Leonardo MUSCI*

* Consorzio BAICR Sistema Cultura

Archivi del Novecento: a project in progress, a software in evolution

The Consortium BAICR (acronym for Libraries and Archives of Roman Cultural Institutes) is a non-profit agency set up in 1989 by five important cultural institutes: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana (so called Treccani), Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Istituto Luigi Sturzo, Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso, Società geografica italiana.

In the beginning of nineties BAICR promoted a network of private archives as a primary source for reconstruction of cultural, social and political history of Italian twentieth century. Basic ideas of the project (called "Archivi del Novecento") were simple but innovative when interacting:
a) every archival fond is a piece of a complex structure, the richness and multiplicity of which need to be revealed through a correct system of description;
b) twentieth century documents need a dedicated descriptive layout;
c) the relations between archival creators and documentary complexes can be described in a network in order to "virtually" reconstruct units broken by historical events;
d) it is necessary to give more attention to the contents of archival units of description beyond the traditional systems of arrangement;
e) our mission is to create a work community of archivists who could share methods, syntaxes and terminology as a guaranty of cultural value added.

Network as a relation of cultural objects exists by itself but needs to be highlighted. To establish connections among documentary sources and to make the archives "speak" among them: these are ordinary aims of researchers' work. We had, instead, to improve archival and documentation operators' behaviour so that their deep-rooted tendencies to isolationism and identification with partial sources could have got over. In our field this means: more opportunities of contextualisation, shared descriptive practices, participation to draw up detail rules, enrichment of archival survey, not made to measure layout. A working party on archival description issues "open documents" as operating tutors for daily activities.

To carry out the plan as written above, we and the firm Datamat have developed a software (named GEA), now running in the

4.06 release. From the beginning, cultural project has ruled the data processing project: we have not a commercial approach to the spread of GEA even if we must of course get funds to invest in research (reminding we are a non-profit group). We're more interested to involve GEA users as much as possible in the sharing of archival guidelines (of course referred to international standards of description), conceiving the application software as a device able a) to enhance the level of communication among the archivists; b) to represent fully archival relations (interior bonds in the fonds; relationship between creators and archives; condition of archival custody; c) to promote public access to archival contents. I would underline that in 2005 the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Italian State National Archive) has chosen GEA.

Following these assumptions, we are now working on a new GEA release, whose issue is scheduled for Spring 2007. Among many novelties, I would point out that we'll develop a multilingual version based on a disposable dictionary of archival terms: whoever would the software speak his own language, he will have to give us the map of archival term in that language; we will provide to translate all technical messages the software shows. Special agreements will be made with institutions that will be able to supply the translation of user's guide.

We hope that this evolution will allow a higher degree of standardisation and normalisation in archival description.

For any further information you can see the website of project www.archividelnovecento.it and of Consortium www.baicr.it.