Journal Article

Finding the Best of Both Worlds: Bridging Research and Archives at ETH Zurich

Author(s):
Wullschleger, Marion; Sesartic, Ana

ETH Library

Finding the best of both worlds: bridging research and archives at ETH Zurich

Das Polytechnikum 1865, later ETH Zurich, S. Zurlinden Hundert Jahre: Bilder aus der Geschichte der Stadt Zürich in der Zeit von 1814–1914 (1914), image available under Wikimedia Commons uploaded by Roland zh

Ana Sesartić and Marion Wullschleger discuss how to manage both analogue and digital data.

ETH Zurich, the leading research university in continental Europe, has a long tradition of preserving its valuable records and data for future generations.[1] In particular, the ETH Library provides professional archival services for unique analogue and digital material from the ETH's fields of research, teaching, and administration.

ETH Zurich University Archives

The ETH Zurich University Archives[2] were founded in 1999 and include the ETH Library's manuscript collection established in the 1940s. Today, it has about 4,000 shelf metres of analogue material. As ETH Zurich was among the early adopters of digital office and lab technology, the University Archives are increasingly faced with the processing of digital documents and data of historical value. According to their legal mandate for the long term preservation of administrative data, the University Archives use the digital infrastructure provided by the Digital Curation Office,[3] while the archival description process is carried out by a team of professional archivists.

When it comes to research material, the University Archives and the Digital Curation Office have established a division of labour. The University Archives are in charge of the analogue material and the Digital Curation Office is in charge of the digital material. The ETH Library has long pursued a strategy of collecting

ETH Zurich at twilight, image available under Creative Commons ETH Bibliotek

research material and personal papers from faculty and alumni as they constitute valuable sources for historical scientific research. Archivists are in regular contact with (retired) faculty in order to identify valuable scientific material and personal papers, which are then appraised, arranged, and professionally preserved. The University Archives regularly digitise and publish research material and historical private papers online on the platform e-manuscripta (www.e-manuscripta.ch). Furthermore, highlights from various collections are regularly published on the blog ETHeritage (http://blogs.ethz.ch/digital-collections/).

In the future, the University Archives might play a more central role in curating digital research data. Notably, the University Archives have decades of experience in handling copyright and data protection issues. This is especially relevant for unpublished research material or data whose owners are no longer at ETH Zurich.

Digital Curation Office

One of the Digital Curation Office's[4] roles within the ETH Library is to provide a point of contact for technical and conceptual questions regarding long-term preservation and management of research data. As the management of research data throughout its life cycle is both a key prerequisite for effective data sharing and efficient long-term preservation, the Digital Curation Office also offers training and consulting services for researchers from early on in the data life cycle. This starts with general consulting regarding compliance and support during creation of data management plans. It continues with the offer of data archiving at the ETH Data Archive[5] and publication services as well as the creation of DOIs[6] for easier citation and re-use of data. In order to cover the entire data life cycle, the ETH Library is also collaborating with ETH Zurich's Scientific IT-Services[7], which offers IT-services and tools like ELN/LIMS[8] to the researchers for handling data mainly during the active research phase.

The significance of research data management is steadily increasing for researchers and funders as well as in curricula and good scientific practice, as stated in ETH Zurich's Guidelines for Research Integrity.[9] The ETH Library collaborates with the Technology Transfer Office[10] and the Office of Research[11] regarding intellectual property and research ethics issues respectively.

With the growing digitisation of science and society, a curation gap[12] is opening between research practice and curation needs. The ETH Library is striving to intensify collaborations with new generations of researchers in order to promote a mutual learning process, tackle new challenges and close this gap. For a technical university like ETH Zurich, it is especially useful to have staff with a background in science in order to strengthen the ties between archives and research.

Pointers for the future: interdisciplinary cooperation

Analogue and digital archivists face similar challenges: research data, records, and private papers are often managed poorly and lack a stringent system or coherent metadata to understand their context. It is thus imperative to bridge archives and research by:
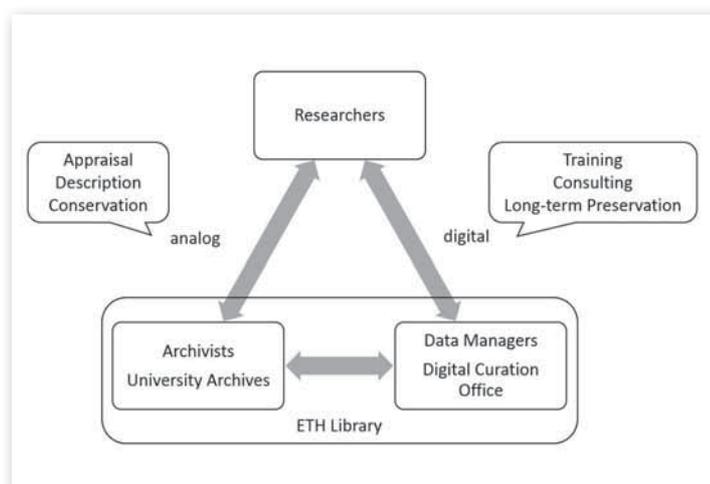

Figure 1 - Interactions between different actors across the disciplines

- providing training to researchers to improve data and records management.
- providing workable management practices both for data and documents.
- raising awareness among university staff and researchers in general (e.g. through colloquia).

It is important for information professionals within an organisation to know each other's services and areas of expertise in order to be able to refer researchers to the right contact person. Hybrid research material (i.e. both analogue and digital) will continue to be the norm for decades to come.

From our own personal professional experience at ETH Zurich, we believe that close cooperation across the disciplines (cf. figure 1), from scientists to archivists, data curators, records managers, and IT-specialists, will yield the best results for preserving scientific and cultural heritage for generations to come.

Ana Sesartić and Marion Wullschleger
ETH Library, ETH Zurich

[1] For an overview of ETH Zurich's diverse landscape of archives and special collections see https://www.ethz.ch/collections-archives.
[2] http://www.library.ethz.ch/en/Resources/Archival-holdings-documentations/ETH-Zurich-University-Archives
[3] C.J. Huber, "*Digitale Langzeitarchivierung im Hochschularchiv der ETH Zürich – Eine Herausforderung für das Archivmanagement*" in B. Rehse and Irina Schwab, eds., Archivmanagement: Ressourcen nutzen, Potentiale erkennen. Frühjahrstagung der Fachgruppe 8 im Verband deutscher Archivarinnen und Archivare e.V. (2015, Leipzig), pp. 44-52.
[4] http://www.library.ethz.ch/Digital-Curation
[5] http://data-archive.ethz.ch
[6] http://www.library.ethz.ch/DOI-Desk-EN
[7] https://sis.id.ethz.ch/
[8] https://openbis-eln-lims.ethz.ch/
[9] https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/itet/department/Studies/ETH_Research_Integrity_2011.pdf
[10] http://transfer.ethz.ch
[11] https://www.ethz.ch/en/the-eth-zurich/organisation/staff-units/office-of-research.html
[12] See A. Sesartic et al. in ISPRS Int. J. Geo-Inf., 5, 6 (2016), p. 91; doi: 10.3390/ijgi5060091.