

## TOPICS

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**PRESERVATION OF WHAT?  
IDEOLOGICAL CHOICES**

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## PRESERVATION OF WHAT? IDEOLOGICAL CHOICES

*Staffan Lundmark*

The origins of these thoughts lie in situations involving choices – but also limited choices. DAUM, *Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet*, the Archive for Dialects, Placenames and Folklore, in Umeå, Sweden, is responsible for the documentation of a huge territory, which we do not regret. Nor do we regret the fact that the archive also grasps a wide range of subjects. We have, however, very few staff, and a feeling of insufficiency is not unusual. One way to conquer this feeling is offered by the ongoing discourse that takes place at our establishment – a discourse that is immaterial yet constitutes a solid ground from which to take bearings in our work with such a vast volume of cultural heritage. My first meeting with DAUM as an employee was full of inspiring brainstorming with the former head Jan Nilsson – an open-minded discussion which still continues with Ola Wennstedt, the present director of the archive. In the 1990s a reorganisation of the establishment (at the national level) has been taking place and we have had to analyse the whole organisation and DAUM's place therein. There were policy questions and economic cutbacks, and priorities had to be established in different spheres of activity. The discourse increased in strength and below I will give some examples of the different kind of questions that I am concerned with as an archivist at DAUM.

### RAPID SHIFTS IN TECHNIQUE

Working with audio material has been a central part of the archive ever since its foundation in the 1950s. In those days the handy tape-recorder was the innovation that made one unconstrained, for instance while working with the dialects of Northern Norrland. The material was carefully analysed and card files were prepared. A paper-database of the collection, which has now been digitalized and computerized, was compiled. In the ever-changing society there was a desire to document as much as possible of the old material, preferably in the original language. But there was also a desire to document the shifts in society, for example the emergence and growth of national movements and communication networks. There

was an interest in urban culture as well. The archive was created by people with an academic background in the area of cultural heritage, but the material shows that from the very beginning there were quite a few private persons who also joined in collaboration with the academics. The diversity of subjects in the material grew in both recordings and written material.

DAUM often assists in copying recordings and in that way archival material grows. Tape-recorders came to be every person's belonging and 50 years of recorded material needs help in being preserved, both recordings now belonging to private persons and recordings belonging to institutions and establishments. The tapes usually survive only together with the machines they were recorded with. The task of keeping all the machine-generations functioning is an ever-growing problem. A great task in the future will, for example, be to save video-grams recorded using different kinds of video-techniques. Thus our ultimate goal would be to be prepared to preserve material recorded using all kind of different techniques.

## **WELL YOU CAN'T SAVE EVERYTHING, CAN YOU?**

This is a common question and in the world of archiving the art of throwing away material is of central importance, yet the bulk of material continues to grow. However, within the national archives there is almost always only one perspective – that of the authorities. When the common man gets to express himself it is mostly in court or in other official situations. A lot of people have, for example by virtue of their background, only had contact with the authorities in a negative fashion. Archives where the common man gets to speak in his own manner and on his own terms are hence unique and at DAUM we preserve as much as possible of incoming material. So it is actually about the trust that is put in us by the people that bring material and how we keep up with expectations. There is no obligation to hand over material to our archive, contrary to most other archives. Compared to the enormous bulk of material that is piling up in archives, our collecting is almost microscopic. Our collections naturally to a relatively high degree reflect the people that have worked at the archive, but on the many thousand recordings that have been performed over the years in

domestic environments, many people have given a piece of their minds. Considering the lack of balance between the voice of society and the voice of the common man in the national archives, it is not very difficult to motivate the acceptance of material that doesn't fit into the world of academia and its time-constrained associations and categorisations, defined by words like "tradition, folklore, cultural heritage, dialects" and the like.

Material that has been collected with a specific aim may in future be noticed by virtue of something that was not noticed at the time of its collection, neither by collector nor by informant. Thus old place name- and folklore-material has, for example, now become very important in disputes concerning the Saami peoples' right to possess pasture for their reindeer. More dimensions can hence be found in the archives of folk tradition. In politically unstable countries, the systematic destruction of archival material can, for example, be a part of aggression. International collaboration may prove necessary.

## **THE ROLE OF THE SCHOLAR**

An important part of the training of the academic involves the selection of material that is relevant for his or her research. A product in written form, preferably a publication, is viewed as the ultimate goal. This ability and aim is encouraged and necessary in its own context, but it should not be taken for granted that the well-trained academic automatically and joyfully grasps the aim that I have been suggesting up to this point, where it is not necessarily your own values that decide what is worth preserving. And you never get to the end. The domain is vast and the same data is of different value to different people. Time constantly passes, and universes of ideas are reshaped. The same may be said of the archival database, with its ever-changing registers. A dynamic process that can never be regarded as finished. It is always possible to interpret the data in more ways than the purpose established at the time of collection. Information that is valued by future researchers may be a complete surprise to the collector and perhaps even to present-day experts who evaluate our activities. The subject fields that archives were initially designed to study are still dominant. At the

time of the latest reorganisation, for instance, DAUM made proposals that the subject called “folk music” should be renamed *folkligt musikliv*, which is something like “popular music-life”. We wished to add emphasise to the social perspective in this manner. This would also avoid the endless discussions about the meaning of the word “folk music”, a relief to DAUM, where we wish to document all manner of musical practices and consumption at all times. The music that has been distributed throughout the country by the music industry, schools, etc. is well documented and relatively accessible. This is the data that is used by most work in music history. But there is a lack of knowledge about what, where, when and how all this music became a part of people’s lives and what role it has played. Our proposal was, however, denied.

The collections of the folklore archives have been established by persons with and without academic training. Archives have been established in conjugation with scientific studies. Due to changes in universities, the flow of scientific material to the archives has slowed. The greatest contribution to the future, when the beauty of the dissertation is gone, may be the tape recordings at home, in the academics’ garages. There is a great risk of excellent contributions being lost. Of course a change would, from the viewpoint of the archive, be preferable, but perhaps the scientist too would be well served by such a change. Perhaps one aim of preservation at an archive could add an extra dimension to the academic, who creates his own material, for example through interviews. To classify and systematise his material with archives in mind and to describe its origins and contents to the future user may add some inspiration and new insights. But the tempo is increasing in the academic sphere. Results must be presented faster than ever before. Accessible materials are therefore used as much as possible. To the keeper of archives this is fairly easy to notice. Well-registered material obtains most attention, but even this material tends to be omitted if it proves to be too time-consuming. Old-fashioned types of handwriting that may be difficult to decipher are one example of the hindrances experienced in contemporary academic studies. Our collections can also encounter difficulties because they consist of recordings in various dialects. Within our establishment we therefore need to have a very high linguistic competence, which is another difference in comparison to other archive-institutions.

## **NEW GROUPS OF USERS**

Research outside academic circles has increased over the decades. Studies in kinship and local history have risen to an increasingly advanced level, and more and more people have to different degrees become involved in theoretical matters that previously only belonged to the academic sphere. The interest of the native surroundings is a strong force in local documentation, and as in the academic sphere the goal is often set on publishing. The collected material does not always have the aim of long-term preservation. But if notice is taken of the raw material, will the question of long-term preservation often be raised? For us this is a deeply interesting user of archives, the persons and groups who use the possibility to contribute to others something which initially only seemed to be of local interest. Acceptance of a broad range of materials could be heavily criticised in terms of objectivity, and is of course not always popular in the academic realm. From my point of view it would not be fair if there was no place for the public's own choice of what should be recorded as history. Nor should it be entirely uninteresting for ethnologists, for example, to take part in how people themselves interact with their own times and the future.

## **CHANGE**

Within our establishment, SOFI, the Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research there are a couple of institutions. An official report from 1992 views this structure as a hidden potential, a virtual goldmine and a keeper of the central memory of society. The author of the official report, however, wishes to see some changes and the role of the establishment more clearly defined in the university world. He comments "There's a need to define both levels, the practical and the theoretical, so that these levels may co-operate in a productive manner. Different sets of paradigms must hence be clarified." The author describes thoroughly the old archive in Uppsala, ULMA, whose programme and ideological stance played a central role in the establishment of other institutions of the same kind around the country, using terms like "biased information" and "the power of tradition". The author seeks an increased orientation towards his own time.

The manner in which the Uppsala-archive has operated through the decades has been studied in detail, but in my opinion it would be of high interest to examine the development of the other archives. DAUM, for example, was created many decades later and from our viewpoint many of the things the author sees as problems do not exist at our archive. It is not very difficult to find support in the report for the ideas I discussed here and the proposals I have been making.

In my opinion there is, however, one major problem with the common view of archives, and that is their description as collections of unrefined material, something incomplete waiting to be completed in publications. The possibility of an archive performing academic research on it's own and publishing both its own working results and material from primary sources is very important, yet one should keep in mind that publications are children of their times as well as of their authors, who are writing with their own time in mind. Archives should, however, live in the future, and be a resource that is completely open-minded when approached by new ears and eyes. The ongoing constructing and maintenance of this resource should be considered a result in itself.