The Swiss National Library 2006-2016 : a period of digital transformation

The Swiss National Library 2006–2016: a period of digital transformation

From 2006 to 2016 the Confederation operated the Swiss National Library (NL) in accordance with the FLAG model – an acronym that translates as "management by performance mandate and global budget". By defining clear objectives and granting a large measure of freedom, it was designed to allow the NL to respond swiftly to changing requirements. In the eleven years of the FLAG period, we successfully extended our traditional strengths in the preservation of Switzerland's cultural heritage into the digital arena.

The Federal Council steered the FLAG units by means of performance mandates covering a number of years. The NL's mandates guided it in a particular direction: towards preparing it for the digital world while enabling it to maintain its established tasks. Accordingly, we extended our collections into the digital domain and reshaped the services we provide. We discontinued some offerings that were less used or obsolete, freeing up resources to create new ones. Our employees supported and helped to shape this transformation, even though it was not always easy. I am sincerely grateful to them.

Marie-Christine Doffey, Director

Digital collections growing alongside analogue ones

On 1 January 2016 the Swiss National Sound Archives in Lugano (Fonoteca nazionale svizzera, FN) were integrated into the NL, bringing with them the largest collection of Swiss audio documents. The overwhelming majority of them are digital. In the last few years we have also built up a digital collection within the NL's General Collection, comprising books, newspapers and periodicals. Some are digitally born publications such as e-books, e-journals and websites; others are digitised versions of printed publications.

The Swiss Literary Archives (SLA) have also expanded their main areas of acquisition to include selected authors' libraries and publishers' archives. One particularly valuable addition to the SLA was the deposits of the Robert Walser Foundation, which have been in the NL since 2009. The Federal Archives of Historic Monuments became part of the Prints and Drawings Department in 2007, having previously been directly attached to the Federal Office of Culture.

We continue to maintain the NL's existing collection areas. We believe it is important to offer as complete a collection as possible of printed publications on Switzerland, along with a representative selection of image documents and literary archives. We can only carry on expanding all our collections – both analogue and digital – thanks to close cooperation with information producers: publishers, libraries, archives, universities, associations, authors and artists.

Work on digital long-term archiving

In 2009 we opened our second underground stack. The two stacks provide space for 140 000 running metres of documents – enough to last into the 2030s. Many of our documents were printed on acidic paper. To prevent further decay, around 1.2 million volumes were deacidified between 2000 and 2014. The next priority in the conservation of analogue documents is preserving the photographs.

Long-term preservation of electronic documents is a global challenge, and the NL is playing a leading role in developing solutions. In 2016 it hosted iPRES 2016, one of the oldest and most prestigious international conferences on digital preservation. For us, the next step will be to manage our digital holdings in a central store known as a repository, thus securing them for the long term.

International standards facilitate linkage

Three developments characterise the cataloguing work carried out over the last eleven years: digitisation, standardisation and automation. The national bibliography *The Swiss Book* has been available as a database and PDF document since 2007, the *Bibliography on Swiss History* (BSH) since as far back as 1999; printed versions are no longer produced. The BSH was also comprehensively overhauled between 2010 and 2012. However we have discontinued the *Bibliographia scientiae naturalis helvetica*, as national bibliographies are no longer relevant to research in the natural sciences. The last volume, covering the reporting year 2005, was published in 2007.

Our involvement in developing and introducing international standards – GND[4] and RDA,[5] to name but two familiar abbreviations – means that our data are compatible with those of other institutions. This results in efficiency gains in terms of cataloguing and data linking. Our metadata are available for re-use free of charge, enabling us to participate in linked open data projects.[6] Initial experience with automated subject indexing has resulted in substantially more bibliographic records being supplied with keywords than was previously the case.

Our archive documents have been catalogued in the HelveticArchives database since 2008, greatly improving access to documents from the SLA and Prints and Drawings Department.

Linkage boosts usage

The digital transformation is particularly striking when it comes to user services. While on-site demand is – with a few exceptions – declining, online demand is rising. To focus on meeting the needs of online users we have discontinued certain less popular services, such as the directory of foreign periodicals in Swiss libraries and the Swiss Union Catalogue of monographs. We have established a digitisation programme targeted on newspapers, periodicals and image documents. Where copyright allows, the digitised versions are publicly available on relevant platforms.[7]

One key to ensuring the wider usage of our holdings is innovation and cooperations. Examples include our collaboration with the Wikipedia community and the SLA's national and international research projects. In the age of big data, however, the stakeholder groups are too many and varied for us even to know who they all are. This reinforces the importance of the www.opendata.swiss platform, on which state institutions – including the NL – can make selected records freely available for re-use by anyone interested.

The Swiss National Library Commission is considering in depth the role of Swiss libraries in general – not just the NL – in the information society of today and tomorrow. The new Commission appointed by the Federal Council took office on 1 January 2016. Its chair is Peter Bieri, a former member of the Council of States. I should like to thank the Commission for our first year of successful collaboration, and look forward to more to come.

Marie-Christine Doffey
Director

---

4 German National Library Gemeinsame Normdatei (combined authority file)
5 Resource Description and Access
6 e.g. www.metagrid.ch
7 Newspapers: www.swisspressarchives.ch, periodicals: www.e-periodica.ch, images: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Media_contributed_by_the_Swiss_National_Library