

CENTRE FOR HISTORY AND ECONOMICS

Note on the Digitization of Library and Archival Catalogues

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This is an idea inspired by a visit to the Czartoryski Library in Cracow. The library has no online or card catalogue of its manuscripts. The visitor is directed to the four volume printed catalogue, published in Cracow in 1908-1913; a wonderful catalogue of a wonderful collection. The idea is the following: that one of the early steps towards an archive of archives might be to digitize some or all of the printed catalogues of archive and manuscript collections. There are a large number of them; the Hollis online catalogue of the Harvard University Library, which owns the Czartoryski catalogue, lists 3,595 volumes of which the description includes the keywords "catalogue" and "manuscripts" (and another 959 which include "catalog" and "manuscripts.") The Cambridge University Universal Newton catalogue includes 3,274 and 259 such volumes. But these numbers are not large in relation to the technical capacity, or what is widely assumed to be the technical capacity, of current digitization programmes, including Google Books. The "post-digitization" difficulties would be much more substantial, not least because many of the catalogues are in languages or scripts which have not hitherto been of overwhelming interest to these programmes. (The Czartoryski catalogue -- which contains material of great interest for the economic history of eighteenth-century France -- is in Latin, and uses Polish characters.) So the project would not be small. It would also be very important to find ways of cooperating with the institutions whose collections would be listed in an eventual online catalogue of catalogues.

The printed catalogues are in many cases out of copyright, or uncopyrighted. But there are obvious questions about moral rights, or rights to the information contained in the catalogues. There are even more obvious and important questions about access to the collections. The object of the exercise would be to provide information about manuscript collections which is at present available only to people who have access to printed books in a few major research libraries; and who know which printed books to look at. But the staff of the collections involved may not be in a position to cope with inquiries from scholars who find out about their holdings, and request further information, or copies of particular materials, or who want to visit the collections. (The website of the Czartoryski Library, <http://www.muzeum-czartoryskich.krakow.pl/prawe/bibliotekaf.htm>, is in Polish only.) So it would be important to think of a sequence of initiatives, in cooperation, where possible, with the staff of the archives or libraries concerned.

This might be as follows. 1) Identify printed catalogues of manuscript collections which are suitable for digitization. 2) Locate online information, if any, about the collections in question. 3) Contact the staff of the collection to explain the project; identify the version of the catalogue which would be most suitable for digitization (where there are several versions), or an online version, when it already exists. 4) Explore the possibility of cooperating with the staff of the collection in reviewing a digital version of the catalogue. 5) Examine the sustainability of the project, including the storage in various media of the eventual digital records. 6) Examine the possible future needs of the archives and collections involved, including the need for help in responding to inquiries. It might be important to think about sources of support for archives which are likely to

expect an increase in inquiries and scholarly visits. This is in a sense the inverse of the problem of the archives in Africa which expected that if their collections were digitized, "no one would come here any more."

NB The Princeton University Library has digitized and made available on the web three out-of-print catalogues of its Arabic manuscripts, which might be an interesting model; see http://www.diglib.org/pubs/news04_02/princeton.htm