

ARCHIVAL STUDIES IN THE WORLD

Digitisation and Digital Communication. Some Experiences and Reflections from the National Archives of Denmark

Over recent decades, much of the world has developed and transformed from a so-called industrial society to a society fueled by digital information and knowledge – this is also the case in Denmark. In 2007 we reformulated the strategic plan of the National Archives to reflect this change. Three major objectives for 2015 were decided upon:

- comprehensive digital communication;
- the safeguarding of digital archives;
- the development of the National Archives as the principal centre for knowledge.

In the following remarks I want to focus on the first strategic goal, the ambitious desire of the archives to offer comprehensive digital communication, and why we want to do so.

To a large extent the world has become digital. E-mails, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other Web 2.0 tools have revolutionized our daily lives and our ways of communicating, seeking and using information. SMS-services for bank operations and ticket purchases and SKYPE video telephony are just a few examples of digital behaviors that already are a normal part of everyday life. Future communication will soon make commonplace use of video consultations, video conferences and other media. This pace of digital development demands that we find tenable solutions to the adaptive challenges to our daily activities. At the same time, digital innovations present us with broad ranges of new possibilities for achieving our goal of being the archive for all of society, and an attractive and accessible cultural resource for all ages and all social classes.

These days there is an enormous interest in history; each week TV offers historical series searching to uncover the roots of known and unknown individuals – and all of these earn good viewer ratings! Dedicated history channels are forthcoming and historical books are published and sold in large numbers. It is tempting to assert that history is more popular than ever. Yet, even though the National Archives are the backdrop and source of research materials used for televised history broadcasts and for published books, increased awareness of history unfortunately has not led to a greater understanding by the general population of the function of the archives, nor has it resulted in a rush to use our reading rooms.

Today we have a large and loyal group of visitors who come to our reading rooms to avail themselves of our extensive collections and to do research. The users are scholars - especially students doing extended essays, and local historians, with the majority being family history researchers. Apart from students the typical user is usually 50 years of age or older. This age group is a steady and even increasing group of users. The problem, however, is that neither young people nor the working part of the population seem to be interested in the archives. The reasons, of course, are many.

Although the archives reading rooms welcome researchers and try to make them comfortable, it is both difficult and time-consuming for some to travel to reading rooms and then to navigate through endless boxes of papers, one after another, filled with documents in handwriting that is sometimes barely legible. Only a few seasoned researchers know how much information is to be found in the archives and how to find it. Even today most people think that archives are simply dusty storage halls overseen by aging archivists. This incorrect understanding of archives and archivists has to be changed, and here digital advances provide exceptional possibilities and ways to reach “everybody”! The digital user has the potential to hunt for treasure in the archives anytime and from anywhere. The records may be used by the scholar, the student, schools, families, family history researchers, the press, and media in any city all over the world, at any time of the day - accessible to suit each person’s schedule and information needs.

If we also want to engage and create interest among our youth and the working population, specific strategies and applications must be developed, appealing to the individual interests and needs of each of these target groups. Furthermore, we have to remain very conscious about the fact that in reaching out to these groups, we are up against tough competition from both cultural and leisure experiences. Therefore, whatever the archives offers, and whatever the purpose may be, it has to be regarded as easy and profitable for such users to want to visit the archives.

We must professionally explore all the potential that digital technology offers in order to attract and engage new users, especially those who normally would not be in the archives but would prefer to stay elsewhere to research and seek new information. Generally, users in the target groups will be comfortable and often very skilled in using IT tools and the Internet. They will expect not only to digitally perform Internet searches for information at the item level but to immediately view document “hits” on their screens. Only in the case of rarely used document types will the user expect and be willing to accept a brief delay in image delivery times, or even tolerate the use of an “on demand” digitising-facility requiring online user payment.

Digitising the general archives has proved a feasible undertaking in all of the Nordic countries. In Denmark the *Dansk Demografisk Database* [Danish demographic database] and *Arkivalieronline* [online archival records] (“AO”) containing millions of censuses and church records have made otherwise centralized resources accessible in every corner of the country. A computer and Internet connection can provide anyone and everyone access to digitized resources. Access is no longer dependent on the geographic location and operating hours of a reading room.

Until sometime in 2003, we were facing great pressure on the capacity of archives reading rooms to serve researchers and the public. At its peak in 2001, approximately 100,000 visitors a year used the reading rooms, often resulting in big problems in servicing the demands and expectations of the users for access. With the development of AO and its comprehensive online digital resources, The pressure on the reading rooms has declined significantly. Today the number of annual visitors has decreased by almost 50% from the highs of 2001.

The interest in *Arkivalieronline* has continued to increase, and the annual number of visits is now approximately 1.8 million. In Norway and Sweden, where they have even more records online, use of digital records is even greater.

The conclusions in the 2009 report from the Ministry of Culture “Digitising the Cultural Heritage” stress that in any digitisation project records of high use and importance should bear a high priority. In addition to censuses and church records, records of probate divisions, military and naval registrations, last will registers, registers of tenancies, trade licence registers, and insurance records are iterated.

Significant advances in digital technology will confront us technically and financially, but the biggest challenges are:

- to identify resources and establish high quality metadata for improved descriptions;
- to create better user interfaces and searching capabilities;
- to develop Internet manuals; and
- to create virtual classrooms with the potential for utilizing data for experiments and tests, new forms of information delivery and arrangement, and virtual exhibitions of information for interactive use.

To successfully overcome these challenges, it will be necessary to actively include relevant user groups in every stage of planning and development. The present users of the archives are ready to participate in such collaboration. In Denmark we have experienced an enthusiastic and widespread response from volunteers, which has resulted in many legacy-based resources being transcribed and published on the Internet to-date.

An increase in digitized resources will not obviate the need for reading rooms. Over time, however, less crowding and greater ease of access will make new users return to the archives. Users will also need to work in a reading room in order to study and examine original documents – in addition to enjoying the benefits of digital access for searching and examining archives online.

Previously we could only hope that users of the National Archives would somehow find out about us on the Internet. Now the quantity of information online is so huge that we have to use the Internet to develop new strategies for serving patrons. How are we to market the archives in the future? That will be a central theme in future discussions for the strategic plan of the National Archives.



Rigsarkivet



Young visitors

*Asbjørn Hellum**

* National Archivist of Denmark. Photos by Ernst Tobisch