“Archives, Libraries, Museums – Collaboration or Merger?” – Danish experiences!

In the old days, archives were for archives, libraries took care of books and museums gathered the rest. The old days still continue in Denmark. The cultural heritage institutions are still made up by archives, libraries and museums, each type of institution handling their special tasks in their special ways.

As a rule, the ALM institutions are happy about this state of affairs. But every now and then an archivist, librarian or curator puts him- or herself in the place of the user. How would the user, interested in some historical problem, know where to start? Would it not be easier for the researcher, if all kind of sources and all kinds of materials were readily accessible in one place? Then the researcher would not have to spend (so much) time locating the whereabouts of the relevant material.

In recent years, the similarities of the ALM institutions have grown. I refer to the fact that the ALM institutions have become digitized, just like the rest of the world. The digital collections of libraries and archives are growing fast. As a matter of fact, in 2010 the Danish National Archives received more digitally born records than conventional paper records. The digital evolution means that preservation, dissemination and research will be digitally based for all ALM institutions. In that sense, archives, libraries and museums will become more homogenous than ever before. We shall all become more and more digital, if we still want to have some value for society. Our users will compare the services provided by ALM institutions to that of other websites – we should all be as easy accessible as GOOGLE or Amazon or Facebook.

As we all know, digitization is not free. There are considerable costs involved in preparing, scanning, web-enabling and not least providing the necessary metadata for the digitized objects, so that the researcher will have a good experience when searching for her or his sources.

This state of affairs poses a challenge to us in the ALM institutions. Can we manage individually, or does the challenge mean that the best solution is to merge ALM institutions to ensure the necessary professional and financial resources for task performance and to ensure the continued development of the heritage institutions?

How are the challenges addressed in Denmark? We do still have a National Archives, a National Museum, a National Gallery, a Royal Library and a State Library etc. We would not like to be merged. But we do cooperate in several fields.

The two national libraries and the National Archives have established a so-called “Bit Repository” to safely preserve our separate digital collections. We share the costs and pay each according to our amount of bytes in the repository.

We are also collaborating in the creation and evolution of preservation tools. The website digitalbevaring.dk (digital preservation) is a forum for exchange of knowledge on and experience with digital preservation. On the website we publish articles on different aspects of digital preservation, and we link to Danish and international publications, events, etc. of relevance to the ALM institutions. The website contains descriptions of tools that may be used for various preservation processes and references to Danish and international initiatives related to digital preservation.

A web-project DANPA (DaNish Private Archives) is another example of ALM cooperation. It is a comprehensive digital finding aid and guide to private archives - photographs, recorded sound, films, maps, plans, drawings, printed material and newspaper cuttings - kept in various public collections such as local and city archives, the Danish National Archives, The Royal Library, The Danish Emigration Archives, The Library and Archives of the Labor Movement (ABA), The Danish National Museum etc. They all contain information of private provenance from persons, societies, organizations, institutions, businesses, shops etc. The database is the result of an enlarged ALM cooperation, channeled through the Committee on Private Archives that is chaired by the Director of the National Archives. The other cultural heritage institutions are represented in the committee.

There are numbers of bilateral projects between the ALM institutions. They all prove that cooperation is fruitful when the different viewpoints, culture and tradition of the three types of institutions - archives, libraries and museums – serve as mutual inspiration and healthy competitiveness.

Would merging the institutions In Denmark serve this purpose of efficiency better than by cooperation? We think not. Some years ago the discussion about merging in the cultural field was discussed. The directors of the national cultural heritage institutions in Denmark formed an unofficial association called RUNAS. Unofficial, yes, but official enough to be recognized as a partner in the discussions about ALM issues. This unofficial institution that ensures the smoothly running inter-institutional cooperation might have contributed to prevent any serious attempts of merging archives with libraries or museums in Denmark on a national level. The RUNAS members meet regularly to discuss any matter of common interest to the cultural heritage institutions.

We pool our resources to bring to our users all the blessings that the digital technology provides by searching our collections through one website or portal. But we do still need the special knowledge and abilities that each institution has developed through generations.

Respecting the fact that an archives is different from a library which again is not the same as a museum will let us all – separately and in cooperation – be better to meet the ever changing and growing demands from the societies we serve.

We acknowledge that the technology involved in preserving digital born records or archives may not be that different from the technologies that libraries and museums use to preserve their different digital objects, but we must remember that mastering the technology is a minor part of our tasks.

Our great task is to make the cultural heritage relevant to our present and future users. That is not done by just putting something on the web. The challenge is to put the right things on the web at the right time and in the right manner. And it is this challenge that demands the special and professional qualifications of archivists, librarians and curators. Dissemination of the cultural heritage on the web requires great skill and knowledge of the experts in our institutions. A classical SWOT analysis will show that the strength of our institutions is based on the existence of their specialized competence and knowledge. The threats are that these characteristics cannot be maintained.

Would it not be possible to create an institution where all those special qualifications were present? Possibly, but not without the risk of considerable transaction costs. Organizational change always involve transaction costs, so before considering to undertake great changes like merging an archives with a museum, one should carefully consider the risks and the benefits. If the analysis would show that the desired effects of a merger can be achieved through inter-institutional cooperation on select fields with lesser risks, the conclusion is rather clear.

In other areas, we in the Danish National Archives have been happy to let part of our institution merge with the Royal Library. With the growing costs of artisan preservation of parchments and bindings, it seemed uneconomic to have two preservation departments doing almost the same work. So the preservation department of the Library took over our specialist in preservation of wax seals and medieval bindings, and we in the archives send them work each year. Thus we have kept an expertise that neither institution could probably afford on its own.

On the other hand, we have let The Royal Library use part of our new archival repository. The library was desperately in need of space, until the finances will allow them to build their own repository.

It is not a claim that merging cultural institutions is doomed from the start. If careful consideration concerning the process is taken into account and if the desired outcomes have been clearly identified, it may be succesfull. It is rather a suggestion that meeting the demands of the digital society does not automatically require merging between cultural institutions.

Asbjørn Hellum
Director General
Danish National Archives