

"Increasing access to archival knowledge through archival cooperation and partnerships: a proposal for enhancing networking and linkage capabilities among academic archives in developing countries"

by

Fe Angela M. Verzosa

ABSTRACT:

The SUV has grown from a small group of members in 1994, and over a period of ten years has been successful in the fulfillment of its primary objective, the strengthening of relations among members who are academic archivists in universities and research institutions thru the holding of annual seminars and conferences. Little has been done, sadly, towards the promotion of a very important objective, i.e., archival cooperation in the fields of documentation, bibliographic access, digitization, open access scholarly publishing, and related activities that would enhance the networking and linkage capabilities among academic archivists, particularly those in the disadvantaged regions as well as in developing nations. The strategic development of archives in the region through collaboration, partnering schemes, and networking can create an information-rich environment, and wide opportunities to benefit from shared information resources. Part of the success of ICA-SUV will largely depend on how well its members can exploit these networking opportunities, and contribute to the development and growth of archival knowledge on a global scale. This paper aims to bring out the spirit of cooperation among the members by promoting the development of sustainable short-term projects that are doable and mutually beneficial, and thereby contribute to the increased access to archival knowledge.

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Introduction*

First, I wish to express my appreciation to the organizers for inviting me to speak on a topic that is close to my heart, that is, “Increasing access to archival knowledge through archival cooperation and partnerships.” One of the primary reasons why I attended last year’s ICA-SUV conference in Poland was for me to have some kind of an international exposure on the world-wide issues and concerns of archivists connected like me in an academic and research environment. I strongly believed, then and now, that the strategic development of academic and research archives anywhere in the world, particularly in regions rich in cultural knowledge but sadly disadvantaged by the lack of technical know-how, human resource, and funding sources, should merit considerable concern by an important international organization like the ICA-SUV. Through collaboration, partnering schemes, and networking, I am convinced we can bridge the digital divide, so to speak, and create an information-rich environment in the archives sphere of influence, and provide wide opportunities to benefit from shared archival information resources. Part of the success of ICA-SUV for the last ten years has been in holding these annual gatherings of academic archivists, and I am sure much of its future success will largely depend on how well its members can exploit collaboration and networking opportunities to contribute to the development and growth of archival knowledge on a global scale.

I came here hopefully to bring out the spirit of cooperation among the members of ICA-SUV by promoting the development of sustainable short-term projects that are doable and mutually beneficial, and thereby contribute to the increased access to archival knowledge.

Early Attempts at Collaboration

International cooperation has been extremely difficult to achieve because of geographical distance. So for many years, I watched on the sideline how early attempts at collaboration in the Southeast Asian region, wherein my country is closely linked to, will fare. It is sad to say here that, apart from organizing conferences and seminar-workshops, attended mostly by government archivists, and publishing yearly a journal that contains the papers presented at such conferences and seminars, little has been done to accomplish collaboration objectives for academic archives and research institutions.

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In 1969, there was a Conference on Research Materials held in Puntjak, Indonesia, focused on sourcing archival materials, microfilming, and bibliographical control. An offshoot of this conference was the founding of the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL), which held its inaugural meeting in Singapore in 1970, and the first General Conference of Southeast Asian Regional Branch of ICA known as SARBICA, which was held in Manila in 1971. One of the noteworthy projects of the combined efforts of CONSAL and SARBICA involved the establishment of a Regional Microfilm Clearinghouse, which was intended to keep members informed of microfilming activities in the region to avoid duplication of efforts and to fill in the needs and gaps. The Southeast Asian Microfilms Newsletter, which published its maiden issue in December 1972, survived until 1993.

Another cooperative regional project was the Masterlist of SEA Microforms, published in 1978 and updated in 1985. In 2000, the proposal to digitize the Masterlist with a total of almost 36,000 entries of holdings from 44 institutions in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and with the expected cooperation from 16 new institutions (making it a total of 60), was approved at a meeting of an informal grouping known as the Southeast Asia Consortium on Access and Preservation (SEACAP) in Chiang Mai. This project was to be funded by Japan Foundation. Despite so many glitches (mostly on funding requirements, delays in fund approval and releases, unmet deadlines for submission, and so on), the project was successfully launched and partial results are shown on the MSEAM database accessible at <http://mseam.seas.edu.sg>. Now the project is in limbo because of data transfer nightmares (due to incompatibility of parameters) and suspension of funds from JF.

In my own country, there is a joint microfilming project of our Records Management and Archives Office (RMAO) and the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas (CSIC) on the initiative of our government and the Spanish Embassy, resulting in a turn-over of the catalogues produced by the CSIC of microfilmed centuries-old documents during the Spanish colonial period of my country.

Speaking of the Philippines, I should mention here that there is a remarkable range of cooperative activities and consortial arrangements that range from the simple to the more complex. A number of them were shaped by varying needs and interests. Many active consortia are still informal and voluntary in nature, borne from institutional linkages of academic libraries (where academic archives are attached) within a particular geographical location, and established expressly to engage mainly in interlending activities and bibliographic control. Only two are government-sponsored. Quite a few are spearheaded by professional associations. The National Committee on Archives, under the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, is represented by a group of archivists, mostly belonging to the Society of Filipino Archivists, with the National Archives in an ex-officio capacity, and mandated primarily to provide technical assistance to institutions starting an archives and conduct training for potential archivists. Its one ambitious project is to create a database of archival resources in the country.

Barriers to Cooperation

It is obvious from the above discussion that geography is not the only obstacle to cooperation. Sustained funding and commitment can make or break cooperative endeavors. The channels of communication among cooperating partners should be kept open and constant, and not merely episodic. Deadlines for submitting inputs have to be met, or materials exchange will wither and collapse. Also, it is essential for a successful experience in cooperation that participating members feel that they are getting a proper level of benefit. Consortial arrangements need to be flexible, adaptive to changing situations, pragmatic and well-focused in order to be effective. Cooperation in the area of digitization is now a major area attracting multiple consortia, but, sharing of digitized materials is hampered by copyright issues, and the reluctance of major repositories with rich collections to participate.

Several barriers have been cited too, such as rivalry and competition, mistrust and jealousy, politics and personalities, different institutional priorities and indifferent institutional administrators, unequal development and parochialism, and so on. Other challenges to cooperation stem from negative attitudes, such as skepticism, fear of loss, reluctance to take risks, and the pervasive lack of tradition of cooperation.

Proposals for New Avenues at Collaboration

It is not my intention here to dwell on the successes and failures of past and present archival cooperation but to seek new avenues, and perhaps better alternatives for cooperative activities on an international scale that are more focused on academic and research archives.

With the increasing use of Internet and electronic resources, digital archives are now an emerging platform for cooperation. Thanks to the Internet, collaborative programs now extend far beyond the traditional. Much of the information that is available on the Internet is free. And even if some are not free, they are usually low-cost. Once the networking infrastructure is in place, the expense of electronic information becomes minimal. What this means for cooperating institutions which use the Internet as their base of operations, is that the information they are sharing is far less costly than if the same information were printed and shipped thousands of miles. Equity in terms of cooperation, therefore, should not be a major problem. Each archival institution has its own unique collection that can be offered to the international community of archive users, and in the context of free or almost-free.

Unquestionably, the Internet presents one of the most effective means towards networking. However, I believe we must recognize that the value and focus of the Internet is full text rather than a mere catalog of bibliographic information. At this juncture, there is a more urgent need for content on the Internet, and this is something that we need to carefully explore as the focus of cooperative projects

Although geography was conceded to be one major obstacle to cooperation, it is now of no consequence if the Internet is used as a cooperative medium. The advantages of using the electronic medium to carry out collaborative projects is fairly evident. Large volumes of paper do not have to be transported. In terms of materials exchange, if electronic materials are lost in transit, they can simply be re-transmitted. Fax, telephone, and microform present traditional modes for information transfer, but none can compare with the possibilities that the Internet offers in terms of immediacy, resources conservation, and retrievability.

Joint Electronic Journals

One potentially very commendable area for cooperation concerns the joint publication of electronic journals. Joint electronic journals can open the avenues for increasing access to archival resources, especially those rare and otherwise inaccessible materials, by encouraging faculty, scholars and researchers at our own academic and research institutions to publish their works in non-subscription electronic journals. By providing the mechanisms for open access publishing through the Internet, the major source of academic information pertaining to Asia and other remote regions will be available on the Web; and scholars and researchers anywhere in the world will gain access to information that would have been extremely difficult to locate. Open access in a cooperative arrangement would even solve the complex problems of document delivery service.

De La Salle University Archives has recently put on trial a few articles online under the journal title, *Sinupang Lasalyano*. This journal will provide open access to all of its contents on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge, and such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work. The contents are indexed and searchable by OAI engines. This approach uses an open journal system, designed by the [Public Knowledge Project](#), to improve the scholarly and public quality of research, and the software is freely distributed to support the open access publishing of scholarly resources.

If ICA-SUV facilitates in assembling a group that wants to take immediate collaborative action leading to the establishment of OAI compatible preprint repositories, then this can become one project in archival cooperation. SUV members participating in this project can organize the open archives on a discipline-oriented basis, and then decide who should be the party(ies) responsible for launching, managing, and maintaining the system, whether the universities, scholarly societies, international research centers, or individual volunteers.

Digital Archives Collaboration

For pictures, sound, and other archival multimedia materials which are storage-intensive, the opportunities for cooperation by establishing as many websites as possible offers a better alternative than a single site. A single site will definitely be burdened with a big storage requirement, while building separate sites will encourage cooperation. The more participants involved, the better for the project to achieve efficiency and effectiveness.

For digital archives, the innovative use of information technology will enable archival information to be accessed anywhere anytime by anyone who needs them. However, the need to integrate technology and content is evident. And outside funding and the commitment of volunteers in such digital initiatives are critical to its success.

In my country, our National Archives has started its project on digitization of archival documents since 1998 and is still on-going. More than 13 million historic documents have been digitized but not accessible in the world wide web. How many more such digital projects are ongoing in developing countries but are not accessible in the web, no one knows. Why? Clearly, there are problems in funding initiatives, technology infrastructure, and technical expertise.

This is in contrast to the initiative of the National Archives of Japan, spearheaded by the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) which is a full-fledged digital archives. JACAR provides image data of official documents concerning the relationship between Japan and its Asian neighbors through the Internet. It offers "anyone, anytime, anywhere" access to the records free of charge. Internet users can read a large amount of Asian historical records from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 until the end of the WWII in 1945, download and print it out easily. About six and a half million images have been scanned, and around two million images every year will be added. All the documents were previously microfilmed and converted into digital format.

Another model of collaboration is JARDA, the Japanese American Relocation Digital Archive, which results in a single point of access to digitized archival materials on the evacuation and internment of thousands of Japanese Americans during WWII. Curatorial and digital collaboration was made possible through California Digital Library's Online Archive of California, which spearheaded the development of digital archives for "thematic collections." Putting all these primary documents in one site made a big contribution to academic research.

These examples lead us to the conclusion, rightly or wrongly, that developed nations can manage its own website for digital archives without need of collaboration. Collaboration becomes an attractive alternative only for the poorer nations when better endowed countries take on the initiative to extend assistance by way of providing the required funds, or the needed technical expertise and training, and/or the technology infrastructure or network mechanism that will facilitate access. Here, SUV can initiate the

launching of an international network of institutional repositories, matching institutions with common interests, needs and requirements.

Copyright Concerns

One of the most serious barriers to building digital archives and establishing open access journals for such archival resources like faculty publications and theses and dissertations, is related to copyright and intellectual property concerns. With these legal issues, it may be difficult to develop higher levels of cooperative arrangements, but the problem is not insurmountable. One of the potential solutions is to require waivers from faculty, scholars and other intellectual property right-holders to the digital contents of their works in the spirit of shared scholarship and complementary research.

Certainly, many academic and research institutions can be encouraged to require their waivers, provided the collaborative partners are also willing to do the same and share their valuable resources. At present this willingness is still doubtful, and efforts towards digital collaboration have been focused on historical materials and government works free of copyright concerns. Hopefully, ICA-SUV can start with small beginnings.

International Collaboration on archival training & education

In the sphere of international collaboration on archival training and education, Southeast Asian academic archivists enjoy limited opportunities. Many of the staff sent for training courses are state or government archivists and records manager, primarily because fund grants are limited to government-to-government arrangements. For instance, the State Archives Department of Vietnam over the last few years has sent its staff to Algeria, Indonesia, China, Japan, France and Laos to attend seminars, conferences or study tours, and, in turn, accepted archivists from neighboring countries like Laos for training under the government's cultural exchange program. Another example is a training workshop on conservation and restoration for 25 Vietnamese conservators held in Hanoi jointly with the Tokyo Conservation and Restoration Center under a Japan Foundation grant. Malaysia has also been consistently active in providing training courses in archival education, and so is Thailand particularly in the area of conservation and restoration under government cultural exchange programs..

Internet-based distance education may offer an alternative to the more expensive traditional teaching involved in archival education, and training courses available only to funded or government-sponsored trainees. The digital environment certainly offers the opportunity to develop archival training through distance education. It is essential, however, to have a centralized system at the institutional level dedicated to building, supporting and maintaining the distance education infrastructure. Hopefully, the ICA Section on Archival Education will work towards developing one. According to a survey made recently, distance education program in archival studies are offered by universities

and colleges in collaboration with international organizations or professional associations, and national/state archives, which cover education and training for professionals and para-professionals. These are, however, extremely limited, and to academic archivists in developing countries like the Philippines, are still expensive. Many of these academic archivists have no formal education in archival studies, and post-appointment training in my country is limited to 2-3 day seminar workshops on basic courses such as appraisal, arrangement and description, conducted by practicing archivists who are, likewise, lacking in formal education in archival studies. Many library schools in my country do not even offer archival courses in their curriculum, for both graduate and undergraduate degrees, and not one school offers a doctoral degree.

Online learning as an emerging educational practice poses several issues and concerns, such as pedagogical and technical problems. But SUV can tap a team of archival educators who can deliver courses online, and decide what teaching competencies should these prospective online educators need to develop to become effective in online training course delivery.

What we are suggesting is an in-service professional postgraduate distance training in basic archival courses that may or may not require external accreditation, just to meet the immediate needs of academic administrators, information professionals, potential academic archivists and records managers. This will provide a higher level training supplementing the World Bank's Learning Program, which is aimed not at practicing archivists and records managers, but at project managers who need record keeping skills within developing institutions.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my talk, I mentioned that I came here to once again meet archivists from all over the globe. It is a constant source of inspiration for me to interact and connect with them in the hope that something fruitful and eventful will happen. Holding these annual gatherings is one thing, but doing something in between these meetings together is another. I am certain that in the very near future, ICA-SUV can exploit collaboration and networking opportunities to promote the development and growth of archival knowledge on a global scale with its better endowed members leading the way. .