



FIZnews

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Why democracy needs archives – an interview with Vice President e-Research Matthias Razum

Karlsruhe, September 15, 2024 — Today, Sunday, is the International Day of Democracy: a day of remembrance initiated by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007 with the aim of promoting and defending the principles of democracy. To mark this important occasion, we spoke to Matthias Razum, who heads the e-Research unit at FIZ Karlsruhe, about how archives, documentation centers and digital thematic portals strengthen democracy and why facts are such an important tool against the trivialization and relativization of injustice.

Question: Why does democracy need archives? How can archives and documentation centers in the digital age strengthen democracy?

Archives are, so to speak, windows into the past: thanks to their archival records, we can understand how society and government action worked in the past. At the same time, they collect for the future the files, photos and other documents we produce today. They select those documents that are of lasting value. A glance at the countless photos in your cell phone shows that you can't do without selection. Choosing the right ones to make our current era, our actions and social developments comprehensible in the future is a real challenge. There is a nice term for this: "tradition formation". The archivists observe the "document output" of our society - especially that of governments, authorities and offices. This creates transparency. And



transparency is an absolute prerequisite for democracy. We citizens can only exercise our role as sovereigns if we are informed.

There is no democracy without transparency

Question: Could you explain what exactly EEZU is and how such software can support the work of archivists and democratic participation?

Unlike libraries, archives mostly hold unique collections that can no longer be found anywhere else. This is why even small and very small archives are important - for historical research as well as for local citizens. Democracy does not only take place in Berlin and Brussels. However, most of these small institutions are massively understaffed and underfunded. As a result, they are barely able to cope with the digital transformation. However, being digitally visible is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for perception. Adrian Lobe wrote exaggeratedly in the SZ: "Only what Google finds exists". With our simple indexing and access software EEZU, we support smaller archives in digitally recording their finding aids, managing their digitized material and making their holdings findable on the Internet. All they need is a laptop and Internet access. And if the archive is then just a mouse click away, the threshold for citizens to do research there is lowered.



Question: The thematic portal “Compensation for National Socialist Injustice” is another important project in which FIZ Karlsruhe is playing a key role. How do such portals help in coming to terms with historical injustices? Who are the target groups?

Archives have huge collections in order to fulfill their mission. It is therefore time-consuming to find your way around and locate the most interesting archive material on topics that are important to society and strengthen democracy. This is why we are working with partners such as the Federal Archives and the State Archives of Baden-Württemberg with their documentation center on right-wing extremism to create thematic portals. One of these is the thematic portal on compensation for National Socialist injustice, funded by the Federal Ministry of Finance. The long-term goal here is to make all case files - i.e. the authorities' decisions on applications for compensation - digitally available worldwide, insofar as this is legally and ethically possible. That's more than 100 km of files strung together. It may not sound that exciting at first, but each case in these files is a personal testimony to the injustice suffered. Each file contains the account of an individual's life and suffering - and at the same time documents how the authorities dealt with these traumatic accounts. This reflects society's attitude to the controversial issue of compensation at the time. Above all, however, it meticulously documents the inconceivable injustice of the Nazi era. Millions of facts against trivialization and relativization: this is obviously important for political education. But it is also important for the families of the victims to understand their family history, which has often never been talked about.



Millions of facts against trivialization and relativization

Question: Is there anything that archives can do that the press, authorities, public bodies or perhaps even the government cannot do?

Archives have an advantage over the press: the public authorities are obliged by law to make their records available. This means that government agencies must offer documents that they no longer need to the relevant archive. These documents are not immediately accessible, there are retention periods, for example to protect the persons concerned. But it is clear what is available in the archive. And in exceptional cases, unfortunately, what is *not* there, even though it should be. The NSU complex is an inglorious example of this, in which some files were destroyed in disregard of the obligation to provide them. But this can be documented, too. And there are many non-governmental archives, such as those of the new social movements, which have collected material in this area. On behalf of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, we are currently working with state and non-state archives to design a thematic portal on the history of right-wing violence in Germany since the end of the Second World War. This is one more example of the importance of small and very small archives for our society and democracy!

The interview with Matthias Razum was conducted by Franziska Kretschmer.

[More information about the e-Research unit is available here.](#)



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