

*Speech for ODIS 2, launching event  
Friday November 29  
Vlaams Parlement Brussel*

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Ladies and Gentleman,

Let me welcome you here, in this modern temple of democracy, on behalf of the Flemish Government.

I am honoured to address you in my capacity of Chairman of the Board of the Hercules foundation, which is one of the science funding agencies of the Flemish Government.

As the mythical name Hercules suggests, we are not a light-weight funding agency, as our main assignment is the financing of scientific infrastructure in the universities and strategic research centers of Flanders.

Some 8 years ago, when I was the head of cabinet of the minister-president, we noticed that in the funding of scientific projects through our Flemish Science Foundation, systematically, the requests for scientific infrastructure and machinery were removed and killed by referees of project proposals, because priority was given to human capital, people and researchers.

Of course, we all know that in modern science, research infrastructure, experimental set-ups, and hardware are indispensable for high-quality and break through research.

In addition, there are many other dimensions that are not dealt with by the more classical science funding agencies. Who decides about participation in European networks for research infrastructure, like the networks that exist in ESFRI ? Who will contribute to the funding of those networks and who will bring the researchers together? Where do we stimulate interaction between research teams and institutes, to avoid double investments in expensive infrastructure, which is more than often underused or not fully booked.

A particularly nice example is the need for a supercomputing facility, an investment that exceeds the financial capacities of an individual university or research institute.

For all these reasons, the government decided to create a new funding agency, appropriately called Hercules, with an initial annual budget of 15 mio euro, to fund the scientific infrastructure in research projects and programs.

Actually, this very parliament that hosts us today, voted a new decree on the Hercules Foundation some three months ago. In close collaboration with the Flemish Government we are now operationalizing this decree, so that in the near future, we can serve the Flemish scientific community even better.

The type of proposals we consider are twofold. Projects with a budget over 1.5 mio euro are treated by an international selection committee. Projects below 1.5 mio are dealt with by the research councils of the universities.

Of course, the budget we have now, is largely insufficient. While the success rate of applying is about 30 %, we clearly see, in our statistics after 5 years of operation, that we have to reject too many high quality proposals, and that sometimes, we are forced to prioritize for other reasons than pure scientific ones.

But, the project we are launching today, is an example of one that got funded by the Hercules Foundation. Which gives me the opportunity to emphasize that we not only fund infrastructure in the exact and biomedical sciences, and in engineering, but also in the humanities research infrastructure is funded.

Currently, about 25 % of the funding goes to projects in the humanities, the share of which is growing over the years.

I myself, as an engineer, am involved in a digital humanities project, in which we digitize old Flemish polyphony musical manuscripts. It even brought us in the secret archives of the Vatican, on exactly the same day as the new pope was elected.

But the major parts of projects in the humanities evolves around databases and digitized heritage and archives.

Your project is one of them, supported by Hercules. It focusses on a contextual web database for the Study of 19th and 20th Century Intermediary Structures.

Let me tell you that we appreciate very much the fact that this research driven instrument brings together the main Flemish private heritage and research organisations with archival holdings, who combine their expertise.

The web database that you are developing and maintaining, centers around many contextual datasets, by which research on the history of civil society, intermediary structures and their protagonists is facilitated. The database can be addressed in several 'mode operandi', ranging from 'encyclopedia', over 'reference engine' to 'archives', and access to periodicals and other scholarly resources.

As the word 'Big Data' is very fashionable these days, I should at least mention it once in my speech.

You know that Big Data is like teenage sex.  
Everone talks about it.  
Nobody really knows how to do it.  
Everone thinks everyone else is doing it.  
So everyone claims they are doing it.

But ODIS is no teenager anymore. The scope of ODIS has rapidly expanded, so that you are getting in the realm of Big Data Country: you have data on more than 31 000 organisations, more than 100 000 individuals, 22 000 serial publications and more than 9000 archives. So maybe you are also comparable to a kind of NSA, not looking into present data, but an NSA that looks into the past. And that this is done by many people, is witnessed by the fact that in 2012 some 106 000 users consulted ODIS, with nearly 620 000 registered record views.

Another fashionable word today is inter- or multidisciplinary. And many people, especially science policy makers, talk about it, not realizing that already today there are excellent examples of cross-fertilization, like ODIS, in which people with very different backgrounds and interests, interact, obtain results, and amplify the resonance of their documentary heritage. ODIS has demonstrated the last decade that a modern and multifunctional online instrument can support a rich diversity of heritage initiatives.

Many research challenges remain, not the least to internationalize initiatives like yours, and connect to similar partners in Europe. Everywhere on this globe, projects in digital humanities are on the rise.

Ladies and gentleman,

It goes without saying that our historical, cultural, political and socio-economic heritage is extremely important for our European culture. The heritage that is being preserved in archives, not only

contains our memory, but is also the yeast of events that happen today and will happen tomorrow.

Therefore, I am convinced of the fact that increasingly, the marriage between the humanities and technology will be deepened the coming years.

And the Hercules Foundation will be a very happy patron, with deep pockets, to support the many children that will be born from this marriage.

Thank you and good luck.