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DIGITAL ARCHIVES / DATABASES

A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN ACTION

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In his 2004 book¹ on how the dynamic development of information technology has been affecting knowledge culture, Alan Liu posed key questions regarding the role of the humanities in the new order emerging along with the computing technologies becoming easier to use and more effective. At the same time, such an order has brought a domination of post-industrial 'knowledge economy' rooted in business logic. He called this new order 'the new cool'. After more than a decade, Liu's questions are worth revisiting, given how academia has changed during this time, having undergone increasingly evident practice of forcing academic life to fit corporate model. The implementation of content and human resource management systems aimed at boosting 'work efficiency' has also significantly transformed the way we think about universities and their role in society. Finally, the last fifteen years saw a forced decline of the humanities in the form they took on between the 1960s and the 1990s, a decline brought about by particular policies of both the governments and universities. In recent years, these changes have provoked a lively debate focused around a number of issues, including:

- the aberrations and pathologies effectuated by a system of narrowly defined and purely bibliometric assessment of academic outputs,

¹ Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004.

- the corporate and business strategies of dominant actors in the academic publishing market (punctuated, however, with news of a growing number of universities, and sometimes entire countries, suspending cooperation with Elsevier²),
- the deteriorating working conditions of the academic staff being forced into mobility and flexibility of employment (epitomized by the precarity of adjunct professors in the US),
- and the pressure placed on the staff by new evaluation systems for teaching and research (the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework, respectively). Although these topics may seem divergent, they all exemplify a major global crisis of academia (especially the humanities³).

In this perspective, the problems experienced in Poland are by no means unique (a fact that still remains largely unnoticed in the local debate).

This, of course, is a huge topic in itself, and one which demands many notes detailing various points of reference. Nevertheless, I shall refrain from addressing it on this occasion, and instead turn my attention to one aspect of the changes described by Liu, which have since become by and large the core of the academic practice. Namely, I will focus on digital (Internet) archives/databases and the multifaceted work made possible by these resources that blurs the line between research and educational practice. It is also one of the fields of the by now very wide area of the digital humanities, an area whose perception in Poland – despite some significant achievements – is sometimes still driven by fundamental misunderstandings.

To offer a meaningful discussion of this field, born at the junction of rich domains of reflection abounding in profound theoretical findings and vast archives of case studies, I will focus on a clearly defined section of the subject, namely, the

2 An intensified debate over the dominating position held on the academic publishing market by, effectively, two corporations: Elsevier and Thomson Reuters, including protests against what has been deemed unethical business practices (inflating the price of access and of publication in the so-called Gold Open Access model), has resulted in a burgeoning boycott of Elsevier. The boycott is manifested not only by grassroots community initiatives, like The Cost of Knowledge website, but also by institutional policies. A resounding example was the 2017 decision of 60 major German research institutions united in the DEAL consortium (headed by the Max Planck Society) to break off their partnerships with Elsevier. The latest episode in the ongoing debate occurred in 2019, when a similar decision was made by the University of California, following in the footsteps of Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian institutions. An exhaustive description of the academic world's dispute with Elsevier warrants a separate study; the matter is much more serious than might be suggested by its echoes that reached Poland in the context of the controversies over adopting indexation in the Scopus database as the main indicator in evaluation of research work. That the debate requires a highly nuanced approach is demonstrated, for example, by an article discussing The Cost of Knowledge initiative, cf. Tom Heyman, Pieter Moors, Gert Storms, 'On the Cost of Knowledge: Evaluating the Boycott Against Elsevier', *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics* 7 (1), 2016.

3 This subject is obviously vast, and I can barely touch upon it here. Suffice it to say that Liu's assessments were confirmed by Toby Miller's book from almost a decade later (Toby Miller, *Blow Up the Humanities*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2012), not to mention the fundamental contributions from Martha Nussbaum (Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2010), Stanley Fish (published in *The New York Times* in 2008–2010, cf. e.g. 'Will the Humanities Save Us?', 6 January 2008, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/> (accessed 10.02.2019); 'The Uses of the Humanities, Part Two', 13 January 2008, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/theuses-of-the-humanities-part-two> (10.02.2019)), and the numerous responses to Fish's articles. In Poland, the debate was touched upon by issue 2 from 2016 of *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, tackling the crisis of the university. The digital humanities are likewise a topic of lively discussion; a good example – apart from the well-known works by Liu, David Berry or Matthew Kirschenbaum – is the thematic issue of the *Differences* journal (issue 1 of 2014).

sustainability of digital archives, understood in its human and technical, rather than purely infrastructural, aspect. To this end, I will look at the formation of communities of practice centred around the ELMCIP Knowledge Base. Founded and developed at the University of Bergen, this database is one of key resource for studies on electronic literature and digital culture.

In approaching this topic, it is important to remember that free circulation of information, its dispersion, or communal mechanisms of its creation are not progressive or emancipatory in and of themselves, as demonstrated by the very complex information mechanisms of the post-truth world or by such circles as the alt-right and the neoreactionary (NXr) movement.⁴ With that in mind, I differentiate between communities of practice (which focus on more or less regular activities aimed at sustaining a specific, material knowledge source) and communities of circulation (whose activities are merely discursive in character). This distinction is relevant and interesting for yet another reason. Liu devotes an entire chapter of his book to contrasting the ahistorical perception of innovation/creative disruption in corporate strategies with its historical revaluation in the humanities (for Liu, such a differentiation reveals the humanities' particular potential). This part of the book is entitled 'The New Enlightenment'. Nick Land and the neoreactionary movement – whose primary mode of reflection and discussion are the Internet, the blogosphere, Twitter, and a number of threads on the infamous Reddit and 4chan platforms, rather than traditional academic forms of debate – propose instead the concept of Dark Enlightenment.⁵ Both its proponents and critics recognise this term as a reaction against the contradictions inherent in key ideas that lie at the foundations of Western modernity and liberal democracy. (This, according to Yuk Hui, is the reason for the inevitable gesture of repeating the Spenglerian narrative about the decline of the West and for the return to the contradictions and debates of the original Enlightenment project.)

Philosophical discussions aside, we should not forget that another issue essentially at stake is the basic institutional mechanisms of verifying what counts as 'knowledge' in its two variations: one rather productive (communities of practice), the other rather destructive ('Dark Enlightenment'). In a sense, my analysis

⁴ It may come as an illuminating and apt remark that I owe this latter point of reference to a few discussions on the master's thesis of my student, Gabriela Korwin-Piotrowska; I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her inspiring contribution. The neoreactionary movement (also known under the cryptonym NXr) is a platform associated with the general antiliberal and antidemocratic tendencies of the contemporary extremist movements contesting the legacy of Euro-American liberalism. These movements are often inspired by the inconsistent set of eclectic propositions from the fringes of Western philosophical thought, and are inclusive of all types of spiritualist and mystical currents, like the bizarre intellectual amalgams constituted by the ideas of Julius Evola, on the one hand, and Aleksandr Dugin, on the other.

⁵ Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, <http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land> (accessed 10.02.2019), with annotations by Mencius Moldbug (Curtis Yarvin). Cf. also the philosophical analysis of the concept by Yuk Hui: 'On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries', *e-flux* 81, 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/> (accessed 12.02.2019). Considering that the debate was initiated by Peter Thiel (and takes place under a considerable ideological influence of the Silicon Valley), the neoreactionary movement may be seen as a consequence of the socially regressive libertarianism characterising the so-called Californian Ideology, disputed in the 1990s by the community of the Nettime mailing list. Cf. Paulina Borsook, *Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High Tech*, Public Affairs, New York City 2001.

also implies an answer to a crucial question. Can we prevent the dismantling of knowledge legitimation mechanisms brought about by increased traffic of Internet content, which separates information from its source and is itself often a by-product of partially or fully automated algorithmic procedures? This, it seems to me, is the real stake of the (necessary) change in educational formulas: to provide better answers to challenges of this kind.

ARCHIVES, DATABASES, AND MEDIA LABS: FROM INFRASTRUCTURE TO A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice) started as a three-year project, funded in 2010–2013 within the HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) programme. Coordinated by the Digital Cultural Research Group at the University of Bergen, Norway, it was carried out in cooperation with six European universities: Edinburgh College of Art, Blekinge Institute of Technology, University of Amsterdam, University of Ljubljana, University of Jyväskylä, University College Falmouth at Darlington and the New Media Scotland initiative. As noted by one of the originators and coordinators, ELMCIP was, from the onset, a collaborative project: ‘As a starting point, we asserted that creativity is not best understood as a manifestation of genius or inspiration within any particular individual, but instead as the collective, performative practices of communities’.⁶ Consequently, attention is paid less to archiving or providing access to collections of works (artefacts) by individual writers and artists, and more to ‘the conditions and environment in which creativity takes place’.⁷ As a result, ELMCIP features records referring to art pieces, pieces of criticism and research projects, names of electronic literature writers, platforms where the works were created, teaching materials (including syllabi), publishers and periodicals, organisations, events, other databases and archives, and thematic collections compiled for research purposes by prominent figures in the field (among them Leonard Flores, Natalia Fedorova, Patricia Tomaszek – curator of *Collection of Polish References* – and Talan Memmott). Another major link in the specific media ecology of electronic literature is the *ELMCIP Anthology of European Electronic Literature*⁸, one of the main resources for this area, beside the tripartite *Electronic Literature Collection*⁹ published under the auspices of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO). Also of note is the Electronic Literature Directory, a database of critical texts and analyses of selected works and artists, supported by CELL (Consortium on Electronic Literature),¹⁰ an umbrella structure for this and a number of similar databases and archives.

6 Scott Rettberg, ‘Bootstrapping Electronic Literature: An Introduction to the ELMCIP Project’, in: *Remediating the Social: Creativity and Innovation in Practice*, ed. Simon Biggs, ELMCIP University of Bergen, Bergen 2013, p. 9.

7 S. Rettberg, ‘Bootstrapping Electronic Literature’, p. 9.

8 *ELMCIP Anthology of European Electronic Literature*, ed. Maria Engberg, Talan Memmott, David Prater, Bergen 2012, <https://anthology.elmcp.net/> (accessed 5.02.2019).

9 *Electronic Literature Collection*, vol. 1 (October 2006), vol. 2 (February 2011), vol. 3 (February 2016), <http://collection.eliterature.org/> (accessed 5.02.2019).

10 Electronic Literature Directory, <http://directory.eliterature.org/> (accessed 20.02.2019).

Moreover, the last three years have brought information flow and synchronisation of information structure between the CELL and ELMCIP databases. Cooperation was also initiated between the Electronic Literature Organization and Rhizome.org,¹¹ one of the most important initiatives aimed at documenting the ephemeral digital art (which often relies on defunct, decommissioned or outdated software and hardware solutions). In his 2019 book, Scott Rettberg emphasises that databases, archives, and media labs are an ‘essential aspect of electronic literature research infrastructure that has become increasingly well developed in recent years’.¹² The examples given by Rettberg include media-archaeology-inspired media labs devoted to the conservation and dissemination of works by a single author (often a pioneer of electronic literature or new media art, like Deena Larsen, Stephanie Strickland or Michael Joyce). Some of the centres involved are key research and documentation hubs: Washington State University’s Electronic Literature Lab, headed by Dene Grigar, Nick Monfort’s Trope Tank (which might be considered the birthplace of platform studies), and the Media Archeology Lab in University of Colorado at Boulder. In Poland, an important foothold of this kind is the UBU Lab, organised and run by Piotr Marecki at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.¹³ All the initiatives mentioned above are well described in existing literature.¹⁴ Here, it bears stressing what I wrote above about the motivation of the ELMCIP’s initiators. All these initiatives are obviously about documentation (and the exceptionally complex issues of digital culture heritage and forms of preservation of original works are the subject of lively debate). Yet it seems that, gradually, the main focus is shifting towards the formation a specific community of practice, where the borderline between research activity and educational project becomes highly fluid. This is another aspect of the field that, as Monika Górska-Olesińska argues, is best characterised by the prefix ‘trans-’.¹⁵

FROM LITERARY PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA FIELD TO COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The ELMCIP database and the community of practice crystallising around it are symptomatic of both the changing university curriculum under the increasingly vague banner of the digital humanities (or perhaps of university curriculum

11 Electronic Literature Organization members mailing list messages, *ELO’s President Report, News and Updates*, 29 August 2018.

12 Scott Rettberg, *Electronic Literature*, Polity Press, Cambridge – Melford 2019, p. 201.

13 Piotr Marecki’s interview with Lori Emerson is well worth a read in this regard: ‘Media Archeology Lab: Experimentation, Tinkering, Probing: Lori Emerson in Conversation with Piotr Marecki’, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 33 (3), 2017.

14 Cf. Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2014; Dene Grigar, Stuart Moulthrop, *Traversals: The Use of Preservation for Early Electronic Writing*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2017; Darren Werhler, Lori Emerson, Jussi Parikka, *The Lab Book; The Situated Practices in Media Studies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2020, <https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/the-lab-book> (accessed 23.03.2021).

15 Monika Górska-Olesińska, ‘Literary Practices and Performances in Transmedia Environments: Introduction to the Special Issue’, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 33 (3), 2017.

in general) and of the equally dynamic development of electronic literature. The latter field is progressively dominated by work with various forms of digital archives and databases (the fact that one of the most popular genres of net poetry of the recent years is bot poetry may come as symptomatic of this trend). Another relatively new trend is netprovs – online performances where text is essentially a pretext for a dispersed net action improvised within a predefined framework. This evolution has been aptly summarised by Urszula Pawlicka, who – following N. Katherine Hayles – proposes a processual approach that befits the ever fluctuating nature of electronic literature itself.¹⁶ Pawlicka points out that ‘electronic literature becomes a platform for digital research, textuality, art, and other forms of expression.’¹⁷ This processual approach, it is crucial to add, involves also focusing on such factors as change, exploration, and collaboration.

In the case of ELMCIP, playing the role of such a platform is made possible by both the database infrastructure (a system of links, data export capability, etc.) and a range of activities incorporated into academic teaching – among other possibilities, it allows for carrying out projects whereby students work with the database and the popular data visualisation tools that it integrates. One such occasion is the Digital Humanities in Practice course (within the post-graduate programme in Digital Culture at the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies, University of Bergen). In December 2018, I participated in the end of course examination. The students’ projects were divided into two parts: independent research work on a selected topic was combined with the practical activity of data structuring (which usually consisted in the structuring of tags, which are user-generated in ELMCIP, although it also features hint mechanisms). The data were then processed with a popular spreadsheet program and visualised using GEPHI. The last stage was preparing a written report and presenting it before the exam committee comprising the tutors (Professor Scott Rettberg and his assistant Hannah Ackermans, today the Editor of ELMCIP) and an outside examiner (this function was performed by myself). The students’ papers were similar in terms of structure, which reflected the basic components of the research procedure: operationalisation of the research question, outline of the theoretical background (the fundamental concepts used in research work), description of the work with the ELMCIP Knowledge Base, the methodology and ways of working with data, analysis proper, conclusion (including reflection on the mistakes made), and bibliography. All in all, the course resulted in almost twenty valuable analyses of selected aspects of the ELMCIP collection. Some of the very diverse topics were: connections between works of art and narratological terminology, electronic literature’s evolution from purely textual forms to the visual form of digital animation, the content of the narrative games subgenre, differences between literary games and various forms of video games, the influence of the programming language on electronic literary forms, the presence of works from

¹⁶ Urszula Pawlicka, ‘An Essay on Electronic Literature as Platform’, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 33 (3), 2017.

¹⁷ U. Pawlicka, ‘An Essay’, p. 439.

outside the English-speaking area, the category of interactivity in 2002–2013 ELO Conference presentations, and works annotating China and Chinese culture. The subjects – which determined ways of analysing and using but also developing and amending the archive – were wide in scope and often showcased the students' considerable creativity.

My aim, however, is not to describe an academic practice that offers a chance of bringing a breath of fresh air to academic teaching; it is not even to identify ways of activating and stimulating the students' creative potential or to list computer analysis and data analysis skills. Propositions of this sort are abundant and almost every institution (also in Poland) that runs a programme in broadly defined digital culture has already developed its own standards and tools. Instead, I would like to point to building a community of practice as an essential mechanism which facilitates the operation of digital archives and contributes to their permanence.

The notion of communities of practice was put forward – not without inspiration from John Dewey and American pragmatism – by two anthropologists studying forms of situated learning,¹⁸ a process of informal sharing of knowledge, techniques, and skills, such as the passing on of crafts in indigenous communities. Knowledge becomes in this context a common ground, giving meaning to the actions taken and attracting new members. Importantly, within this notion, community refers to the social fabric forming around skill-learning and knowledge-sharing, while practice concerns a form of focusing the group's energy and activity around a shared goal associated with the knowledge and skills being transmitted. To be sure, this theory does provoke some doubts (it is brimming with the optimism characteristic of the 1990s and has since been coopted by the corporate approach). Nevertheless, it is a substantial reformulation of some educational tenets in a way that promotes the sharing of knowledge resources. What is even more important is that the concept may be a chance to work out some degree of permanence for digital archives, which in this day and age of 'archives fever' are under constant threat of becoming mere 'data silos' – large virtual networks full of objects whose digital life is fading away, since they never have any type of contact with the social space. That this threat is real (and quite commonplace in Poland) is demonstrated by a report from the Małopolska Institute of Culture 2017 research project entitled *Digital Practices and Strategies of National Heritage Promotion and Reception in Poland, 2004–2014* (*Cyfrowe praktyki i strategie upowszechnienia i odbioru dziedzictwa kulturowego w Polsce w latach 2004–2014*).¹⁹ The report, admittedly dealing with the process of digitalisation rather than archiving born-digital objects, paints a grim picture of digitalisation as a solely technical process, undertaken with no reflection whatsoever regarding the future

¹⁸ Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

¹⁹ Cf. a series of reports published on the project's website by a research team comprising: Mariusz Dziegłowski, Anna Fiń, Aldona Guzik, Marta Juza, Piotr Knaś, Kinga Kołodziejska, Jadwiga Mazur, and Weronika Stępnia, <http://cyfrowe-dziedzictwo-kulturowe.mik.krakow.pl/> (accessed 20.02.2019).

circulation of the digital objects or the type of community of practice that could sustain their digital life.

There is, however, one more thing to add. As I mentioned above, in the case of digital databases and archives – two functions that ELMCIP seems to combine – the practices of working with data increasingly translate into performative reflection/action, which is simultaneously a form of sustaining and invigorating the archive. Moreover, the archive's sustenance – or preservation – is not limited to its infrastructure (albeit this aspect is also crucial, a case in point are the efforts made by the Digital Culture Research Group to maintain the analysed resource after the research project ended). Other activities undertaken to this end include the decidedly creative teaching methods. Yet the micro research programme carried out in ELMCIP-enabled cooperation between the academic staff and students still serves one more purpose. It can be perceived as a series of necessary strategies for a (self-) defence of the humanities. In the prospect identified by Liu, the world will be / is being given over to a 'dominant mode of knowledge associated with the information economy and apparently destined to make all other knowledges, especially all historical knowledges, obsolete'.²⁰ The forms of knowledge subjected to information technology are to form an autotelic whole – with the sole exception of 'the knowledge of all the alternative historical modes of knowledge that undergird, overlap with, or – like a shadow world, a shadow web – challenge the conditions of possibility of the millennial new Enlightenment'.²¹ According to Liu, the goal of the arts and of cultural criticism is what might be described as 'hacking' the foundations of 'knowledge society' or, more precisely, its technological foundations shaped by the corporations and profit-oriented entities – an operation akin to introducing a virus, not unlike the tactic presented in the ending scenes of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. In a world where innovation takes on a total character and becomes creative disruption that causes considerable epistemological, social and cultural disturbances, Liu envisions a special role for literature: its job is no longer to be creative but instead to be a 'dark kind of history [...] the history not of things created – the great, auratic artifacts treasured by a conservative or curatorial history – but of things destroyed in the name of creation'.²² It is difficult not to perceive this diagnosis as a mirror image of the media archaeology project, in terms of both theoretical postulates and initiatives aimed at clearing variantological paths of technological progress, being brought to life in material terms in media labs.²³

This seems like a more suitable perspective through which to view the various forms of distant reading encouraged and provoked by databases and archives of

²⁰ A. Liu, *The Law*, p. 7.

²¹ A. Liu, *The Law*, p. 8.

²² A. Liu, *The Law*, p. 8.

²³ Media archaeology is a complex set of theories and methodologies, whose programme is of course very diverse and rich. Here, I am referring above all to Siegfried Zielinski's proposition, articulated in a series of anthologies devoted to variantology and the project of rooting media history – as a result of an intersection of artistic, scientific and technological discourses – in the notion of radical difference. See, above all, *Variantology 1: On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies*, ed. Siegfried Zielinski, Silvia M. Wagnermaier, Walther König, Köln 2005; *Variantology 2: On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies*, ed. Siegfried Zielinski, D. Link, Walther König, Köln 2006.

this kind. The distant reading tools – like visualisations, network analyses, stylometry and cartography – allow one to go beyond thinking about literature in terms of the canon and beyond working with text. As aptly demonstrated by Joseph Tabbi – who references the performative turn to action and Latour’s disposition against critique – activities of this type have expanded rather than limited the humanities’ array of engagement with cultural texts, while also broadening the application of critical reading practice to systems and algorithms, which fall outside the scope of traditionally defined cultural analysis.²⁴ We are thus dealing with something more than simply another iteration of participation culture, a widening of digital literacies, or an educational renaissance. This is the very core of the humanities’ well organised resistance against, as Siegfried Zielinski once put it, the *psychopathia medialis*: the standardisation and unification that are undergirded by the illusion of a linear history of technological progress.

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²⁴ Joseph Tabbi, ‘Relocating the Literary: In Networks, Knowledge Bases, Global Systems, Material, and Mental Environments’, in: *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, ed. Joseph Tabbi, Bloomsbury Academic, London – Oxford – New York 2018.

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ABSTRACT: This article is an attempt at an analysis of digital archiving as a process of forming a community of practice. Such community has coalesced around the ELMCIP Knowledge Base developed by the University of Bergen. It is seen not only as a shift in academic pedagogies, where boundaries between professors and students become blurred, but also as a strategy of the humanities aimed at reclaiming the knowledge work in the age of a novel, 'cool' and ubiquitous innovation. The latter is often presented as a goal in itself contributing to fundamental digital disruption, supposedly reorganising society and culture at large. Moreover, establishing such communities of practice is seen as a crucial factor to safeguard the sustainability of digital archives that extends beyond purely infrastructural and technical circumstances.

KEY WORDS: digital archives, archiving, electronic literature, digital humanities, ELMCIP Knowledge Base