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## THE ROLE OF ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS DURING TROUBLED TIMES: THE CASE OF COVID-19

### Abstract:

*This article questions the role of archival institutions in times of distress and disruption, with particular emphasis on the current reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. It tries to assess whether archival institutions play active roles at times of distress and disruption or shy away into passive observers' role. The hypothesis is that archival institutions can take centre stage even at such phases, as communities often go into a soul-searching mode during such times. This can provide an opportunity for archives to draw the spotlight on them and partially redefine their position in society.*

*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 two case studies of successful projects that have turned the Covid-19 pandemic into an opportunity for interacting with audiences and redefining the traditional canons of archival practice – preservation and accessibility.*

*This paper argues that archival institutions could use times of disruption and distress to further emphasise their presence and interaction with the community. The pandemic is not yet over and any results from such assessments are only preliminary. Further analysis, even of a quantitative nature, should be carried out to build on the present assessment, also keeping in mind the geographical and regional differences that come into play.*

*The most important finding of this study is that times of disruption and distress can act as triggers for more creativity and new ways on how archives fulfil their traditional roles of preservation and access. Further studies can strengthen these findings by adding a quantitative aspect to these findings and also tackle one of the central constraints of this study in the form of diversity of archival institutions discussed and the geographical disparities that make the extrapolation of the findings to other areas challenging.*

**Keywords:** archival resilience, Covid-19, archival activism, memory projects.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

A substantial amount of studies have been carried out about the reaction of the archival profession in times of war, natural calamities and other forms of social distress. The resulting affects of such disasters also top the list in terms of the academic debate they generate. Issues such as that of displaced archives and the impact these have on much wider phenomena have been under the focus for a number of decades. This even inspired the International Council on Archives (ICA) to set up an Expert Group on Shared Archival Heritage (ICA, 2017). This latter initiative augurs well for a more holistic approach and a shift from the traditional regional perspective to a more international dissection of the issues.

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A number of authors are also reevaluating the work on such topics and using it to revisit the canonical theories that have become quite sacred in our profession. In one such work, Anne Gilliland revisits concepts such as the physical and moral defence of archives emanating from the views of authoritative personas such as Hilary Jenkinson and Ernst Posner. Her work tries to contemplate how historical examples might help the field to prepare today's archivists for the realities of acting and advocating on behalf of records, archives and their constituents in situations of conflict and exigency around the globe (Gilliland, 2018).

This study focuses on the Covid-19 pandemic as a phase of world-wide distress and tries to contribute to the rising academic debate about how cultural institutions are reacting to the situation. The pandemic has forced an inevitable slow down or disruption to our routine. For some of us, stressed with the burden of overlapping diary appointments, such a pause might initially have looked as a providential welcome break. But counteracting this, there was the uncertainty of what comes next coupled with the risks in terms not only of health but also of financial stability. The development of a number of vaccines to combat the virus brought a ray of hope, although a number of scientific studies still argue that the Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), may be here to stay (Anderson et. al., 2020)

This article questions the role of archival institutions in times of distress and disruption, with particular emphasis on the current reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. It tries to assess whether archival institutions play active roles at times of distress and disruption or shy away into a passive observers role. The hypothesis is that archival institutions can take centre stage even at such times, as communities often go into a soul-searching mode during such times. This can provide an opportunity for archives to draw the spotlight on them and partially redefine their position in society. This study focuses on the reaction of the National Archives of Denmark and that of Malta to Covid-19, and the projects they launched triggered by the same pandemic circumstances.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OVERVIEW

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 precious. This study focuses on the role of archival institutions during troubled times. The meaning of troubled times for the scope of this study is defined by circumstances of disruption on a national or international scale that adversely affect the lifestyle of large sectors of the population. In our recent past, war, earthquakes, flooding and other natural disasters were the most troubled times which created archival dilemmas, some of which are still lingering to be resolved.

One debate that is still ongoing is the issue of displaced archives, referred to by terms such as 'trophies of war' (Grimsted, 2001) or under the more positive umbrella terminology of 'shared archival heritage'. Writing about it two decades ago Charles Kecskemeti underlined how challenging such situations are, and the difficulty for international organisations to steer discussions on such topics. In his own words, "when passion opposes passion, rational arguments advocating a negotiated agreement can hardly prevail." (Grimsted, 2001, p. xi). At that time, he argued that UNESCO and ICA had to satisfy themselves with a thesaurus rather than the real settlement of issues.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is a case of troubled times of a different dimension. It is a reality affecting all nations and that managed to reconfigure the way we live. This will undoubtedly also reconfigure the archival record for future generations. Due to the dimension of the crisis the leading international organisations tried to guide the international community and their professional membership cohorts how to best deal with the situation.

UNESCO took the lead and issued a statement titled 'Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage.' The representatives of the various collaborating bodies argued that:

"The way the world is responding to this unprecedented global crisis will be part of history books. Memory institutions, including national archives, libraries, museums, as well as educational and research bodies, are already recording the decisions and actions being made which will help future generations to understand the extent of the pandemic and its impact on societies." (UNESCO, 2020)

In their statement UNESCO came up with four principles and directions urging memory institutions to turn the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater across borders collaboration and investment in documenting mankind's actions.

*When it comes to the 'information professions', the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) issued 'Key Resources for Libraries in responding to the Coronavirus Pandemic' (IFLA, 2020). These resources touch on a variety of topics, mostly controversial, as different role players in the system will assess the situation from their different personal perspective. Amongst the topics discussed and guided upon there are the issues of closing libraries, handling and sanitizing materials, social distancing in library environments and the options of working remotely. As opposed to normal office work, holdings in libraries and archives are physical artefacts that make several workflow processes on them impossible to carry out remotely. Notwithstanding, most archives tried to shift to online work through the devising of roster systems for their staff. The sudden need to work from home also resulted in a renewed focus on cataloguing and a more positive perspective towards what work archivists and librarians can really do from their own homes.*

In its position document issued by the International Council on Archives (ICA, 2020) it appealed for three important principles to be put into action during the pandemic. The first principle is that decisions must be documented. The second is that records and data should be secured and preserved in all sectors and the final point highlighted is that the security, preservation and access to digital content should be facilitated during the shutdown.

In their statement ICA argued that:

Archives are the custodians of the 1918 influenza pandemic records, which are being studied by scientists around the world and these institutions will eventually be the stewards for records related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic and societal impact of the current pandemic needs to be evidenced, not only to prevent and/or anticipate similar events but to understand the effect this event will have on current and future generations. Records and archives are more than paper documents marked 'official record'. ... as the economic impact of COVID-19 is felt around the world, it will also be critical to secure, capture and preserve the records of defunct companies and/or private entities. This way, the social, cultural and even economic significance of former undertakings can live on. (ICA, 2020)

Side-by-side with archives and libraries it is worth looking at museums and to what extent the pandemic is affecting their *modus operandi*. What is most interesting in this case is the impact on collecting policies rather than the services which were also severely hit due to decline in audiences. A recent article by Sandro Debono revisited the concept of Rapid Response Collecting, a concept developed after the 11th September 2001 New York disaster. Such process forms part of the collecting policy of a number of museums and aims to empower museums to collect the ephemeral and the momentous

that might be difficult to acquire once the phenomenon is over. In his article Debono quotes Aaron Bryant, curator of the National Museum of African and American History who argues that, "It is critical that we collect so this moment does not get lost. . . History is happening right before us. . . If we don't collect this stuff, who knows what happens to it." (Bowley 2020, as cited in Debono, 2021).

### **3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.1 METODOLOGY**

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 two case studies of successful projects that have turned the Covid-19 pandemic into an opportunity for interacting with audiences and redefining the traditional canons of archival practice – preservation and accessibility.

The case studies come from two European national archive institutions: the Danish Coronavirus web collection of the National Archives of Denmark, and the Covid Pandemic theme under the Memorja Project of the National Archives of Malta. What follows is an explanation of the rationale of the two projects and archival perspectives that can be derived from them.

##### **3.1.1 CASE STUDY 1: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF DENMARK**

One of the archives that embarked on a Covid-inspired project is the Danish National Archives. This was important as the institution had to close its reading rooms due to the national lockdown and this meant that the covid project was a way to keep active communication with the general community.

The Danish Web collection on coronavirus in Denmark is part of a general documentation on the corona lockdown in Denmark in 2020, embarked upon by the main memory institutions in the country. The stakeholders in the project at the National Archives (Rigsarkivet), the National Museum (Nationalmuseet), the Workers Museum (Arbejdermuseet), local archives and, the Royal Danish Library. The plan to capture corona lockdown documentation was supposed to be carried out into phases. The first focused on the "here and now" collection of documentation during the corona lockdown. This was to be followed by a more systematic follow-up of material collecting from authorities and public bodies.

The first phase of the project consisted of a national call to all Danes to contribute to the corona lockdown documentation, by sending photos and narratives from their daily life while enduring the lockdown. The call under the banner "Days with Corona" was mainly led by the Danish Folklore Archives run by the National Museum and the Royal Library. This effort was also supplemented by Netarchive in the form of a public call for help by nominating URLs of web pages related to coronavirus, social media profiles, hashtags, memes and any other relevant material.

##### **3.1.2 CASE STUDY 2: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF MALTA**

A second institution to embark on a similar project was the National Archives of Malta (NAM). In this case the initiative fitted in as a thematic focus under an already established memory project. The initial phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic Memory Project was to collect any material (e.g. journals, photographs) documenting people's experiences during the current situation. Calls for public collaboration were issued through various means, such as social media, virtual interviews on local television programmes

and newspaper articles. The goal was to connect to many people from different backgrounds as much as possible so as to build a rich collection which would enable the researcher to look at the situation through different perspectives.

Anyone interested in donating their material was subsequently directed to contact the NAM via email in order to avoid any direct contact. In turn, a PDF document with further information about the project was sent. A Donation Declaration Form authorising the NAM to provide access to the deposited material for research and educational purposes was also included.

The response by the public was rather enthusiastic. A total of 71 persons interested in the project have contacted the NAM so far. These include families, the elderly, Maltese and foreigners living abroad, educators (teachers and lecturers), poets, music composers, religious persons, photographers, social workers and students. A large variety of material has already been deposited at the NAM as well. Examples include journals, photographic albums, poems, philosophical ramblings, paintings and video recordings. Current plans are focused on the implementation of the second phase of the project. Following a more structured approach, interviews will be carried out to capture an additional perspective through which one can view the effects of the pandemic on local society. For instance, these include those who were directly involved in its management (i.e., government officials, healthcare workers), business owners, police officers and people who had already been infected by COVID-19.

In view of this, the NAM will showcase an innovative approach whereby interviews will be conducted in a virtual manner. This will serve as an example which will be highlighting the application and effectiveness of an uncommon fieldwork methodology in oral history research. In addition, the recording of information through virtual means will also further reflect the current difficult situation, which would be especially beneficial to the researcher.

### 3.2 COMPARING THE CASE STUDIES

Comparing the two case studies it was possible to extract certain patterns of thinking with regards to: a. The aims of the projects; b. The acquisition process; c. The marketing strategies; d. Public relations; e. Material accessioned.

#### a. Aims

The patterns that Covid-19 imposed on National Archives seems to have been quite similar in the countries under review. Both the Danish National Archives and that of Malta specifically stated that the importance of preserving corona pandemic evidence emanated from two needs: Firstly to document and preserve what happened; and secondly as an affective tool in the archives branding in demonstrating the relevance of the National Archives institution within society.

#### b. Aquisitions

The same affect was also traced when it comes to the acquisition process. The main challenge this event posed was the fact that documentation has to be acquired as events are unfolding. This has put on the institution the need of analysis and discipline in distinguishing between what can be acquired instantaneously and what can wait.

#### c. Marketing Strategies

Both institutions used all possible social media platforms and other disseminating means to get a public appeal out inviting the private individuals to donate covid-times related material. The Denmark campaign used the statement "Your story of the corona

crisis is an important part of Danish history!" A similar call for action in Malta was, 'do you wish to join our efforts to make sure that persons born in 50 years from now may know our life during this pandemic? These messages were repeated via press releases, TV interviews, and social media publicity mainly via Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Facebook seems to be the most popular due to its easy to use, and wide reach.

The institutions in question highlighted the downside of platforms such as Facebook. Amongst the challenges there is the difficulty of defining a target audience. It also demands constant online presence as the public expects immediate interaction if not answers. Thus, it takes time and resources which can only be acquired gradually and not overnight.

The collecting approaches are different between the National Archives of Denmark and that of Malta. The Danes went for a specific website for content delivery. It includes a form asking for basic personal details about the contributor, photo title, date when the image was taken, and the creator of the photo. The same platform is used to acquire the necessary consents. In the Maltese case study the infrastructure on an on-going oral archives project called Memorja was used. This encourages more formal interviews. Due to the challenge of conducting face-to-face interviews, the emphasis was put on the first phase of the project, that of collecting written diaries and ephemera.

#### d. Public Relations - Online enthusiasm vs Archival Activism

In both the Danish and Maltese projects one common feature emerges. This is the discrepancy in metrics between the members of the public who showed initial interest in participating and the actual numbers who keep their word. In the case of Denmark, from around 30,000 people who clicked on the Facebook advert and related webpage, only 275 contributed to the initiative.

The team in Denmark thinks that reasons for such funnelling down of numbers might have been the formalisation of the donation. The information requested and the required consent form might have not gone well with an audience used to one-click social media processes such as the use of Likes and Share. While contributors might be discouraged by consent processes, public institutions cannot abdicate their legal and ethical responsibilities in view of GDPR and other considerations. The big challenge is to strike a balance between the regulatory frameworks, and the benefit of such projects to the community.

#### e. Material Accessioned

When it comes to the material received from the two initiatives, there are also common patterns. Most of the accessions came from private persons and as much as possible no appraisal was done of the donated material. Most donations consisted of pictures from everyday life, showcasing how the people have adjusted their home working environment, public signs, special occasions, and people wearing protective equipment.

The two projects are still ongoing. The main target of the National Archives of Denmark is to work on the second dimension of the project, focused on structured active acquisition from private and public companies. The Danish National Archives will reach out to private companies to submit documentation which would show how the pandemic affected their business and how they are dealing with it. A selected number of private companies have already been approached and have helped in the planning of this phase of the project.

A similar approach was taken in Malta and a number of private companies took the inspiration from the NAM project and launched internal initiatives. Two such organisations



are CareMalta<sup>2</sup> and the Richmond Foundation.<sup>3</sup> This interaction is one of the great benefits of such projects. Apart from having organisations look at national archive institutions for inspiration, they do bring the often refined marketing infrastructure of these organisations on the side of the archives.

### 3.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The pandemic is still ongoing and developing at times in very unpredictable ways. The disparities between countries, both in terms of the severity of the pandemic and the responses by authorities and the public varies considerably. Thus, the study cannot rely on tried and tested methodologies or on the advantage of historical evidence. The analysis is also conducted at a time when the institutions involved are continuously adapting themselves to the realities of time, without having much time to take decisions on scientific evidence that can be built in a gradually planned manner.

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

This study indicates that the two national archives in question were able to think creatively and to launch new initiatives even during troubled times. Their initiatives were warmly welcomed by the media in the respective countries and this facilitated publicity and reaching out. 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. There is not enough available evidence so far to study what will be the long standing impact, if any, of these initiatives.

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2 CareMalta Group is Malta's market leader in providing quality services in nursing and residential care, independent living for older persons, specialised dementia care and certified courses in health and older persons care. It is a private company established in 1993, and today it cares for over 1,300 residents and employs a workforce of over 1,000 professionally-trained personnel.

3 The Richmond Foundation is a private institution backed by the Maltese government that recognised the gap in services of mental health and set up on 13 May 1993. Today the Foundation, a registered non-governmental and non-profit making organisation (VO/0017), has established itself as Malta's leading NGO in the provision of community services for people with mental health problems. It is at the forefront of the promotion of good mental health and the prevention of mental illness amongst the public.

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