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How to Steer an Archive Through Neoliberal Waters.

Questions of Financial Sustainability Exemplified by the Österreichische Mediathek

The ocean is wide – and the waters in which our boats or ships are floating differs very much. Neoliberal waters, what does this mean? Is it an international phenomenon? Is it only new as far as Europe is concerned? What does it mean when speaking about cultural policy, when speaking about sound archives?

Unable to go into the depth of this question – especially in English – I will approach the subject rather pragmatically: I am dealing with the changed situation in Austria and for the Mediathek. I have the feeling however, that what happened here in the last years is rather typical for the situation in several countries, especially in Europe, but I may be wrong, of course.

Most of the Austrian institutions collecting and preserving media – libraries, museum, audiovisual archives – underwent a significant change of their surrounding conditions in the last ten years. Nearly all were part of public authorities or very near to them and were treated more or less as bureaucratic entities. There was no question of getting additional money by commercial exploitation of one's assets.

I remember a situation many years ago, when my institution began to produce folklore discs – they had a good demand. Record producers protested against such a competition by a governmental institution and we had to stop it.

Now things look entirely different, the new approach being that cultural institutions are business enterprises like all others.

So my institution is no longer part of the public administration of Austria; its name was changed from Phonotheke to Mediathek and it was included into the Technical Museum of Vienna. The museum was also part of the public administration, but is now an independent company.

It stands for reason, that this independence has to be qualified: the biggest part of the budget of the museum and of our archive is still provided by public authorities, this is even stipulated by federal law; but now we are prompted to make additional money by our own. What was forbidden in the past is now most desirable.

It was a big change and a rather difficult period of adaption to new perspectives. Instead of a bureaucratic administration we had to build up a business management; the museum of which we are a division, had to build up a division for public relations, marketing and sponsoring.

This big change – was it worth while? Is it an improvement? The unambiguous answer is yes and no, of course.

Let me give a simple answer:

In the time before the change we didn't take into account economic aspects sufficiently, now this has to be done too much sometimes.

So I am in favour of something rather boring: a middle course; we have to strike a balance between professional and economical aspects.

To think more economically will not disorient an archive professionally, same as our economy did not break down when ecological aspects had to be included in its calculations.

But we had to learn a new language – and new ways of assessing our work.

We were accustomed to - so to say - internal assessment criteria. What we had was an assessment by the criteria of our own job: to have a good climatized archive, to be technically well equipped and to work on a professional level; even such an assessment is difficult enough - and it could only be really done by other professionals, of course. The bureaucratic control and lead was sometimes problematic, but on the whole not very strict. We were able to define ourselves to a relatively high degree, restricted of course by scarce financial resources.

The orientation was an optimising of our professional duties as sound archivists.

Now new questions and a new kind of examiners came across our way and very often their orientation is rather maximising:

How many users do you have? Why so few? What can be done to get more? Do you have sponsors? If not why not? What is wrong with your offering? Does it really make sense to collect that much, when the public seems not very interested?

You are going to buy this technical equipment – but does it really give a good return?

We get questionnaires all the time and have to press everything into figures.

This is not a necessarily a problem and questionnaire results can be very helpful. But as a tool for the assessment of an archive a benchmarking only works when several condition are met:

- professional questions targeted exactly to the particular institution; in our case we are very often measured with questionnaires aimed at museums now, in the past we got questionnaires aimed at libraries; so there is real progress!
- then the judge of our work should also know, that not everything in archival work can be measured with a metering rule;
this is the main problem: it is so much easier to evaluate an institution based on some key figures instead of trying to form an opinion about it based on knowledge about the real work of the institution.

Another field which is now seen a bit different from the times before is **collection policy**.

Our so to say inborn attitude as sound archivists is to collect fiercely and strongly only along professional principles;

An attitude with which we are confronted now sometimes would be to stress the use to the disadvantage of the collecting: Let's use collections – the assets – for present purposes and let us not bother much about acquisition.

Even from an economical point of view such an attitude would not make sense in the long run. It would also be a break of the implicit inter-generation contract, on which all archives, libraries and museums are based: we make use of holdings collected and preserved by generations before us and have therefore the obligation to preserve and to collect for generations to come.

This is an aspect we have to say to our funding institutions over and over again.

The same is true as far as **access**, the public use of our holdings, is concerned. An archive is not only responsible for the public of today, but we are working also for a lot of future publics of which we know little or nothing.

Another important feature – if not the very core - of the new look is the tendency to **reduce public funding** of cultural institutions. They should try to finance their expenses – at least partly - by other sources, that is by marketing their own products, by sponsoring and so on. This is relatively new for European institutions, I think, it is in any case for Austria.

I think, that it is very important to have the possibility to look for additional financial sources. On the other hand – being a conservative European and speaking from the point of view of a national sound archive – I still think that it is the obligation of society as a whole – organised in the form of state – to sustain cultural institutions. Public money means democratically controlled money; it means a cultural policy for which a democratic majority is responsible. Of course I am willing to take money from the house of Medici or from Mr. Maecenas himself – and I will loudly praise their generosity, but please in addition to public money.

As is the case in Austria, I should add! Our budget still consists of more than 90 % public money. But this percentage will diminish, I fear.

We have to prepare for that and therefore now to the practical task we are tackling now. –

The change of attitude stresses very much two objectives we always had:

- to get a broader public
- to get additional funds

Both is extremely difficult if you are sitting in an audiovisual archive, especially a sound archive. We all know this.

Point one: **Broader public**

Here the Mediathek didn't find a solution which really fits into neoliberal concepts of a broad reception of cultural assets, but it is an improvement when compared with the situation before.

We still have listening facilities on our premises. We keep trying to make them better known, but there is no real chance to increase the user figures considerably.

So we pin our hopes on another way. We try to build up a virtual av-archive in the internet. This is difficult and has its limitations. As I have reported on our web expositions last year I won't go into this further.

Just one remark. – One disadvantage of our web-presence seen from a neoliberal angle is the fact, that our internet users do not pay. At the moment we are planning special zones in which

users have to log in and to pay. We are very doubtful however, if this will make sense, that is if users will come, if they have to pay.

Point two: **additional funds**

As already hinted at: admission charges will not make the Mediathek rich – and the same is true with copying of media, with charges for using our media in broadcastings, expositions and other forms of public use. From a strategic point of view such income has no importance at all. That is, we could well do without an admission charge – as in the old times. But this is out of the question in the new paradigm, of course. For a museum on the other hand, admission fees really play a very important role.

For an institution like the Mediathek there are only two ways open to achieve substantial additional means:

- project money
- digitising for third parties

The first point – **project money** – is nothing new, of course. But its importance for us has increased. Projects were a real help in digitising parts of our collections in the last years. I mention two projects to make accessible and to analyse radio news broadcasts and another dealing with parliamentary recordings.

There is one problem to overcome here: such projects have to be research, they have to be scientific projects, meaning that digitising and cataloguing alone is not enough. There is no money for infrastructural projects unfortunately. In my view this is a very weak point in the project policy in Austria, but the same is true with the European Union as a whole: money may be attainable to research about digitising and about long-term-preservation, but nothing to do the job as such.

So to get our projects we had to be creative, that is combining research – or a bit of research – with digitising – or a lot of digitising.

There is another structural problem with the project policy of today. – Project money ends, when the project is finished – that´s clear, that seem to be logic, but what about the results of the projects? In our case these are the digitised media, in other cases there are digital data of all kinds. We know, that to preserve digital data is costly and complicated. The project does not provide money – so what?

As far as the Mediathek is concerned we know this fact and are willing to take the responsibility into our own hands.

But I would like to stress, that this is another weak point with projects: the aspect of preservation normally is not dealt with.

Point two: **Digitisation for third parties**

After seven years of concrete work with audio digitisation, of long-term preservation of files, of a system held together by databases for metadata and for the workflow our technical infrastructure as well as our expertise is sufficient to digitise for third parties.

But why should we do so? Is it really a job for a sound archive to be a service provider also? Some years ago I would have said no. Now I have already given you the answer of the new paradigm: if the public money becomes scarcer we have to look for new resources.

Sometimes I have still difficulties to see it thus, but normally I act according to the new conditions.....

There is another side to it too, however. – The third parties asking us for help are normally other institutions with collections which really should be preserved. So it is part of our job as a national archive to support them. For themselves it makes sense, not to try to digitise their material themselves; It is less expensive to hand it over to somebody specialised – and it is also safer. It makes sense to outsource material to an institution working on reliable high quality standards.

That's very important too: We all know that there are counter-examples of so-called digitalisations producing results not worth while. There are method to ensure oneself against something like that: Our biggest client at the moment is the National Library of Austria. To make sure that we keep quality standards they even commissioned another institution – the Phonogrammarchiv – to control our digitisation. It sounds complicated, but functions perfectly. What really was complicated was the tuning of the digital systems of Mediathek and National Library, but we know, how difficult interoperability is.

If this kind of digitising for other parties is going on, there will be a tendency to separate this service from the archival work as such. At the moment we have only small orders – with the exception of the National Library order. So we can handle this more or less like the digitisation of our own holdings. The key personnel of the project comes from the Mediathek staff.

It is – so to say – the laboratory approach we are using currently. If more orders will come – as may be and which I wish – then we will have to change to a kind of factory approach. With this I mean, that we will need additional technical equipment, room, a specialised workflow and a staff of its own. Otherwise our own archival work would be disturbed, while the service may be too slow. Even then an intrinsic connection between the archive and the service department would still be very important.

Of course there would also be the possibility of a joint venture between an archive and a company. We have heard about such an enterprise on the last conference in Mexico. In our case it was and is important for us to start on a small scale and to see what is developing just by ourselves...

I need not stress that is difficult for civil servants and scientists working in an archive to come up with a business like that. It used to be very alien to me. But somehow, step by step, we got started. In the cold waters of the neoliberal ocean we have to try to swim now.

With this let me close my rather ambivalent paper. You have heard me speak sceptic about some aspects of the new paradigm, on the other hand you have seen, that we are very much trying to streamline the Mediathek to the new thinking. Well, I think it is inevitable to ride the wave.

May the archive survive!