PRESERVATION POLICIES AND DIGITISATION IN GREEK LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES: AN INVESTIGATION OF ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Digitisation, as a reformatting method, has greatly influenced the course of documentary heritage preservation. However, empirical evidence indicates that a preservation policy is – or should foremost be- , the underlying basis that provides the rationale, justification, goals and objectives of planned digitisation projects. Thus, the preservation of a digitised collection is currently under scrutiny and performing ad-hoc digitisation of collections is under a lot of criticism. Early evidence of the evolving digitisation of Hellenic cultural property shows that it will certainly face its share in preservation uncertainties. The state of the art in Greek libraries and archives, so far, presents a rather diverse digitisation landscape; although they do endorse digitisation and they are willing to be involved in such a project, at the same time, they are far from able to support its preservation in a sustainable way. This paper presents the primary results of a research about the current preservation status of the General State Archives and the Municipal Libraries in Greece; these will be discussed in connection to the digitisation projects currently undertaken and their possibility to sustainably support digitised collections.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE KNOW

Archives, libraries and museums, as guardians of the cultural heritage, share some of the same problems, since they all have to strike a balance between making their collections available now and safeguarding them as information carriers for future use [Klijn E. and de Lusenet Y.:2000: pp.1]. So far, they seek to promote and ensure continual access to

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their cultural assets and knowledge by preserving documentary heritage. The challenges of preservation have been addressed in various ways. Institutions have primarily used conservation practices in order to ensure the longevity of the original object, as well as various reformatting techniques for preservation and access purposes.

The vulnerable nature of the library and archival material forces institutions to take action and organise preservation. Paper based materials, photographs and audiovisual data are common to find and the balance between making them accessible and protecting them should be met. Currently it seems that institutions world-wide have placed their hopes for achieving their main goal of accessibility in digitisation, since substitutes in an electronic form, both in situ and on the internet, could provide greater access to a wider public. However, creating sustainable digital collections, involves much more that just scanning, even if this is performed with the best available resources and intentions. The risk of loss is far higher than in most other preservation functions so, understanding where the risk lies and making an institutional commitment to lessen it is precisely what preservation in a digital world is all about [Conway, P., :2007]. So, despite this remarkable upsurge of digitisation, serious questions remain about its use for preservation reasons. Some of the digital data created today is not worth, or intended for, long term preservation. Indeed, one of the key challenges of digital preservation is to create digital objects worthy of the effort and the expense to preserve them [N.D.C.C.:2003:pp.67]. That is only one of the preservation issues regarding digitisation, and it is a basic and important one. Another critical issue is the misleading way that digitisation is presented and perceived. As a reproduction tool, the strong lure of digital imaging is difficult to resist, but somehow, the set of preservation problems and the electronic solution to them do not quite line up, since, at least up to now, this promising new electronic technology is not yet the panacea needed to completely supersede microfilm as a medium for long term preservation [de Stefano:2000:pp.307].

It should also be highlighted that as long as the longevity of digital collections is still endangered, the originals remain the main and lasting source of information. Digital

materials cannot in any sense replace the originals, which therefore, have to be preserved in a condition that will allow future returns, use of them for making copies or for re-capturing certain of their aspects in the future for similar, as yet unforeseen, use [Klijn, E., de Lusenet, Y.: 2000: pp. iv].

In addition, for digitisation as a reproduction method to take place, preservation of the originals through conservation treatments is often essential in advance, or even while the digitisation project takes place. Conservation treatments can last hundreds of years, but because they are applied to materials vulnerable to handling and use, loss, vandalism, theft and possible disaster as well as poor environmental conditions within the institutions, short term preservation strategies are essential to lengthen the collections' life [de Stefano:2000:pp.309]. Digitisation may contribute to preservation and access, but the terminus remains. The original collections should be passed on to future generations.

There are two issues to be considered. Firstly, the existence of a preservation policy with a solid support of the institutions' collections. This policy clearly supports preventive and remedial conservation of the materials and functions through the implementation of a preservation programme. This way, safeguarding of the collections and access is partially achieved. However, new technologies such as digitisation also support preservation of the content and access to the materials, avoiding unnecessary handling. The planning of digitisation within a preservation policy is important, for both organizing the amount of work and maintaining it.

That leads us to the second issue, which is the sustainability of the digitized collections, which is a possibility only when digitisation has its part within preservation and is organised accordingly. The sum total is in most cases that continued access needs to be guaranteed to the digital images as well the original collection, and preservation consequently becomes more rather than less complex [Klijn, E., de Lusenet, Y.:2000: pp.iv]. The preservation of digital collections should always be considered during the project planning and costing stage within a digitisation project, so that a budget for the

cost of storing and maintaining the digital files can be built into the project. A digital preservation strategy will require the continuing commitment of financial resources in order to incorporate the changes in technology which will ensure the continued accessibility and usability of the digitised collections [NPO:2003: pp. 23].

In Greece, the interest on archival and library collections has grown over the past decade and they are currently understood as an essential part of the Greek cultural heritage. Institutions are engaged in efforts to increase access to their collections and experiment with the use of technology, such as using the internet to provide access to digitised (parts of) their collections. Despite that, preservation appears to be a priority issue for them; nevertheless, little has been done in order to organise it accordingly, especially in the light of digitisation projects.

At the moment though, there has not been enough research on the existence and implementation of preservation policies in Greek institutions. On the contrary, digitisation is growing in a number of projects undertaken and research on the latest methods and technology, but with no data or references on their preservation. The encouragement for the current digitisation projects has been EU funding that aims to promote the Greek cultural heritage by means of ICT usage. But, as already mentioned, there are two issues regarding the implementation of digitisation, a short term and a long term, and although digitisation is mainly a reformatting consideration for preservation, the institutions seem to perceive it as an 'easy' way to overcome existing deficiencies of their conservation and preservation capacity and thus, bypassing preservation immediate or long-term capabilities in action. So instead of drafting and implementing a preservation policy, with digitisation as a substitution method for their collections, they rather pursue a non-targeted, poorly justified digitisation objective, concerned mainly with access or technical issues.

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INVESTIGATING THE STATE OF THE ART IN PRESERVATION

In order to explore the situation in Greek cultural institutions, the University of the Aegean, Department of Cultural Technology and Communication, currently undergoes a nationwide survey regarding the preservation status of the collections of the Public and Municipal libraries (P.L., M.L.), the Hellenic Academic Libraries Link (HEAL-Link) as well as the General State Archives (G.S.A.). This survey seeks, among others, to clarify the institutions' current preservation actions, policies and overall approach towards preservation and digitisation, in particular, as one of its means of realisation. It is also interested in investigating the current facilities and human resources available for the realisation of both conservation and preservation activities, the need to define and adopt a national preservation policy, supervised by a national preservation centre or a corresponding institution. The University of the Aegean aims to develop an open-structure tool which will help the institutions to decide on their preservation policy actions for their collections based on a set of benchmarks, through the internet.

The survey was conducted with questionnaires, sent out to cultural institutions, from February to April 2008 and is still ongoing. It contains various questions about the institutions' profile, type, size and significance of their collections, issues regarding preservation policies and prioritization, conservation and preventive conservation actions, training of the employees, digitisation and disaster management. The results of this survey clearly indicate certain tendencies and are illustrative of the situation in Greek institutions. Since it is currently in process, this paper presents only the primary results regarding preservation and digitisation.

The results are based on the data gathered from 78 institutions within the public sector, representing the General State Archives[1] and the Municipal Libraries all over Greece. These libraries and archives differ in their policy mix, practices and interest regarding

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[1] The General State Archives is the Greek national archive service. It was established in 1914 by the Eleftherios Venizelos government. The GSA have been since then, with the exemption of a short period (1971-1985), under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs.
General State Archives, Historical Overview, http://www.gak.gr/en/h_overview.html, last updated, 10/10/2007

conservation, but they all share a common element which is supervision and funding by the Hellenic Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. The questionnaire had been sent out by both post mail and e-mail. By May 2008, 45 from 62 (72%) offices of the General Public Archives and 33 from 47 (70%) of the Municipal Libraries had replied to the university's research, providing significant evidence about the organisation and its current actions in preservation and conservation.
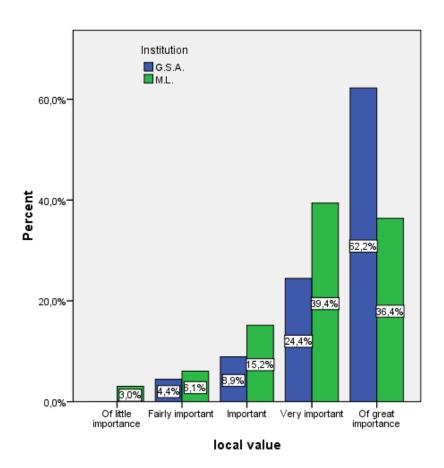
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Firstly, it is essential to provide the characteristics of the respondents. There are two main groups of institutions, as mentioned before, the Municipal Libraries (M.L.) and the General State Archives (G.S.A). Their background, size and characteristics vary greatly, even within the same group.
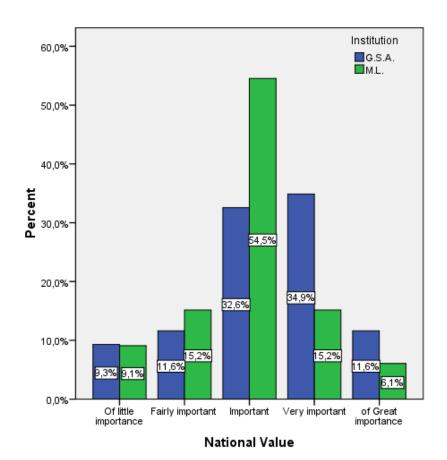
To begin with the collections' identity, the institutions involved in this research, own documents, books, audiovisual materials, photographs and, to a smaller percent, works of art (Table 1). When they were asked to classify their collections according to their importance on a local and national level, the majority of the institutions replied that they hold collections of "great" local importance whereas, on a national level, are "of importance" (Graphs 1, 2). Also, the majority of the institutions have historical as well as modern material, which clearly indicates the demand for both remedial and preventive conservation, since the historical collections have their own problems and significance and modern material needs to be available on a daily basis (Graph 3). It is common for historical collections to be preferably digitised, due to the uniqueness of their nature and scholars' demands. Therefore historical collections and unique materials should be treated in order to be in good condition for digitisation and handling.

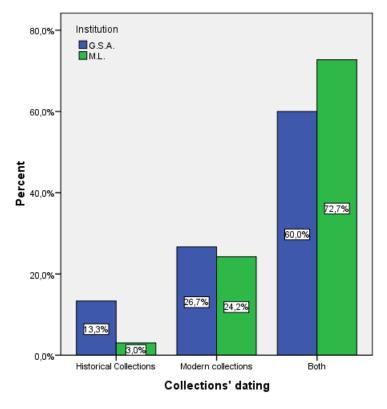| Collection's Type	Institution		
	G.S.A.	M.L.	Total
Library collection	43	33	76
Archival collection	45	31	76
Photographs	33	11	44
Audiovisual materials	21	27	48
Total	45	33	78

1. Type of collections within the institutions

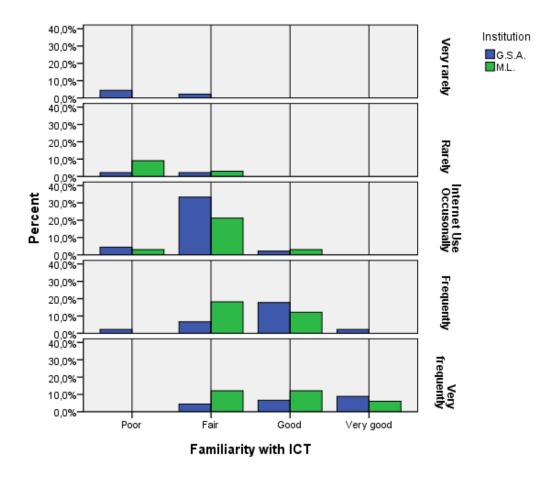1. Perception of collections' local value

2. Perception of collections' national value

3. Collections' classification according to their chronology in M.L. and G.S.A.

The questionnaire includes a number of questions that refer to the demographic statistics of the respondents. In most cases, it was the directors of the institutions those who replied to the questionnaire. It is therefore important to present their profile and their familiarity with new technologies and the use of internet. The majority of the employees of those institutions is over 45 years old. In particular, 74% are over 45 years old, 18.2% between 31 and 44, 6.5% between 25 and 30 and only 1.3% under 24. Their age is closely connected to their familiarity with computers and new technology, and this is evident since 51.3% is "fairly familiar", whereas 26.9% is "familiar" and only 9% are "very familiar". However, there is a 12.8% that is "not familiar" with the new technologies, which corresponds to 10 respondents. As far as the *internet use* is concerned, 34.6%,
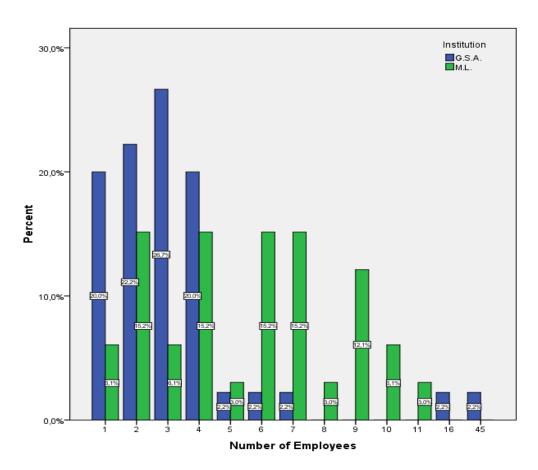
which is the majority, has a "fair use" of the internet, whereas 29.5% uses the internet "a lot" and 24.4% "very much". That leaves a small percentage of 11.5% with "little or no use". That is comforting, since internet access is, among others, directly linked to information and knowledge sharing and it is of high importance for the implication of the university's research. Also the implementation of actions such as digitisation demands a basic knowledge of processing digital images and of providing the substitutes to the public. (Graph 4)
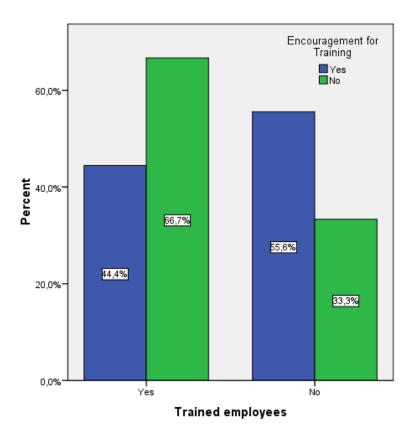

4. Employees' familiarity with new technologies and use of internet in M.L. and G.S.A.

Both libraries and archives are understaffed, since the majority of the archives have up to 4 employees, with the exception of the central G.S.A. in Athens, with 45 trained

personnel of various specialities (Graph 5). A major issue within the institutions is that there are not enough employees to fulfil routine, everyday tasks, service the public and perform on-going projects. This is often an important issue when it comes to training and seminars. For example, although the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government organises a series of seminars for the employees of archives and libraries, it is often the case that staff can not attend due to lack of employees. However, 97.4% of the institutions replied that they consider the training of the employees "necessary", since, on a daily basis, they have to deal with various tasks, most of which are beyond their current knowledge or competences and expertise. Also, 96% claimed that they encourage their staff to participate to seminars and lifelong learning programmes. (Graph 6)

5. Percentages of the number of employees in General State Archives and Municipal Libraries.

6. Employees already trained on preservation matters in comparison with the Institutions' encouragement.

It should be also highlighted that the majority of the institutions do not have a designated annual budget for preservation actions. In particular, only 6 institutions, 2 G.S.A and 4 M.L., out of 74, claimed that they do have a separate annual budget for preservation, whereas the rest cover their preservation needs through the total annual budget provided. Under these circumstances it is difficult to organise current actions for both preventive and remedial conservation and to plan and prioritise future actions.
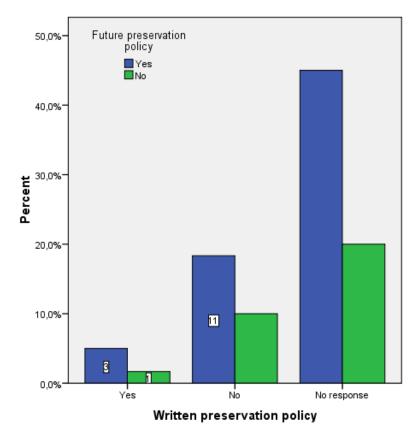
Preserving library and archival material is a challenge, since it requires knowledge and in depth understanding of the materials' nature. Preferably, preservation actions should be taken within the frame of a preservation policy and a formulated preservation programme, designed to respond to the institution's specific needs and achieve its stated goals. The number and nature of activities associated with each action will vary from

institution to institution, depending upon the identified needs and the resources available [Ward C.:2000: pp. 54]. According to Ward, the main elements of such a programme are the *Needs Assessment* for both new accessions and collections already in the institution's custody, as well as the building facilities; the *Protection of Holdings* that includes basic preventive conservation activities necessary for the protection of the material, such as environmental control, storage and handling; *Staff and User training*; *Conservation treatments* for materials of intrinsic value and *Reformatting*. Such preservation programmes are accepted and prevalent in various institutions, shaped according to their needs and goals. It is obvious that digitisation, as a reformatting method, is only a part the institutions activities and should be evaluated accordingly.

The existence of such a policy is the basis for the sustainability of the collection, but its knowledge and awareness is equally important. The institutions that claim to have a preservation policy are limited and the number of institutions that have a *written* preservation policy is only reaching 19%. As it appears, 24.7% (19 respondents) from the G.S.A. and 7.8% (6 respondents) from the Municipal Libraries have a preservation policy, from which only 12 G.S.A. (15.8%) and 3 of the M.L. (3.9 %) stated that their preservation policy was articulated in a document and evaluated. These results are under question since there is a usual misunderstanding of the meaning of the term "preservation policy". In many cases, the measures taken for the preservation of the materials, such as conservation or storage, or the legal obligation to preserve the collections were mistakenly considered to be a preservation policy. For this reason the questionnaire included the definition of such terms and the validity of the results will be certified by the interviews that will follow, as the next part of the research.

It is encouraging though, that 43 of the institutions that do not have a written preservation policy, 23 G.S.A. and 20 M.L. are planning to prepare one in the following years. If that turns to be realised, 75% of the institutions *will have* a documented preservation policy within the next couple of years. That is a high expectation and an auspicious start for the cultural heritage of Hellenic institutions. It also seems that all of the institutions seem to be aware of the usefulness of a preservation policy, since 97% answered positively in the

corresponding question. On the other hand 47.7% of the G.S.A. and 26.7% of the M.L. stated that they have a Preservation Programme, which is obviously easier to establish within an institution, more practical and easy to keep updated. The existence of a preservation programme is usually connected with the existence of conservation actions. (Graph 7)

7. Existent preservation policy in comparison with the intention to form one in the near future.

Access through digitisation can reduce manual handling of original items if there is a policy of restricting access to the originals, but on the other hand, it can also provide a mechanism for funding the conservation of original analogue material if it is built into the overall project [NPO: 2003:pp8]. However, the collected data showed that a limited number of the institutions involved have a conservation unit and an organised lab for

their collections. In particular only 2 of the G.S.A. and 1 M.L. answered positively. However, 14 of the institutions (18.42%) outsource the conservation of their collections to external collaborators or other institutions. Although some institutions did employ a trained conservator, they still do not have an organised lab.

The majority of G.S.A. is currently engaged on a nation wide digitisation project for a selected number of materials from their collections.[2] Such a project can be of great value as far as preservation of the material is concerned since it contributes to the protection of vulnerable material. It is also organised on a national level which provides a good background for a national preservation policy. It evaluates the material nation wide and avoids duplicated work and digital copies. An equivalent national project is about to start for the M.L., which will also be co-funded by the European Union.[3]

According to the data currently gathered, 18 G.S.A. and 6 M.L. had undertaken a digitisation project. That means that 30.7% of the institutions currently engaged with the digitisation of part of their collections. It is noteworthy that only 12.8% of the institutions believe that the sustainability of their digitisation project is achieved. Graph 8 presents the reported data on the sustainability of the digitised collections due to digitisation projects. It is obvious that there is a loot of concern on the sustainability of their digitised collections and this is probably connected with the lack of preservation policies that in most cases gives the idea of adhocracy, even in such a national project.
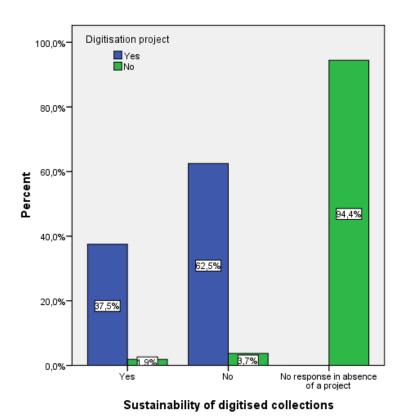
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[2] The Programme is titled "Digitisation, process and documentation of archival documents of the General State Archives", within the "Development of the Digital Cultural Collection of the General State Archives" programme, funded by the Operational Programme "Information Society", EU Structural Funds, 2000-2006. The programme started in 2006 and will be running for 2 years, with a total budget of about 4 M euros.

[3] The programme is titled "Digitisation of Materials from Public Libraries".

8. The respondents' opinion on the sustainability of the digitised collections within the existence of a digitisation project.

To a more practical level, besides the high-quality preservation actions within the implementation of a preservation programme, there are actions taken, such as proper handling and storage of the collections, important preventive conservation issues that form the basis of an everyday good practice. An institution's proven capability to select the materials according to their condition (among others), to perform conservation treatment before digitize, and supervise the secure handling during the procedure, affects its maturity to undertake and manage the full lifecycle of a digitisation project.
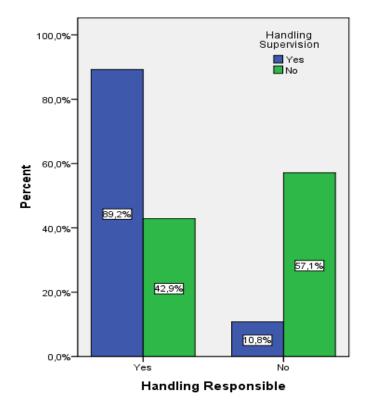
Due to developments in the technology and the process of digitisation, a large range of formats and media held by libraries and archives, such as large scale maps and documents, manuscripts, books, drawings, photographic and audiovisual materials can be reformatted. But, limited knowledge and competence on preventive conservation, under skilled and non specialized staff and scarce supervision could endanger the selected

materials. This could be further enhanced by inexperienced external vendors that provide digitisation hardware and services. So, the state of the material can be one of the criteria in selecting objects for digitisation and damage to the original material can be avoided with proper handling in the scanning process and the choice of suitable equipment. Digitisation of originals can be often combined with basic conservation measures and repackaging. To involve staff with a preservation background in a digitisation project will contribute to its success in terms of management of their collections [Klijn E. and de Lusenet Y. :2000: pp.v].
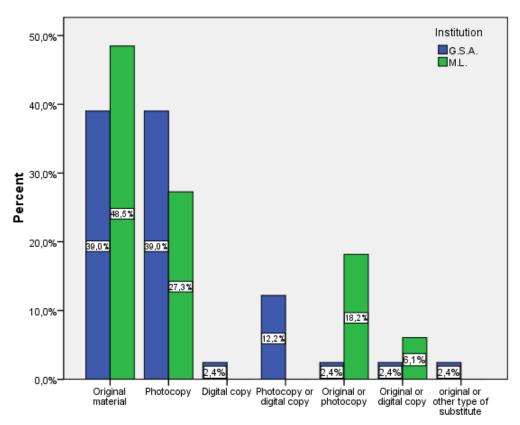
Handling issues are one of the main reasons for digitization of historic or fragile collections. So proper handling is critically important during digitization. During the actual capture process it is essential to ensure that good handling techniques are practiced when staff is handling original materials to minimize damage and ensure that the digitised images are free from finger marks or other disfigurement [NPO: 2003: pp13]. Institutions should be aware of the necessity to properly handle the material to improve protection and to oversee users. In order to provide such a service they should firstly train their own staff on the proper actions and preventive conservation measures in general. The current research explored the training of staff and users on the handling of vulnerable paper based materials. The majority of the institutions (83.8%) claim to have an employee responsible for overseeing handling of the materials. Another issue had been the user's guidance by the staff, even if there is not a specific employee in charge. In this case the percentage of the institutions that supervise their users during handling is even higher, reaching 90.3%. Graph 9 represents the relationship between the existence of an employee responsible for the proper handling and its supervision in general.

Access to the material is closely connected to their handling. Special collections are usually under a restricted access policy and handling supervision. Also, when originals are so fragile that their survival is endangered, copies are important in order to reduce the stress on them. Offering these surrogates to readers significantly reduces the necessity of handling the originals. The survey showed that the majority of the institutions provide

theirs users with the original materials. Nevertheless, photocopies and digitised copies are also given when available. Currently it is the photocopies that are the preferable surrogate to provide the users. (Graph 10)

9. Connection between "handling supervision" and the existence of a "handling responsible".

10. The materials that institutions provide access to, according to their type.

Although the terms "preservation management" and "preservation policies" have become commonly used during these past decades and preservation activities have managed to evolve to a common and functional part of any institution that cares for its collections, they were only recently introduced to the Greek cultural institutions every day reality. Consequently, there has been little done regarding the organisation of preservation within the institutions, let alone preservation policies as part of the management of their collections according to their goals and objectives. On the other hand, there are actions taken, not necessarily in the context of a preservation policy, but still producing results. Using the existing good practice can be a starting point for developing what could be called a "substantial policy".

In the last few years, access to funding has made digitisation projects feasible for a large number of Greek institutions. Nevertheless, the preservation of digital archives and the institutions' ability to ensure continuing access to their collections as well as maintaining them in a good physical state remain somehow neglected. The findings of the survey have shown that although there seems to be a wide-spread awareness regarding preservation policies, the actions taken towards materialising them are limited. Institutions are understaffed and not only expect, but also rely on the forthcoming help from the central state.

As far as funding is concerned, there are different policies between on going digitisation and preservation projects. The digitisation projects surveyed in this research, fall under the category of about 190 projects that are implemented by cultural institutions (public and private). So far, about 90 million Euros has been invested in these projects, supported by EU Structural Funds. On the other hand, the vast majority of the institutions do not have a designated budget for preservation. Although some digitisation projects could be combined with the conservation of the originals, there is not yet evidence of such a case. So, there seems to be a mismatch between funding institutions' needs for preservation and funds available for digitisation.

Moreover, since these digitisation projects are mainly EU and Government funded, there is a high probability that a discontinuation will occur when these specific digitisation projects are over and the preservation of the digitised archives will need to begin. Early results of this ongoing research indicate that although institutions gladly endorse digitisation, at the same time they seem to be worried about the sustainability of the results of these projects. They believe that digitising their collections will somehow relieve them from everyday demanding tasks on access and preservation of the materials, but they are concerned that the currently available staff and budget will not be sufficient to cover future demands of the preservation of digitisation.

Finally, this research focused on the role of preservation actions and policies in digitization as a means to preserve the originals. So far, the analysis of the data on the preservation status for both G.S.A. and M.L., illustrates a strong relation between preservation policies and digital preservation. It also provides evidence that although institutions build up digital collections to meet the requirements of users, they do not demonstrate appropriate care for their original collections.

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