

Unlocking the Full Potential of Public Records: A Conceptual Content Analysis on Archival Use

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Abstract

Archival use is predominantly framed through a cultural and historical lens, often neglecting its crucial role in public administration and e-governance. This study examines notions of archival use as reflected in scholarly research and public reports. It aims to conceptualize and improve the understanding of how records convey information over technological, organizational, and temporal borders, which is of relevance to both scholars and practitioners. Conceptual content analysis is performed on literature reviews of research on archival use and reports from Swedish archival institutions holding government archives. The study finds that there are commonly held assumptions about archival use, which make the role of archives appear less vital to society than it is. Certain forms of archival use are overlooked or rarely mentioned. This is particularly true for the use of archival records in public administration. The findings suggest further research on administrative use of archival records and the underlying information needs. Greater awareness of this understudied area would benefit the field of e-government.

Keywords

archival use, public administration, records, archives

1. Introduction

It has been argued that the principal justification for archival institutions has shifted from juridical-administrative to socio-cultural over the past century [1]. Cook [2] further describes a series of shifts in archival paradigms, noting that the evidence paradigm has been replaced by memory, identity, and community. Examining the concept of archival use may clarify the decline of the evidence paradigm and the extent to which the postmodernist critique has challenged the juridical-administrative justification for public archives. This study aims to establish a foundation for empirical research on administrative use of archival records, by mapping the concept of archival use as reflected in scholarly research and public reports. Filling knowledge gaps on archival use is of importance for e-government initiatives and the continuous and long-term information supply to society.

2. Method

The methodological approach combines interpretive content analysis and conceptual modelling on two sets of documents. The first set includes eight scholarly literature reviews of research on archival use and the second set includes operational plans and annual reports from the four Swedish archival institutions holding government archives, covering the period 2021–2023. Various sources are examined to capture a broad range of perspectives, covering the views of both scholars and practitioners. Shepherd and Yeo's [3] model of archival use serves as an initial coding scheme for the content analysis. Nuopponen's [4] 'satellite' activity model is used to visualize the concept.

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3. Results and discussion

To cover all notions of archival use in the source material, Shepherd and Yeo's [3] two-dimensional model of archival use (*purpose* and *value*) is supplemented with the phenomena *agent*, *time*, *place*, and *tool* from Nuopponen's activity model [4]. *Status* is also included. See Figure 1.

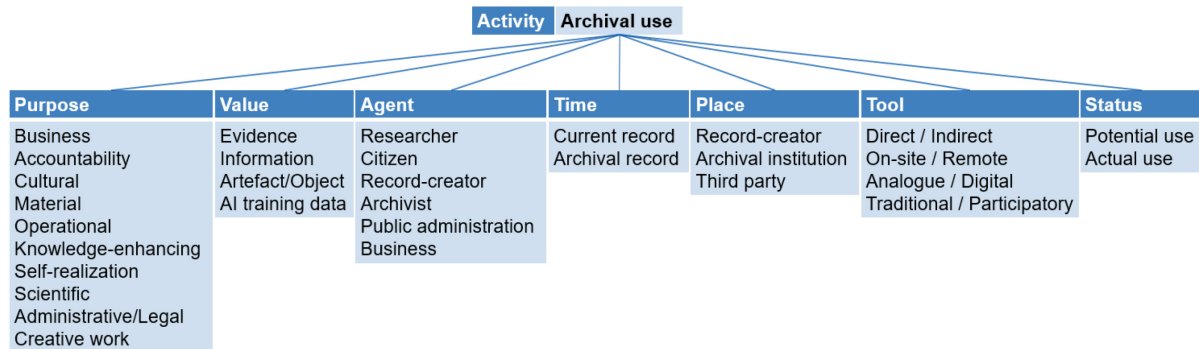


Figure 1: Conceptual model of archival use, developed from content analysis of scholarly research and public reports. Manifest and latent content, not in order of frequency.

Most notions of archival use pertain to cultural, creative, or knowledge-enhancing purposes of use and analogue records in physical facilities. In the literature, the archival user is, or is assumed to be, a scholar, a student, or a genealogist. In the reports, the primary users are the public or the citizens. Public authorities' use of archival records for legal or administrative purposes is rarely mentioned. The focus on visitors in physical archives, and the neglect of users of other forms of information systems, can be understood in the light of the influence of the LAM (Libraries, Archives, Museums) community on archival research. The fact that Swedish public archives fall under the cultural sector, both administratively and politically, may explain why the reports focus more on certain forms of archival use and user groups and less on others.

4. Conclusion

The study has identified research gaps and established a foundation for empirical studies on the use of archival records in public administration. The inclusive conceptualization suggested challenges prevailing assumptions about archival use and expands existing theoretical models. The neglect of certain forms of archival use warrants further research that can advance the understanding of how records convey information over technological, organizational, and temporal borders. This can inform operations and policy in archives and e-government and is crucial in securing the continuous and long-term information supply for vital societal functions.

Declaration on Generative AI

The author has not employed any Generative AI tools.

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