

European Navigator: the Authoritative Multimedia Reference on the History of Europe

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One of the most common examples deployed in the argument that the European Union (EU) suffers from a so-called 'democratic deficit' is that a lack of information and analysis exists about its history and institutions. For an individual faced the task of exploring its history – perhaps an undergraduate student taking a course which somehow touches upon the early integration process – a yearning for information can be satisfied by the reading of one of a plethora of academic texts that have been released over the years. Yet even here, and despite the ever-increasing amount of ink spilt on the issue of the early EU, this type of work all too often occupies but a small slice of the wider history holdings of university and public libraries. More general 'textbooks' devoted to the theme normally fail to make use of any thorough documentary evidence, while equally the explosion of archival-based monographs may not be the best point of departure for a simpler overview. 'Bringing history alive' may seem a favourite catchphrase of government, but the idea that in order for students to fully grasp and engage with Europe's history there needs to be less reliance on conventional output does seem valid.

The use of digital media is perhaps a vivid illustration of what can be done to plug an apparent void in European integration historiography. The very fact it is 'digital' can appeal to students more than most other methods, while the ability to draw on more varied sources – more on which below – can prove to be a useful addition to traditional material. The European Navigator (ENA, www.ena.lu [2]) is among one of the better examples of such an attempt. The website is a 'digital library', a product of a development by the *Centre Virtuel de La connaissance sur l'Europe* in Luxembourg. The site claims – rather too boldly at times – to be an 'authoritative multimedia reference on the history of Europe' based on documents which cover all the key events in the post-war development of modern day Europe.

At first glance the ENA website seems to be very well structured. On entering the website the user is

confronted by a sidebar with five categories: 'historical events'; modern day 'European organisations'; an ominous sounding 'special files' section with a focus on what its designers see as particularly relevant periods of Europe's history; an 'interviews' section; and a 'research and teaching' section which, by the website's own omission, is an area designed for researchers, teachers and students but one still under development. The number of documents collected in all sections is also impressive. About 16,000 documents are made available and cover different formats such as videos, interviews, press cuts, cartoons, photos, letters, summary records of meetings and various others. In order to use all kind of documents ENA website users do not have to download additional software, to which any computer-phobe would undoubtedly breathe a huge sigh of relief. All documents open easily and quickly in a new window as well, another welcomed aspect of the site.

The site is geared to obtaining rather general information on the most important time periods of the European integration process. This includes the development, organisation and the political responsibilities of the various European institutions - including not only the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission but also, for example, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, the European Central Bank and the Council of Europe etc. The first two main sections are of the highest value for ENA website users; they contain several subsections providing very detailed information on the various steps of European integration beginning from the pioneering phase in the late 1940s up to the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union in 2007.

To locate such topics or documents regarding European integration history, users have two options. As with the above, they can navigate through various thematic files. For example, to find a selection of documents on the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in April 1951 one can attempt to find the section headed as such. One major rub with doing so, however, is that the user has to open four thematically consecutive folders. Thus, the initial well-defined structure of the ENA website gets slightly unclear. On the other hand, this structure does allow for new documents and future developments of the European integration process to be easily incorporated into the website.

The second – and more useful – aspect of the website which removes the confusing 'sub-division of sub-folders' scenario is its search functionality. To take the example of a search for 'Denmark', the website returned, almost instantaneously, 182 documents of relevance. The scope of the search results was impressive, if a little haphazard. For instance, a copy of a Danish Communist pamphlet on the EEC from 1971 sat between a 1992 *Die Zeit* article on the Danish position towards the Maastricht Treaty and a table of manufactured exports from the Nordic region in 1967. The ability to search within searches or to filter/sort results according to a particular wish is a feature lacking and would be a welcome addition here.

Yet in a sense the search revealed just how comprehensive and ambitious this site is. A varied collection of background notes on Denmark and NATO all the way through to the inclusion of photographs and speeches – text and sound based – demonstrate where the real value of this resource lies. Another major merit of the structure of the ENA website is the synopses introducing each of the numerous topics on the history of Europe. These are very well written and make the complex process of European integration attractive to laypersons. The synopses are very often of different length, however. Thus, while some are too short others are too long. In total 650 synopses can be found which cover topics such as, for example, the transparency in the Council of the European Union or the European Unions relations relation with African, Caribbean and Pacific States.

From on practical point of view, the ENA website provides some very helpful tools. The most attractive tool for users is the option to create an album to collect documents. In order to create such an album users must first register. Registration is free and is not binding. Just by clicking the 'Create Album' icon new albums are automatically created in a personal area and may first not be viewed by other users. Besides, there is an option to share an album with other users. These public albums may be consulted by other users but may only be modified by the person who created them. However, this option of public albums is a very practical toolbox for website users to create eventually a common work basis in form of shared pools of historical documents on European history. In this respect, the possibility to create a personal or public album is the

interactive element of the website. The high number of already created albums proves that this is an extremely popular tool for ENA website users.

Frequently interpreted as a hurdle for the integration of Europe, the variety of languages is less of a problem for the ENA website and its dissemination in Europe. The website is available in five different languages: French, German, Dutch, Spanish and English. However, not all documents and synopses are available in these five languages. No surprise, all documents are only available in French, German and English. Moreover, it is a pity that the website does not include any East European languages. To make the website available at least in the language of the largest East European member state of the European Union, Poland, would not only comply with the own entitlement of the ENA website producers to be the 'authoritative' reference, it would also aptly reflect the current status of the European Union itself.

A similarly less striking aspect of the website is the use of archival news clippings. Following our search for 'Denmark' we undertook a thorough root around the site in an attempt to see what newspapers had been used by the developers. Given the importance of political posturing and arguments over the entire integration process, and as with the language issue, we were somewhat dismayed by the overreliance on German, French and, to a lesser extent, Italian newspapers. To use our 'Danish' example again, and in addition to the previously mentioned *Die Zeit*, the search results produced articles drawn from *Le Monde* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* but nothing from any Danish or Scandinavian source. This is clearly another omission that needs urgent correction if the ENA is going to continue referring to itself as an 'authoritative' source.

The layout, content and basic introductions all provide flesh to the fact that while a useful resource this is one primarily aimed towards a basic audience, for example undergraduate students or members of the general public, than anyone more comfortable with European integration history. This is, on the whole, true throughout, and the site itself lists pupils and students of European integration as the main beneficiaries. At the same time, however, a number of searches produced an impressive array of source material to which even the more seasoned academic could find useful. Again using our example search for 'Denmark', the more developed European integrationist will find the copies of speeches by Jens Otto Krag or the Commission's Opinion on Danish entry an immense – and perhaps even previously undervalued – resource. The inclusion of pictures such as Prime Minister Krag signing the Treaty of Accession or that of the cover of the Danish Communist's position on entry reminds those of us working on Danish accession that we are talking about real people with real emotions facing real situations. The level of pressure and the immensity of the task at hand do not always come through in the archival documents or indeed the monographs on them, and this is where the value of digital output lies. Still, these are rare moments in what is essentially a resource for students of EU history or those teaching it. The latter will prove particularly true when the 'research and teaching' is developed further.

In all, the layout of the ENA website is plain, simple and effective. It fits very well to a website with scientific requirements and is certainly an information-rich site. In essence we share the view of Richard E. Baldwin (Professor of International Economics, Graduate Institute of International Studies) published on the ENA website: 'I [we] really like the site. It is absolutely fantastic and helps students born after 1980 understand what European integration was all about'. It is in this respect – as a resource for students – that this website should be highly commended.

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[3]

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[1] <http://history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4925>

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