The European scene as part of the InterPARES Project

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Introduction

The Inter Pares research project consists of a number of research teams from all over the world, including Europe. In fact there are two European research teams, an Italian and a (Northern) European group. One reason for having two groups is funding. As has been mentioned, the Italian team has acquired its own funding within Italy and started earlier on the InterPARES research. The other reason could be the 'Italian connection' (Vancouver - Rome) within Inter Pares!

The objective of Inter Pares is to develop viable concepts and guidelines for dealing with longterm preservation of digital records, meanwhile guaranteeing their authenticity and usability over time. The complexity of this problem requires a multidisciplinary approach and above all co-operation between several existing electronic records initiatives within the archival community, and also within Europe.

People sometimes find it difficult to figure what cooperative relationships exist in areas such as electronic records, both within and beyond Europe. I will try today to provide you with some insight into existing European electronic records initiatives and the bodies involved, in order to introduce you into the peculiar world of European co-operation and to explicate the profesional and organizational contexts within which the Norhern European InterPARES team is working.

The (Northern) European Research Group

Unlike the most of the other research teams within Inter Pares, such as the Australian, US and Canadian teams, the European team consists of more than one country. The consequence is an additional organisational level and that makes it a little bit more complicated. Recently an Asian Team has entered the Inter PARES project, that faces the same problem.

What is the present situation? In the preparation phase of the InterPARES Project , persons in both the academic and professional archival community were approached by Luciana Duranti, because of their expertise or position, to participate in an international research group. Among them were several Europeans. It turned out that that was not a feasible option, since there appeared to be several groups or countries interested and each of them had its own funding or was applying for it. So the original idea of one group was modified and the present structure with seven national research teams was adopted.   That meant that the Europeans involved, with the exception of the Italians, were suddenly confronted with the fact that they had to establish a common basis for cooperation by determining their own appropriate organisational structure and interests, and then identify how to go about obtaining the necessary funding.

Represented in the European Team so far are the National Archives of Ireland, Sweden and the Netherlands, the English Public Records Office (PRO), the University of Glasgow, the Dutch Archives School, and University College London. As with other teams, participating archival institutions are expected to serve as case study and test-sites, and academic institutions will provide researchers with additional disciplinary research expertise.

There are several reasons for individuals or institutions in Europe to participate. The main reason, as already mentioned, is the complexity of the problem. The innovative character of electronic records issues coupled with the scarcity of expertise in this field require a common and multidisciplinary approach. Lack of   financial resources can be considered as another reason.   Finaly, there is the hope that a joint effort could lead to faster results. So at least the archival institutions, that because of their mandate have to come up with solutions in order to deal with electronic records, participate in these common projects with certain expectations. Nevertheless, even without fast results, projects such as Inter Pares offer benefits and opportunities such as information exchange on activities and experiences elsewhere, discussion and confrontation of diverse approaches in different archival

traditions and research activities, and the building of an extended network of people that could serve as a platform for feedback and support for the institutions that are having to cope with electronic records issues.

In December 1998, some of the European participants met in London and established a body called 'European Partnership for Electronic Records Research' (EPERR). This body will be used to co-ordinate the efforts of the European participants and serve as a structure or body that could pursue funding, mainly through the European Union (EU). As such it should also provide a platform for co-operation and as basis for participation within the Inter Pares project. One of the things that is missing is a structure for collaboration in the sense of working together in a practical way. There exist many bodies or platforms for discussion, but they do not lead to concrete results.

The main objectives of EPERR, apart from Inter Pares are:

- to consider options for establishing an enduring organizational structure to support research
- to be research-driven and team-oriented
- to act as a staging ground for identifying, applying for support for and managing projects
- to use the available support of research students at associated academic institutions and access to the policies and practices of member organisations to support the research.

A steering committee, initially consisting of Seamus Ross (University of Glasgow), Ken Hannigan (National Archives of Ireland), Ian Macfarlane (English PRO), Torbjörn Hornfeldt National Archives of Sweden), Nancy McGovern (University College of London)and Hans Hofman (National Archives of the Netherlands), will co-ordinate the activities. If necessary the membership will be expanded.

As already mentioned InterPARES activities will take place at three levels in Europe: national, European (EPERR), and international (being the international meetings of the Inter Pares project). On the national level each of the participating organisations will have its own (domestic) projects in the field of electronic records. The scarce expertise will be distributed across these three levels, thus necessitating a lot of careful co-ordination in orderto ensure that participating individuals are not submerged in work.

To make it even more complicated, there is another European platform for co-operation, the DLM Forum, that was initiated by the European Commission in 1996. This Forum consists of representatives of archival institutions, the research community, industry and public administration. Representatives of the different directorates-general of the European Commission (EC) are present at the meetings of the DLM Monitoring Group, the group which co-ordinates the activities. This platform is multidisciplinary and as such very valuable, because it offers an opportunity for information exchange and discussion, a window to the European bureaucracy where the funding has to be found, and a forum for identifying common interests and projects. Compared to EPERR, which is primarily research driven, the DLM Forum can be characterised as a more politically-oriented structure.

What is going on?

Having discussed the organisational aspects the next question is what is actually happening in Europe in the field of electronic records? I will not sum up all the individual projects in the different member-states, because it would take too much time, but restrict myself to European co-operation and then I can be very short. There are no European projects at the moment that are actually addressing electronic records issues. Existing projects mainly focus on information delivery, such as the EUAN project (European Union Archive Network). The objective of EUAN is to improve access to the content of European archival institutions and as such this project is mainly oriented at cultural heritage.   The electronic records activities initiated by the DLM Forum are rather low-level and mainly deal with surveys of   the current situation in the different member-states. One survey has provided an overview of the legal aspects and how these are applied in the member-states.   Another survey, which is under way, will provide an overview of the relationship between archival institutions and public administration in each member-state. Both could serve as a basis to identify and more closely define those issues for which co-operation might be useful.

The EPERR group has similarly tried to identify issues for co-operative research projects. One of them is the longterm preservation of electronic records. In several European countries there is a growing

sense of urgency about the need to tackle this problem. Consequently projects are being developed to deal with it. At the moment a bid to get European funding for a common project on preservation is being prepared. Partners in this project will be the (English) PRO, the National Archives of Ireland, Sweden, and the Netherlands, the German Bundesarchiv, and the University of Glasgow, but this could be expanded. The bid will be evaluated in December this year, and if approved the project could start next year. The source for the funding would be the research program of the EU, called the 5th Framework. This huge research framework was approved by the European Parliament in December 1998 and is valid for the next four years (1999-2003). One of the programs within this 5th Framework is Information Society Technologies (IST). Unlike the previous 4th Framework, one of the objectives of this program is to foster co-operation between libraries, archives and museums.

The above mentioned project of EPERR on preservation would be integrated as much as possible into Inter Pares Research. As such Inter Pares could give co-operation in Europe a boost.
Apart from that each of the participating national archives will serve as a test-site, where InterPARES hypotheses and findings will be tested. More immediately, the participants will provide the project with case studies that will implement and test a questionnaire for establishing the authenticity characteristics of digital records and to investigate whether a typology of digital records can be built.

Conclusions

European co-operation, at least among archival institutions, is growing slowly. Unlike other comparable areas such as libraries and scientific research, until a couple of years ago, such cooperation within the archival community was almost non-existent. It can, therefore, be considered as a process in itself with all the difficulties that accompany it (in this respect the laborious process of unification of the EU itself can serve as an example). The different European archival traditions, different legal contexts, different social-cultural aspects are all examples of the gaps or the differences that have to be bridged between countries or archival institutions in order to co-operate effectively.

Nevertheless the current situation, especially the consequences of the increasing use of information- and communication technology (ICT), pushes the archival institutions in Europe towards more co-operation, although this co-operation should not and can not be limited to Europe taking into account the magnitude of the challenge that we are facing. The Inter Pares Project is an example of this, and fosters co-operation within Europe. EPERR offers a structure for it.
This growing awareness is accompanied by the acknowledgement of the complex nature of the issues at stake, the scarce knowledge and expertise available, the lack of resources, and the fact that a multidisciplinary approach is required.

Despite of all the differences Europe is however also the continent that holds some of the oldest traditions on archival theory, and that is just one of the starting points that characterises the Inter Pares Project. The research project has been set up to investigate in what sense old archival traditions and methodologies, such as diplomatics, could offer solutions or guidance for modern manifestations of writing such as digital records. Whether this will work out or be viable or not, will be one of the results of the project. One thing should be clear up front, the confrontation within this project of the different approaches taken in the world to date in dealing with electronic records, is interesting and will, and in my opinion already is, prove to be fruitful one way or another ......