

Archives in a Changing World

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I am very pleased to speak on the occasion of celebrating the 175th years anniversary of the Rumanian national archive. I am gladly queuing with the congratulators for this jubilee. Two years ago my honoured colleague Cornel Lungu together with his committed staff has shown me the Rumanian state archive here in Bukarest and other important archives like the one in Sibiu. I have seen rich historical fonds, I was exalted by the beautiful archive building in the typical art nouveau stile in Sibiu. But the Rumanian archives have also taken off to play a vital role in the 21st century. The saying "persisting is what is changing" holds true for archives as well. Persisting is what is changing might be the motto of my further talk.

By the technological development especially in the realm of information and communication our society is changing even more than by all known measures of rationalisation, of modernisation or by revolutionary processes. This holds true as well for the informatisation of the individual as for the market driven globalisation. By this the life of the individual and the appearance of society is in a very short time going to be more thoroughly changed than all other technological developments in centuries before could have done. Information has become a value in itself. Information should float in connection with industrial production but increasingly even free of it in every amount and quality. It should be available where needed, in a first-class quality and at the right moment. When information is interconnected it is going to contribute ever more to the creation of wealth in society and its subsystem economy than the production of material goods.

In the architecture of the information society the archives are playing a central role beside the libraries and documentary institutions. This significant role lies in their division of labour function to preserve information over long time periods and make this information available. By this they guarantee the tradition of knowledge with their spatial and temporal dimension that is the basis for every new knowledge. The archives are distinct from the other institutions that are keeping knowledge by preserving information out of the information pool of the state. The state with all his division is the biggest owner of information.

At his disposal there are large and trusted holdings of infonnation that cover nearly all important areas of life such as economy and finance, work and

welfare system, health and demography, schools and universities, home security and migration, traffic and environment. A significant part of this information comes to the archives as archival material in the context of its origin. The archives have the obligation to keep it and make it commonly available. In contrast to the reservoir of knowledge that is constituted by the book, archival material originates not for the purpose of disseminating knowledge. Archival material originates from a co-operative process of forming of opinion and consequent decisions of government and administration, it collects the knowledge of the people preparing decisions or substantiating these. The administration does not need archival material any more for this primary purpose once the task is fulfilled. But as secondary purposes it is open for any questions specially from an inquiring and scientific perspective. Authentic archival material in its original context of creation is therefore an nearly inexhaustible mine of knowledge or at least information, that could produce new knowledge by ever new connections between information and data. This importance of information deriving from the public sector for the development of the economy in Europe is further emphasised by the regulations of the European union and the subsequent creation of archive laws and laws regulating the access to public information in the member states. The current and liberal access to information from the public mine of information becomes consequently a question of advantage in competition and must therefore be granted. Where raw material is getting scarce knowledge itself becomes a raw material and information a resource which are crucial for competition in an information and in a society oriented on services.

Archives always have adapted themselves according to the developments and needs of the society. They have left behind their function as a legal armoury for the proof of claims and privileges of the magistracy and have opened their holdings to the scientific community in the age of the nation state and thereby helped with their sources for a national history to found a national identity. They have found their place in the culture of remembrance by maintaining authentic sources for the examinations of the pleasant and less pleasant periods of the history of one country including the barbaric aberrations. They have – and here I am addressing especially the archives of my country – substantially contributed to societies putting asunder with two dictatorships in the last century and have rendered it possible that the victims of tyranny and degrading treatment were getting compensation and satisfaction. Besides in the last two decades they have undergone a decisive change of paradigms: from institutions that are holding archives and make the material accessible more exceptional to service institutions that promote the use of the archival material as a right provided by law for everyone. Accessible archives with a high quality of services have become a mark of a liberal and democratic constitutional state, since they guarantee that the

actions of government and administration can be examined.

This change of paradigms from an archivist as an advocate of the intact preservation of the archival material to an advocate of the users of the archival material or at least as a representative of both interests in a responsible weighing was only possible because the archives opened themselves to the new technical possibilities: the knowledge of the possibilities and the limits of the preservation of archival material enables the professional compromise of interest between protection and use. The techniques of photographing, copying and microfilming could be used for the protection of endangered archival material as well as for the use of it. The graphic information of an document that is stored on a copy, a photo or a microfilm enables the ubiquitary use of documents that remained physically stored under conditions in the repository that keep their life expectancy high. And by copying or photographing archival material new graphic information results that belongs to a new holder of information. The holder of the information and the information belongs together and archives could preserve archival material by packing up the holder of information expertly and keeping them under the right conditions.

This by centuries proved principle of preservation does not work any more with digital information. From the technical changes that characterise the information society none has such significant effects on the archives than the possibilities and characteristics of digitalisation. Digitalisation has separated for the first time what was formerly for archive inseparable: that is information and its holder, the holder of script and the writing material. In contrast to information on a charter, a file and even a microfilm digital information is not directly readable by humans. It is not bound to a specific holder, is transitory, could therefore be transported trough the net, copied from one holder to another, changed and deleted. Only suitable applications for coding and encoding in connection with fitting computer and reading devices makes the ensemble of digits with the ordinary values of 0 and 1 readable and only the right application makes this information understandable. The holder of information of the digital age are only meant to keep the digital information on optoelectronic or magnetic material for a few decades. But even these relatively short periods of maintaining the information on its holder exceed by far the life expectancy of the systems combining hard-and software that are able to make this information understandable for humans. There is good reason to call the digitalisation as the second and even more enduring revolution beside the invention of printing with movable type.

Archives are therefore faced with wholly new challenges. One can not pack electronic records in boxes and place them on a shelf. Archives need totally new strategies to make digital information out of applications of e-government in

the context of their origin accessible for the long periods of time that administration and user are used to. It is not done with stabilising the digital documents over a long period of time – which means for archivists for ever –, to get a quality of archival sources that one is used from the paper world, every step of work on the topic and the processes of decision making must be documented. Digital documents must therefore be accompanied by certain metadata that tell something about the creation and development of the documents. Archivists therefore are not only responsible for the technical possibilities of the long term accessibility of digital information by migrating emulating or converting, they have to speak with all the agencies which are operating e-government applications to make sure that the digital information is going to be connected with the necessary structural and workflow information. Preserving digital archives is not only a technical challenge but a professional and organisational task for archivists in the next decades. Because for a not foreseeable time archivists will face a hybrid chaos: in one agency traditional analogue archival material will be in use next to digital records, which will be administered more or less automatically. The archives must therefore establish new methods of appraisal, of preservation and conservation and of the utilisation of hybrid archives.

Since now I have shown the effects that the digital environment cause for the task of preserving the archives. The digital world of information brings a lot of advantages for the electronic description of archives and for distributing the information. All over the world the archives have learned in a short period to use the internet for professional purposes. A ever growing number of archives informs the public not only about opening hours and conditions of use but also presents information on the holdings and online finding aids. By providing such services the archives conform to the expectations of the information society I mentioned at the beginning, they make useful and high quality information accessible at the time and the place when the people are going to use it. Archival finding aids and the technology of the web are made for each other. The structure of the web that may be connected on different levels and its technology of hypertext with the possibility of the user to navigate on his own and use associative ways for searching is supporting the open functionality of archival finding aids in a very special way.

Of course, a society hungry for information which is looking for an easy access to high quality and authentic information will also demand to use the archival material in a digitised form. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to have professional description that is allowing a immediate access to the archives. For the digitising programs of the archives the rule of the thumb holds true: firstly 100% of the description of the fonds of an archive should be ready for online

consultation, secondly one should provide 10% of finding aids to much frequented fonds on the net before thinking about presenting 1% of digitised archival material in the world wide web.

Nowadays archives are only able to play a vital role if they use the key technologies of the internet. Archives working together with other archives are more likely going to be recognised by the public as a group and as individual archives. By integrating descriptions of holdings of different descriptive levels of one archive or even of many archives in gateways the online-presence of archives is even more valuable. These gateways could be organised around thematic or regional aspects or combining both views. Like no other media the internet has changed the conditions for common border-crossing services. Now it is on the archives to place emphasis on the co-operation in such connected systems. The digital environment places archives for utterly new challenges – and the old "challenges" are by no means worked out. I will name only the keywords: preservation of archives, measures against the degrading of paper, restoration of archival material that was damaged by defective storage and frequently usage, the advancement of the storage by erecting functional archive buildings. Often the work on describing old holdings or even transferring documents from governmental or administrative agencies belongs to the old challenges or deficiencies. But then new challenges arise that has nothing to do with the digital environment for example the now sensible effects of the global warming. Archives has to prepare for the effects of catastrophes such as hurricanes and flooding, which even in Europe has become not only possible but probable and has caused in the last decades heavy damage to archives.

The council of the European Union has passed the report on archives in the enlarged European Union on the 14th of November 2005, that was set up by the national archives together with the commission who was in charge. Most of what I told today you will find in this report and its recommendations. In the middle of this European initiative stands the invitation to work together across all boundaries in order to face the challenges side by side and find together the right answers. I am glad to find the 175 years old Rumanian national archive in future in the circle of European archives that are going to find common solutions on the European level.