

# ***A pre-administrative outset for archives?***

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DIGITIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF ARCHIVES. Records creation and recordkeeping

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*Abstract:* A number of studies shows that records management is imperfect. Administration can tell that records does not enter the proper it-systems, and newspapers can tell that it now and then has severe consequences for one or another citizen. These deficiencies also have consequences for the archives, who do not receive the records they expect. Could and should the archives move from a *post-administrative* to a *pre-administrative* point of view in their understanding of the administration? What kind of research studies could be useful for the archives in this transition?

## **Quality in records creation**

Transparency and reliability in public administration are important prerequisites for an open and functioning democratic society. The role of public archives is to maintain documentation of government and municipal decisions and actions in the future. The archives have a common interest with other parties in ensuring that the documentation in the public administration is complete and orderly so that documentation of decisions and actions can be found, now and in the future.

Administration's records become in due time the "gold" of the state and municipal archives. This have been the case for decades, all though modified by archival appraisal when the quantity of (paper) records overwhelmed the archives. Much effort has been put in the discussion on what the archives should keep and what they should let go.<sup>1</sup>

In digital administration it is still the case that the administration's records are the "gold" of the archives. Only, it has proved difficult to identify the total body of administrative records. A number

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, Terry. "We are what we keep; we keep what we are': archival appraisal past, present and future." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011): 173-189. *At vogte kulturarven eller at slette alle spor: om arbejdet med den danske bevaringsstrategi*. Bind 1 og 2, redigeret af Elisabeth Bloch og Christian Larsen. Arkivforeningen 2006 [To guard the cultural heritage or to erase all traces: about the work on the Danish conservation strategy. Volumes 1 and 2, edited by Elisabeth Bloch and Christian Larsen. Danish Archives Association 2006]

of studies show that very many records do not find their way to the dedicated it-systems. And thus, not to the archives.

If the records do not go to the digital document and records management systems<sup>2</sup>, they can be stored in for example the emailing-systems and shared folders /common drives. Digital management entails a truly complex organization in which each employee has several, often parallel it-systems available. Often, the employee has several systems available for solving the same task, and even if there are recommendations or even rules on which systems to use, the employee can often choose other systems.

The it-systems used in the administration are very important for the form of the digital archives and for the way they are stored. Therefore, the very design of the many systems has a major and important role and consequently, it-companies have become an important party in the archival work. The challenge is to design administrative it-systems that will be experienced as an advantage, not as a difficult obstacle in the daily work in administration.<sup>3</sup>

Archives – as well as other parties – would benefit from it-systems that were easy to use and therefore were used consequently in administration. We know what is stored in the dedicated it-systems and what comes into the archives. But we know little about what is *not* coming into the archives.

In the municipality of Copenhagen, a study showed in 2014 that there are errors in the filing of emails in more than half of the cases investigated and that naming documents very often is deficient. This means that many documents do not find their way to the relevant it-systems at all, and that many of the documents in the systems are poorly described and thus difficult to rediscover for the users of archives in the future. The study showed major or minor errors in the filing of digital communications in 97% of the cases investigated.<sup>4</sup> A study in Esbjerg municipality showed similar results: for example naming of documents is deficient, filing often happens rather late, cases are not closed, more cases on one subject<sup>5</sup>. In the same line, the interviews on filing practice in

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<sup>2</sup> Danish: ESDH-systemer.

<sup>3</sup> Malene Seifon og Tine Marcher: "Digitalisering og decentralisering: hvad gik galt med datakvaliteten?" *Dokumentation i en digital tid – ESDH, arkiver og god forvaltningsskik*. 2017. ["Digitisation and decentralisation: What went wrong with data quality?". *Documentation in a digital time – ESDH, archives and Good Administrative Behaviour*]

<sup>4</sup> Borgerrådgiverens beretning 2013, p.23. [Citizens' adviser's report]. Journaliseringsikkerhed ved elektronisk kommunikation. Endelig rapport. Borgerrådgiverens egen driftundersøgelser. 2014. [Security of journalization of electronic communications. Final report. The citizen's adviser's own operation studies].

<sup>5</sup> Henriette Spang Sørensen og Jørgen Dieckmann Rasmussen: "Fra postliste til åben adgang til emnesager – erfaringer fra Esbjerg Kommune". *Dokumentation i en digital tid – ESDH, arkiver og god forvaltningsskik*. 2017. ["From mailing list

three municipalities, conducted by Marianne Paasch, show severe difficulties in administration concerning the quality of the filed data and consistent compliance with the rules to ensure the quality of data.<sup>6</sup>

My archival experience tells me that these documented examples of inadequate filing only are the tip of the iceberg. Struggling with deficient filing is very often part of the management of it-systems. However, most municipal archives choose not to disclose their problems in the public. The fact that the Danish National Archives have both a guide on the subject and training courses indicates that this is a major problem.<sup>7</sup>

An important criticism of the public administration records management comes from journalists and, to a certain extent, the investigative commissions issued by law, who rely on trustworthy information on the work of the public administration in their investigations. Their investigations can be hampered by the fact that the necessary documentation is not available, neither in the administration nor in the archives. One of the most critical and thorough journalists in Denmark, Jesper Tynell, has stated that archive access is a way to prevent journalists from getting to the bottom of delicate questions. It is his experience that he do not find what he is looking for in the archives – because it is not there. He continues, that many emails are not filed and the archived material is not enough to get to the bottom of the problems.<sup>8</sup>

How can the administration even work despite these problems? The positive answer goes in two directions. First, in many cases it-systems are used correctly and the right documents go to the archive. It-systems are included in the daily solution of the tasks assigned to the administration. It usually works well, you have to assume. Second, the formal systems are constantly complemented by organizational, formal and informal knowledge. With everything from extensive management decisions to informal talk between colleagues. That is, informal knowledge and communication

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to open access to subject matter – experiences from the municipality of Esbjerg". *Documentation in a digital time – ESDH, archives and Good Administrative Behavior.*]

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Paasch: *Gemt eller glemt? En undersøgelse af recordsbegrebets betydning for fremtidens informationsforvaltnings- og arkivpraksisser*. 2018, Aalborg Universitetsforlag. 542 s. (Aalborg Universitet. Det Samfundsvidenskabelige Fakultet. Ph.D.-Serien). [*Saved or forgotten? A study of the impact of the record concept on the future of information management and archiving practices.*]

<sup>7</sup> Vejledning om kvalitetssikring i it-systemer - Rigsarkivets minimumskrav og anbefalinger Rigsarkivet, marts 2016 [Guidance on quality assurance in IT systems-minimum requirements and recommendations of the National Archives]. Jette Holmstrøm Kjellberg og Mette Hall-Andersen: *Kvalitetssikring – i hvilken grad bør arkiverne styre myndighedernes digitale sagsdannelse? Dokumentation i en digital tid – ESDH, arkiver og god forvaltningsskik*. 2017. ["Quality assurance – To what extent should archives manage the authorities' digital case formation?"]. *Documentation in a digital time – ESDH, archives and Good Administrative Behaviour*]

<sup>8</sup> P1 Dokumentar: Tibet-kommissionens blinde øje. [P1 Documentary: Tibet-the Commission's blind eye. Radio Broadcast]. Broadcasted 18.10.2018.

makes the it-systems work in a complicated organizational setting. Unfortunately, as this kind of informal knowledge is very difficult (read: impossible) to keep in the archives, it will not be preserved for the future archival users.

The documented or at least rather well-known problems of filing leaves the archives in a dilemma. Should the archives make an *active* effort to obtain as complete a documentation as possible to document how state and municipal decisions affects society? Or, should the archives document how the administration has performed and documented its tasks by *neutrally* keeping the state of the public administration and thus accept that not all relevant documents are archived? The dilemma can be tracked down to the question, when should the archives meet administration?

### ***Pre-administrative* interests of archives?**

In the past, it was sufficient for the archive to relate to (paper)records when the administration no longer had use for them. Through an appraisal process, the archives picked out what was to be preserved for posterior. The archives could work *post-administratively*.

Digital administration has changed this setting. The process of filing is now diverse and rapidly changing. The administration has several filing systems at their disposition. They have the option to choose the system that best suits a given situation. Often, colleagues working with the same area can choose different systems or freely switch between multiple systems. Does this mean that the archives now have an interest in being present before and while the files are being created? Should the archives now work *pre- and inter-administratively*?

The *pre-administrative* aspect means that archival interests should be introduced already when the administration introduces new forms of work to ensure that all relevant data and documents can be transferred to archives. Firstly, the archives must be familiar with the administration's practice and, secondly, it must be ensured that these practices are suited for archiving.

The *inter-administrative* aspect means that it is an archival interest to follow the administrations practice to observe if guides are followed and if practice is changing over time.

The question of when the archives will meet the administration, is basically a question of how the archives can become so flexible that they can adapt to a digital administration that is constantly changing.

## **How can the archives comprehend the complexity of the public administration?**

In Denmark, the National Archives set rules and standards for appraisal to the archives. That is, the future holdings of the archives. But how to evaluate a body of records created in ways you hardly know as an archivist? Danish National Archives have several approaches, differentiated according to the group of archive creators involved. For *private* archival creators, such as individuals, companies and associations, it is done in a close dialogue in each case, a dialogue where the archive creator can veto and withdraw from the process at any time. Private archival creators are not obliged to archive by law.

For the authorities in the *State administration*, it is done through the Danish National Archives' specific appraisal of every it-system. The main ones are taken for preservation, and in these cases a comprehensive casework is going on for each system to ensure that all relevant data and documents are actually entered into the archive. The individual assessment of each system provides a good understanding of the individual systems' archival potential, but also a very fragmentary understanding of the overall file formation of the State authorities. It should be said, that the individual evaluation of the it-systems also implies that the it-systems selected for preservation are approved by the Danish National Archive before they are put into service. After two years, it is checked whether the it-systems are used appropriately. The organization of the archival work is based on a *pre-administrative* outset, supplemented by an *inter-administrative* overhaul.

It should be noted, however, that there is no penalty for not following the recommendations of the National Archives. The above-mentioned challenges for digital administration, also apply to the administration of the state, despite the efforts of the National Archives.

In contrast to this individual assessment of the it-systems in State administration, the Danish National Archives evaluates the *municipal* IT-systems in a general provision covering every it-system in every municipality. This is done in an official decree followed by authoritative guides.<sup>9</sup> Danish National Archive sets out general and broad guidelines, which should apply overall,

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<sup>9</sup> Bekendtgørelse nr. 183 af 26. januar 2018 om bevaring og kassation af digitalt skabte arkivalier i kommunerne. Vejledning til bekendtgørelse om bevaring og kassation af digitalt skabte data og dokumenter fra kommunerne 2007ff. Cirkulæreskrivelse nr. 9112 af 26. januar 2018 om kassation af dokumenter i kommunernes it-systemer. [Decree no. 183 of 26 March January 2018 on the preservation and disposal of digitally created archival archives in the municipalities.

Guide to the Ordinance on the preservation and disposal of digitally generated data and documents from the municipalities 2007ff.

Circular Letter no 9112 of 26 January 2018 on the disposal of documents in the municipalities' it-systems.]

regardless of how the administration is organized locally and whatever it-systems are used. In Denmark this is unique to the municipal area.

The municipalities are free to decide to keep more than requested, but it can be a hard job for the municipal archives to convince the economic bodies that they should spend money to keep more than requested by the Danish National Archives.

The decree from the Danish National Archives is based on a *post-administrative* view on archival work. It points out which it-systems that needs to be archived, assuming that municipal administration can be covered by the same rules for all 98 municipalities. Taking an effort to grasp the diversity, a guideline lists a number of topics that should be archived, no matter what it-system they are located in. This, though, can collide with the list of it-systems. A topic that is to be archived, can be stored in an it-system, that is not to be archived.

However, here I shall not go too deep into the making of rules and guidelines. I just want to stress that there are obvious difficulties in making an overall *post-administrative* assessment of the total body of a complex and diverse administration. It is almost impossible to consider the many local variations in the administration's use of it-systems. The *post-administrative* starting point makes it even harder to take into account the above-mentioned general problems of quality in digital administration because the rules of the archives are designed so that the archives first meet the administration when the digital documents are created and filed.

### **Questions for future research**

The major threat to the archives is not insufficient, or even wrong, appraisal, but flawed archives formed in pragmatic digital administration.<sup>10</sup> I would point to three important archive challenges arising from digital administration.

The first challenge is how does the public administration document its work? In the real world, what are the significance and use of the parallel systems, such as the digital document and records management systems, mailing systems and shared folders? A study showing the state of documentation in the public administration would help us to estimate the size of the problem, and thus help us to decide if there is a need to move away from the *post-administrative* position.

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<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in above-mentioned the two books from Danish Archives Association, published in 2006 and 2017.

The second challenge is how to design digital document and records management systems in a way, so the employees would find them truly useful? Could the it-systems be transformed from being a troublesome extra task to an integrated and valued part of the daily work? How can public administration influence the it-companies that delivers the dedicated it-systems? A study showing the difficulties and possibilities in designing it-systems that actually meet the needs of the users would help us to identify the problems of parallel systems and to estimate for how long we have to live with them.

The third challenge is (re)defining the role of the archives in a digital administration. Should the archives settle with documenting how the administration documents its work? Or should the archives take a more active part in making the proper documentation? That is, should the archives keep working on a *post-administrative* level, or should the archives move to a *pre- and inter-administrative* level? – Or, could the *pre- and inter-administrative* archival interests be trusted to administration itself or to other parties? A study considering the role of archives and how the archives should meet administration would help us strengthen the position of archives towards administration, help us estimate the amount of resources needed for fulfilling the demands, and it would help us to identify cooperation partners in the efforts to make future archives as strong as needed for ensuring appropriate documentation of the present time.