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Rosa M^a Gregori i Roig, Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó/Archive of the Crown of Aragon
Ramon J. Pujades i Bataller, Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó/Archive of the Crown of Aragon

Abstract:

The creation of the possibility of accessing by Internet to the archival information and to the digital reproductions of the documents kept in the archives for centuries has meant a true revolution in the world of the social diffusion of the archival sources: on one hand, it has let the general direct access by the non specialized public to both, description instruments and digital images, and it has provided to the specialized researchers an unlimited consultation timetable; on the other, this increase in the number of readings has been possible without increasing the level of physic pressure on the original sources. The tool that has made it possible in the Spanish state archives is the platform of the Spanish Archives Portal, known by its acronym PARES.

It is now almost two decades that it was inaugurated a system of access to the digitalized documents in the Spanish state archives. Everybody was conscious then that it represented the beginning of a new era, but it was still generally considered that the microfilm would be the long term preservation instrument, while the digital image just would be the most suitable resource for offering an immediate substitutive way of access to the information contained on the original archival documents, in order to avoid the progressive deterioration that always implies their daily direct use. Nowadays, although still persistent, the initial panic to the ghost of the technologic obsolescence has become quite smaller, and the incredible improvement of the hardware and software, the much faster velocity of electronic transmission of the information, and, above all, the absolute social triumph of Internet, have accelerated enormously everywhere the tenuous tendencies started 20 years ago. At the moment, the electronic access by Internet to the instruments of archival description (guides, inventories and catalogues) and to the digital images of the documents is already numerically much more important than their direct consultation in the reading rooms of the archives, although just a part of their archival fonds has been already digitalized and published by Internet, what means that this difference still will increase sensibly if it is kept in the future the constant progress of the digitalization and electronic publication of their fonds.

For the Spanish state archives, PARES means a platform where the information of the databases containing our archival description of our documentary fonds can be offered to the whole society in its most actualized state, and where medium resolution digital images are permanently available to the public as a very good substitute of the original documents. Nevertheless, in order to transform the original possibility in a true reality, as institutions with a background of centuries of tradition as we are, we have had to put in a lot of effort into the job of converting the ancient description instruments made by the previous generations of archivists in modern and normalized databases, and into the job of preparing the original ancient documents, physically and intellectually, for their digitalization process. The archival sources preserved from the pre-statistical period are not at all normalized products as can be modern printed books or contemporary administrative expedients. A very important part of them still have their folios unnumbered, and an important amount of these old registers and accountancy books are crowded with interleaved notes and original documents that must be also individually identified, because a non exactly identified digital image is a lost image when put among millions of similar digital images. It means lots of additional work that must be invariably done by the archivists previously to the beginning of their digitalization process, what slows down sensibly the possible development rhythm in comparison with the velocity that can be

achieved in other kind of institutions, like libraries, for example. And, from these peculiar and specific reasons comes out also the biggest disadvantage that for all the archival institutions can have all this modernization process. As institutions with very limited human resources as we are, all this amount of work obligates to reduce or even stop temporary the progress in the archival classification and description process of our still many insufficiently described archival fonds, and without a complete and erudite archival description, the task of trying to find the archival documents which contain information on a specific subject or person will be really, really hard for the researcher, specially if not a professional historian, independently if the consultation is direct or indirect, across the digital images published by Internet. Thus, perhaps it is the moment for a professional reflection on the way of balancing newly the three social functions that must be always developed by the historical archives: conservation, description and social diffusion of the archival patrimony.