

Using a professional digital archiving service for the construction of a family archive

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Abstract

Interest in preserving and sharing personal sentimental objects in digital format is increasing. This paper examines the use of a professional archiving service (the YKSA archiving service and the YKSA client) for the construction of a family archive. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach are described as a result of a case study. The paper claims that using the professional archiving service makes family archiving more plausible and a multi-purpose undertaking. The description of archived objects seems to encourage the archive creators to tell stories. This social and storytelling motivation should be exploited when developing the professional archiving services. Special attention should be paid to the multimedia features of a digital archive service and to the feasibility of the offline management software.

Introduction

Humans are natural collectors and storytellers. The collecting of sentimental objects is obvious in homes: photographic albums, pictures on the wall and other personal objects that are preserved for various reasons [1]. Now, because of the widespread use of computers and the decreasing storage cost, interest in preserving and sharing sentimental objects in digital format is increasing. There are various software solutions available for those who wish to undertake a personal archiving project [2]. Basically, private persons have the same technical opportunities for personal archiving and they are facing difficulties of a similar kind as the professional archivists.

Personal digital archiving in families is a voluntary undertaking. There are several reasons to construct an archive. However, it seems that personal archiving is about defining self. Personal archiving has identity value. Meantime this identity work is combined with sharing and framing the family [1, 3]. I consider family archiving as part of the communicative construction of the family identity. It means that the archived objects are material for the narratives of the family members. The archived objects are interpreted by each family member differently. In this way, the archiving is a continuing sense-making process. This makes the archiving process a social activity, where the interpretation of the archived objects is the core of the digital archiving. Several studies have discussed this narrative and the social “nature” of the archiving practice [3, 4, 5].

This paper examines how an archiving service mainly used by archiving professionals can be used for the construction of a family archive? What kind of advantages and disadvantages this kind of archiving approach has to an archiving process of photographs and other documents of one family? How do the professional practices affect the lay archivists’ work?

Approach

The paper presents a case study of the construction of a digital archive for a married couple born 1924 (the parents of the author). The archive is constructed by selecting, describing, organizing, digitizing and preserving photographs, written documents and some other sentimental objects from 1926-1955. The archiving process started in March 2013 and it is still continuing. The material in this paper is based on recorded interviews, field work and documented experiments with the material in a digital archive service.

Archiving process

The archiving process began a year ago. There were several principles we agreed upon before the project began. There was a need to make a digital archive of the photographs and other documents from the 1920s to the 1950s. Many of the photographs did not have any information about the people nor the events in the photographs. We discussed and agreed that the archived objects will be principally published openly. We also made a plan as to how the objects would be selected and organized. For me, the project is about the use a professional digital archiving service for personal archiving purposes. The archiving creators are my parents, my role is to assist and function as a participating observer.

During the construction of the family digital archive, we had every Sunday an “archiving” hour. The photographs and other documents were selected and discussed. First, I recorded the selecting sessions, but soon I realized that the recordings resulted in situations where the oral stories were difficult to connect to the photographs. Then, I decided to digitize the preselected photographs and show one picture on my laptop and undertake an interview one picture at a time. This process seemed to be functioning well. After the selection, digitizing and interviewing, I uploaded the documents to the archiving service. The recorded interviews were then attached to the documents. The interviews were used as source information for the metadata the archiving service demands.

Material

The first part of the archive was based on six photographic albums with black and white photographs from the 1920s to 1955. The albums included 160 – 200 photographs each. Altogether there were approximately 1000 photographs in the albums. From the 1920s to 1950, the pictures were mainly taken by professionals or unknown amateurs. From 1950 or 1951, the photographs are mainly taken by the archive creators themselves.

The black and white paper photographs are small – their average size is 6 x 8.5 centimeters. They were digitized by the

recommendations of the National Archives Service of Finland. The interviews were recorded and stored as wav-files. The photographs and the interviews were occasionally supplemented by some other sorts of documents like letters, reports, study records and written memories in pdf-format.

The YKSA archive service

The archived records are preserved in the YKSA archive-service developed and maintained by the Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences, Finland. The beta version of the YKSA client software was used to manage the uploading of digitized records for the YKSA archive-service. YKSA is a service as a software solution. You can use the YKSA service either with a browser or with a client application.

The YKSA archive service is used by several Finnish archives. It has been developed in the Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences since 2007. It is used for the management of traditional archives as well as for the management of digital materials and metadata. In this case, the YKSA service was used as a digital archive only. The user interface for this private archiving purpose was to some extent less complicated, but it included many of the same features that the professional archives use.

For the management of the archive there are seven basic functions: Search, Browse, Upload, Archive management, User management, Reports and Statistics. In this paper, the focus is on the construction of a family digital archive, thus the “Upload” and “Archive management” features will be described more in detail. (Figure 1).

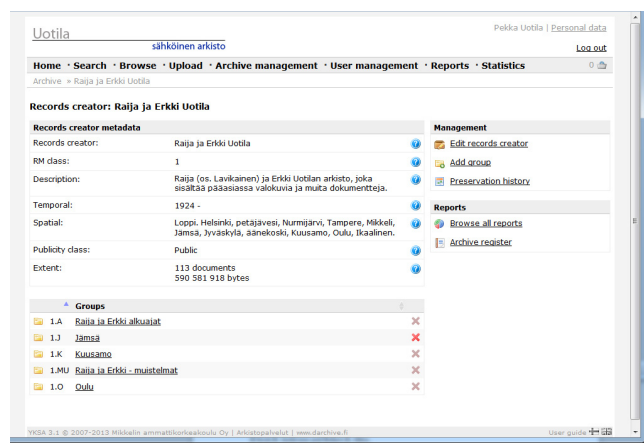


Figure 1. The user interface of the YKSA archiving service. <http://www.darchive.fi/uotila>

This kind of service embodies the basic assumptions of the professional practice of archiving. This means that the user has to act according to some of the basic procedures the professional archivist would carry out. For example, one simply cannot upload documents to the archive before you have some kind of idea who is the record’s creator and what kind of classes and groups the archive is going to include. This is what the user is supposed to know in advance, when they use the digital archive service.

The Upload feature in YKSA service includes the functions that are the most important in creating the digital archive. During the Uploading process the document is described by metadata of different kind. For example, in YKSA the user of the archiving service gives basic information on the document including “title”, “agent”, “publicity”, “rights” and “change information”. The descriptive metadata includes “subject”, “description of the archived object”, “controlled keywords”, “spatial and temporal coverage”, etc. Of course, the documents are described in terms of technical metadata as well. As soon as the metadata has been saved, there is the possibility to add attachments to the archived object.

Results

The results I present here are based on my observations during the family digital archiving process. Based on that information, I consider the following features as the most interesting observations.

Professional setting as a learning environment

For the lay user, YKSA archiving service is a digital tutor to archiving. The “Archive management” feature of the YKSA service makes the user of this service think about the structure and content of the evolving digital archive. The user interface makes the lay archivist accept the basic practices and vocabularies of professional archiving. After some trial and error, the user of the archiving system will understand that it makes sense to make an approximate description of the material to be included in the archive and to think about the records’ naming logics. This is necessary, because the YKSA service assumes that the records will be uploaded to a certain class which should be somehow reasonable.

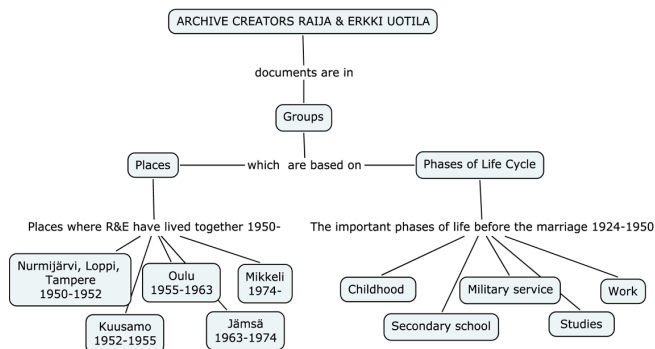


Figure 2. The family archive map as a general plan for organizing the family photographs

Understanding the importance of “Archive management” might happen only when one has already started to upload files. Especially, this might be the case if you are not a trained archivist. In my experience, these features of the archiving system made the archive creator think about the “general groups” of the valued photographic objects and how these groups should be named and more or less hierarchically organized. The first one was illustrated as a “family archive map (Figure 2) and the second one as a Records management class system (Figure 3). Structures of kind

have a strong influence on how the meaning-making in the digital archiving service functions.

FAMILY ARCHIVE - SERIES		
Places		
1K	Kuusamo	K
1O	Oulu	O
1J	Jämsä	J
1M	Mikkeli	M
1A	Raija and Erkki first years	REA
1MU	Raija and Erkki memories	REM
1NLT	Nurmijärvi, Loppi, Tampere	NLT
Phases of life before marriage		
21	Raija's childhood	RL
211	Raija's parents	RV
22	Raija's school	RK
23	Raija's studies	RO
24	Raija's work	RT
Erkki's childhood		
31	Erkki's childhood	EL
311	Erkki's parents	EV
32	Erkki's school	EK
33	Erkki's military service	EA
34	Erkki's studies	EO
Raija memories		
21	Raija memories	RM
Erkki's memories		
31	Erkki's memories	EM

Figure 3. The series and classes of the family archive based on the family archive map and the requirements of the YKSA archiving service.

Family archiving as social and semi-professional activity

The professional archiving service makes the process of constructing a family archive plausible and interactive. It is more interactive because the selection, appraisal and describing require discussions and decisions by the record creators. When the professional services are used, there is a need to find metadata for the photographs and this information seeking might require discussions or correspondence with other family members, friends or public archives. The complicated archiving procedure does not encourage one to simply save and forget the digital objects.

The digital archiving of family documents is more plausible, because the digital archiving service requires professional procedures and the use of professional vocabulary. For the record creator the professional environment increases the value of the process and might lead to better self-esteem. However, to use the professional digital archiving service makes the family archiving process semi-professional and this makes the family archives look like "proper" archives. Therefore the family archives could be used in research more easily.

The family archivist as a developer

The descriptive metadata is understood as a possibility to tell stories by the record creators. The lay archivist whose personal records are the objects of the archiving process might be very eager to tell stories that are not directly connected to the archived records. As a solution to this problem, the record creators suggested that their descriptive metadata should be audio taped and attached to the photographs preserved in the archiving service. This solution enriched the digital archive with interesting oral history which was used as a source for the metadata as well.

This example shows that the needs, ideas and interests of the record creators might be used as triggers for software development. The descriptive metadata is for a family archivist an opportunity to tell stories. In the era of computers this obvious function of the archives as a source of stories should be exploited by developing the multimedia features of digital archiving services. The lay archivist as a user of a professional service is free to think "out of the box".

The family archivist and the metadata

The original order of the pictures in family albums and other records can be vague. The help of family members, friends, colleagues and other archives is an important source for verifying the metadata. The managing of the archiving seems to be problematic because the structure of a family archive is fuzzy due to the non-professional nature of the record creators. There are no ready-to-use models for the structure of a family archive. The relatively large number of digitized documents is difficult to manage because the family archive might be constructed during a long period of time by many different lay archivists.

The use of a professional archive service helps the family archivist to organize the documents but still, the metadata is typically not very exact. Therefore the possibility to use several members of the family to verify the metadata increases the plausibility of the archive. The possibilities to add metadata should be made as easy to manage as possible. The user interface for family members who are only occasional users of the digital archiving service should resemble common social media solutions. It is very important to offer the lay archivist a user interface where one can see the archived object at the same time one is adding metadata. This is important, because for the family members the adding of metadata might happen as a side activity in a family meeting or similar social activity.

Conclusions

The advantages and disadvantages of using a professional archiving service for the construction of the family archive provoke some developing opportunities. Following the principles of professional practices help in some cases to correct the metadata and make the use of a personal archive as part of a public archive possible. This semi-professional approach should be used to promote the services of public archives as well. In turn, the materials of semi-professional personal archives should be used as part of the public archives.

The idea to use recorded speech as descriptive metadata gives better possibilities for the family archivist to tell interesting stories. If the archive creators are elderly people like in this case, this approach enriches the content and it makes the construction of metadata easier. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the multimedia features of the digital archival practices and to the digital archiving services. For example, it is important for the lay archivist to have access to the archived photographs and to the recorded interviews from the same interface.

The construction of a family archive is a social undertaking. These small communities have a direct and emotional relationship to the archived records and a willingness to tell stories. There should be better tools for enhancing this personal commitment. The construction of a semi-professional family archiving requires archival management abilities that the lay archivist is not

necessarily familiar with. To make the managing and establishing of a digital family archive more feasible, client software (the YKSA-client) is to be developed for personal archiving needs.

The professional archiving services can be used as learning environments. This might make the archiving in general more attractive and it could open new business or public service opportunities for the professional archives. For this purpose the professional archiving services should develop “light digital archiving services” for educational and family archiving use. These versions should include comprehensive tutoring and introduction to the process of professional archiving.

These suggestions lack empirical evidence despite the illustrative case presented in this paper. Future research can attempt to interpret the use of professional archiving services and other archiving solutions for family archiving through more extensive empirical studies.

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Author Biography

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