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## Knowledge or science archives in a changing world\*

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*Erik Norberg\*\**

### The political environment

**E**urope underwent a fundamental change in the late 1980's and early 1990's. In the middle of the 1980's Europe was divided between the West with its society based upon democratic principles and the East where the state had encompassed every aspect of life. Also the archives, their organisation and practice, reflected the existence of the totalitarian state. With the events between 1989 and 1991 we experienced the emergence of freedom of information and a democratic system. But a condition for a stable democratic state system is a legal framework for access to information. In this context records administration and archives play a most crucial role.

It is for most archivists in a democratic society evident that everyone has the right to gain access to information in archives freely. It is not the duty or right for the archivist to make a selection among the information available. Another aspect on access is that it is a condition for administrative transparency. It makes admi-

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\*\* Director general de los Archivos Nacionales del Reino de Suecia.

nistration function more effective, but it also contributes to the controllability of government and public institutions. Thereby arbitrariness and corruption is prevented and a sound base for a democratic society is laid.

It has in all parts of Europe become clear that archives have a political importance, but we should not forget the cultural aspects. Every country must have the right to preserve its sources for the study of its history. Intellectual cooperation within and between states can exist only in a system where archives give researchers of different kinds free access to the historical sources.

Against this background the Council of Europe recognised that archives are part of its responsibilities and in October 1993 an archives programme was worked out and later adopted. In 1993 and 1994 a number of projects in the archival field were started in cooperation between the Council of Europe and ICA. Seminars were arranged on archival legislation and archival networks. Missions were arranged to different countries. Several actions of different kind are taken within the framework of cooperation between ICA and the Russian Federation.

*One of the most important points on the program was a conference in Strasbourg in November 1994 for directors of national archives, arranged by ICA and the Council of Europe. The aim was to establish a base for cooperation between Western and Eastern European archives. Actions were defined along three main lines:*

- the preservation of the archival heritage,*
- the democratisation of legal systems and procedures,*
- the opening up and improvement of the accessibility of archives.*

The theme of this seminar concerns the third question, access to archives. One of the outcomes of the meeting in Strasbourg was a number of recommendations which should serve to assist countries in implementing minimum requirements to reach a democratic minimum for the creation, administration and use of archives. The recommendations which are most important in this context were the following:

### **In developing a democracy**

- equal access to all should be provided;
- attention should be given to the role of archives in national information systems;
- public records should be made available as soon as possible after their creation, while recognising that privacy and national security have to be protected for a limited time and according to law;
- professional archival control over all stages of the life cycle of public records, regardless of their format or medium, is essential;
- full statutory control over the whole range of public bodies past, present and future should be maintained.

**In order to ensure that archives can fulfill their role in a democratic society;  
with regard to archival policy and legislation**

- the formulation and implementation of appropriate development policies for archives and of comprehensive and up to date archival legislation;
- a national archival system should be responsible for the implementation of the policy within this legal framework;
- guaranteeing the autonomy of the profession and its independence from any external pressure;
- establishing minimum requirements for all archival activities.

**With regard to creation and access**

- setting out adequate standards for preservation;
- enhancing records management;
- establishing descriptive standards;
- applying modern information and communication technologies at local, national and international levels;
- making all finding aids publicly available.

**With regard to professional development**

- establishing a code of good practice and ethical principles;
- translating and disseminating professional literature.

After this conference next step was to work out a program for the future actions. A program Access to Archives was proposed by ICA and later on given support by the Council of Europe. The first step in the program was a series of bilateral round table meetings between experts in archives, research and law. The second step should be the preparation of a set of norms which could serve as a base for further harmonisation of rules guiding access to archives in European countries. The third step should be a consultative meeting between all member states of the Council of Europe with the task of transforming this text to a recommendation which could be submitted for adoption by the Council of Europe.

## **The information technology**

As we have seen, the development of priorities within the archival field have to a large extent been influenced by changes in the international field. The other new field is of course information technology.

The traditional activities of the national archives was to be custodian of national records, to provide King and Government with access to archives and to serve as an armoury for historical research. Towards the middle of the 19th century historians approached the archives to use the historical sources in a more systematic way. They were arranged by the most different subjects and all went on undisturbed until the principle of provenance was officially introduced around the turn of the century after the publication of the well known Dutch Manual. The growing government administration and the new role of the National Archives with responsibilities also for the current records of the agencies made this important. The reasons were not only theoretical but also to a great extent practical.

Since then this basic principle for arranging records has not been severely questioned until electronic archives and records provoked a debate concerning the validity of the traditional theory in a modern environment. The implications of the technical development has been regarded as contradictory to the demands on a stable and longterm theory for arranging records. Is it no longer any need of a basic theoretical framework? Is the principle of provenance out of date now when computers easily can help us to distinguish between the physical and intellectual order in the archives? Can we define the lowest common denominator, the term record in electronic archives? The term public record is crucial in legislation concerning access to information, freedom of information, transparency. What is in that case a public record in a data base where nothing is given in advance, and records are created first when somebody makes use of the data base?

## The role of National Archives in this development

A National Archives must carry a heavy responsibility for all work aiming at access to records. In the daily procedures this task has many aspects.

### Legal questions

Contribution of National Archives to the legislative work or in the safeguard of legal framework. *Historical background and present situation.*

The Scandinavian archival tradition is based upon what is nowadays normally called the "life cycle" approach. This means that there is very little or no difference legally or technically between the current records of the creating agencies or the historical records preserved in the repository of the archival institution. Even the current records are considered to be parts of the national cultural heritage. The access to the historical records is strengthened because of the impact of the freedom of information act and the system for administrative transparency.

The responsibility of the Swedish National Archives over current records dates back to the 1800's when it was decided that a state agency was not allowed to destroy or give away records without first submitting the question to the National Archives. Already in 1879 regulations were issued concerning travels and missions of archivists of the National Archives and the same year one person got the task to look into the Naval Archives in Karlskrona. This was the birth of the "field service" or current records activities of the National Archives.

The West European tradition differs between the countries in this respect. In many countries there are so called intermediary archives used for appraisal and rearranging of archives after they have been transferred from the creating agency. There is at present a strong drive towards the "life cycle" approach. The necessity of this has several times been pointed out by ICA. At the CITRA meeting 1994 one of the resolutions stressed this approach.

Because of the importance of the legislation for any aspect of the archival profession it is not enough if the National Archives has staff trained in interpreting the applicable laws. They must be prepared to make the legislation well known where this is necessary. They must be prepared to guarantee the enforcement of the legislation. They must last but not least be competent to point out to the respective Ministry or the legislative body advantages or disadvantages with the legislation from the professional viewpoint and they must be prepared to be involved in the work for changing or improving legislation where this is necessary.

The link between records management and legislation of interest for access to records

One reason for "life cycle" approach in archives is the need to put all kinds of records within the same legal framework. This will guarantee the preservation of important current records as well as the access to them within the legal exceptions from the freedom of information legislation like e.g. secrecy acts.

The responsibility of the creating agency is supposed to increase within a system of this kind. The agency is obliged to keep the records well arranged and to work out finding aids which can be used not only by the staff of its own but also by the public. These finding aids can be transferred to the archives and finally be used by researchers. The creating agency has to give professional attention to the preservation of its records.

There is a need for the creating agency as well as for the National Archives to organize appraisal and access with respect to the balance between integrity and access.

The "life cycle" approach has a great impact on the practical work of a National Archives. The staff must be trained psychologically and professionally with the aim of working with current records in close contact with the staff of the creating

agency. There must also be an established link within the National Archives between archivists responsible for current records and archivists in charge of transferred records in the repository, research facilities and different technical services.

The link between preservation and access within the archival institution

There must be a clear link between legislation concerning access to records and the practical work of archivists granting the access. This should be pointed out in instructions for the work within the archival institution.

It must be quite clear that the work of an archivist includes responsibilities towards –not only creating agencies and the physical safeguard of the records– but also to the public, researchers and other people with who are interested. This awareness can best be created by a solid archival tradition, but it can also be enhanced by a comprehensive code of ethics for archivists. Such a code of ethics is at present being worked out by ICA, primarily within the Section for Archival Associations. A final draft was prepared for the CITRA meeting this year and a final version will be adopted at the Beijing Conference in 1996.

But a good legal framework granting access to records and a complete agreement on the ethics of the archival profession is not enough. There must be a wide assortment of practical solutions helping the archives or the researcher to exercise the rights given by laws, cultural tradition or ethical codes. Basic among these practical means are finding aids of all sorts from the fundamental inventories to computer based information systems.

The relations between a National Archives and the users. The National Archives as custodian of vital information, but also guarantee for transparency and freedom of information. If the “life cycle” approach shall reach a high standard of credibility, the National Archives must be regarded as trustworthy partner –or opponent– to the rest of Government administration or the civil service. The legislation must be observed also in contacts with other agencies. The National Archives must on the other hand be prepared also to observe how other agencies are fulfilling their obligations in this respect.

The National Archives must be regarded as a safeguard in this regard in relation to academic research as well as other kinds of research, e.g. genealogical etc research. Same task must be exercised in favor of journalists and different kinds of news media.

### **Administrative structure**

Relations between a National Archives and relevant Ministries. The position of a National Archives in civil service

The National Archives must have close contacts with the respective Ministries and with other agencies with tasks within related fields, like e.g. Data Inspection agencies. These contacts can be strengthened by formal solutions given by instructions or special agreements, but they can also have the shape of joint bodies for discussion, investigation or production of background material necessary for decisions.

It is vital that the National Archives not only is regarded as a repository for ancient documents but also as a partner in the current administrative routines. This is also a way to strengthen the role of the archives in general.

Organisation of a National Archives from the point of view of the access question

This is a question which has to be solved with respect to the tradition and fundamental organisation of the institution. The traditional approach was to have a totally integrated organisation. In the course of time the demand on specialisation have grown stronger. Specialists could be posted close to the direction of the archives. There could be a division between records management archivists and archivists responsible for traditional preservation, research and technical services.

The role of the International Council of Archives in this field

ICA has a wide range of activities within this field. It organises general archival cooperation, program activities, activities through Committees on Legal Matters, Current records etc, seminars, CITRA meetings.

ICA is also a link between National Archives and the international community.

It is a fundamental paradox with archives. We talk about the national heritage, are used to building archival repositories which look like national monuments. But we are all aware of the fact that the historical sources like history form a web over the globe which link human beings and countries together.

UNESCO has for long time been the most important partner of ICA. The organisation has subsidised meetings, travels and studies (RAMP).

The Council of Europe is a new but rather important partner, concentrating on archives as a support for the democratic process.

The European Union will be a more and more important partner. Activities have until now concentrated on a general report *Archives in the European Union* and some particular activities concerning archival questions in the electronic age. Cultural programs will follow, however.

The military alliances have exercised an impact on archives by having an important political structure with no respect for traditional boundaries between states or National Archives. Questions concerning the archives of these bodies must be handled in a political context.

## Training

The training and recruitment of archivists and specialists

If a National Archives shall fulfill its role as custodian of access this must influence the education of archivists as well as all in job training. The National Archives must also have at its disposal specialists within this field.

In times of great change and instability, people have a tendency to turn to philosophy and religion. I would say that the political changes, the increasing importance of archives in society, and the development within the information technology has created that kind of instability, however good the development might be from other viewpoints. Many generations of archivists before us have maintained, with more or less justification, that they lived in times of change. We can also maintain this, maybe with even more justification than most before us. And in front of changing administrative environment, information technology in rapid development, attitudes with records creators and users, we turn to discussions concerning archival science and theory.

We have had for some years a lively international discussion concerning the term "archival science". Is there an archival science or is it only a question concerning professional knowledge, practicalities and common sense? Could we speak of a science when we have only one developed theory, the principle of provenance?

I am convinced: time has come to move from theory to science, backwards may some think, but still within the limits of the well proven military strategy of flexible defence when facing a strong opponent, vendors of supply, records creators with short term perspectives.

One of the most obvious self-denials of archival activities is the question if there is anything that could be called an archival science. If the question is answered with yes, the statement is still often followed by the opinion that archival science is rather poor, that most of it is a question of common sense and practical procedures, that we have very little to offer except the discussion concerning the survival of the principle of provenance. Sometimes the scientific content of archival activities is totally questioned and that is of course from an intellectual point of view fully acceptable. But before we enter the discussion concerning the content and idea of archival science I would like to put a few questions of a fundamental kind:

- we invest billions in research on the health of mankind, human body, human wellbeing and human environment. How could we then question the justification of scientific treatment of human intellect transferred to a form which we are able to preserve?
- governments, agencies, universities and firms spend enormous amounts of money on scientific research and development to



increase the distribution of information in society. Should we not then consider also the creation of information, the content, the quality and the preservation from a scientific viewpoint?

The question is only rethorical. Generations of sensible archivists with good training have fulfilled their tasks with more or less scientific ambition. Of course we need to continue the discussion, there is no harm in questioning the fundaments of archival activities, but I think that our main task is to be pragmatic, accept that archival science is not less justified than information science or library science, to go on defining the basic concept of the archival science and do what we can to promote development of science and research in our profession. Between the extremes history and information sciences, where are we to put archival science? Since soome time we have had a most interesting cooperation and some work shops together with the medical firm ASTRA, having and advanced pharmaceutical research, lots of resources and a concept of information and data quality, which is certainly somewhat abstract, but very fruitful for archivists. It was evident that this firm and records creator uses almost an identical approach to questions concerning authenticity and other vital questions as historians do who are specialized in medieval manuscripts.

Technical development together with a new way of looking upon the role of public administration change conditions for agencies and individuals. By the use of modern technique, basic information systems related to registry procedures or internal communication can be extended to external users. Important work can be decentralised. In many important respects the traditional administrative structure is undergoing a development. At the same time it is influenced by a drift of traditional tasks from government administration to municipal environment and from municipalities to corporate form. Important information is transferred from a well organised government framework to rather well managed municipal activities and finally to the private sector where the legal framework supporting archives is poorly developed, and where the possibilities of extending the continuity of records creation are small.

Also in public administration we meet all the more often an established cooperation between state and municipal institutions. And in the international field we meet a cross border flow of information not only in the business sector but also between governments. This is a tendency which expands together with the efforts to coordinate resources and political structures. Those who are responsible for the records creation must decide who is the records creator, which legal framework is applicable, and which agency shall be responsible for the archives.

The technical development has forced us to question traditional boundaries between our field and other activities. A simple way to distinguish between archives

and libraries has been to point at the difference between printed and unprinted material. Libraries as well as archives have started a promising work aiming at common registre rules. This has recently reslted in data term catalogues and rules for authority controle. But even if we are building up joint systems to support preservation and access we need to distinguish between the one and other kind of information and this can not only be done by judging on the basis of legal or constitutional rules.

### Archival science in Sweden

The importance of a scientific approach and an established system for training in archival science is necessary.



Imagen de la invitación a la conferencia "Semblanza de David Alfaro Siqueiros",  
Archivo General de la Nación, 1º de agosto de 1996.

Imagen: Portada del folleto *Noveno aniversario, Homenaje a David Alfaro Siqueiros*, detalle.  
México, Fundación Cultural Siqueiros, 1983. Colección particular.