

Business Archives: in Peril or more Observed than ever?

By Hans Naess

As years have gone by the world of business have changed rapidly in many ways. Some trends of development are conspicuous; increase of free trade and the building down of national protectionism, the development of a new media world and means of communication and an era of air transport that together have made the world grow rapidly smaller, the growth of huge multinational companies buying and selling other companies, a world of mergers and split ups. This marked development of a stronger and more diffuse private sector in some ways have replaced the central – in many countries monopoly – role of the public sector. While on the other hand the public sector have grown as fast – in many places even faster than the private one due to factors like increased control mechanism and audits of many kinds, the increase in public services like health care and education systems and transport. In most societal areas both the private and the public sector play their part. Governments own companies of all kinds – or they are shareholders in companies; the school system consist of private and public schools. The same dual situation is found t\within health care. This complex and fast revolving development leaves many traces. Public archives swell more than ever. Archives is a sector of constant growth, governmental as well as local public archives and regional archives.

The private archives are not governed by archives laws in the same way as the public ones but in this area of regulation one sees much of the same development as in all other kinds of activity; archives laws have come in to being as a result of need in the public sector in the first phase covering the needs for securing, protecting and preserving vital documents, the archives, created by the public sector itself. But as the private sector during few decades have immerged as a ever more important part of society and of the cultural history of society a growing number of public regulations have been introduced in order to surveil and secure knowledge about the affairs of the private sectors. Most conspicuous in all countries world wide is demands for the preservation of documents relating to tax issues, matters of security and health in the industry as well as in the field of transport. And in a growing way public archives have been authorized by the government to take on or have taken on by themselves the role of protectors of archives including archives from the private sector. In addition to this the larger multinationals in an increasing degree have established their own archives as tools of necessity for knowing their own ways and history of business, may that be brands, patents, business strategies, personal files or other vital documents. And as within many sectors of society there emerges an increasing number of instances where private companies and public archives cooperate about a policy of preservation of private archives in cultural heritage institutions may that be archives or museums or libraries. The Deutsche

Wirtschaftsarchive is a good example of cooperation between actors on the arena of archives creation and archives preservation. Many city archives, regional archives and archives foundations fill the same function. Some big businesses keep their archives separately from public institutions as vital departments within their own companies.

The financial crisis have hit many businesses hard. Companies go bankrupt. But in business companies go bankrupt if not so often that in some countries have been the case during the last two years. On the other hand: just during the times of crisis the vital importance of documentation for many companies leads to an enlarged conscience within company management as to the importance of archives. So I am in great doubt whether the crisis has had a tremendously negative effect on the preservation of business archive by and large compared what would have happened anyway.

And in any case I strongly believe that in accordance with the general development described above the preservation of archives is a growing concern – and a growing activity – in the whole society.