, we have reached a thorough understanding of the current situation of related infrastructure projects with which we may want to ensure inter-operability.

Currently, we are focusing on establishing the interaction design of the VRE infrastructure and on enhancing our portal prototype. To this end, a first prototype version of the portal's core searching and browsing functionalities has been developed.

Expected final results and their potential impact and use

The final result of the project will be an integrated infrastructure offering researchers a number of services to research and access dispersed Holocaust collections. Users will be able to research on-site into available collections and will have durable online access to collection descriptions via a portal and a VRE; users will be supported by a multilingual thesaurus which will allow them to browse in an associative manner through Holocaust material. Archives will be enabled to connect to EHRI and to offer access to collections in a standardised manner. The connection built between dispersed Holocaust collections on the one hand and user-driven services to access collections on the other will be managed by a standardised metadata registry. This provides an innovative model for the coming years in offering researchers throughout the humanities access and use of archival material as well as tools to support research. Among these tools are a number of prototypes of rich finding aids on specific Holocaust related subjects that point the way for further qualitative development of virtual research. At the end of the project EHRI will have involved a core Holocaust research community of users and will have been able to connect with the holdings of key aggregators and the most important collection holding institutions.

A main challenge within the final result will be to present a sustainable organisational and financial model. Currently a strategy is being devised to be able to present such a model for sustainability at the final conference in Berlin in 2014. This will combine a strategic partnership for new innovation projects and connection of new archives and user communities as focus points for a movement towards even more cooperation and integration. Secondly, EHRI requires a (small) sustainable organisation able to manage and develop EHRI beyond the end of the project as an important pillar of new digital services to access "big data" for the humanities.

We are convinced that EHRI offers the possibility to continue to support and strengthen the Holocaust research community after 2014. This is also relevant for the larger public as the Holocaust continues to play a crucial role for the development of European societies.