The woes of Swedish private archival institutions

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Swedish
private
archival
institutions

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Received 27 January 2016
Revised 21 May 2016
5 September 2016
5 October 2016
Accepted 14 October 2016

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the long-term preservation challenges that the Swedish private archives are faced with. In as much as they offer a complement to the public archives and hence offer a nuanced national narrative, they lack both financial and human resources to effectively deal with the digital information management environment.

Design/methodology/approach – Participatory Action Research (PAR) was used to identify the challenges of long-term preservation together with the six private archives institutions that were involved in the collaboration. The collaboration was financially facilitated by the Södertörn University. PAR is defined as a systematic investigation, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change. What is distinctive of PAR is the active involvement of people whose lives are affected by the phenomenon under study.

Findings – The private archival institutions face long-term preservation challenges such as lack of a digital repository that would facilitate the capture, organization and management of digital records that are of different formats and in a dispersed environment. There are no stringent legal requirements to facilitate the creation and management of the records in a standardized way and the institutions fear that imposing such requirements might deter their clients from depositing archival materials with them. The institutions will also need to espouse the business-oriented archival descriptions where private organizations are concerned to identify relevant archival materials and to promote participatory archival descriptions that would allow the creators to tag their records with metadata. Digital information requires a proactive approach, that is, planning for the long-term preservation of the information before it is created. Private archives need to invest in education packages that will facilitate their clientele's understanding of the challenges of digital long-term preservation.

Research limitations/implications – The findings cannot be generalized to all private archival institutions, as it was only six institutions that participated, but the issues discussed are relevant to most archival institutions.

Practical implications – A lot of research has been carried out in the area of long-term preservation, but researchers have not paid enough attention to the woes of the private archives. To sustain a nuanced national narrative, the private archives need all the support to be able to live up to their mission of preserving archives of the private sector that are not captured by the public archival institutions. This is important in a pluralistic society such as Sweden. Highlighting the challenges might enable the institutions to work towards finding common challenges.

Social implications – The private archives are part of Sweden's national heritage. Their preservation matters to the society as a whole and to enhancing the voices of the underrepresented.

Originality/value – The literature review revealed that not much research has paid attention to the challenges being faced by the private archives. This paper, therefore, contributes to this knowledge gap.

Keywords Long-term preservation, Digital information, Archival repository, Business-oriented archival descriptions, Participatory archival descriptions, Private archives

Paper type Research paper

The author would like to thank Södertörn University for the grant that facilitated the collaboration that the author had with the six archival institutions that were involved in the discussions that led to formulation of this article. She, therefore, thanks the members of the institutions for sharing their views.

1. Introduction

This article presents the long-term preservation challenges faced by six Swedish private archival institutions. Private archives are created by the private sector and may constitute archives of private organizations, associations and individuals. Private archival institutions are part of the Swedish national cultural heritage and hold archives that contain information that should be re-used by its creators and as a national resource (Riksarkiven, 2010). These archives are an important complement to the public archives. They cover other spheres of society and contribute to a full understanding of the history of everyday life, political and social developments in Sweden. The information in these archives, therefore, offers a nuanced picture of societies and is a rich source for research. This is why countries such as Canada have embraced the philosophy of “total archives”. The idea behind the philosophy of “total archives” is the requirement for public archival institutions to acquire and preserve all information of significance. This has meant acquisition of information from other sources other than government. The total archives concept has been used in Canadian archival history for the past 150 years (Millar, 1998). This approach addresses the issue of representation in the archives.

Recording and preserving the memories and histories of different communities harnesses the voices of the voiceless and the under-represented within mainstream cultural institutions. Cook (2011, p. 174) wondered, “how well we integrate conceptually a virtual ‘total archives’ of government and major institutional archives with private-sector personal and family archives in ways to complement and supplement each other”. He also postulated that it is through the “total archives” approach that different aspects of life from both the private and public sector can contribute to the greatest potential of archival value, that is, complementary, holistic and integrated. Cook was of the view that certain sections of the society have been de-legitimized through exclusion from the archives. Archives and heritage should endeavor to be representative and inclusive (Flinn, 2007). Traditionally, the collection and preservation of archives was performed after the information had lost its immediate value for the creating organization. The current information landscape requires a proactive approach which necessitates the management of the entire information continuum (Svärd, 2014). This means planning for the management of information before it is created, including managing it for long term. To wait until information is transferred to the archival institutions by its creators is posing a challenge to the private archival institutions who operate on very limited budgets. The information is likely to be locked in legacy systems if steps are not taken early enough to migrate it to new technical platforms.

The Swedish cultural policy objectives that were formulated in 2009 referred to cultural institutions as bearers of and vehicles of knowledge (Kulturrådet, 2017). Archives are characterized by continuity, and this requires systems that can maintain them in an authentic and reliable manner. Though information systems have enabled the information society to enjoy the advantages of being able to accumulate enormous amounts of information and to use it in various ways, we still face the challenges of managing this information for long term. Since the 1990s when digitization intensified, there have been warnings for a “digital black hole” (Palm, 2006). This has been exacerbated by the constantly changing information technologies and technology obsolescence. This development is likely to lead to immeasurable loss of valuable information which is dispersed in different creating environments. The challenges of managing digital information are many and may include legal issues, intellectual property, metadata and policy questions (Barata, 2004). These challenges are more pronounced in the private archival institutions. Despite the fact that they are considered a complement to the public archival institutions and part of the national heritage, they lack the financial and human resources to manage digital information. Additionally, while government institutions are

required through legislation to hand-over their archives to public archival institutions, people who deposit archival materials with private archival institutions do not operate under any stringent legal framework. Deposits of archival materials to the private archival institutions are voluntarily made. Therefore, private archival institutions cannot impose requirements on their clients. However, given the challenges of digital information which require a proactive approach, private archives need to develop a strategy that will facilitate their mission of documenting the society in a representative way.

The challenges of managing digital information have been addressed for over a period of 20 years (Bearman, 1994; Dollar, 1992; Duranti and Preston, 2008; Factor *et al.*, 2009; Gladney, 2007; Hackett, 2008; Rothenberg, 1999). Institutions continue to struggle with the management of the growing information volumes as well as the different formats that are used by information creators. The traditional records types, such as minutes, correspondence and accounting records, have been supplanted with new types of records. Examples of these new records include dynamic web pages that are used as contact interfaces and as an instrument of communication, blogs and different social media-generated content and information stored in the cloud by private companies. Though the capacity to create and consume digital information has advanced, the challenges of its preservation are omnipresent. This is because of technology obsolescence and the fragility of digital storage media (Lavoie, 2004). Information is being created and stored in different environments, and it is a challenge to identify and collect what can qualify as archival materials. Yet archival institutions must have “the ability to sustain the accessibility, understandability and usability of digital objects in the distant future regardless of changes in technologies and in the ‘designated communities’ that is, the future users of these archives (Burda and Teuteberg, 2013, p. 442)”. Most of the information today is in distributed information systems, and this complex environment requires adequate and trustworthy repositories, human and financial resources for its effective management. The article offers an introduction which highlights the importance of preserving private archives and the environment under which they operate, a literature review, a method, research findings and a discussion and conclusion.

2. Earlier research and initiatives

Roos (2003) gave an insight in the work of Finnish Business Archives Association (BAA) that was founded in 1960. Its objectives constitute the promotion and development of records and information management and archival science, publication of articles in its quarterly Bulletin called *Faili*, collaboration with sisterly organizations, support to the repository of corporate records to save records of defunct and bankrupt companies. The BAA as Roos refers to it also offers courses in records management and co-operates with records management associations at home and abroad. It further organizes conferences that address archival challenges and it in addition issues retention plans for business records. With the internationalization of the Finnish industry, the BAA also keeps its members abreast with international developments and the impact they have on the management of records and information. He argued that the main challenges are the transition from paper records to electronic media, the fact that organizations are quick at embracing new media without paying much attention to long-term preservation issues and the behavior of managers, planners and other employees to withhold records instead of submitting them for management and preservation.

Lan (2003) looked at the state of the archives and their management in China. She argued that the establishment of records management in the private companies took place much later than in the state-owned companies. Public companies were obliged by the 1987 Archives Law to manage their records. This statutory requirement did not, however, apply to the private sector. She clarified that the nature of the private companies also reflected the

characteristics of records management. The private companies were small scale, spread all over the country, constantly changing and had many types of businesses. She identified challenges such as lack of statutory requirements for the management of records, lack of records and archive management skills, lack of channels for receiving relevant information on laws and regulations, low levels of archival consciousness and lack of an understanding of the consequences of bad records management on profits and law suits. However, when private companies start being registered and controlled by the local Bureau of Industry and Commerce Administration, most local archival bureaus started promoting knowledge on private archives' work, and this was to be introduced around the country.

Fisher (2009, p. 2) postulated, private archives are a poor cousin to government archives in the family of archival theory. Archivists who work with private archives often lament the absence of a professional literature on which to base their work and thought about the archival endeavor. It was further lamented in a Nordic national archives' report that not much work has been done to address the long-term preservation challenges faced by the private archives (Riksarkiven, 2010). A benchmarking study that was conducted on behalf of the Nordic national archives confirmed that private archives face long-term preservation challenges and that the issue needs to be prioritized. Though considered to be a complement to the public archives, they are accorded less political support and, hence, the constrained budgets with which they operate. The report further established that the archival holdings of the private archives are almost equal in volume to those of public archives. This has implications on the resources required to salvage them. The report confirmed that if nothing is done to capture the volumes of information in the private archives, the Nordic societies risk losing part of their history (Riksarkiven, 2010). The responsibility to preserve Sweden's cultural heritage is divided between libraries, archives and museums. The digitization process is, however, at different levels in the different institutions (Statskontoret, 2014). At a national level, the Swedish government is investing money in the effective management of digital information. Through the national archives, collaborative projects have been established between the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and government institutions. Among the issues that have been examined is the development of electronic archives. These projects have, however, only focused on the management of information produced by government institutions (Riksarkiven, 2010).

The digitization and preservation of archival holdings require planning for the future and funding for maintenance (Palm, 2006). Technology obsolescence poses challenges that will obliterate institutional memories and information resources if proper information planning is not undertaken (Dollar, 2000; Gladney, 2007; Rothenberg, 1999; Sturges, 2006). Preserving digital information requires addressing issues of file formats and creating a strategy for future action. This means establishing procedures and acquiring equipment and software needed to maintain the information in the archives accessible and authentic for current and future use (Dollar, 2000). Hedstrom (2003, p. 12) postulated that:

In some cases market forces work against long-term preservation by locking customers into proprietary formats and systems, adding new features to encourage or force upgrades, and phasing out useful but unprofitable hardware, software, and services.

Dollar (2000) emphasized that long-term preservation requires undertaking long-term policies, quality control, environmental control, monitoring and transfer of information, reformatting, migrating and multi-institutional co-operation. In 1999, Rothenberg contended that there was no viable long-term strategy that would enable the reading of digital information in the future. Rothenberg's observation was affirmed by the International

Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) project ([Duranti and Preston, 2008](#)).

A lot of projects have been undertaken to address the challenges of managing digital information for the long term. The list below is not exhaustive but includes the Pittsburgh project that addressed the functional requirements for evidence in recordkeeping and metadata requirements for evidence ([Bearman, 1993](#)), the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) Project 1 that was conducted in 1999-2001 and focused on issues surrounding the preservation of authentic administrative records, InterPARES 2 conducted between 2002 and 2007 and focused on theory and methods for ensuring the reliability, accuracy and authenticity of electronic records and InterPARES 3 that was a five-year multi-national project that was scheduled to commence in 2007 and aimed to translate theory and method of digital preservation drawn from the earlier InterPARES projects into concrete action plans ([Dale and Gore, 2010](#); [Duranti and Preston, 2008](#)). In March 2000, the Research Libraries Group (RLG) and Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) embarked on work that strived to establish attributes of a digital repository for research organizations, building on and incorporating the then-emerging OAIS reference model. In 2004, the German Network of Expertise in Long-term Storage of Digital Resources (Nestor) set up the Nestor Working Group on Trusted Digital Repository Certification. In 2004, a group of leading international scholars met at the Swiss Federal Archives under the auspices of the Electronic Resource Preservation and Access Network (ERPANET) to discuss and examine the topic of managing and archiving records in the digital era.

Digital Preservation Europe (DPE) was a collaborative European digital preservation project that ran from 2006 to 2009 and that built on earlier successful work of ERPANET. Its aim was to facilitate the pooling of complementary expertise that exists across the academic research, cultural, public administration and industry sectors in Europe ([Strodl et al., 2011](#)). The Building resources for Integrated Cultural Knowledge Services (BRICKS) project was also funded by the European Union and was established in 2004. It finished its work in 2007 and aimed to tune the mission of memory institutions in the digital era, develop a shared vision for the exploitation of digital cultural content and to encourage cultural co-operation for the construction of an interoperable and co-operation cultural capital. The project focused on researching and the implementation of advanced open source software solutions that promoted the sharing and exploitation of digital cultural materials ([Runnarsdottir, 2009](#)).

In 2005, The Digital Curation Centre (DCC) was created to help solve challenges of digital preservation, digital curation and to lead research, development, advice and support services for higher education institutions in the UK ([Dale and Gore, 2010](#)). In 2006, a program entitled Cultural, Artistic and Scientific knowledge for Preservation, Access and Retrieval (CASPAR) examined how digital data will still be used and understood by future generations despite changes in systems, software and everyday knowledge changes. The Personal Archives Accessible in Digital Media (Paradigm) project was funded between 2005 and 2007 facilitated for major research libraries of the universities of Oxford and Manchester to explore the issue of digital preservation of private papers. This was done through gaining practical experience in accessioning and ingesting digital private papers into digital repositories according to archival and digital preservation requirements ([Hansen, 2008](#)). In Sweden, the Centre for long-term Digital Preservation (LDP) is a competence center for research and technical development and testing of methods and technologies for long-term digital preservation and access ([Quisbert et al., 2009](#)). In 2011, the Swedish government gave the Swedish national archives a task to create a secretariat that

was to co-ordinate efforts directed at the digitalization, preservation and access to Sweden's cultural heritage (Statskontoret, 2014).

Not many projects, however, have focused on the long-term preservation needs of private archives. The author only found the Paradigm Project mentioned above and the following projects:

A project in Västernorrland in Sweden with the acronym "EnArk" (an abbreviation for Enskilda Arkiv and translated as private archives). EnArk was a two-year research and development project which started in 2013 and ended in 2015. It aimed to contribute to a more sustainable and efficient digital archiving of materials created by companies and associations in Västernorrland. It examined issues that prevented private archives from collecting or taking over the custodianship of digital information. This project was conducted at Mid Sweden University and more information on it can be accessed at: www.miun.se/cedif/forskning/avslutade-projekt-och-aktiviteter/enark.

A three-year collaborative project between Uppsala University and the Swedish Labour Movements Archives and Library (ARAB) entitled "The Labour Movement Gone Digital: Preservation of organizational activities in the On-line Era" and that was granted funding in 2014. The project's aim is to collect information from the Swedish trade unions' websites and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The project will, therefore, be in a position to collect and preserve parts of the private archival institutions' digital holdings but not all. More information about the project can be accessed at: www2.statsvet.uu.se/statsvetny2/Forskning/Forskningsprojekt/Forskningsprojekt/Valtforskningsprojekt/tabid/5319/ForskningsId/1279/language/en-US/Default.aspx.

An old Ramp study that was commissioned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 1984 to make widely known and understood the basic problems involved in ensuring preservation and access to an invaluable information and cultural resources of non-governmental institutions and organizations (Seton, 1984).

3. Method

This article draws on collaborative work between Södertörn University and six private archival institutions. The collaboration aimed to develop a research application for funds to address the challenges of digital long-term preservation faced by Swedish private archival institutions. The collaboration was, hence, between practitioners and a researcher. The archival institutions were both medium and small in size. The two medium institutions had to a certain degree systems that were facilitating the management of the digital information, but the remaining four small institutions did not have any such systems and were, therefore, not receiving or collecting digital materials. The two medium archival institutions had between 10 and 20 members of staff, while the small institutions had between 2 and 4 members of staff. The big institutions had more financial resources than the smaller ones. In total, six meetings were held at the archival institutions and the university to identify the challenges of long-term preservation. The meetings took place between November 2014 and February 2015. Minutes were taken during the meetings and preserved in Dropbox to facilitate access and reference. The long-term preservation challenges that are presented in the article were, therefore, based on the discussions that were pursued during the meetings and captured in the minutes. The first draft of the research application was formulated according to what transpired during the first meeting. Drafts were circulated during the remaining meetings to all the representatives of the archival institutions and which led to improvements of the final application. We, therefore, worked according to the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method which is used to address a problem in a given community and

to find a solution to the problem together with the community. It facilitates the creation of a common narrative. PAR is defined as “a systematic investigation, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change” (Minkler, 2000, p. 192). PAR constitutes three stages inquiry, action and reflection. The multiple cycles of these stages improve the knowledge and understanding of those involved in the inquiry. This leads to social action, while reflection leads to new understandings and opens up new areas of inquiry (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2012). What is distinctive of PAR is the active involvement of people whose lives are affected by the phenomenon under study. Pain (2004) posits that participatory research allows research participants to self-represent other than being represented by the researcher. It further generates rich accounts based on qualitative inquiry. Minkler (2000), however, argued that PAR is not a particular research method, but a research orientation that is community driven, systematic, participatory and oriented toward community and social change. Though PAR is commended to enhance capacity building and community development, it is criticized for bringing unequal players together to engage in complicated and predetermined decision-making processes (Minkler, 2000). The researchers and practitioners together in a reflexive process contributed to enhanced knowledge by identifying the challenges and solutions.

4. Long-term preservation woes

4.1 *Trustworthy and sustainable archival repository*

The private sector’s current repositories are insufficient to preserve the emerging formats of digital information. Lack of an archival digital repository was identified as the biggest challenge that the institutions faced. While the institutions continue to receive information in all types of formats, some did not even have the infrastructure to start receiving digital information. There is an immediate need to create a common and scalable archival digital repository that would constitute administrative routines, standards for long-term preservation and methods for accessing digital information. The routines should also address issues of media and format obsolescence, the management of information in dispersed creating environments, privacy and integrity and information security issues. Long-term preservation of digital information means long enough to be concerned with changes in technologies, new media and data formats and the user community. The participating archival institutions identified collaboration with an IT company as a strategy that would facilitate knowledge transfer but also as a way to curb the costs that the creation of an archival repository might require. The institutions have limited budgets and are, therefore, financially vulnerable. They lack resources to make these kinds of investments on their own, and new models of collaboration will have to be developed. Collaboration would enable scalability and, hence, the application of solutions across repositories with heterogeneous holdings and data formats (Hedstrom, 2003).

4.2 *Development of business process-oriented archival descriptions*

To identify and to capture the dispersed archival resources, the private archival institutions identified the need to adjust to new ways of describing archives. Since 1903, archival institutions in Sweden have used a standardized archival description system. It is being abandoned for a business process-oriented archival description model that was created by the Swedish National Archives and issued in 2008 (RA-FS 2008:4) (Jarborn and Gäfvert, 2010). This new system is based on the analysis of the business processes to identify relevant records that need to be preserved for long term. In as much as the business process-oriented archival description offers great advantages when it comes to the identification and capture of important records, the archival institutions were finding hard to reinforce it in an

environment where the production and management of the information is not regulated by law. The institutions were afraid that this could deter some of the clients from depositing their archives with them.

The institutions further needed repositories that would accommodate the different information management processes and that would allow ordinary people and organizations to directly upload their documents, using recommended formats and guidelines. Especially now in an environment where information creators are deserting traditional document creating methods and engaging in networked information management systems, using new channels of communication and different document creating platforms. This development makes it urgent to start proactively working with the information creators because of the volatile nature of the formats being used, the fragmentary nature of the created records and the dispersed environment in which they are created. One way to deal with this challenge would be to undertake participatory archival descriptions which would enable document creators to describe their records and to give them the necessary metadata. Information communication technologies ought to promote participatory archiving and archival descriptions. [Wendy and Harris \(2002\)](#), for example, emphasized the need to create descriptive architectures that can allow genealogists, historians, students and other users to annotate the finding aids or add their own descriptions.

4.3 Creation of education packages for the stakeholders

Though technology has made it possible for most people to create their own content and documents, this is not often followed by an understanding that the information has to be managed for long term. The archival institutions will have to create education packages that can teach the different categories of their clients about the challenges of preserving the content that they deposit with them. Creating awareness through education and espousing standardized document creating procedures would be one way to deal with the challenges. [Runnarsdottir \(2009\)](#) posited that organizing for digital long-term preservation requires paying attention to people, technology and the entire organization.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Private archival institutions have a central role to play in the Swedish national archival system, as they document the civil society and private sector organizations. They hence offer a counter-narrative to that of the public archival institutions. The role private archives play in constructing and evolving identities is essential to understanding the society as a whole. This makes the management of the information generated in the private sector crucial, especially given the fact that digital information can get locked in legacy systems or lost. The exponential growth of digital information and new ways of its creation require effective document management regimes. Private archival institutions can no longer afford to sit and wait until the records are brought into their custody. With the little resources they have, they will need to embrace a proactive approach to influence the information/records creating processes before the creation of the records that they manage. Digital information is problematic because of the short life span of storage media, hardware and software.

Though numerous projects have been pursued to address the challenges of long-term preservation of digital information, very few have focused on the challenges faced by private archival institutions. Private archives are finding it difficult to live up to their mission of collecting digital archival materials because they lack the long-term preservation archival systems and financial and human resources. [Palm \(2006\)](#) argued that the long-term preservation of digital information requires resources to sustain it.

The fact that the private sector information domain is less regulated and only required to be preserved for a limited period of time to fulfill legal and administrative purposes makes the mission of the private archives quite difficult. The archival institutions were, for example, wary that imposing best practice requirements might discourage their clients from depositing archival materials with them. The information management domain has changed drastically because of technological developments, and therefore, private archival institutions also need to adopt new strategies if they are to live up to their mission of collecting and preserving representative archival materials.

Digital preservation starts with the creation of a record, and therefore, the records' creators are key partners if the long-term preservation challenges are to be dealt with. Individuals and organizations need to actively start participating in the archiving processes that have solely been managed by the archival institutions. Lan (2003) demonstrated the necessity to create awareness in her article on the state of records and archives management in the private sector in China. Roos (2003) also highlighted the engagement of the Finish Business Archives Association in the various aspects of records and information management in the private sector. This could be a model for other private archival institutions to emulate. Through training and information sharing with member organizations on developments that affect the management of information, organization of conferences and publication of articles on archival challenges, the organization kept its members informed.

There is further a need for archival institutions to create participatory and business process-oriented archival descriptions to facilitate the identification and capture of archival materials. The solutions needed to mitigate the long-term preservation challenges faced by the private archival institutions will require them to collaborate to identify solutions that can be used across the entire sector and those that would be specific to some of the institutions. The institutions are not homogeneous and, therefore, have individual needs. Collaboration would facilitate knowledge transfer and sharing. The nature of digital long-term preservation challenges will require the institutions to draw upon the knowledge that has so far been generated by the different research projects. The private archival institutions play a complementary role to the public archives and their holdings contribute to a complete understanding of the Swedish cultural heritage. Private archival institutions need financial and human resources to be able to live up to their mission. Additionally, more research should be undertaken on the role they play in the society and the challenges they face in dealing with the current information management environment.

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