Being Digital in People's Archives

Eric Ketelaar

Eric Ketelaar is Professor of Archivistics in the Department of Media Studies of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam. His current teaching and research are concerned mainly with the social and cultural contexts of records creation and use. Australian records professionals have heard and seen him performing regularly, most recently when he delivered the keynote address at the Australian Society of Archivists' 2002 conference 'Past Caring? What Does Society Expect of Archivists?'.

Being Digital entails for archives more than preserving and providing digital documents: it presents a techno-cultural challenge to connect archives with people.[1] Archives will be redesigned as a public sphere where individual, organisational and collective memories and stories are experienced, exchanged, and enriched. To achieve this, a goal-oriented entrepreneurial shift to new products and services is necessary. Strategies should not be restricted to merely digitising what archives-as-a-place already do.

The 'Archives of the Future' was one of the concerns Captain Hilary Jenkinson dealt with in his *Manual*, which in the first edition included treatment of 'the problems of war archives and archive making'.[2] *Libraries of the Future* was the book Joseph Licklider, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), published in 1965. Licklider, today considered to be one of the fathers of Cyberspace, envisioned 'human brains and computer machines ... coupled ... tightly'.[3] In 1982, Licklider came to The Netherlands to give a progress report on what had happened since 1965 and to project on what might happen between 1982 and the year 2000, with regard to the interaction between libraries and information technology.[4] Licklider admitted that,

while he had foretold many technical trends which developed since 1965, he had not concerned himself with the very fundamental choice between evolution and goal-oriented change: would libraries use information technologies mainly to *improve* the functions and procedures they were using in the '60s, or would they try mainly to develop new functions and procedures they would (or could or should) use in the future? Looking backward, in 1982, Licklider asserted that libraries had followed the easy and conservative path of computerising traditional functions and procedures, together with somewhat radical institutional arrangements such as consortia and associations, but that they had not yet embarked on real goal-oriented change of the organisation of the collection, of finding what is needed, and of making it available to users. Licklider considered the technical basis for remote use of digital libraries assured, and he predicted that by the year 2000 personal study-and-workstations would not only be widespread and cost-effective, but more importantly, be communicating with the digital library. A bold statement in 1982, in view of the fact that IBM's PC was just one year old then. In 2000, Licklider imagined in 1982, document rooms and libraries would interact with people sitting at their PCs and connected by local area networks and perhaps by rooftop satellite antennas. He urged librarians to move away of storing physical or even digital documents and to become curators of the future body of knowledge, a system of more or less interconnected knowledge bases, interactive and dynamic.

I remember vividly the uneasy reaction of the audience to Licklider's address. They were assembled, in 1982, to celebrate the inauguration of the new building of the National Library of The Netherlands, providing space for 5 million books, 300 library staff and 330 seats in reading rooms, and there came Licklider telling them that the future would know no physical storage, reference and access! One of the very few who really understood Licklider, was another psychologist, John Michon, from Groningen University. Michon himself presented, later in the symposium, a paper 'How to Connect a Library with a Mind' recasting some of Licklider's arguments. Michon's paper concluded:

> We shall have to concentrate on the accessibility of knowledge, rather than on the management and availability of symbols … The theory of knowledge as it is emerging in cognitive science should provide an adequate theoretical framework for a new professional image. The

> only way of connecting a library with a mind is to provide inputs so structured that they are maximally compatible with representations already held by the user.[5]

Both Licklider and Michon gave basically the same advice to librarians: get involved in the development of knowledge bases instead of sticking to providing access to individual documents.

Some years later I had the privilege of presenting a keynote paper at the 11th International Congress on Archives, in Paris in 1988.[6] I adapted Michon's expression and wrote about 'how to connect archives with a mind' in my paper 'Exploitation of New Archival Materials'. Archivists, I said, have to connect archives with a mind, the more so because archives will be physically at a distance. The user is no longer obliged to visit the holding institutions in person. So much so that he is no longer primarily interested in the place where the information is available, but in the way in which the information can be retrieved. I said furthermore, following Michon, that 'the archivist might develop from a custodian of a repository into an information broker, who contacts with his clients only at a distance. The paperless search room might even become a useless search room! I know that this seems futuristic, unrealistic even,' I said in that paper, now fifteen years ago. I ended by stressing that all archival documents constitute together the world's 'imaginary archives', paraphrasing the 'musée imaginaire', the 'museum without walls' of André Malraux.

Not only at the 1982 symposium in The Hague and at the 1988 Paris congress did we try to look into the future. In Brussels our Belgian colleagues organised in 1996 a seminar 'Archives in Europe: A Vision of the Future'. Then, seven years ago, I used the concept of 'archives without walls' again. Archives without walls, I said:

> ... are archival institutions that no longer are restricted to providing what they have physically stored in their own repository. They respond to the need for historical information, regardless of the place where that information is stored. The boundaries between archives and libraries, between archives and museums, are no longer relevant for an archives without walls, since these boundaries were based to a large extent on the physical properties of the information objects preserved in archives, libraries and

museums. Archives without boundaries - via Internet one can access archives all over the world sitting behind the computer at home. Instead of access to archives I should say: access to information.[7]

I do not want to make the point that some of the current and future developments were already foretold in 1996, or 1988, or 1982. Neither do I want to denounce those of us who did not have a vision of the future as stimulating as Licklider's or Michon's, or who felt more safe in their Jenkinsonian custodial role. It is always less risky to continue improving what you already do, less daring than entrepreneuring into new products and services. 'I know what I like and I like what I know,' as the saying goes. But innovation is about *not* knowing, not sticking to what you like and about *not* liking, *not* taking for granted what you know. Innovation is like research: cultivating a habit of examining received notions for their pertinence and relevance.[8]

It is the mindset we educators try to endow to our students, who will be agents of change. It is the raison d'être of the bond between training and research. Archivistics research is the instrument for experimenting, inventing, changing, and improving.[9] I do *not* know what I like and I do *not* like what I know, is the entrepreneurial spirit, the spirit of explorers. And aren't we explorers every time we explore cyberspace?

One of those archival entrepreneurs in The Netherlands is Bert Looper, currently director of the Historisch Centrum Overijssel.[10] To ensure that archives function as a living component of society, Looper advocates not only a conceptual switch in archivists' thinking from archives to information, but also a paradigm shift required by our postmodern experience economy.[11] Society is transforming from a goods-producing to a services-performing and experience-generating economy. No longer do we buy a product: we buy access to services. 'Services are being reinvented as long-term multifaceted relationships between servers and clients.'[12]

Information technologies are used as relationship technologies. A cellular phone is given away for free, as an inducement to use the telecom services. The physical container becomes secondary to the unique services contained in it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* have dematerialised into an online service. Books and journals

on library shelves are giving precedence to access to services via the Internet.[13]

The title of my paper refers, of course, to Nicholas Negroponte's famous book *Being Digital*, published in 1995. Negroponte, another MIT guru, a modern Licklider, stresses that in the modern information society we are no longer primarily in the business of providing atoms, but of providing bits. Archives, libraries and documentation centres, are moving from providing physical documents to providing access. Archival science, too, is embracing an access paradigm, leading to strategies for rethinking and repositioning of all work-processes of archival institutions, since they are *all* access-related.[14] Archives are moving from counting visits to the search room to counting hits on their website, from issuing a reader's card as a ticket to enter the search room to issuing a customer's card as the start of a multifaceted relationship between client and service-providing institution.

Being Digital archives basically provide information, but not information as a product, but as a process. 'One size fits all' wouldn't match very well with user expectations, users who are clients and customers in an individualistic society. As Nicolas Negroponte predicted, information is more and more tailored to the individual's information profile. One can read his or her own newspaper, watch his or her own TV program, custom-made by the system on the basis of the users' preferences. At Amazon.com's website I am welcomed with recommendations for books and CDs, based upon my browsing history and customer profile. Why doesn't the website of the archives offer such a service: 'Hi, Eric Ketelaar, last time you asked for information on the director of the Queen's Cabinet from the Prime Minister's archives, we now have new stuff in the newly arrived archives of the Navy Intelligence Service Archives.' Or 'People who have accessed in the past this type of series, file or image have also looked at the following records as well'. This would enhance the archives by thousands of links – where researchers' actions create incredibly rich cross-references. I will return to this later.

Archives Being Digital do not provide physical documents, but an information service, that is, access to an archival memory.[15] Or rather, memories. In order to establish and maintain relationships between servers and clients, we have to go beyond the limits of a passive stance and reinvent how to connect archives with a mind, how to connect the

memories in our archives with the memories in people's minds, how to make archives into people's archives.

Reinventing archives, and transforming paper archives into people's archives have been advocated before.[16] Being Digital, however, offers exciting new opportunities. Digital documents are a remediation of paper documents; they do not just possess the functionalities of paper documents, but have totally new possibilities because of their virtual character. Digital documents are fluid, open and dynamic; because of links with other texts a document is connected with others. The linearity of a paper document is replaced by an interactive relationship between writer and reader. The document as a hypermedia experience, consisting of text, pictures, sound and – in future – smell, creating, as Jay Bolter states, an intense awareness of and even delight in the medium.[17] Moreover, because of virtuality and hypermediacy, there is no 'original' any more, only different representations, made at the moment a reader or user instructs machine and software to create the document 'just in time'. The information will be presented to every user, at every moment, in a different form and with a different content. Just as Negroponte predicted, the digital newspaper is personalised, custom-made. What your neighbour is reading in his copy on his screen is not the same you are reading on yours. Amazon.com's recommendations to me are not the same as their recommendations to someone else. The newspaper and Amazon.com are connected with my mind, Licklider's vision of human brains and computers coupled tightly. Being Digital in People's Archives allows – no, necessitates – connecting the memories in the archives with the memories in people's minds.

'Making the memory metaphor useful to scholars and users of archives,' Margaret Hedstrom recently wrote, 'will require not only a more refined sense of what memory means in different contexts, but also a sensitivity to the differences between individual and social memory.'[18] Such sensitivity, I believe, to the relationships between individual and social memories is essential for a true understanding of the potential challenges of Being Digital in People's Archives.

People relive the past in different ways. Among Raphael Samuel's 'theatres of memory' are commemorations, ceremonies, 'retrochic', living history, heritage, old photographs, and costume drama.[19] What these practices have in common is that they allow the individual to

relate directly to what he or she regards as 'the' past: a personal immediacy.

As Pierre Nora reflects :

> The atomization of memory (as collective memory is transformed into private memory) imposes a duty to remember on each individual. This 'law of remembrance' has great coercive force: for the individual, the discovery of roots, of 'belonging' to some group, becomes the source of identity, its true and hidden meaning ... The less collective the experience of memory is, the greater the need for individuals to bear the burden ...

And the consequence, Nora affirms, is that our whole society lives for archival production.[20]

This archival production is characterised by its personal immediacy with what is considered to be the past. Archives are overwhelmed by scores of genealogists. The genealogical databases created by the archives have already been commodified and discovered as goldmines by Ancestry.com and other entrepreneurs who sell not the raw data, but a service, for a quarterly or an annual subscription fee.[21] Family history gave rise 'to quite the most remarkable 'do-it-yourself' archive-based scholarship of our time'.[22] The owner of a digital camera makes 900 photos a year, three times as many as with a traditional camera. Is this nothing else than obsessive self-archiving or is this just another way of engaging with the past? The same one might ask with regard to the craze for 'scrapbooking'.[23] People collect oral history, old photographs, they visit people and places to reconnect with their roots. In doing so, they are not only engaged in a personal hobby. The living histories of individuals and families form part of a larger framework, of local, regional, and national history but also of the history and identity of political, religious and other social groups. People's Archives are challenged to network with these parts of the larger framework.

Last year's DigiCULT report published by the European Commission strongly advises memory institutions to go beyond mere access to and provision of source material. They have to offer 'services that also relate to people's lives'. One of the key issues identified in the report is creating *new* tools, not just enhancing *existing* products and services. The knowledge and expertise of curators, librarians and archivists on

holdings and collections have to be used 'to build knowledge-rich multimedia information resources that provide explanation and guidance as well as additional context'. Evidently this has been on the agenda of archival institutions for quite some time, that is to say in those institutions that have understood the message delivered by Terry Cook in 1984: 'archivists must transcend mere information, and mere information management, if they wish to search for, and lead others to seek, 'knowledge' and meaning among the records in their care'.[24] Apart from data that can be retrieved by pushing buttons, for instance to find a telephone number, or the departure time of a train, people are looking for information that may connect them to other people. Recent research on the Internet's impact on American life suggest 'that people are using the Internet to stay more closely in touch with family and friends, to discover support groups and community organizations with which to get involved'.[25]

People use the Internet to connect with 'serious content', to give meaning to their own past or present or future. The past is not 'a foreign country', but a 'usable past'. Therefore, people want to create their own stories and live their own experiences. They will look for servers where they can download and upload these stories and experiences, using interactively new types of personalisation and customisation tools.

The living histories of individuals and communities are, however, elements of a larger framework. 'Evidence of me', to use Sue McKemmish's wonderful phrase, is evidence of *us* too.[26] *The* 'national memory' is not located in the National Archives. It is a tapestry woven from a host of societal resources.[27] Collective memory is 'ultimately located not in sites but in individuals'.[28] The memory-individuals ('hommes-mémoire') of Pierre Nora are as essential as the recognised memory institutions in constituting, preserving, using and transferring stories, experiences, and memories.

There are hundreds of thousands of people who are actively doing local history and genealogy. In The Netherlands there are 1 500 historical associations at local, regional and national levels plus approximately 4 500 clubs and associations for folklore, folk art etc. In 1998 the Dutch project 'Letters to the Future' yielded 52 000 letters written by ordinary people describing facts about their doings on 15 May 1998. To this enormous 'time capsule' of letters, people added, two years later, more than 6 000 photos, documenting one single day or an aspect of their

lives. In 2003, during the weekend Dutch museums opened their doors for free, hundreds of people brought their own collection to be appraised or registered or just to be admired by museum staff and fellow collectors. How can People's Archives be connected with this wealth of material, building on the widespread societal interest in collecting and archiving?

In the field of museums the concept of 'shared authority' between the audience and the museum curator has caused museums to 'tap into the intimate ways that people use the past'.[29] As early as the late 1980s, The People's Story Museum in Edinburgh involved local people 'in the presentation of their own history'.[30] Nowadays, information and communication technologies promise more opportunities in a truly 'participatory historical culture' (David Thelen). The Internet Archive, founded by Brewster Kahle, stimulates music fans to upload the music they taped during concerts.[31] The Living Music Archive now holds about 5 600 shows by 300 artists.

In the common room of an Amsterdam senior citizens' home a *verhalentafel*, a storytelling table was recently installed.[32] Three to six people can sit at the table. Built-in screens allow them to access historical audiovisual material, including cabaret, theatre, newsreels etc. They can then add their own commentary, tell their own stories, have them taped and stored in the system. The storytelling table becomes a participatory databank of life stories, of interconnected public and private memories.

The storytelling table project (initially designed as a work of art by the Waag Society for old and new media) shows on a limited scale what the proposed 'Digital Society of the Past' may become on a grand scale.[33] This project, commissioned by DIVA, the Dutch consortium of archives and records management institutions and organisations, links digitised historical information held by individuals and by communities of interest, to the resources of professional cultural heritage institutions, such as archives and museums.

The goal is to stimulate people to upload their documents, comments, stories – texts with meanings – to the memory institution's server, as an addition to the institutional holdings.[34] Not just an addition: an enrichment because by establishing a relationship between private and public documents they become nodes in a network, whose value increases with each addition. It is like sharing your music with other

people, using KaZaa-like technology. 'Walling off public from private pasts doesn't make sense,' David Thelen remarks.[35] It is true, archivists, librarians and museum curators have always stimulated people to donate or deposit valuable private material into a public repository. But archives, libraries and museums are more than a repository, a reading room, a gallery, more than a digital shop-window. They are studios where people collaborate in collecting, describing, enriching cultural memories.

Being Digital allows archives a continuing enrichment, using digital technologies as relationship technologies, to establish relationships with the people, connecting public and private memories, shaping the pluralising dimension of the records continuum, constituting a new *public sphere*. I use Jurgen Habermas' term *public sphere*, on purpose, because I believe that Being Digital in People's Archives could and should entail providing the kind of sphere Habermas conceptualised: a sphere between civil society and the state, where an informed and thus critical public discusses matters of general interest.[36]

Of course, a public sphere in the digital age will encounter challenges that the public sphere of 18th century England (which served Habermas as a model) was not exposed to: ease of access to *and* control of information – Google *and* 'Big Brother'. Nevertheless, as Frank Webster concludes, 'the *ideal* of the public sphere allows us to estimate the shortcomings of dull reality. And what is striking today is how yawning is the gap between what a public sphere could be in terms of its informational content and what is actually offered'.[37]

Public sphere is the rendering in English of what Habermas called *Öffentlichkeit*. That German term is the same as *openbaarheid* in Dutch, and this in the meaning of Thorbecke. That great 19th-century Dutch statesman – 'the Dutch Gladstone' – considered *openbaarheid,* the public sphere to be 'the great general school of political education' (*'de groote, algemeene school van politische opvoeding'*).

These words, inscribed in the hall of the National Archives of The Netherlands, proclaim the mission of archives, both archives-as-a-place and archives being digital: archives-without-walls, being a public sphere, where people meet, discuss, exchange information, use information in their critical dialogue or even struggle with the state and within civil society. Collective memories can only be maintained and transferred in a

public sphere. Their continuous enrichment by individual and group memories is only possible in a public sphere.

There are in cyberspace numerous public spheres, many of them connecting to cultural memories. Archives, libraries, museums and other memory institutions, they all connect with the minds and the memories of people. But what distinguishes archives from all other memory institutions is their commitment to being a public sphere. The nexus between evidence, accountability, openness and transparency in all dimensions of the records continuum marks out the great distinctive feature of archives.

Archives are unique, not because the information they contain is unique, and only rarely because the document as artifact has an intrinsic uniqueness.[38] Archives are unique because of their 'contextual envelope',[39] constituted by the uniqueness of the processes and functions that produced records and by the context of other documents created by the same activity over time.

To summarise, Being Digital in People's Archives means a lot more than digitising paper, or creating digital records, or providing online access to the public. Being Digital in People's Archives calls for a goal-oriented entrepreneurial shift to new services that relate to people's minds, creating a public sphere, where archives are Archives of the People, by the People, and for the People.

Endnotes

[1] This paper is part of a project which ultimately will result in my book, *Meanings of Archival Memories*. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a symposium 'Archives Online: Moving Archives into the Digital Era' organised by the National Archives of The Netherlands, 17 April 2003, and at a seminar 'Digital Longevity of Parliamentary Archives' organised by the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Development, 22–23 May 2003. I included parts of the paper in an address at a conference organised by ABM-Utvikling, the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority, 22 September 2003.

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[5] John A Michon, 'How to Connect a Library with a Mind', in Reedijk, Henry and Koops, pp. 137–52, here 151.

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[7] Eric Ketelaar, 'Archiefdienst zonder muren: Archives without walls', in *Archieven in Europa: Een toekomstbeeld. Bijdragen van de Nederlandse sprekers op de studiedag gehouden op 22 oktober 1996 in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek te Brussel, Miscellanea archivistica studia* 102, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels, 1998, pp. 7–9.

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[12] Rifkin, p. 85.

[13] Rifkin, pp. 76–93, 100.

[14] Angelika Menne-Haritz, 'Access - The Reformulation of an Archival Paradigm', *Archival Science*, no. 1, 2001, pp. 57–82; Paul Macpherson, 'Theory, Standards and Implicit Assumptions: Public Access to Post-current Government Records', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 30, no. 1, May 2002, pp. 6–17.

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[16] G Blais and David Enns, 'From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives', *Archivaria,* no. 31, 1990–91, pp. 101–13; Eric Ketelaar, 'Archives of the People, by the People, for the People', *SA Argiefblad / SA Archives Journal,* no. 34, 1992, pp. 5–16 (online available via EBSCO Academic Search Premier), reprinted in Ketelaar, *The Archival Image,* pp. 15–26; David Bearman and Margaret Hedstrom, 'Reinventing Archives for Electronic Records: Alternative Service Delivery Options', *Archives and Museum Informatics,* 1993, pp. 82–98, reprinted in Randall C Jimerson (ed.), *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice,* Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2000, pp. 549–67.

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[18] Margaret Hedstrom, 'Archives, Memory, and Interfaces with the Past', *Archival Science,* no. 2, 2002, pp. 21–43, here 31–2. See also Brien Bothman, 'The Past that Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records', *Archivaria,* no. 51, 2002, pp. 48–80; Eric Ketelaar, 'The Archive as a Time Machine', *Proceedings of the DLM-Forum 2002: @ccess and Preservation of Electronic Information: Best Practices and Solutions, Barcelona, 6–8 May 2002, INSAR European Archives News, Supplement* VII, Luxembourg, 2002, pp. 576–81.

[19] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture,* Verso, London and New York, 1994.

[20] Pierre Nora, 'General Introduction: Between Memory and History', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* [on the jacket: *The Construction of the French Past*] *I. Conflicts and Divisions,* transl. Arthur Goldhammer, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, pp. 8, 11. The original 'La société tout entière vit dans la religion conservatrice et dans le productivisme archivistique' (Pierre Nora, 'Entre mémoire et histoire: La problématique des lieux', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire. I. La République,* Gallimard, Paris, 1984, p. xxvi) was translated by Goldhammer as: 'society as a whole has acquired the religion of preservation and archivalization'. This sentence does not appear in the first English edition of Nora's introduction: Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire', *Representations,* no. 26, Spring 1989, pp. 7–25. When I introduced the term 'archivalisation' in 1998 (Eric Ketelaar, 'Archivalisation and Archiving', *Archives and Manuscripts,* vol. 27, no. 1, May 1999, pp. 54–61) I did not know that Goldhammer had used it before.

[21] *The DigiCULT Report: Technological Landscapes for Tomorrow's Cultural Economy: Unlocking the Value of Cultural Heritage,* European Commission, Luxembourg, 2002, pp. 162–74. Executive Summary and Report at *www.salzburgresearch.at/ fbi/digicult/.*

[22] Samuel, p. 148.

[23] Query any search-engine for *scrapbooking*. On the history of scrapbooking: Anke te Heesen (ed.), 'Cut and paste um 1900: Der Zeitungsausschnitt in den Wissenschaften', *Kaleidoskopien*, no. 4, 2002, pp. 1–188; Ellen Gruber Garvey, 'Scissoring and Scrapbooks: Nineteenth-century Reading, Remaking and Recirculating', in Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B Pingree (eds), *New Media, 1740–1915*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 2003, pp. 207–27.

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[28] Susan A Crane, 'Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory', *American Historical Review*, no. 102, 1997, p. 1381.

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[31] *www.archive.org*

[32] *www.waag.org/verhalentafel*

[33] *www.divakoepel.nl*

[34] On the website of the City Archives of The Hague (The Netherlands) people can add their comments to the descriptions of digitised photographs at *www.gemeentearchief.denhaag.nl.*

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