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THE DIGITAL ARCHIVE AND THE POLITICS OF DIGITISATION

Gerben Zaagsma, Assistant Professor, [Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History \(C²DH\)](#)

This paper deals with a question that is becoming increasingly important for historians who work with digitised cultural heritage: what are the politics of digitisation and what are its implications for historical research? Is the often-lauded democratising potential of digitisation also offset by risks, inherent in selection processes that might privilege the digitisation of heritage corresponding to existing national master narratives, the availability of funding and/or the priorities set by cultural policies and certain research agendas? How does transnational heritage fit into this picture when most digitisation projects are, in one way or another, nationally framed? What biases can digital archives introduce in our work and how does that differ from issues of bias and selection in the 'paper' archive? In discussing these questions, I will provide a couple of examples before emphasising the importance of more transparency in this regard and the need for guidelines about how digital archives are constituted. A key point to highlight is that professional historians can and should be more open to learn from the experience of digital archivists and librarians who are at the forefront of the digital turn in heritage work.

Biography

Gerben Zaagsma is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) at the University of Luxembourg. His main fields of interest are modern European Jewish history (including Yiddish Studies), digital and public history. Within the context of digital history he is particularly interested in the methodological and epistemological implications of using new technologies in historical research and writing. He currently works on a new project about the politics of digitisation, as well as several smaller spatial historical projects.