

Assignment - week 15:

Part 1 – Schriver og Jensen (2022): Digital archives and historical method Arber Avdiu

The article: "Arkivets digitalisering. En ny udfordring til historisk?" written by Schriver and Jensen (2022) analyses the relationship between the digitization of archives and historical methodology, it shows how digital archives are not only neutral platforms for access to historical material, but also co-creative actors in the writing of history. This is demonstrated through the case study of the Royal Library's digital archive Danmark set fra luften – før Google (DSFL) (Schriver & Jensen 2022, 10-11).

A central argument is that digitization is not a technical and neutral process, but instead it is a cultural and institutional practice that has significance for what is preserved, communicated, and forgotten. As an example, the authors point out that the digital DSFL archive is the result of complex selection processes shaped by financial, legal and conceptual considerations – such as copyright, funding and the expectations of user groups (Ibid.: 14-15). This means that large parts of the analogue archive are omitted, which has an impact on what historians can actually find and work with digitally (Ibid.:16).

Schriver and Jensen also argue that historians often use digital archives without critical reflection on the influence of digitization on method and source selection (Ibid.: 6-7). There is therefore a need for archives to be transformed from solely being a historians resource to also being their subjects –as an example, objects for critical methodological consideration (Ibid.: 9).

By analysing DSFL as a communicative act shaped by institutional, political and technological conditions, the article demonstrates how digital archives influence the kind of historical knowledge we are able to produce (Ibid.: 10-11). This calls for a new historical method, where the practices of digitization are included as part of source criticism.

Part 2 - Write 750–1000 words addressing the following questions. Be sure to make references throughout to Schriver and Jensen (2022), Pomerantz (2015), as well as Jensen (2021), where relevant:
Rune Fischer

Briefly analyze the two institutions behind these digital resources. What do you know about the institutions in terms of their funding, strategies, mandates, etc.—especially as they relate to digitization strategies?

The first institution that I will examine is the Frihedsmuseet. The Frihedsmuseet is part of the national museum of Denmark. In terms of funding, the museum seems to receive most of it from the local or state government. The main mission and mandate of the museum is to inform and teach the public about the German occupation of Denmark during world war two and the subsequent resistance movement that emerged. In terms of digitalization, the museum seems to be state of the art. The entire photographic collection of the museum has been digitised in recent years. Most likely because of a fire that occurred in 2013, after which the museum received significant funding to digitize parts of their collection.

The second institution is the Næstved city archive. It is a significantly smaller institution and its mission and mandate is to keep and secure records relevant to the city of Næstved. The funding originates from the local government, but independent foundations also seem to support the institution. In terms of digitalisation it seems to lag behind the Frihedsmuseet a bit. Several digitised collections of photographs are available but a significant amount of photographic material is still only available in the physical archives. This of course poses a problem as mentioned by Helle Strandgaard Jensen, as less popular material is relegated to the physical archives, whilst the digital material likely eclipses it in popularity¹. Their focus in terms of digitalisation is on photographs, sound recordings and video material.

Find sources from Næstved in the Frihedsmuseets fotoarkiv, and sources related to the Occupation in NæstvedArkiverne. Describe how you found these sources. Where did you search, and what search terms did you use?

Now in regards to searching for digital sources both of these systems are rather simple and intuitive to use. First I went into the photo archive of the Frihedsmuseum, here I simply used the search bar and wrote “Næstved” after which I was presented with several images that were associated with the area around Næstved. In the Næstved city photographic collection archive they have a separate topic tag for the occupation which provided me with plenty of images.

¹ Jensen, Helle Strandgaard. “Digital Archival Literacy for (All) Historians.” Media History 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): page 4-5

What can you say about the provenance of the sources you found? For example, what information do you have about the record's creator (arkivskaber), the collection/context (samling/serie) it was part of when created, etc.?

These images also have metadata attached to them. The Frihedsmuseet includes a short description of the image, so descriptive metadata², an approximate date for its creation and a location if it is known. The image is also assigned several topic tags. Following this if possible, the creator of the image is credited. Finally in the description relevant technical information about the image is also displayed. For the Næstved city archive the data about photographs is quite similar all things considered. The pictures include a short description, following this the topic tags of the image are shown, then the date of creation if possible, an approximate location of the image, and the creator if they are known. After this technical information is displayed. It includes a link to the original image within the archive, which makes it easily accessible. And then some minor technical information is also included. The collection of the Frihedsmuseet mostly seems to include private photographs and other material that has been donated. The Næstved city archive seems to be quite similar in terms of where the material originates from.

Is it possible to obtain information about related material from the same record creators (arkivskaber) that has not been digitized?

In regards to finding possibly related materials by the same creator that have not been digitised yet, the Næstved city archive makes this information readily available and relevant identification numbers are included. In regards to finding possibly related materials by the same creator that have not been digitised yet, the Næstved city archive makes the information readily available and relevant identification numbers are included. It is not possible to obtain this information in the Frihedsmuseet collection, because the entire collection is digitised.

What information is available about the digitization process? For example, workflow (OCR, ML, crowdsourcing), technical specifications, quality checks, or metadata structure/vocabulary.

In terms of the digitisation process both the Frihedsmuseet and Næstved Archive use modern technology for it. The Frihedsmuseet uses OCR to read and transcribe old labels, in addition to this there is a crowdsourcing project called “Hvor er det fra” where volunteers identify the location of certain images. In the Næstved city archive crowdsourcing is used to a great extent. Users are allowed to geotag data and the museum even offers a short guide on how to properly tag images giving them relevant keywords and topics. So both institutions make fairly good use of crowdsourcing according Ølgaard and Strandgaard³. In addition to this the museum makes use of machine learning by using Transkribus.

² Pomerantz, Jeffrey. “Introduction.” In Metadata: page 17

³ Schriver, Astrid Ølgaard Christensen, and Helle Strandgaard Jensen. “Arkivets Digitalisering. En Ny Udfordring Til Historisk Metode?” Temp. Tidsskrift For Historie Årg. 13, no. Nr. 25 (2022): page 12-13

How would you cite the digital source versus the original analog? Does the archive provide any guidance?

In terms of citing the digital sources both organisations have a guide on appropriate digital citation. The Frihedsmuseum requires the image licence, the photographer and the source. The Næstved city archive does not have a template for citing their sources, but the image must clearly be accredited to the archive. Both websites did not give any information on how to cite the original source, but I would guess that It would be fairly similar to the approach that is used by the Frihedsmuseet, maybe even just including some additional ID information so it can be located easier in the physical archive.

Based on your answers above, how well do you feel able to apply source criticism to the digital sources when conducting historical research on the Occupation in Næstved? Please explain your reasoning.

Well I believe that both collections can be used for historical research, as long as simple source critique is used. As said by Strandgaard archives are products of their environment, and both of these specialize in different fields⁴. The Næstved city archive is more focused on the city while the Frihedsmuseet is more focused on the time period. In addition to this the collection of the Frihedsmuseet seems to be targeted at a more general audience, in comparison to the Næstved city archive, which seems to be targeted more at historians. Both collections have their advantages and disadvantages. Most notably that the collection of the Frihedsmuseet is fully digitized, which allows for a more complete overview of all the sources and it removes the popularity and archivists bias that might be present in the Næstved city archive. This according to Strandgaard is one of the major challenges that digital archives face⁵. At the same time the context of some of the sources are lost in the collection of the Frihedsmuseet, whilst it is partially preserved in the Næstved city archives collection⁶. The city archive also informs the user about the sources ID information so it can be easily found in the physical archive. In general I would say that the Næstved city archives target audience is someone more familiar with the field of history, whilst the Frihedsmuseet seems to be aiming for a more general audience. But as a whole I believe that both collections and institutions can be relevant and usable in historical research as long as basic source critique is performed when using them.

⁴ "Digital Archival Literacy for (All) Historians." Media History 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): Page 1-2

⁵ "Digital Archival Literacy for (All) Historians." Media History 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): Page 4-5

⁶ "Digital Archival Literacy for (All) Historians." Media History 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): Page 10-11

Part 3:

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Digitization has in many ways expanded the historian's toolbox. It's not just something that makes research methods and sourcework more complicated - as it's sometimes made out to be. Instead, digitization also brings new opportunities for insight, collaboration, and it allows for easier access to rare sources. Schriver and Jensen (2022) do point out that the digitization process can be selective and shaped by institutions, but they also highlight the potential in seeing digital archives as active co-creators of history.

Whilst working with the photo archive from Frihedsmuseum and the Næstved Archives, it became clear how much digital access can help with the early-stages of research. It's much easier to quickly find relevant material, and it was especially interesting to see how different archives organize and present their collections. At the same time, as Jensen (2021: 253 - 255) notes, it's important to be aware of how search functions, metadata, and interfaces influence what you find - and what you don't. So while digital archives offer fast access, they also require us to think about the systems behind that access.

Metadata plays a key role, and as Pomerantz (2015: 4 - 6) explains, it's exactly because metadata is usually "invisible" that we need to be conscious of how we use and understand digital materials. Knowing who created the archive, how it's structured, and the context around it made it easier to use the material critically - and in cases where that info was missing, we learned how valuable it is to look outside the archive to understand its backdrop. It's also important to ask questions about what's been digitized, how it's presented, and what's left out. It is a major part in using digital sources responsibly. Digitization gives us quick access, but as historians, we need to start asking new questions - not just about the contents, but about their visibility, what's possibly missing, and how they are shared. That's where digital archival literacy comes in. It has become an essential skill in regards to working with historical sources in our time.