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Archiving the past, defining the present: the societal role of a non-governmental archive on the example of the Open Society Archives

In my current research project I look at the goals and practices of an independent archive and take the Open Society Archives as my case study. The OSA's material challenges the classical idea of "provenance" as leading organizing principle for the archive. In the situation when the archive preserves funds, which come from organizations with unstable character or complex connections with other organizations and contexts, as well as copies of materials from other archives, the question to be asked – what is the goal behind this archival practice and how well the idea of the archive and its realization work together.

Through the study of the documents and publications describing the work of the OSA and a series of interviews with the archive's employees I addressed such questions as: the role, which the OSA archive played/plays in its social context, the neutrality and political involvement of the archive, the connection among its different funds, what kind of regulations outline the work of this independent non-governmental archive, and who and how defines its strategy.

Initial project idea was to look at the appraisal and selection criteria for the Cold War archives at the OSA. Nevertheless during my stay in the archives I understood that the 3 core archival collections of the OSA construct the well-fitted archival unity, which is also intertwined with the research and public activities of the OSA. As a result I made a decision to broaden the scope of my investigation and look at the work of the archive in general.

The information on donations and processing is well described in the annual reports and catalogue descriptions. Nevertheless I felt that I need to compliment this official part of the story with more personal approach of those who work with the archival material to better understand why certain funds were taken in, and what kind of public institution is constructed by preserving and promoting those funds.

Therefore I realized 8 interviews with the OSA employees. The selection criteria was to interview those who worked the longest in the archive and could contribute with information about the changes which have happened with the archive during the time of its work. The interviews had a semi-structured character. I prepared a list of questions, which I wanted an interviewee to reflect upon but at the same time gave the opportunity to him/her to talk freely if he/she felt interested and comfortable with that. Most of interviewees were inclined to develop those themes they felt most familiar with and interested in, which corresponded my intention because I was interested not just in facts but employees attitude to the institution.

Being an independent archive, the OSA is free to choose its strategy and goals but at the same time it follows the best archival practices and standards. In my interviews I tried to challenge the employees to reflect on the principle of choices they make and values, which these choices reflect, and the image of the archive created in this process - as an independent but nevertheless public institution.

The interview was divided into 2 parts. First I asked employees to tell about their experience and knowledge about the archive as well as their role in the institution. The second part included more concrete questions on different projects and archival strategies.

Preliminary results

After a first short preliminary analysis of the interviews conducted during my stay at the OSA archive, I found two interesting red threads, which I would like to develop further in a future article or a conference paper. Both of these themes are touching upon the question what the archive is and can be and as such are relevant within the archival studies' research field.

1) The study of archival material as well as interviews demonstrated that even being an independent institution, the OSA follows the archival routines common for state archives as well as international archival standards. The OSA also benefited from the fact that its founding Executive Director was an outstanding professional in the archival field - Trudy Huskamp Peterson, who worked on different positions at the U.S. National Archives for twenty-four years, and more than two years as Acting Archivist of the United States. In addition the OSA is involved in several European projects such as best practice for social history domain HOPE, promoting access to scattered digital collections on European social

history, including various archival organisations in Europe (http://hopewiki.socialhistoryportal.org). From the information I found in the archive and received from the employees I can conclude that the OSA is a well established archival institution.

At the same time during interviews several employees underlined that the OSA is "not a usual archive" or even is "not an archive" at all. This, as I suggest, represents their understanding of the character of the OSA's activity as an institution of public memory - an institution, which role is to help the society to preserve its historical continuity and understand itself better.

To analyse the work of cultural institutions one needs to pay attention to the mutual influence of two dimensions: their goals, or ideas about the purposes of an institution, which institutions define themselves or receive from other institutions or persons, and institutional practices, established to realize these goals and ideas. The connection of these two dimensions is dynamic and has more complicated character than course and effect. In the interviews this dynamics is revealed through interviewees' references both to generally practised archival routines and at the same time to the moral responsibility, which the archive assigns to itself.

The concept of a "moral duty" was named several times by different interviewees, when I asked about what defines the OSA's institutional strategy. This makes the OSA an interesting example of an institution of public memory, which works for the sake of historical justice while defining values it follows through its institutional choices and practices. Sometimes the value system the OSA is subscribed to does not go hand in hand with its archival practice. During interviews I was told that although the OSA is supporting the value of transparency and free access to the archival material, many records produced by the OSA and the Central European University, the part of which the archive is, are not available for the audience for 25 years since the date of their creation.

Every project initiated by the OSA challenges the understanding of what is and is not a morally responsible approach to the historical material and public memory. Therefore one of the interesting themes to investigate is the decision making process, made in line with the understanding of the "moral duty" – how that understanding influence the choice of a theme for an exhibition or an archival fund to preserve and present, etc.

On the question about how the decision making process is organised at the OSA and who makes final decision all interviewees answered that the decision is made after being circulated among employees – someone proposes an idea, then it is discussed and tested during official or unofficial meetings and is being accepted or rejected. That makes it crucial that all employees who work with the archival and exhibition content share similar value system to achieve at least basic understanding of what can and cannot be done – a consensus on what defines and limits the archive choices. It is not a surprise then that many employees have scholarly background in the humanities.

2) Another dichotomy, besides "archive – non-archive", shaping the work of the OSA is "original" and "copy". Traditional archives are interested primarily in the original material. This is what archives in general stands for – to preserve history "as it was", as it is reflected in original documents. Even in traditional archives nowadays the concept of originality is questioned. One of the reasons is that even the way an archive chooses and collects its funds is already an intervention in the "originality" of the historical material. Nevertheless not so many archives would consciously preserve copies of documents from other archives as the OSA does.

The archivists and public program managers I talked to at the OSA are also aware of the problem related to the concept of "originality". Nevertheless their reason to preserve copies is not in the first place an understanding of the limit of the concept of the "original". One of the main goals of the OSA is to provide an access to the information, otherwise scattered around in different archives or which is difficult to access because of poor management or the absence of resources to provide a good service to researchers in those other archives. Therefore a copy which is labelled as a copy, which does not hide that it is a copy and refers to the original, can be, according to the OSA employees, a relevant item in the archive.

To conclude, during my stay at the OSA, I got familiar with what kinds of documents exist on archiving the OSA's activity, conducted eight interviews with the OSA's employees on their working experience and understanding of the OSA's aims and the role in the society. As a result of his work I could find several constitutive points, which define the OSA's work and make it different from state archives. In short they can be presented through two dichotomies: "archive – non-archive," and "original – copy".

The list of question, which I used as a framework for interviews:

1. Please tell what you remember about the first years of the OSA. The role of the US Congress and how the funds were acquired.

2. While reading annual reports I found that the OSA initiated a joint project between NATO and the members of the former Warsaw Pact in order to promote the declassification and cataloguing of the Warsaw Pact Archive. In 2001 OSA helped to set up the Gorbachev Archives in Russia. How these projects went?

3. Can you tell how the relation with Russia and Russian archives has been developed during the time of the OSA. For example, I have found that in the 1990s the OSA issued a grant for electronic cataloguing of the Russian Film and Photo archive in Krasnogorsk. What do you remember about this project? What are other significant projects with Russia, which you can remember?

    4. When and why happened a shift towards the topic of human rights violations

    5. When and why the OSA started to work with NGOs?

    6. Tell about your part of the work on Martus, secure information collection and management tool.

    7. Tell about projects within European Union scheme: Culture 2000, HOPE (The Heritage of the People of Europe. Other EU projects of significance?

    8. What position the OSA has towards recent changes in the Hungarian politics?

Tell about the project where the OSA archived 2002, 2008 elections' messages from people to parties. In the course of the Hungarian election campaign the OSA preserved e-mails and cell phone messages supporting, criticizing, accusing, or parodying the parties and candidates. What happened with this project then?

    9. The aim of Soros organisations including the archive was to help post-Soviet countries in transition to build democracy and open society. Since the 1990s many things has changed. How the change of this situation influences the definition of the archive's goals?

Questions on archival routines and ideas:

1. What regulations for the work of an archive you follow? I have found in 2005 Annual report that rules for destruction of documents is taken from ad hoc Appraisal Committee of NY Legal Council. What else? Which archival standards do you use?

2. Who and how defines your archival strategy?

3. How is this strategy expressed?

4. Who decides on what funds to accept?

   5. In 2005 Annual report starts with the statement that the OSA is "an archive of the copy: clippings, biographical information, monitoring transcripts, samizdat carbon copies, positives of the photo collection, film collections, electronic documents". Do you agree with that and what do you think about the concept of the archive of the copy?

   6. Istvan Rev in his article in the book "Open Society Archives" uses yet another metaphor - "enemy archive". The information, which you do not get from organisations, which produce this information, but information which someone collected and re-interpreted on the Other. Do you agree with this metaphor and how could you reflect on it?

   7. You have material, which is placed on two different poles: propaganda documents (which is obviously biased) and very personal testimonials on a personal life (which is very subjective). What kind of history tells this type of material? How does it influence the picture of the past?

   8. You made several projects, which you call "crowdsourcing people's history": on old houses in Budapest, on Jewish deportation. How would you evaluate this type of material as archival material?

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