

Post-war history at a glance: retrospective digitisation of social-democratic press services

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In the recent past nearly all industrial nations have developed programs that aim at making their cultural heritage available as digital publications on the Internet and thus allow access for everyone. Different nations have found different ways of presenting their cultural heritage digitally.

The United States as well as France chose solutions that allocated a leading role to their national libraries (the Library of Congress and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France). An example for a project with centralised administration “from the top” is the French project “Gallica” (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>).

After the Second World War German cultural policy was organised in an extremely federalist and decentralised way. Librarianship is normally the responsibility of the German Länder. However, there are national authorities in Germany that have an all-German function in the field of librarianship. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (the central public funding organisation for academic research in Germany) belongs to these institutions. It fosters national projects in German librarianship (<http://www.dfg.de>). Since 1995 the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft finances a big project that deals with the development of virtual specialised libraries. This ambitious project is very challenging for all participating libraries.

Within this project financial support is available for single digitising measures. German libraries can apply for this financial support. Independent experts decide on the projects. Naturally, the allocation of financial support is committed to certain conditions:

- The documents must be of special significance for academic research.
- They must be rare.
- The online presentation should lead to a certain added value.
- All questions concerning copyright law must be verified.

Within the Library of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation we thought quite a long time about the question which documents we could recommend for the national project of retrospective digitisation. The chance to be financially supported attracted us, of course. After thorough consideration we decided on the Social-Democratic Press Service in the years 1946 to 1995 (<http://library.fes.de/cgi-bin/populo/spdspd.pl>).

Every expert among us knows that newspapers are an important source for the

understanding of the history of the labour movement. But we also know that the examination of newspapers is extremely time-consuming. And we do know that it is hardly possible to create subject indexes for newspapers by means of digitising measures. So the Social-Democratic Press Service for the period from 1946 to 1995 seemed to be a good compromise for the post-war period.

Within social-democratic parties there is usually no central committee that announces the party's "official policy". It is the Social-Democratic Press Service though where central statements of the elected representatives as well as the more or less official positions of the party to current urgent questions are published (for the whole project see in more detail: Die Retrodigitalisierung des Sozialdemokratischen Pressedienstes mit Hilfe der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft, ein Projekt der Bibliothek der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, von Rüdiger Zimmermann. 23 KB, Text. In: Mitteilungen des Förderkreises Archive und Bibliotheken zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung ; no. 21 (2002), p. 4-8).

In the past there were two decisive facts that imposed a restriction on the use of these excellent sources: On the one hand no library in Germany possesses a complete copy, the Library of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation is the only one with an almost complete copy. On the other hand the documents are only inadequately indexed and catalogued. Neither a weekly nor monthly nor an overall index exists. Thus the scientific utility value is extremely limited.

These deficits have been erased completely through the retrospective digitisation. The only copy that remained preserved has been microfilmed by the Library of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in accordance with the corresponding DIN-rules. With the help of an external service provider (the Dutch company DMP) the complete microfilm has been retrospectively digitised as "digital images". This means an electronic copy has been made available in the World Wide Web. This service alone though would not have improved the user-friendliness.

Therefore all parts of a single article that describe its content have been "transcribed" anew, stored in a database and finally linked with the electronic copy. Moreover, a librarian has revised this information with special emphasis on the explanation of abbreviations and pseudonyms. Besides this, personal names have been replenished with extra added biographic information.

On the Internet further searches can be carried out comfortably with the search engine Google. The German-Greek member of the European Parliament Jannis Sakellariou is a good example for the additional functions. For instance the researchers working on the Willy Brandt Complete Edition were highly surprised how many "hidden" documents could be found after the project had been finished.

On the screen the early years of the Press Service don't look particularly attractive at first sight. But the original printed version isn't really any better. And a document

printed out at home with a standard printer is of better quality than a photocopy from the original document. The text is completely readable.

To emphasise it again:

The described process doesn't allow the search for certain terms in the full texts, an appropriate conversion is impossible due to technical reasons. But it is possible to search for all personal names and all keywords from titles and subtitles in a single database. This advantage cannot be valued highly enough. With the help of an automatic indexing software it was possible to achieve a qualitative improvement for enquiries. Everyone who knows the German language is familiar with the compound nouns. This software is able to dismantle these compound nouns into its logical elements, e.g. "Arbeiterfamilie" (working-class family) into "Arbeiter" (worker) and "Familie" (family). Plural is converted into singular, which is especially important in the German language. Synonyms are generated automatically as the program works on the basis of a thesaurus; a query for the keyword "Exil" (exile) will result in the output of titles that also contain "Emigration" (emigration) as keyword. The essay of Moritz Thape: "Wachsam sein gegen Intoleranz und Diffamierung. Aktueller Bezug auf die politische Emigration" makes this additional gain of information clear.

The project presented here was completed in 2001. We then put in an application for a follow-up project that aimed at the retrospective digitisation of another press service that was published from 1958 to 1998 under different titles (from 1958 to 1976: "Pressemitteilungen und Informationen der SPD" (press releases and information of the SPD), from 1976 to 1986 "Sozialdemokraten: Service, Presse, Funk, TV" (Social Democrats: service, press, radio, tv), from 1986 to 1989 "Service der SPD für Presse, Funk, TV" (SPD service for press, radio, tv), and from 1989 to 1998 "Presseservice der SPD" (SPD press service) (<http://library.fes.de/cgi-bin/populo/spde.pl>).

This press service was a product of the new media landscape. First and foremost it documents interviews on television and radio and brief statements for journalists. As source material this press service has almost the same significance as the traditional one. A source that was hardly used until now can now comfortably be used world-wide. This project was also completed in summer 2003. Now simultaneous searches in both databases are possible. So far the response of researchers was altogether positive.

At present we are making available more than 1.200 programmatic documents and statutes of the German trade union movement and the German social democracy in the World Wide Web. This can be considered as an electronic edition of central documents that never would have been published conventionally. This electronic edition comprises programs and statutes from the 19th century to the present. All important movements of the German trade union movement have been included.

This edition isn't an isolated phenomenon on the Internet server of the FES Library. We have made possible that every major search engine is able to find every single document. Besides this, all documents can be found through the German library

associations.

At the moment one can hear quite often that soon simply “everything” will be available digitally. In my opinion it is a complete illusion to think that one can search online for almost every older printed source in the future. I'm sure that the percentage will always be less than one percent. No-one will be able to bear the enormous costs for the retrospective digitisation and from my point of view this isn't sensible either.

What matters more is to find the “right material” for retrospective digitisation, that can be of a lot of use through this special editing. I believe, with the project presented here we have chosen the right way.

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