Access – the reformulation of an archival paradigm

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Abstract. The focus of archives is shifting from storage to access. This shift changes fundamentally the views of archival thinking and of the difference between past and future. Archivists become specialists who provide means for the use of time, and do not just offer past times themselves. The author argues that the access paradigm reinforces the theoretical challenges as well as the pragmatic implementation of archival methods and ideas. She discusses the consequences for archival theory and for the methodologies of description, appraisal and preservation.

Keywords: access, archival science, memory, paradigm shift

1. Introduction

The future has rarely been as open as today. That is the result of fundamental changes in the near past. The shock waves caused by the collapse of the socialist block did not yet calm down. The existence of a block of socialist states, governing half of the world definitely is over. It is the past. But that past still influences the present. The future seems to need thorough preparation and planning. Yet prognosis needs diagnosis. Planning for the future and understanding its perspectives needs knowledge about what happened when and why.

In this political and social context archives have attracted new attention. Records of suppressive regimes are left over in more or less huge quantities. In Germany the records of the ancient secret service, which had tried to inspect and influence the whole life of the people in the eastern socialist state, are now open and can be inspected in a special institution and a law was passed that allows us to investigate them. The records of the whole administration of that vanished state were transferred to the state archives and there they are free for consultation without the normally observed closing period of thirty years. Repositories nowadays have to make available huge masses of records. All these papers allows everybody to know what happened. They give access to the past to support present knowledge and so they assure the capability of common remembrance.

Another development stressing the importance of archives is the introduction of information technology in all areas of social life. Computers
meanwhile are indispensable means of daily communication and they are no longer only storage devices for data. With the networked interconnections they have generated a third form of communication besides the oral speech and the written messages. This third form has special characteristics. Electronic writings and messages have the volatility of oral communications but at the same time they have the stability of analog writing because they can be distributed to anybody like paper letters and their copies. The communication is even less controllable by the author of a message as it was the case with analogue letters because their distribution is much easier and needs less special logistics. Those are new encouraging and also frightening experiences. These effects of the technical developments create insecurity concerning the capability of remembrance. With the new instability the concern for memory becomes more stressing.

But what is memory? It is a social, not a technical phenomenon. Memory is needed, when activities are about to be undertaken. Than it happens or is done. Memory is not a thing like a book or a recording that could be stored. Both are useful to make memory possible, but they cannot replace it. Memory happens whenever it is needed. It uses all sorts of sources that are available and that can tell its history. They all are investigated for the purposes of memory grounded in a special situation and the attention is not focussed only on what is presented and offered as sources.

Storage is one technique – but only among others – to assure the capability and functioning of memory. Storage of content represented in recordings and data has the disadvantages that it needs planning for the future and anticipation of its needs. But the future is unpredictable as are its needs of knowledge about the past. Reconstruction, which is especially used and elaborated in historical research, can be seen as a supplementary or even largely used technique for building memory especially when explanations of what happened are needed. Reconstruction takes the opposite direction compared to storage. It looks exclusively at the past, while storage only sees the presumed future. This is more secure, because the past is definitely there. It is finished and cannot be altered any more. So reconstruction starts in the present and looks at the past. If memory cannot be stored, than reconstructability becomes an alternative approach. It becomes an important concern of archivists. Potential sources can facilitate later reconstruction if they are prepared to tell their story. Digital recordings cannot assure their own longevity with technical methods of refreshing or migration as well as they cannot incorporate their own trustworthiness (Lynch, 2000). So reconstructability meanwhile also became subject of scientific research on longevity with the help of emulation strategies (Rothenberg, 1999).