

**Burn your letters
– before it's too late!**

Or: secrets and silences in the archives

Gudmund Valderhaug

<http://depotdrenge.wordpress.com/>

In 2001, ten years after the death of king Olav V, his daughter princess Ragnhild announced that she was going to burn the letters she had received from her father. After marrying Norwegian shipping tycoon Erling Lorentzen in 1953 and moving to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, she and her father had written to each other every week. Needless to say, her announcement caused reactions. Representatives of the Norwegian Biographic Society protested, stating that burning the letters was an “irresponsible and short-sighted act”. The National Archivist was sorry, but couldn't do anything to prevent the burning.

The princess did have some supporters; Data Protection Agency director Georg Apenes called on all Norwegians to follow her example: Burn your letters before it's too late – before archivists or historians get their hands on them...

And I will. My secrets shall remain secret!

Derrida ... insists on the archive as a form of 'remain' – in creating archive, consciously or unconsciously, I leave a trace; I create something which will speak for me when I am not present. So that the archive always attests to an absence of presence. Most of us, I'm sure, have had that spooky experience of reading a document written by oneself in the distant past and feeling the strangeness of that author now gone. The archive subsists in spectrality. It is the domain of ghosts. (Verne Harris)

Archives keep traces of events, but as Derrida has pointed out, the archive is not a living memory; it is a location and we need “the exteriority of the place in order to get something archived”. On the one hand, transferring traces (documents, records) to an archive will put them beyond our control.

On the other hand, such locations will always exercise what Derrida calls an “economy of accumulation”: “...the social and political power of the archive, which consists in selecting the traces in memory, in marginalising, censoring, destroying, such and such traces through precisely a selection...”.

Selections, marginalisations, censorings, and destructions occur throughout the whole archiving continuum; in the creators' decisions what to archive, the registration and classifying done by records managers, the archivists' work with acquisition, appraisal, processing and description, the use and re-use of archival documents, and so forth.

Missing records

During the 1990s municipal archives in Norway received an increasing number of requests from people looking for documentation of their own individual pasts (as children's home inmates, child care clients, or individuals who had insufficient education.) and who wanted to use this documentation to achieve justice and reparation.

In many cases we discovered that the requested documentation was poor or completely missing. Some documentation was deliberately destroyed, some had been lost and some had not been created in the first place.

...silences...

During the 1990 we had several requests for records documenting primary education of individuals from the Romani minority. In Western Norway, the Romani were nomadic during the summer half-year, traveling by boat along the coast. When a family came to a local community, they would stay there for some time, selling their handicraft or maybe working at farms. Their children would attend the local school. But even though I have been searching through a great number of school records, I have never found any traces of the Romani school children in the school diaries that the school teachers were keeping.

Why?

There may be several reasons for these absences; I have not made a systematic study of these cases, but I imagine that a combination of two factors may have been central here: The Romani boat people were outsiders, they were discriminated against and the Norwegian majority regarded them as dishonest, thievish and even worse. Such common prejudice, combined with the fact that the children probably did not go to the same school more than a couple of weeks a year, could have led the teachers to not register these children. Whatever the reasons, the result was an archival silence

The Norwegian «war children»

Documented in

- 1) Lebensborn records, which documented the war children's lives until May 1945. After 1945, some of these records were used in legal proceedings to establish paternity and ended up in regional state agencies.
- 2) records created by the central Norwegian government in the conduct of national policies after WWII. In the main, these records document the development of national politics towards the war children as a group.
- 3) records created by the local municipal bodies which should contain evidence of the individual war child as a school child or a child care client or a children's home inmate.

Poor recordkeeping

However, these records are very often incomplete and defective. The main reason for this was poor record creation in the municipal sector, due to the public administration *regime* of the time. (Before the introduction of the legislation on public administration and freedom of information in 1970, public case handling processes were insufficiently documented, especially in smaller organisations like schools, childcare administrations and children's homes. The records that actually were created were not accessible for clients, so unlike today, the public record-making processes were largely beyond public control).

...hidden stories...

About ten years ago, I found a letter telling this story of a childbirth in late November 1867:

“[---] according to the account of the old farmwife on *Ingstad*, which she, and other people may swear as the truth, they came one evening to *Ingstad* and then during the night the Lapp’s wife became ill and gave birth to a son, who on January 5 was christened in *Hegre* church and given the name Elias. Thereafter the parents went away bringing the child with them.”

The Elias Larsen Kant story

This letter was one of some 80 documents telling the life story of Elias Larsen Kant until he disappears from our sight while working as a labourer at the construction of the Bergen railroad in 1903. The Elias Larsen Kant file is an excellent example of multi-layered information that may be found in archives. The initial purpose of the case was to provide evidence of Elias Larsen Kant's municipal domicile and nothing more; nonetheless the documents contain stories about his hardships as a foster child, his work as reindeer shepherd, his accordion skills or his participation in a cross-country skiing race.

From the archival borderlands

The file was found in the archival borderlands, among the archival pariahs, which according to most appraisal theories should have been destroyed, namely the account receipt series.

It was hidden by the creators recordkeeping system and discovered more or less by accident.

Archivists hiding documents

Kaisa Maliniemis research on the documentation of the Sami and Kven minorities in local public archives in Northern Norway, has shown that documents in the Sami or Kven languages actually have been «hidden» by archivists. These archivists probably could not understand these documents, so they have been placed at the end of the series and not listed in the catalogues.

...and then there's appraisal:

What do we – the archivists – choose to keep for posterity?

Which silences do we create?

Archivists do create silences. Standard appraisal methodologies have – at least in Norway – destroyed records that – in retrospect – should not have been destroyed.

My first encounter with the call of justice in an archival framework happened when I – as a new archivist at the Bergen City Archives – was asked to search for any possible records documenting the pension rights of a retired teacher. The person in question claimed that she had two more years of service than the National Pension Fund acknowledged, and she needed to have these years documented to get a full pension.

I found evidence that she had worked as a teacher in those two missing years back in the 1960s, but by chance. The records that documented her employment were copies of her salary slips, records that should have been destroyed after 10 years according to rules of appraisal and destruction. But they weren't, because the creating body had been dissolved some years earlier and the records left to oblivion – at least for some years...

One of the wikileaks last year tells a story about Putin and Berlusconi going hunting. Putin shoots a deer, and to show his respect for his hunting companion he cuts out the heart of the animal and offers it to Berlusconi. Seeing the bloody heart, Berlusconi faints...

Is this a story we need to know? Or is this a story that could – or should – have remained secret (whatever might be said about Berlusconi)?

Are there such things as legitimate secrets?

In his keynote at the Philosophy of the Archive in Edinburgh some years ago, Verne Harris discussed the boundaries between the «public» and the «secret». He argues that «what we call freedom of information, as an endeavour, is precisely about resisting the illegitimate secret» - contrary to the legitimate secrets. «... secrecy is the stuff of healthy psychic life, and the stuff of healthy human connection», he says, quoting James Hillman stating that «Secrecy is basic for individuality. In a family, for instance, no individual personalities can develop unless the members keep some secrets *with* one another and other secrets *from* one another».

Verne continues: «To understand institutional secrecy, I would argue, we must begin with the individual. In institutions we see the same dynamics at play».

In public bodies the boundaries between the secrets and the public should be set by regulations in the freedom of information legislation (which, of course, may vary in different countries). But how do we handle requests for secrecy in private archives?

Could I trust archivists to keep my secrets secret – if not forever, but for a very long time?

Or I maybe have other reasons for burning my letters; when they are gone, what is left is pure memory, the things I want to remember undisturbed by archival evidence:

*Well, all of your letter burned up in the fire
Time is just memory mixed with desire*

(Tom Waits: *The Part You Throw Away*, *Blood Money*, 2002),