

Charles J. Farrugia¹

ARCHIVES: TOWARDS NEW COMMUNITIES OF VIRTUAL USERS

Abstract

This article studies the reaction of users to the shifting patterns of national archives towards more inclusive communities of knowledge. The hypothesis is that there are substantial benefits if national archives become more all-embracing in both their accessions and user services. This can be done by shifting away from the 'public record only' approach into a more community-based perspective. The article studies the case of the newly set-up MEMORJA project within the National Archives of Malta. The building of this innovative oral, sound, and visual archive required substantial adjustments in the frames of mind of the archivists and supporting staff involved. The three main challenges identified were: a. the changing role of the archivist when faced with such projects; b. a new approach towards the cataloguing of the records; and finally, c. the learning experience of the best ways on how to engage communities or sectors and cohorts of such communities. The article revisits these three core questions that were asked at the beginning of the MEMORJA project during a conference in Birmingham. It uses the metrics coming out of the project and initial public feedback to assess to what extent the project is reengineering or not the approach and interaction of the National Archives of Malta with its clients. This research is still at a preliminary stage as the user interaction phase of the project just started. Notwithstanding, it is a study that can pave the way for more in-depth analysis on the changing underlying attitudes and perspectives users have towards national archive institutions.

Purpose: *This article assesses the role of national archive institutions in view of the demands from society for a more all-inclusive documenting of society. The hypothesis is that national archival institutions can take centre stage in supporting communities document their history using oral, sound, and visual archives. This approach takes national archives away from their comfort zone – preserving and giving access to public records. Yet, this can provide an opportunity for national archives to draw the spotlight on them and partially redefine their position in society.*

Methods / Approach: *The approach taken in this study is mainly conceptual, revisiting the insights developing in the growing literature on the topic and supplementing this with participant observation from the author's own experience in the field. It also brings into the analysis one case study of the MEMORJA project recently launched by the National Archives of Malta. Three main questions that were investigated at the start of the project four years ago have been re-visited now that the methodologies of the project are well defined, and the public has an interactive portal to access the project through.*

1 Charles J. Farrugia, PhD., Head, Department of Library, Information and Archive Sciences, Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, University of Malta / National Archivist of Malta / Chairperson European Branch of the International Council on Archives
E-mail: charles.j.farrugia@um.edu.mt

Results: *This paper argues that national archival institutions could benefit if they open from a traditional 'public records only' approach and add a degree of community interaction to both their accessions policy and the subsequent archival processes. The main advantage that such an approach could bring to the organisation is the tapping into new communities of users, at times also providing a new sense of social justice in bringing the views, lifestyles, and actions of underrepresented communities into the realm of documented national memory.*

Conclusions / Findings: *The most important finding of this study is that new archiving processes that might challenge the traditional canons of archival theory are worth the effort. The process can add more visibility to the institution and help in promoting a fairer representation of society through the reaching out to previously underrepresented sectors of society.*

Keywords: *archival activism, community engagement, memory projects, oral, sound and audio-visual archives.*

1 INTRODUCTION

National archives world-wide operate within a legal framework that stipulates a very specific mission and set of functions. This has the advantage of guaranteeing long term sustainability and a clear mandate for which public funding can rightfully be asked for. A substantial amount of literature exists about the role of archives in society (Maher, 1998). Yet, the distinctions in the nature of the archival institution and to what extent this conditions its operations is often overlooked.

Archives are the result of the bigger context, the laws and regulations but above all the way society interacts within those parameters. In part, this has led to a rethinking of the role of archives and complementary domains such as libraries and museums. This transition is very much at the centre of Sarah Cascone's (2020) observation that: *»Collecting hand-painted signs and makeshift protective equipment used by protesters, tear gas cannisters used by the police, as well as print material and photographs concerning the protests, prominent institutions from the New York Historical Society to the National Museum of African-American History and Culture and the Smithsonian Institution seem to suggest that bustling life in the street, ordinary life in the home, and anonymous life on the internet produce the sort of archival material from which histories of societies should be studied and recorded.«*

This study gets its inspiration from the fascination of the nature of national archives which the author of this paper studied for his doctoral qualification (Farrugia, 2016). It is also a reflection of the application of those principles in a real setting at the National Archives of Malta.² Furthermore, it tests a number of archival dimensions on the case study of the recent setting up of an oral, sound and visual archive branded with the name MEMORJA (The National Archives of Malta, s.d.).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Archives represent the permanent memory of the actions and feelings of people as they act and react to the events of daily life. It is this connotation that makes them so powerful and so valuable. Such actions are often well documented in national archival institutions as the interaction of persons and groups with government makes an efficient capturing intersection. But can we say that the feelings of humans, their views, perceptions, and reactions to daily life events are documented with the same vigour?

In a previous study the author of this paper argued in favour of three specific and interrelated roles of national archive institutions in society. Building on the available literature on the topic, he argued that if one had to identify the main roles of such institutions these can be summed up into: (a.) guardians of memory; (b.) cultural institutions; and (c.) vehicles for good governance (Farrugia, 2019). This study focuses on the first of these three – the role of national archive institutions as guardians of memory. But even this is challenging to define. Whose memory? Which memory? What constitutes the memory of a nation?

In trying to come up with answers to these questions one has to acknowledge the never-ending debate about the role of the archivist in such institutions. The traditional

2 The author had the opportunity to join the national archives of Malta at a young age and at a time when this institution employed just two persons. He had the opportunity to involve himself in the development of this institution and its direction especially during the last two decades. During these years, the institution developed its different dimensions from scratch and managed to position itself as a strong influencer both within ICA (having chaired both ACARM and EURBICA) and European projects (having been founding partner in the Archives Portal Europe and also founding partner in the European Digital Treasures project).

view of the archivist was that of a neutral custodian – a gatekeeper who not only shies away from intervening in the record-creating process but even considers that act as almost immoral. On this dilemma Ketelaar argues that “every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretations by creator, user and archivist is an activation of the records” (Ketelaar, 2001).

This study takes the view that national archives are very much in the domain of the humanities and have an obligation to shape the memory depiction we leave as inheritance to future generations. This role is explained in the words of the Catalan philosopher Xavier Antich³ who wrote that: *»We are obliged to choose between these two equally inhumane absolutes: to forget everything and bury it into oblivion or to remember everything and thereby erase any possibility of the present. In between, of course, lies culture. The choice. The selecting of what must be memorable because it defines us. Without this effort, humanity is but a shadow.«* (Boadas i Raset, 2020).

The project MEMORJA steered by the National Archives of Malta and which provides the main case study of this paper is inspired by this obligation to identify and capture what is memorable because it defines us and the society we live in. It is an obligation towards hearing the voices in the society around us and the constant questioning of whose voices we need to document for posterity (Farrugia, 2018).

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 METHODOLOGY

The approach taken in this study builds on the available literature and applies a case study approach. This is supplemented by observations from the author's own experience in the field as a practicing national archivist. The focus is on a case study of the oral, sound, and visual archive recently inaugurated by the National Archives of Malta. The initial scope of this project and its context within a national archive that strongly believes in shifting from a machinery of government in charge of public records towards an all-inclusive guardian of public memory has already been discussed by the present author in recent publications (Farrugia, 2019a).

This study presents a conceptual analysis with a strong dose of application. The author had led a paper presentation of the project MEMORJA followed by focus group discussions on three dimensions of the project that has recently been launched.⁴ The three focus groups discussed three main questions that were investigated at the start of the project four years ago. Now that insights from that discussion were applied in action on the project, and that the project is now formally launched and used by the public, those three areas of inquiry are re-visited.

3.2 THE CASE STUDY: THE MEMORJA PROJECT

The professed vision and targets of the MEMORJA project from its early days aimed to employ innovative research methodologies, theoretical and archival approaches, and

³ Joan Boadas i Raset who is a distinguished archivist from Girona quotes Catalan philosopher Xavier Antich from his article *La voluntat de comprendre* published in *Filosofia e minúscula* in Barcelona in 2016. The translation of the quote from the original in Catalan was provided by Boadas i Raset.

⁴ The author of this publication led the team who delivered the presentation ‘People Make Memories: capturing and sharing collective memory through oral history in Malta’ delivered on 21 November 2021 at the Birmingham Conference and Events Centre in the UK. This event was part of the DCDC2018 conference organized jointly between the TNA and RLUK. The main theme of the conference was ‘Memory and Transformation’. The presentation was followed by three focus groups that discussed the three core questions that are revisited in this paper.

techniques to collect, record, transcribe, preserve, and make available all deposited material detailing the history of the Maltese Islands. Thus, in so doing, the project aimed to transform the National Archives of Malta into the main depository of national and public memory.

A five-person team started working on this project in January 2017. Through a collaborative agreement with the University of Malta it was guaranteed that the team undertakes the necessary training in the form of courses in oral history and public memory. MEMORJA aims to record and collect oral history interviews, personal photographs, documents, and other ephemera and, as a result, the National Archives of Malta has taken on the dual role of a memory-capturing institution and one which now creates records, as opposed to the traditional task of preserving only government/public records.

Another initial intellectual challenge was selecting the research themes for the initial phase of the project. It was decided to focus on an initial five themes: Maltese Emigration; Experiencing War: survival, shelter and food; British Expatriates in Malta; Public Administration; Bell ringing/campanalian culture; and the Malta Bus Archive. The decision making was based on an assessment of gaps in knowledge and the availability of interviewees and resources to tackle those sectors.

These oral testimonies – of which there is still a substantial number – strive to preserve daily experiences as felt by the people on the ground. Whether it is the war, fishing, fireworks enthusiasts, bell-ringers or hawkers they are providing narrative experiences that are often overlooked in official documentation. Through this project, this perspective is finding its place side by side with the official version held in public records.

This project gave more visibility to the National Archives of Malta. It is also proving successful in filling in gaps in the collective memory of the nation. It brought also new challenges in terms of intellectual control decisions. The incoming material is now more diverse and not restricted to traditional documents. We received all kinds of artefacts from knives, to medals and other clothing artefacts. Although we are restricting the amount and typology of artefacts (as these bring with them up-keep challenges) we are still departing from the traditional public records focus. Along the process the National Archives is also supporting other entities such as the Department of Library, Information and Archive Sciences at the University of Malta to develop the audio-visual and oral archives component of its offerings.⁵

3.3 THE THREE MAIN QUESTIONS

This study revisits three considerations that were discussed during the Birmingham workshop in 2018. At that time the audience was made up of professionals interested in memory capture and management, most of whom were themselves running similar projects.

The first theme for discussion was the changing role of the archivist with projects such as MEMORJA. The second was the challenge of cataloguing the MEMORJA records while the final sub-theme discussed focused on identifying the best community engagement methods. For each theme participants were to brain storm around two specific questions that are reproduced below.

⁵ The Department of Library, Information and Archive Sciences (DLIAS) at the University of Malta forms part of the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences (MaKS). Set up by Dr Lillian Sciberras more than three decades ago, it added the archives and records management component in 2005 to the long-standing tradition of librarianship. Currently the Department offers a whole range of LIAS courses ranging from Bachelor to Doctorate degrees. Further information at www.um.edu.mt/maks.

3.3.1 THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE ARCHIVIST

a. Which is the best way in which themes are agreed upon and decided? and b. Are these challenges being reflected in human resource development?

In terms of the first question, the project developed a mixed methodology. There are a number of guiding principles that came out and that are listed below in order of priority:

- The uniqueness and urgency of capturing the information;
- The specific needs of a particular community;
- The availability of resources to carry out the fieldwork.

A number of themes developed from within the community. The bell-ringing theme and the Malta Bus Archive came to us with a structure, expertise and loads of enthusiasm. In those instances we had to standardise and rendered the philosophy and structuring more archivally sound. Another similar theme was Public Administration. This idea came from the top but we had to devise the best ways to tackle such a cohort of interviewees.

The issue of resources is crucial to the decision-making process. The initial impetus in this project came from an electoral manifesto proposal. Thus, for the initial years we had the political support by government to recruit the required personnel. Experience has taught us that the project needs specialisation and extensive human resources. Finding the right qualified personnel was and still is one of the main challenges.

In order to cope with the workload and the need of specialised input we went for a policy of recruitment in the professional posts of administrator for the project and other central roles such as archivists and an audio-visual archivist. The huge work of pre-interviews, interviews, filling of legal forms, transcriptions and digitization of ephemera has to be steered by our team. Yet we did develop a support network of volunteers eager to be part of this national memory capture project.

3.3.2 CATALOGUING THE MEMORIA RECORDS

a. Do the traditional cataloguing standards and systems offer us effective tools for the new and mixed media we are capturing in our archives? and b. Software has its own limitations and boundaries. How can we surmount this challenge?

The views shared during the DCDC conference gave us a snapshot of a number of similar projects. In terms of the digital dimension of each we noticed that it was largely dependent on the wider context of creating organisations of the various projects. Having an *ad hoc* specialised team offering tailor-made solutions to the digital challenge is a desideratum. But in our case we had to frame the project within the wider dimension.

Aware that we cannot in any way abandon our main remit of a national archives, we opted for a mixed method. For cataloguing we have used our AtoM platform which forms the backbone of our cataloguing system.⁶ This did present us with a number of challenges. Amongst these we faced the issue of large amounts of ephemera deposited. Thus, certain customisation of the software and the cataloguing approaches had to be made.

⁶ AtoM stands for Access to Memory. It is a web-based, open-source application for standards-based archival description and access in a multilingual, multi-repository environment.

While keeping in mind the overarching mission of the National Archives, we are aware that MEMORJA provides us with a sub-set of data. It caters for a much wider audience than what some of our fonds and hierarchical structures can cater for. Thus, through our external company we developed a portal that farms out data from AtoM. This allowed us to come up with the Showcase (*vetrina*) feature where we apply a sort of virtual museum focus on particular themes or holdings. Another exciting facility is what we called the 'Citizen Archivist' section. This is an area which encourages the public to tag photos from an extensive College collection. In this way, the user becomes co-creator with the archivist and brings to the archives unique feedback which our archivists cannot input as they lack the historical context of the photos in question.

3.3.3 ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COMMUNITY

a. What is the best way to foster active participation among interested communities? and b. Is there only one way in targeting the community or must the archives be more dynamic and creative in its approach?

When we had our initial discussions during the DCDC workshop we identified two distinct challenges to these questions. The first was how to reach to specific communities and the second was more on what we want to achieve through this reaching out.

The work our teams did on certain topics made us aware of the challenges in infiltrating in certain communities. This was felt with the Malta-Lampedusa theme whereby our interviewer was carrying out interviews in the houses and on the shores of Lampedusians. It was even stronger with the Malta Bus Archive theme. In reaching out to bus builders and drivers we reached to a community that felt betrayed and unjustly treated in the past. Our action was felt as a first approach by the state of have their side of the story told and documented following the privatisation of the industry by government some years back.

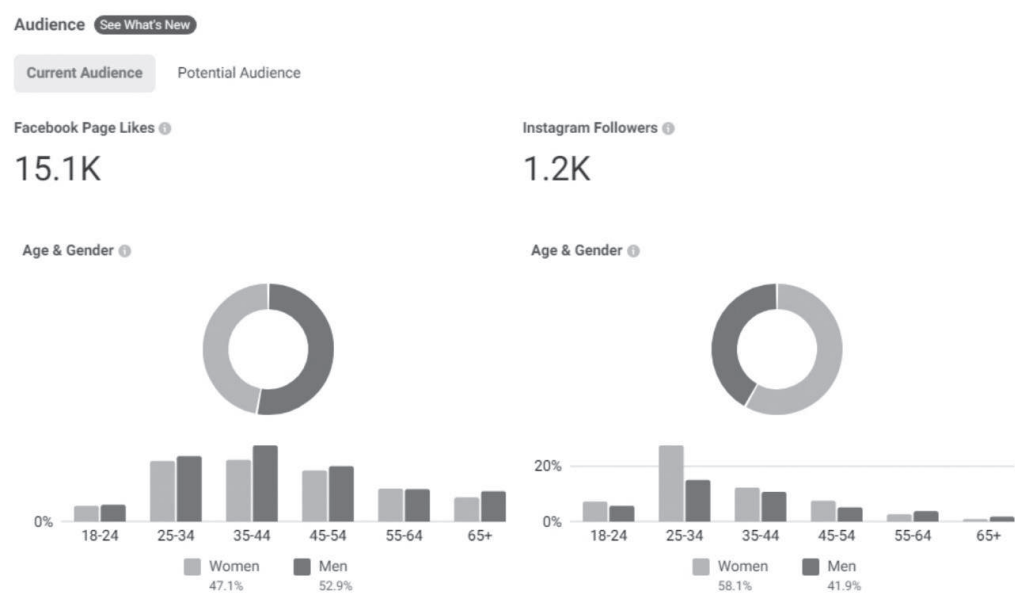
The project is also redimensioning our online activity. Before the launch of the project the National Archives of Malta was already successful in using its social media, mainly Facebook. Our Facebook page had reached 15,100 followers and another 1200 on Instagram.⁷ Most of the Facebook followers fall between the age brackets of 25 and 54, most being men (52.9%) while on Instagram followers fall between the age bracket of 25 and 34 with most of them being female (58.1%). Most of the NAM social media followers are from the Central Region of Malta and our international followers are mainly from the U.K., Australia and the U.S.A.

Our projections indicate that NAM has a potential to reach out to 51 000 users on Facebook through its daily posts with each post reaching an average of 1000 -13,000 users, 350 likes and up to 30 shares. The Instagram page is fairly new and that explains why the audience reach is still low when compared to that of our Facebook page, but even on this platform our team are working on steadily building a community on Instagram as well.⁸

⁷ These statistics represent a snapshot taken on 22 September 2021.

⁸ Unlike most other countries Facebook in Malta is still more popular than Instagram. Statistics issued by MISCO shows the following pattern for Malta: most accessed platform remains Facebook (87%), followed by Google+ (50%), YouTube (46%), Instagram (24%), Twitter (12%) and Pinterest (9%). This shows that although so many people are online, many are not on the same networks. It is also interesting that whereas 62% just look at other people's content and comments and 55% share this content, only 9% create new content. – Social Media Usage Trends in Malta, MISCO study – 2018.

Fig. 1 Facebook vs Instagram use of the National Archives of Malta platforms



3.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The design and implementation of the MEMORJA project was carried out within the National Archives of Malta. This is a relatively young institution having been legally founded in 1990. Thus, the project was not in any way hampered by long archival traditions and cultures when it comes to accession policies.

The second characteristic of this project is that it started in the pre-pandemic years and was designed in those circumstances. The second half of the implementation together with the ceremony inaugurating the project were carried out under pandemic circumstances. Thus, these factors need to be taken into consideration when one analyses the process and public reaction to the project.

The study would benefit a lot if a systematic survey of similar initiatives taken by other national archives can be carried out. Also, the impact of these projects on the traditional services and on the perspectives of users on the institutions need to be studied in future years.

4 RESULTS

MEMORJA is in line with the evolving thinking of a proactive archival community. We have a role not only as neutral agents or custodians of records but as active co-creators. The project has proved the hypothesis that multidisciplinary teams provide the best answer to the archival challenge in areas such as cataloguing, digital intervention and IPR connotations.

This study indicates that the initiative by the National Archives of Malta was welcomed by the traditional and new user cohorts of the institution. Certain under represented communities felt that a focus on their topic or issue provided a level of historical justice to their cause or views. There are indications that those who participated in the projects feel that they are contributing to the nation’s history at a very crucial phase in its trajectory. Further studies need to be commissioned to assess what will be the long standing impact, if any, of this project.

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