

The topotheque, a “harvesting machine”

Almost ten years after its launch, the topotheque has become something more than “just” a reservoir for historical image documents of all kinds. It has a story to tell about its own history. A look back on the first decade of the topotheque and a glimpse into the future.

When you are searching the Internet for old pictures on the history of your family or of the places they were living at, you will most probably come across the topotheque. The online platform for privately owned historical documents was founded in 2010 and has meanwhile developed into an online archive which is being taken seriously and promoted by experts from all over Europe. Thanks to their integration into the co:op project, topotheques are currently in place in more than eleven European countries. They are mainly operating on a local level and are managed by more than 800 people, our so-called “topothecarians”. In response to the geographical spreading of the platform’s use, the user interface of the topotheque has become multilingual: At the moment, about 400,000 records are available in 17 languages.

The future is geared towards a meta topotheque

Further technological development will focus on searches across languages and topotheques. A “meta topotheque” will connect all topotheques and allow global searches. It will therefore no longer be necessary to enter your search terms in one topotheque after another. Instead, a single search will automatically go through all topotheques that exist – from Finland to Spain! Thesauri are yet another feature that will be in-

cluded in future versions. If you presently want to search for pictures of dogs you have to enter all kinds of breeds to get good results – ranging from Chihuahuas to Golden Retrievers. With the use of thesauri, you will automatically receive results for all dog breeds. Thesauri will also make automatic translations possible. With the search term “dog”, the topotheque will automatically include the German word “Hund” or the Italian word “cane” in the search.

A versatile tool for training and education

The steadily growing number of topotheques has created a solid basis on which new use cases can be considered. In many courses on local history, for example the one held by the Lower Austrian Provincial Archives, topotheques have become an essential part of the training. In addition, museums are increasingly turning to topotheques when they put together an exhibition. The Lower Austrian provincial museum “Museum Niederösterreich” is taking an important step in this direction by hosting the annual topothecarians’ meeting of Lower Austria in the autumn of 2019. Topotheques will be able to play a major role in many areas of training and education, for example at schools. The renewed participation in the Citizen Science Award 2019 for schools underlines



Everything started with Alexander Schatek’s own Prater photo collection from his childhood in the third district of Vienna. In order to bring order to his treasures, Schatek had an online archive programme programmed, which allowed an exact indexing.

the fact that the topotheque of the future has everything it takes to become a standard tool.

Time travelling with the topotheque

The topotheque will also play an essential role in the development of local time machines. The EU project “Time Machine”, in which ICARUS is a part of the steering committee, includes plans to this purpose. In this sense the topotheque will turn into a “harvesting machine” that collects the material which is then processed by artificial intelligence. In the end, it will be possible to reconstruct entire places and localities at a certain point in history.

Link

Discover the international
Topotheque landscape:
topotheque.eu

info

Alexander Schatek has a degree in Industrial Design from the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Since 1989 he runs his own company in Wiener Neustadt; in 2010 he became the “father” of the topotheque.

© Franz Baldauf

