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An interface into European sound archives

Franzen, R.

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Ricarda Franzen

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Europeana Sounds: an interface into European sound archives

Europeana Sounds, 2015, <http://www.europeanasounds.eu/>

We tend to think of archives as physical storage facilities of knowledge. Sound archives in particular might traditionally be imagined as the home for material sound carriers, wax cylinders, tapes, LPs, CDs and cassettes. Europeana Sounds, by contrast, is an online sound heritage project, that offers a platform for sound items and in the process becomes a virtual meta-repository in the digital native sense. In the logic of internet platforms, Europeana Sounds is an online connector of sound institutions. For the actual work of digitisation, selection and other constitutive sound archival activities, it relies on its partnering specialist institutions, archives, national or local

libraries and museums. It provides a search engine that allows to search across sound archival institutions in all of Europe. It develops its own system of indexing, and it imports, curates and promotes “Europe’s sound heritage at your fingertips” (Europeana Sounds 2015a).

Funded since February 2014 until January 2017 by the European Commission, Europeana Sounds is timely in its objective of providing access to European digital heritage; it is part of the broader Europeana project that was conceptualised by several heads of state in 2005 and had subsequently been developed as “A European Digital Library for all” (Digital Agenda for Europe 2016). The Sound project’s goal – in short: aggregation, enrichment and distribution of digital sound items (cf. Europeana Professional 2015) – is broken down into concrete work on several issues such as increasing the amount of audio content available online, improving the quality of access through enrichment of contextual information and developing specific sound channels tackling constraints of legal rights. As Europeana Sounds is an ongoing project, reviewing it means to keep these ambitions in mind while looking at the online construction site and vice versa.

Search for sounds

Via the main Europeana website one can access sound items amongst other digital cultural objects such as artworks, artefacts, books and videos via a simple search engine interface – an interface seemingly directly into the body of European heritage. The search will lead to the same list of results whether accessed from Europeana’s main site or from one of the thematic channels, with the option to filter for sound in specific or for all related media. In 2014 only 1.5% of Europeana’s assets were sound items, which is half a million items in total. In terms of interface design, below the central search bar thematic collections are featured as well as an exhibition section – for example on recording and playing machines. Of the planned sound related channels – so far only the music themed channel has been alpha-released – search results are presented under the header of Opera, Folk Music and Musical Instruments as well as more specific topics such as “Georges Bizet’s Carmen”.

Europeana Sounds’ own domain (<http://www.europeanasounds.eu/>) gives an impression of the work in progress, its events, press and further planned theme channels. The event section and the conference documentation in particular reveal the extraordinarily varied network and professional high standards that are at Europeana Sounds’ disposal. In one conference video from 2 October 2015 you will find, for example, Richard Ranft – Head of Sound and Vision at the British Library and Project Coordinator of Europeana Sounds – present the project’s goals (Ranft 2015), in other videos you can follow panel discussions that go into depth about legal access and user interaction. The impression of a high level of sophistication and the possibility of informed decisions based on extensive dialogue amongst leading experts from several European countries manifests also throughout further exploration as Europeana Sounds’ clearest contribution. Expertise also radiates from the repeated so-called *edit-a-thons*, a term used to designate gatherings of stakeholders to enrich information on Wikipedia and collaborate in sharing knowledge, for example, around bird sounds.

The archival turn towards the community

While the aforementioned bird sound edit-a-thon is an example of how Europeana emphasises user-orientation, in other cases the site’s emphasis on user-orientation is, perhaps, less self-evident. What does it mean, for example, to develop “audience-specific” sound-channels (Europeana Sounds 2015b)? Is the audience specificity reflected in the distinction of sound-channels into the rather general genres of music, spoken word recordings, environment recordings, radio programmes and sound effect recordings? One might speculate on how user-orientation in this regard could also have led to quite different categorisation schemas for sound: in the

regular publications of the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA), for example, different types of recordings are distinguished according to their archives' specific approaches and needs concerning digitisation, leading to a differentiation into recordings from broadcasting sound archives, national sound archives and research archives (Breen and Flam 2004). Europeana Sounds, in contrast, does not discriminate between different archives, but presents search results in a new homogenised and equal manner, hoping for its users to make the difference and help assigning importance as well as meta-data. The pages of Europeana imagine archival material to be reused for research as well as artistic remixes, and accordingly categorise their users ranging from "culture snacker" to "culture vulture" (Brinkerink 2014).

Communication scholar Robert Gehl has described YouTube as an "archive [and a *Wunderkammer*] awaiting curators" (Gehl 2009, 45), and indeed Europeana Sounds bears some comparable characteristics in its organisational structures, such as the central collection being contained under one domain and server, and the aggregation of digital objects produced elsewhere. Online aggregation is a trend that Europeana shares with mainly commercial platforms such as Spotify and Soundcloud.

From the point of view of archival theories, user-orientation and the turn to the community signifies a leap in the archival imaginary, a historical shift away from earlier approaches to archiving as hierarchical conceptions of custodianship. The challenge of copyrights that Europeana is undertaking is, particularly seen from the aforementioned perspective, ambitious in its own right, challenging the institutional tradition importantly with the internet's own logic. Yet, unlike digitally native aggregation platforms such as YouTube, Europeana Sounds is to be understood foremost as a merger of the existent European heritage institutions' digital content and does not embrace community archiving for content, as for example the Library of Congress has done.

"Culture snacking" and attention

Many of the planned deliverables, such as a crowd-sourcing component to the search, I could not find put to practice yet. Also the goal of enriching meta-data by outsourcing the time-consuming labour remains in the stage of experimentation and was not evident to me from actual experience. I did however test search from a number of different perspectives, including my own academic research involving a mainly offline Dutch theatre sound archive as well as for archival material from the Lautarchiv in Berlin, the latter relating to my professional work in the field of German radio drama. I test-searched for content-related keywords and, in both cases, got a list of relevant search result of over 20 pages, enabling me to locate sound recordings amongst others in the Royal Irish Academy, the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

One can click on single sound results that will reveal a page of collected information labelled "technical metadata", providing basic data for browsing: next to the title of the recording it offers a description (often in the language of the recording), classifications (also in the language of the sound recording), properties (such as language), time (if available) and provenance, naming the publisher, institution and providing country. Furthermore the page contains information on the item's copyright status and, at the bottom of the page, a suggestion of similar items. One can listen to the item via an embedded player on the item's own Europeana information page, or one is referred to the item on its original institution's website. For the sake of browsing ("culture snacking" in Europeana's own vocabulary), I came across singular interesting recordings, yet, I had at times trouble filtering further usefully and experienced a certain lack of specificity and context still as an obstacle. Using material for a radio drama means sometimes looking for aesthetic qualities in a recording, but also means working with further restrictions that are not (yet) searchable, such as similarity in qualitative features.

Europeana, including its Sounds project, taps into recent controversies; the most prominent one might be the one about copyrights, an activist fight that Aaron Swartz, the "Internet's Own

Boy"¹, had brought into the Europeana discussion during the first EuropeanaTech conference (Swartz 2011), a discussion that finds its counterpart in paradigm shifts in archiving, as exemplified above. Other issues are a prolongation of political economy debates around digitisation, such as uttered doubts about the hope for an increased democratisation through increased access (cf. Hendy 2000).

To end, I would like to take up a question by Goldsmiths sociologist Mark Fisher uttered during a Sound Symposium "Keeping Tracks" in 2014 at the British Library asking: "What is access without attention?" (Fisher 2014). While, as I have discussed above, the emphasis of user orientation of Europeana Sound is evident, it nevertheless remains to be seen whether the figure of the multi-lingual interdisciplinary European sound researcher, remixer or snacker will in fact emerge in sufficient numbers to support an initiative like this in the long term, also after 2017.

Note

1. *The Internet's Own Boy*. Directed by Brian Knappenberger. USA: Participant Media FilmBuff, 2014. Film.

Notes on contributor

Ricarda Franzen is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Heritage and Memory Studies. Having been trained as a dramaturge, she currently coordinates the MA Dramaturgy programme in the Theatre Studies department at the University of Amsterdam. Her PhD project "Voices for the Future – Sound Archives and the Performing Arts in Twentieth-Century Netherlands and Europe" explores historical practices of theatre sound archiving, for the case of the Netherlands as well as internationally.

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Ricarda Franzen
University of Amsterdam
 r.a.franzen@uva.nl