

Chapter 24

Access to archival holdings and unique library materials

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The period from 1988 to 1994 has been one of dramatic change and rapid but uneven development. The growth and spread of consensus on the general principles of access to archival and primary documentary materials have been remarkable. In contrast, the state of affairs in different countries and regions varies significantly, and there are enormous resource problems to be faced. Nevertheless, the outlines, or at least the principles, of a generally agreed system for access to primary documentation and the dissemination of information from it are now beginning to emerge. Technological change and the emergence of international electronic highways have begun to affect the way we see the situation, but from a worldwide point of view have not yet begun to influence seriously the way access to archival and manuscript material is provided. The potential for change here is very great, and will probably be the most obvious development during the next decade.

Appraisal of archival documents

All archival and unique documents are, and always have been, subject to some kind of appraisal, and this appraisal process has, of course, been fundamental in determining what information would survive and what would be provided for use (see also Chapter 14). In the past, much appraisal has been haphazard and completely or substantially a matter of chance or, in some cases, subject to political control.

From the beginning, archivists have sought to establish a general set of rules by which appraisal should be carried out. At times this has been seen as an attempt to delineate a science of appraisal. Probably few would still make the claim that selection procedures can be so objective and so exactly based on an analysis of the information world that they can be regarded as scientific in the full sense. Nevertheless, there is a consensus, expressed in most new archival legislation, that general lines of approach can be laid down. Features of this consensus are:

- That the total production of documentation by modern administration is so large that the great bulk of it must be destroyed – appraisal is the process whereby this destruction should be carried out in an objective way.
- That a wide spectrum of human activity is worthy of being included in appraisal at the national or international levels – hence the documentation of areas such as literature and scholarship (the work of individual authors), politics (personal, central and local), government (central, regional, municipal), science and medicine (research and implementation), banking, insurance and commercial activities generally, and manufacturing industry are all to be included in appraisal and collection programmes.

One result of this understanding is that the process of appraisal is no longer seen as being essentially the preserve of government agencies or of large corporate bodies.

Although no longer claimed as a science, the principles on which appraisal is conducted have been developed in important new ways over the last decade or so. Traditional ways of approaching the task of appraisal were centred upon structural analysis: archivists would examine the surviving documentation and apply tests to it. These tests were to establish the value of the material in terms of its evidential or informational quality. More recently there has been a tendency to include appraisal tests based upon functional analysis. Here the archivists would be attempting to judge whether the documentation available did or did not present a true overall picture of the relevant field of activity; where it did not, they would seek to fill in the missing bits by alternative means. Another development of increasing importance has been the tendency of archivists to take into consideration the costs (both financial and in terms of informational value) of retention or disposal of the material being appraised.

These changes in the principles of appraisal

have not yet been disseminated to all parts of the world, nor are they universally accepted, as yet, by the archival profession; but they are well established in the most advanced areas. Overall, it is probably true that everywhere in the world it is accepted that appraisal and collection policies should cover a very wide range of activities. The effective implementation of this perception varies greatly, of course, from country to country.

Legal framework and standards for collecting, preserving and access

In 1995–96 the International Council on Archives (ICA) published the text of recent new archival legislation in two volumes of its main journal, *Archivum*. This reveals that in the period 1981–94, ninety-seven countries introduced new laws, or revisions of earlier laws, on the management of archives, and at least ten international, quasi-governmental institutions did so too. The weight of this legislation varied considerably, but there is no doubt that most of it incorporated generally agreed international principles of archival operation. Differences mostly concentrated upon the degree of centralization within a state structure and on the detailed control of government materials.

Several features are worth reporting. New laws in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and the United States show the application of new principles, advancing to new levels of activity and new quality standards. The most advanced of the new laws (for example those of Canada) explicitly define the right of citizens to access materials held in archival institutions, redefine the range of materials that fall within the purview of these services, and make provision for systematic appraisal.

The most striking changes were in the legislation introduced by states created by the break-up of former imperial groupings. The most important of these were the republics of the former USSR. During the communist period, the archival system

of the USSR had been extremely centralized. By 1994 the central structure (Glavarkiv) had been dismantled and replaced by new controlling authorities at the level of the constituent republics, and in some cases at lower levels as well. The reconstitution of the central archival training facility as a new University of the Humanities will doubtless have an effect on user services and on access to archives generally. The Russian Federation, under its own new legislation, is in the process of giving up the central control of archival services; the new legislation in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine provides these countries with their own national legal framework. The states of the former Yugoslav federation show a rather similar situation. New laws in Albania, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia are all intended to bring their respective national systems in line with accepted international standards by allowing clearly defined rights of access not only to their own citizens but also to researchers from abroad.

The new archival law in Germany reflects the union of the country after 1989, and provides for a centrally organized federal archives service, with state archives services in each of the *Länder*, within which a network of city and specialized archives and libraries exists. The changes that have made this possible involved an enormous upheaval in established practices and services on both sides of the former dividing line, but have been carried out with professionalism and thoroughness.

The official policy of the old regimes in all the former communist countries had allowed access to archival sources for approved researchers but there had been no clear delineation of the principle on which access was based, nor on what finding aids should be open. The new legislation has sought to change this. Most countries now seem to have adopted some variant of the thirty-year rule (the delay between the storage of archival material and

its accessibility to the public), which now can be regarded as an international norm (see Chapter 12).

Interesting new developments in archival regulation can also be seen in South Africa, where the regime established after the fall of the apartheid system has begun organizing the archives to support its attempt to resolve past enmities and open its society. This has led to the re-establishment, in professional terms, of the country's leadership of the Central and Southern Africa region, a leadership that had been impossible to exercise during the apartheid years (see Chapter 11).

Bibliographic control, finding aids and descriptive standards

It is clear that whatever the law may say, users cannot have access to either archival or unique library materials unless there are adequate finding aids, and unless these finding aids are openly available. It is, and always has been, a difficult and slow job to provide these aids, and it is probable that completely satisfactory finding aids will never be available for all the documentation that has to be covered. Even in countries and sites where archivists and librarians have been steadily working at the completion of catalogues, there remain substantial backlogs, and there are cases, sometimes notorious, where access cannot be given because lists are not ready or not divulged.

These cases are not always confined to countries that have suffered from political control. A notable example is provided by the papers of Eamon De Valera, founding President of Ireland, which are nominally open to access but in practice are largely closed because of the lack of finding aids. As an example of the reverse situation, the papers of Dr Salazar, former President of Portugal, have been catalogued and released for research access in Portugal. Archivists and librarians continue everywhere to work at backlogs, and there are signs that eventually a substantial investment in computer equipment may improve the rate of progress.

There is a particular problem in the countries of the former USSR, and to a lesser extent in the countries of the former Eastern bloc in Europe. Under the previous regimes finding aids were either secret or restricted to internal use. Under the liberalized regimes that have been established since 1989, these internal lists are now being progressively released for use by researchers, but their coverage and adequacy as catalogues have often been questioned. In these countries, enormous quantities of new archival materials, previously secret, have now been transferred to the archives services or have been released for consultation. It is clear that the task of drawing up adequate finding aids for all this documentation is so massive that even if there were no resourcing difficulties, the job would take a very long time. Microfilming and other external projects do little to attack the main core of the problem. An additional problem is that government bodies are tempted to sell access rights to their archive materials, or even the materials themselves, in order to obtain hard currency. This has led to a patchwork of uncoordinated releases, often through American universities.

ICA, with funding from UNESCO, has begun to follow the example set many years ago by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) for the library community, in establishing description standards for the international exchange of data about archival holdings. The basic document is the International Standard Archival Description ISAD(G), adopted by the International Congress on Archives in Montreal in 1992. ISAD(G) has now been translated into French, Italian, Japanese, Spanish and probably other languages. Training courses and workshops in its use have also been held in different parts of the world. The standard is minimal, but is serving as a skeleton upon which national or subject-based finding aids can be structured. For many countries and traditions this is an innovation, the first such standard that has

had any degree of penetration from the outside world.

ICA is now working on the development of a standard for authority files covering the names of creators of archival holdings, whether official or corporate bodies, private individuals or families. This standard is not as yet fully accepted by the archival community – it will be debated at the International Congress on Archives in Beijing in 1996 – but it also follows in the footsteps of the library community.

Another standard for the description of archives and manuscripts was developed in North America in the early 1980s: the Archives and Manuscripts Control (AMC) version of the long-established Machine-Readable Record (MARC) bibliographic exchange format. AMC became well-established in the United States because it was a required format for the large public online catalogue systems, Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), both of which have extensive but partial outreach capabilities in other parts of the world. It has since become more important because of its use in the project to catalogue the Vatican Secret Archives, undertaken by the University of Michigan in 1988. The opening of the Vatican Archives almost coincided with the opening of the Communist Party archives in the former USSR and its satellites. The Vatican case has a broader and more technical significance, however, because of its use of the MARC AMC standard: this standard has allowed the great mass of this historic archive to be structured and managed in a way that conforms to best modern practice. Significantly, this also marked the first international use of a previously purely American standard.

A standard for the archival use of SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language) is being developed at the University of California. If successfully completed and adopted by the archival community this standard will be of great use in under-

pinning the use of the Internet for archival interchange (see Chapter 18).

There will probably continue to be a need for international data exchange for two categories of archival and unique library materials: full text (in which the content of the documents can be displayed) and bibliographic (giving information about the existence and whereabouts of archival holdings). There have been interesting innovations in both these areas.

Full-text interchange

The imaging project at the Archivo de Indias in Seville, Spain, is making available the images of original documents from the Spanish discovery and administration of America from 1492 onwards. Some 10% of the holdings of this major archive are covered by the project. The images are retrieved by a separate but linked indexing system, and can be accessed remotely (although this aspect of the project still remains for the most part unexecuted). In the United Kingdom, large databases containing full abstracts of the personal papers of the first Duke of Wellington (a general in the Napoleonic wars and subsequently Prime Minister of Britain in the early nineteenth century) and the personal papers of Lord Mountbatten (Commander-in-Chief Pacific during the Second World War, and Viceroy of India) have both been made available electronically, giving access to full or almost full text. British universities also have provided bibliographic descriptions of other archives. Unfortunately, none of these have been based upon any descriptive standard or format, nor have they yet been assimilated into the new formats required by the Internet.

Bibliographic interchange

The wide-area bibliographic networks, OCLC and RLIN, both hold large quantities of bibliographic descriptions of archival and unique library materials.

Although based in the United States, these databases also contain materials relating to other countries and, of course, can be accessed from anywhere in the world. Since American universities and other institutions hold much important material relating to other regions, the ability of users to consult them is an important enlargement of the world's information resources. During the late 1980s it appeared likely that these databases, or others like them, would expand to include comparable materials from other countries. This promise has not, for the most part, been realized. The failure of these projects to expand fully over the world was probably caused by a lack of resources, but also by the development of alternative, and less restrictive, media of communication, and more generally by the backlog of descriptions that could be made available.

Access to documents for research, information and private needs

The idea that archives and unique documents are kept primarily so that users may have access to them spread only slowly through the world. Certain countries, such as Sweden and France, accepted early the principle of public access (subject to broad restrictions) to materials held in archival or library institutions. By the middle of the twentieth century a consensus had developed that there should be statutorily supported rights of (or at least facilities for) access. The spread of this principle received an enormous boost in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when most countries, in all parts of the world, set about revising the relevant legislation. Practical implementation of the new approach has been slower and less predictable than the acceptance of the principle. However, it is probably true that researchers now expect to be able to gain access to a wide range of documentation, and there is a growing body of literature that reports on the success or failure of such expectations.

Several nations that can be regarded as being in

the vanguard of the modern information movement have enacted Freedom of Information legislation. These laws give the public rights of access to government documents, irrespective of date or of whether they have been transferred to archival institutions. The most notable of these countries are Sweden (where the legislation has historic roots), the United States, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands. The subject was discussed by the International Archive Round Table Conference held at Austin, Texas, in 1985, and one of the recommendations from that meeting was that archivists should be professionally charged with the duty of advising their governments on questions of freedom of information and of privacy.

Since then, although the principle of freedom of information is still gaining ground (especially, of course, in the countries of the former communist bloc), the privacy side of the equation has come into more prominence. At the Austin meeting the areas in which privacy should be ensured were set out: personal registration details (birth, marriage, death); the health of individuals; income; criminal proceedings; professional life; political, religious or philosophical opinions; the basic documents providing statistical information (for example, census returns); questions of family honour; police matters; and information gained under promise of confidentiality. Methods used to ensure privacy include control both by regulating the transfer of relevant documents to the archives and by the operation of a phased closed period. Most countries now have data protection legislation that applies these principles to databases held on computer systems.

Important principles are involved. One is that under data protection legislation it is usual to give subjects the right to insist that erroneous information about themselves should be changed. Archivists, however, must argue that there is a broader historical interest: data that are erroneous in terms of the current situation are not necessarily erroneous as a his-

torical record. In some notorious cases a conflict of interest has come to the fore, for example, where persons who have changed sex during their lifetime have demanded the right to have their birth certificates altered. Although desirable for their current rights as citizens, it is clear that to alter the certificate would be historically a falsification. It is likely that there will be further controversy on these issues in the future. Similarly, if personal information is rendered anonymous in order to promote rapid current use, this process damages its long-term historical value. There is a need to ensure that information supplied under conditions of confidentiality is preserved archivally without being rendered anonymous. In some countries, for example Australia, this question has become politically sensitive and has led to the destruction of important census material.

The major event of the last decade must surely be the actual and promised release of the enormous and detailed archives previously closed because of the nature for the regimes that generated them. The release of this material has been accompanied by important upheavals in the archival administrations and library services of these countries. The attention of the world has been drawn to these events, which indeed have had considerable significance for everybody (see Chapter 12).

In Germany the process of unifying the two previous republics into a federal structure included a radical reorganization of the federal archival system. The two archive administrations were brought together, with a considerable change of senior personnel. The older archival holdings had been scattered by the occupation of Germany in 1945, and these were now reassembled. The enormous archives accumulated by the apparatus of state control of the former German Democratic Republic, including secret dossiers on large numbers of individuals, were brought under archival administration and a start made on making them available for consultation.

The full effects of research and personal access to this material have still not been realized; when the material is fully open, there may be significant effects on society.

Similar results may be expected in other countries of the Eastern bloc. A particular problem in these countries was what to do with the archives of the Communist Party. Theoretically these belonged to a private organization, but in practice they contained material relating to the entire range of government activity, and reached deeply into the affairs of many citizens. For the most part, these archives have now been brought under the control of the national archives system, though the problems of creating and making available the necessary finding aids remain formidable. Interestingly, this resolution of the question of the Party archives has brought into relief the parallel problem of the archives of the Church in these countries. While the state had taken over from the churches the responsibility for civil registration, church archives still contain important demographic information, and access to them is a subject of broad interest. One particular aspect of this issue concerns the recovery of confiscated Church property, the re-establishment of monastic institutions and the specific ownership (as between different ecclesiastical groups) of buildings.

There have been bilateral projects intended to assist in the preservation and accessibility of archival holdings in the former communist states. For example, the Hoover Institute at Stanford University in the United States had an agreement between 1992 and 1995 to microfilm some of the state archives in the Russian Federation. This project was very controversial and recalls similar projects in the past, such as that of Syracuse University and the archives of Kenya in the 1960s. Though they help to preserve and make accessible parts of the world's archival heritage, it is not clear that the best way to achieve this is to remove control from the country of origin.

China, echoing its importance in world affairs, is now strengthening its impact on international archival matters, and in 1996 assumed the presidency of ICA. Despite the damage and setbacks of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the country has made considerable new investment in the management of archives and unique documents, and has begun to attack the problems posed by a tradition of secretiveness. Archives for the period up to 1949 were opened by legislation in 1980, and there has been increasing international co-operation in archival training since then.

Human rights and rehabilitation

When discussing archive collections in terms of human rights, the development of archival services in international bodies and the coming together of archival services in the countries of the European Union are both significant. The latter has been marked by a determination to recall the importance of proper archives services for democratic regimes and the rule of law, and to implement such services. An important statement made by the countries of the Council of Europe as a result of a conference in Strasbourg in 1994 included plans for the computerization of finding aids and publications, microfilming, and improving access facilities as an underpinning to the concept of a common European heritage (see Chapter 25). A particular programme was announced for the management and opening of the archives of the Comintern (the Third Communist International), and for aid to currently disadvantaged countries – a specific programme is proposed for Albania.

This European statement applies principally to archives held in traditional form. Similar problems exist in connection with appraisal, preservation and access to archival material in audiovisual form. These have been the subject of international discussion and agreement in specialist forums. An example of effective co-operation is provided by Germany, where

the national film archive is the responsibility of the Federal Archives (see Chapter 14).

Impact of new technologies

The importance of computers for library cataloguing and for archive administration is clear, and several projects and events have underlined this potential in the world arena. The project for an extended international catalogue of eighteenth-century books has now been virtually completed, and is another example of the effective use of agreed formats and cataloguing standards (see above). After long delays and hesitations, the Manuscripts Division of the British Library adopted a system for computer cataloguing which has, in effect, eliminated the notorious thirty-year backlog between the acquisition of materials and the publication of the finding aids to them. This achievement alone should give cause for optimism that in the following decades similar backlogs can be removed.

The arrival of the Internet has caused a flurry of activity, and it is now possible to find on it descriptions of archive and manuscript holdings in many countries. One reason for the rush to put homepages on the World Wide Web is that, once access has been gained to the Internet by way of a provider agency (usually the archive's parent institution), archivists and librarians are not impeded by the need to learn and adapt to detailed formats and cataloguing rules. It is a simple matter to put descriptions on the Web as free text, embellished by graphics and digital images. Comparing the structure of MARC records with pages entered using the standard Internet format, HTML, shows immediately how relatively quick and easy the latter method is, both in the technicalities of data entry and in the presentation of the material to users (see Chapter 12). The Web is itself, moreover, directly a user interface.

Nevertheless, it should be added that from a worldwide point of view the computer age has hard-

ly begun for manuscripts and archives. In many of the most important regions it is not easy for archivists and librarians to get access to hardware or software, or to keep their equipment maintained to a reliable standard. When equipment is obtained, there is a shortage of relevant training. Software may have to be adapted to local conditions, and there is little or no standardization in either the developed or developing world. In some developed countries, such as Italy, Germany or the United Kingdom, archivists and related communities have attempted to develop specialized software, only to find that they do not have the resources to compete with the constantly upgraded commercial packages.

In less developed areas, UNESCO's CDS/ISIS software has been used to good effect, but here again the absence of pre-designed applications or of general standards has prevented rapid development of databases, and this despite the devoted efforts of a few trainers to extend the body of expertise. In other developed areas, for example Japan, archivists and manuscript librarians have not yet generally come into contact with computer systems. Even in the most highly developed countries there are many smaller, local, specialized or poorly supported archives and manuscript collections that have not yet seriously begun to use automated methods.

ICA is now actively establishing a presence on the World Wide Web, and is supporting a project under which the national archives of key countries in the developing world will be enabled to join the Internet community. There is still no explicit standard or model for using the medium, and this remains an important training issue.

Appraising, preserving and giving access to electronic records and data sets has been an increasing preoccupation in many countries. Most progress towards a technological solution to these problems has been made in North America, and from there the expertise has been disseminated. In November 1994 an important conference in Australia, 'Playing for

Memory of the World

Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But that memory is fragile. Every day, fragments, if not entire sections, of the documentary heritage disappear for ever.

To guard against collective amnesia, it must remain our aim and hope to preserve manuscripts and other rare and valuable archive and library material existing in any form, whether written, audiovisual or electronic, and to ensure their wider dissemination. For this reason, UNESCO has launched a vast and ambitious programme entitled 'Memory of the World'.

The twofold purpose of the UNESCO 'Memory of the World' Programme is to safeguard and promote the endangered world documentary heritage.

The scale and structure of the programme are such that intellectual, technical and financial partnerships will be required. In this programme, UNESCO intends to act as a co-ordinator and catalyst.

An International Advisory Committee guides

the overall implementation of the programme and determines the award of the 'Memory of the World' label to the projects selected.

At the national level, a committee is responsible for project selection and follow-up.

A world list of endangered library and archive holdings will be a cornerstone of the programme.

Preservation by means of the most appropriate techniques, ease of access and wide dissemination must be the hallmarks of this programme, which is to include not only rare manuscripts and documents from libraries and archives, but also audiovisual and computerized recorded material.

The 'Memory of the World' Programme has aroused great interest from the time it was launched, and requests for assistance are regularly being received by UNESCO. The task ahead is immense for this vast world campaign to safeguard and disseminate documentary treasures in danger.

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Keeps', assembled a body of authoritative papers which is likely to serve as a structure for action in this field. These papers deal with the management of electronic archives. In the case of unique but non-archival documents in electronic form, a body of expertise has already been developed, under the general aegis of the International Association for Social Science Information Service and Technology (IASSIST), operating through electronic data archives. One or more of these institutions can be found in most developed countries, and there is now a regular system for identifying, appraising, acquiring and making available data sets in electronic form.

In some countries, such as Sweden, this operation is strongly co-ordinated with the national archives service. In others, such as the United Kingdom, the operation is separate. Access to this material is increasingly provided remotely by way of the Internet or other networks.

Memory of the World Programme

The Memory of the World Programme, initiated by UNESCO, is of central importance to the work discussed in this paper. It is aimed at preservation of and access to the documentary heritage of the world (see box). As stated in its initial document, 'access

facilitates protection and preservation ensures access'. The seven introductory projects include digitization of manuscripts from the cities of Prague, St Petersburg and Moscow, and from Bulgaria and the Yemen, a newspaper project in Latin America and a programme for scientific manuscripts in Turkey. A Memory of the World national committee now exists in ten countries, and it is clear that the programme will have important effects in preserving and making available specific sets of unique materials. So far these materials appear to have been chosen because they are considered particularly valuable and attractive; the real problem lies with the vast masses of undescribed and unmanageable archives, bearing intimately on the life of people, that have suddenly, in the last few years, been thrust upon the world stage. ■

Further reading

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