

Work in Progress: Towards the establishment of a Maltese National Register of Archives

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Abstract

The National Archives is currently building up a new web-site that aims to reach the public in innovative ways. It will make it possible for patrons to order copies of records and make on-line payments using the government payment gateway. Another achievement of this web-site will be the facility of an on-line National Register of Archives (NRA). This idea is not new to Malta, and was repeated over and over again during the last sixty years. However, the availability of the internet, and the present structures of the National Archives make it possible to have this vision come true. This article traces the background to this development, and also presents a first snapshot of the benefits which this NRA will provide to the public and to scholars.

Introduction

One of the leading theorists in archival science was Sir Hilary Jenkinson (1882-1961). He distinguished himself as an archivist, palaeographer and influential thinker in the archives field. His *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922) remained an authoritative work for practicing archivists to the present day. Just after the end of the Second World War he was sent to Italy to assess the state of the archives there.¹ He was also commissioned to compile a similar report on the state of Maltese archives. He arrived in Malta on 6 May 1944, visited a number of public archives, and presented a report which was later discussed but unfortunately never implemented.²

Jenkinson's report discusses Maltese archives under two broad categories: **a.** governmental, semi-public and private; and **b.** ecclesiastic. Apart from the detailed analysis about the main archival collections, Jenkinson made a series of recommendations to safeguard the future of Maltese archives.³ One of the recommendations made was for a general study about the types of documents, their whereabouts and the authorities managing them. Although Jenkinson does not specifically mention the term "National Register of Archives", he was hinting in that direction.

A more formal proposal to compile a National Register of Archives was made by Dr Ann Williams during the conference 'Maltese History: What future' organised

¹ National Archives of Malta (NAM), GMR1458, *Report on the working of the Royal Malta Library for the period 1939-46*, 28.xii.1946.

² NAM, CSG1/1400/1944.

³ The full recommendations are reproduced in C. Farrugia, *L-Arkivji ta' Malta*, Malta, 2006, 33.

by the Department of History of the University of Malta in 1971. During the Fifth Session of this conference Ann Williams presented a supplementary paper entitled 'A National Register of Archives',⁴ in which she argued that documentary records in Malta are scattered in various libraries, public buildings, as well as private and ecclesiastical collections. In this paper, Dr. Williams advocated that a valuable beginning would be the recording of the location of such documents and their level of accessibility. She also suggested that until a public repository for archives was established, the national register should be hosted at the Royal Malta Library or the University Library. The author also placed information about the law and practice relating to the National Register of Archives in the United Kingdom for consultation in the Department of History, at the Royal University of Malta. Not much happened in the direction advocated by Williams, and local and foreign researchers still make several demands that cannot be satisfied due to lack of adequate finding aids.

A National Register of Archives would facilitate research as the whereabouts of particular records would become public knowledge. Local archives are still fragmented and scattered across the islands. One takes the impression that each and every archive is a world on its own rather than one ring in a chain of interrelated data. Archival research relies a lot on the interdependence of data that can be traced across a broad spectrum of repositories. The availability of a central register will therefore make it possible for the public to access at one place the various archives, information about their services and also the list of records they hold.

Each profession passes through challenging times, and indeed, one might say that each period in history provides its own unique challenges. Moreover, certain changes affect the very core of this profession as indeed happened with the advent of computers. The ensuing diffusion of electronic records was such a turning point for the archival profession – the change from records on traditional media to records in electronic format meant not only a change of medium, but also a change in the way public administrators think, act and record their actions. These changes placed before the archivist the challenge to, either adopt to the new environment, or chance the extinction of his/her profession.

The advent of automation and the development of standards

One consequence of the IT revolution in the archival profession was the realisation of the need for standards. The original reluctance by archivists to develop their own standards gradually gave way to more universal ones adopted by librarians, though this proved problematic. The arrival of automation created a renewed interest in standards.

One of the first standard manuals issued for archivists was the *Manual for Archival Description* by Michael Cook.⁵ It was extremely helpful in that it tried successfully to map out the various standards existent by then and also highlight similarities and differences in order to pave the way for further standardization. The

⁴ A. Williams, "A national register of archives" in A. Williams and R. Vella Bonavita, ed., *Maltese History: What Future?*, Malta, 1974, 136.

⁵ M. Cook, *Manual of Archival Description*, 1986.

increasing need of standardization led the International Council on Archives (ICA) to set up a committee on standards in 1990 with the first ISAD(G) published in 1994.⁶ One cannot attribute the development of these standards simply to the advent of automation. Yet it is most certain that automation provided an incentive to the archival community to standardise its descriptive systems in order to facilitate future automation.

A new perspective for archivists

The changing scenario implied a new role for the archival profession. It placed before the archivist the challenge to change the very essence of his/her profession. On this issue Lekaukau Masisi wrote that:

archivists have traditionally focussed on providing information on things that happened a long time before, but if they are to compete, or even to survive alongside other information providers, they have to change and become active information seekers, as well as information providers.⁷

This means a reorientation of the profession implying new skills and responsibilities.

In a paper on the topic presented during the 1998 Stockholm CITRA Conference, John McDonald compared the situation to a train that is leaving the station while archives are still at the platform. Yet, he was optimistic enough to grant that it is still not too late if they would like to jump on board.⁸ However, ten years later, it is still worrying that several archivists still consider the issue of making the best use of electronic media as alien to their profession.

These changes are affecting the Maltese archival sector like many other countries. During the last nine years, the National Archives of Malta lobbied with the local authorities to implement a wide-ranging reform that will give the archives the necessary legal, administrative and financial tools to fulfil its mission. This movement was supported by the *Friends of the National Archives* and led to substantial achievements. It made it possible to have a new legislation for archives just after 15 years from the enactment of the first Archives Act.

The 2005 archive legislation reformed both the administrative structure of the National Archives and the professional basis of the same institution.⁹ It separated the National Archives from the libraries sector, a proposal that was made even by Jenkinson way back in 1944. One of the reasons which led to this reform taking so long might be the misconception that the National Library holds substantial archival collections. Only a small fraction of the National Library holdings are archival (basically the Archives of the Order of the Knights of St. John that amount to circa

⁶ International Council on Archives, ISAD(G): *General International Standard Archival Description*, (2nd Edition), Ottawa, 2000.

⁷ M. Lekaukau, "Serving the administrator. The archivist in the new millennium", *Archivuum XLV*, Paris, 2000, 121.

⁸ J. McDonald, "Current records, access and the international archival community", *CITRA XXXIII*, 1998, 130.

⁹ "National Archives Act, V – 2005", *Chapter 477 of the Laws of Malta*.

7,000 volumes). By archival standards this is a very small collection, although it is of high historical value. Following the reform, the National Archives functions as a government agency with its own legal persona and annual budget. The professional archival aspect of the reform included the creation of the office of the National Archivist, with responsibility for overseeing not only the National Archives but the whole archive sector. The law goes into detail about the structure of records management in public entities and departments and also provides for collaborative structures in the form of a National Archives Forum. The Forum is to be convened bi-annually by the National Archives Council. The aim is to bring together all stakeholders and discuss a state of archives report. These structures augur well for an impetus in a sector that suffered so much from years of neglect.

Archivists as role players in the information society

The various e-government initiatives in most democratic countries are adding more value to the idea that in an information society it is the duty of the government to guarantee the safeguard of, and access to information using electronic means. In some countries this responsibility is already shouldered by National Archives. This is in line with one of the resolutions passed by a seminar held in Kuala Lumpur in 1998 which stated that 'the National Archives should assume a leadership role in serving as an authoritative source on matters relating to record-keeping in government'.¹⁰ It is a new challenge for the National Archives to make its voice heard in all issues related to e-government and electronic government as these activities also produce the archival record of the future.

Even when this is not the case, what is worth highlighting is the new perspective of the archivist as a role player in an information network rather than as the custodian of non-current records. This is emphasised in another resolution agreed to during the same seminar in 1998:

In the new electronic environment, no single player can address the issue alone. Archivists, information technology specialists, administrators and other specialists should foster partnerships to bring together the expertise and tools required to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by electronic government.¹¹

A number of archivists have published extensively on the need to give online users the same quality attention provided to those who physically visit reading rooms. One should strive hard to provide new services to what Amanda Hill calls 'the invisible researcher'.¹² Unfortunately, there is no readily available statistics of archives users in Malta, let alone of researchers who conduct their research online. It is hoped that the periodic state of archives reports, that are now required under the National Archives Act of 2005, will start addressing this situation.

¹⁰ H. Zon Yahaya and M. Yusuf, "Technological challenges and preservation issues", *CITRA XXXIII*, 1998, 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹² A. Hill, "Serving the invisible researcher: meeting the needs of online users", *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2004, 147.

The issue of custody

Another issue which archivists have to face is the issue of physical custody of electronic records. Most professional archivists spent a large chunk of their University training studying the best conditions for the physical custody of records, archives buildings, security, preservation etc. The idea of having custody of records which are not physically under lock and key might initially worry the traditional archivist. Different perspectives are being adopted on this issue. The experience of Australian archives is very relevant in this regards. In March 1995 the Australian Archives formally adopted a distributed custody approach.¹³ This approach eases the burden of physical custody of the electronic records from the Archives service. In such an environment the archivist can concentrate on the general direction of the system and guarantee that records are created, used, maintained, and preserved in the appropriate manner.

This approach is explained in a few sentences in the words of Steve Stuckey, Assistant Director General of Australian Archives:

... The information super highway allows delivery of the records to the users in a way archivists of old could never have dreamed of. And all these things, the true tasks of archivists, can be done – and may be done even better – if the records themselves are never in the hands of an archivist.¹⁴

To further complicate matters, most University level archives training does not equip the future archivist with the necessary expertise to manage electronic records effectively.¹⁵ While every effort has been made to structure a module on the management of electronic records as part of the Diploma in Archives and Records Management at the University of Malta, one still hopes that our students will have the opportunity to train hands on specifically on archival cataloguing software as part of their University training.

Current progress on the setting up of the Maltese National Register of Archives

In this rapidly changing scenario the National Archives of Malta is striving hard to make best use of technology in order to reach out to its patrons. One of the functions of the National Archives is to establish and maintain a register to be known as the National Register of Archives (Act V, 2005, Article 4 (1) b) The same legislation stipulates that the National Register of Archives shall contain particulars, in such form as the National Archivist considers appropriate, of :

- (i) archives open for public inspection and location of holdings;

¹³ B. Reed, "Electronic records management in Australia", *Records Management Journal*, vol 7, no. 3, 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁵ K. Barata, 'Archives in the Digital Age', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, 69.

- (ii) records of national significance in private archives, after the necessary permission has been granted by the owner of the records; and
- (iii) any other details or information which will benefit the promotion of the archives and the provision.

The initial assessment of how this function can be fulfilled indicated that basically the success of such a measure would be conditioned by two factors, namely the practicality of the method used for data collation and management; and the sense of collaboration we are able to raise amongst all stakeholders. For this reason, it was decided to combine this effort with the launching of the much-awaited web-site of the archives. The delay in launching the final product was mainly the result of several changes that took place in government thinking about its ICT strategy, in particular e-government. The first web site of the National Archives of Malta (www.archives.gov.mt) was constructed in line with the thinking of the time – that of presenting encyclopaedic-type information to the patrons. The present site (www.nationalarchives.gov.mt) is more geared towards interactivity and tries to create a platform for the exchange of information and services.

The National Register of Archives will form part of the e-government services of the new archives portal. The brainstorming that went into this particular service led us to identify the following fields worth of inclusion at this stage:

1. Name of Repository
2. Owning Entity
3. Address
4. Person in Charge
5. Contacts : Tel: Fax: E-mail: web-site:
6. Opening Hours
7. Access requirements
8. Description of Holdings
(to include list of founts names; codes; dates; and any descriptions or attachments of documents in a number of formats)
9. Extent of holdings
10. Photo of repository or important document

Individual archives (whether public or private) will be able to participate, fill-in the data themselves following the granting of an access password by the National Archives. The data will then be vetted by the staff of the National Archives and once approved or revised made available to the public. The possibility to attach files to the various founts and entries will provide archives with a golden opportunity to start putting their finding aids on-line. The system will have its limitations. The file formats that can be accessed have been limited to a restricted number of formats in order to avoid technical complications and restrain costs. Other projects which are of a much larger dimension and very well funded were studied.¹⁶ But even in these projects, certain technical issues, such as version control,¹⁷ remained unresolved.

¹⁶ One project which was analysed is the AIM25 Project. The Archives in London and the M25 area portal provides a web-accessible database containing some 5700 high-level descriptions of about 50 higher education and other institutions.

¹⁷ R. Cosgrave, "The AIM25 Project", *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2003, 172.

The system will allow for searches to be carried out in any of the fields of the data included. All efforts are being made to get the best results from the systems currently in place at the National Archives. However, all these efforts are severely constrained as none of the participating archives have a back-end equipped with the right technology for archival cataloguing.

A more challenging future

The creation of a National Register of Archives will not remedy the pitfalls the local archives sector has. However, it will be the first step in making best use of technology to enhance collaboration between all stakeholders in the sector. International developments are putting pressure on the archival community in Malta to act and establish policies and best practices for the archival care of digital media and electronic records. A lot of work has been done about certain aspects of the whole process including the important issue of metadata.¹⁸ The creation of metadata is the process of building up supporting data attached to each digital image. It is a process that involves the expert input of the archivist and cannot be done in an automated manner. The same can be said about the very controversial issue of appraisal of electronic records.¹⁹ However, several issues are still hazy and need the right professional people to come forward, take the lead, and act. This should be the new character of present day archivists – initiative and innovation should be the catch-words of a profession which has a challenging future rather than a dwindling role. The initiative to set up the National Register of Archives is a small yet important step in setting the basis for future collaboration between the various stakeholders in the archives sector.

¹⁸ Information about metadata and its archival value can be found at:
http://www.euan.org/euan_meta.html (accessed on 27 September 2008).

¹⁹ Cf. G. O'Shea, "The medium is NOT the message: appraisal of electronic records by Australian archives", *Archives and Manuscripts*, 1994.