Opening the door to Europe's archives

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Historical archives can be difficult to search, especially when relevant documents are held by institutions in different countries. A European project has shown how a single online portal with a simple graphical interface can speed cross-border searches.

Most people have used a library but very few will have visited historical archives. Unlike libraries, archives are primarily concerned with conserving records rather than being accessible to visitors. Even with online search facilities, locating archival material is an art best left to specialist researchers who know their way around.

"Archival structures are complex," says Fredrik Palm of Umeå University, assistant coordinator of the QVIZ project co-funded by the EU. "Archivists have a duty to maintain the provenance of their records – this is the most important thing they do. And if you keep that structure it doesn't make it easy to find the right information."

In Europe, researchers have the added headache of dealing with dozens of national archives, not to speak of thousands of private collections all over the continent. And shifting borders over the centuries make it even harder to track down all records about a person or event.

QVIZ was launched in 2006 to find ways to make Europe's digital archives more accessible. Collaborators in five countries have created an online portal that makes it easier than ever to find documents quickly and accurately.

Searching in space and time

The QVIZ portal brings two main innovations to the task of searching archives. First, it uses a graphical interface with a map and a timeline to let users home in on the place and time they are interested in.

Archives are normally filed under the name of the institution that assembled the records, such as a local authority, church or tax office, each associated with a geographical area. Within the collections, records are usually organised by place and date.

"So we use space and time as common entry points to a lot of different resources," Palm explains. "Archivists traditionally ask about 'where' and 'when', so these two entry points help to limit the search dramatically."

The prototype portal allows users to search more than 75,000 archival files containing 16-18 million digital images in the national archives of Sweden and Estonia. Although the two archives are quite separate, and use different indexing systems, QVIZ can search both simultaneously and return a single set of results.

The key to locating the correct records is a complex 'ontology' that describes how the hierarchy of administrative units has changed over time. It is based on an ontology devised for the United Kingdom by the University of Portsmouth and used in their extensive 'Vision of Britain' website. Although focused on Sweden and Estonia, QVIZ has extended the ontology to include 71,000 units covering the whole of Europe.

Estonia was ruled by Sweden from 1561 to 1721 and the overlapping archives are a test of how well QVIZ can cope with changing borders. Because the ontology does not rely on precise geographical coordinates it can even cope with older administrative units whose boundaries may be poorly known.

Many archives use online 'finding aids' to help locate resources but they all require knowledge of the host language. QVIZ allows researchers to find what they need without being able to read either Swedish or Estonian.

Social bookmarks

A second innovative feature of QVIZ is the use of 'social bookmarks' to allow users to create a trail that others can follow.

"We want to involve the user communities so they can share knowledge and add information to the archival description," Palm says.

Visitors can tag information that is of particular interest in much the same way as users of sites, such as Delicious or other social networking software, so helping other people to find the same material.

Palm stresses that the information to support social bookmarking is held within the QVIZ platform itself and not in the archival source material. "We will never change the original records, this is on top of everything and outside the archival system."

The QVIZ project, which was supported by the Sixth Framework Programme for research, came to an end in April 2008.

The platform is a working prototype but it is not hard to see how the principles could be extended to include archives from many other countries. The long-term dream is a single portal that will allow users to search all the archives in Europe, but that is still many years away.

One step in that direction is another EU-funded project, Europeana, which is launching a portal to provide access to two million items selected from museums, libraries, archives and audiovisual collections

across Europe. The know-how from QVIZ will feed into it.

"I think they will be inspired by what we have done and we are willing to help them get it right," says Palm. "Mixing libraries, archives and museums together is always a challenge."

Provided by ICT Results

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