

UNIQUE AND UNIVERSAL: CHALLENGES FOR THE MANUSCRIPT LIBRARIAN

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A decade of writers' commemorations - and what we have learned

[SLIDE 1]

My name is Bente Granrud, and I am head of section of private archives, or keeper of manuscripts, which sounds a lot better, at the National Library of Norway. The National Library is a young institution, but the manuscript department has a long history. I will start by speaking about how the national library was established, and how the manuscript department became part of the library. The main part of my speech will be about how the new dissemination strategy of the National Library influenced and changed the old work routines in the manuscript department. Research librarian Rebecca Boxler Ødegaard will in the second part of the speech tell you about and show examples of how we are working today with writers commemorations.

[SLIDE 2]

So, a bit about the background of the institution. In 1813, the first university in Norway was founded, in Oslo. From then on, the Library at the University of Oslo functioned as both a library for the university and as a national library. Like many university libraries, it had from the start a manuscript department that was actively collecting archives from especially authors, artists, composers, scientists and also from organizations and institutions in the Norwegian cultural sphere.

In 1989, after much political debate, Norway established a National Library as a legal deposit repository in Mo i Rana, a small city in the northern part of the country, with a mandate to preserve everything published within the country in compliance with a revised version of the Legal Deposit Act. The University of Oslo Library retained its mandate to preserve

historical and unique collections and to make all its collections available to the public. In 1999, these tasks were consolidated within a newly established branch of the national library in Oslo. That meant that the manuscript department was no longer part of the University Library, but instead became part of the National Library. But we remained physically in the same place, as the University Library built a new library building on the university campus, while the National Library took over the old university library building in the city center. As you perhaps can see from the picture, the name University Library is still cut in stone above the entrance.

During the next five years, provisional arrangements were made, while the library building was being renovated. In 2005, the national library and the manuscript department moved back into a renovated building in Oslo, which marked the true beginning for this new national institution. With its reopening, the national library launched itself as a modern library, with both a physical presence in Oslo and Mo i Rana and a digital appearance. Since then, the amount of exhibitions, conferences and seminars have increased every year, and we are now planning 8-10 exhibitions a year, and have around 150 public arrangements annually.

As all of you who have experienced this will know, moving house is never easy, and moving a manuscript collection back and forth during a four year span, leaves little time for, well anything at all. All human resources were occupied in keeping track of the material, reboxing old and dirty archive boxes, and trying to serve researchers in the temporary reading room. So, when we moved back, all we wanted was to get back on track, and continuing working the way we were used to from the University Library.

But, a National Library proved, perhaps not surprisingly, to be a very different place to work compared to a university library. And 2006 became the start of two important programmes that were to bring a lot of new tasks to the manuscript collection.

Firstly, it marked the centenary of the playwright Henrik Ibsen's death. This turned out to become the first of several official commemorations of Norwegian authors, where the Ministry of Culture gave the National Library the official responsibility of organizing the

commemorations in collaboration with academic experts and other relevant organizations and individuals.

Secondly, the national Library started an extensive digitizing programme, aiming to digitize its entire collection in the scope of the next 20-30 years.

How did these new and highly prioritized tasks fit in with the workflow in the manuscript department – then a small unit with around 6 staff members?

[SLIDE 3]

Well, first of all, as I have tried to show on this slide, we did not have any real workflow. We had a lot of separately prioritized tasks, which only in a small degree were connected and planned as a whole. This slide shows the main tasks, familiar to most of you, I suppose. We had, and still have, an extensive card catalogue and handwritten manuscript protocols, which we were converting alphabetically. From other parts of the organizations, came demands for exhibitions and conferences about various topics. We were of course trying to process new archive material, as well as an overgrown backlog. There were a lot of frustration, and a feeling that nothing was done properly. We were also starting to digitize material, but we still could not make the digitized material available online. Material for digitization was chosen by a kind of priority by importance. We started with Henrik Ibsen's letters and manuscripts, and continued with other famous Norwegian writers, polar researchers and painters, such as Fridtjof Nansen, Roald Amundsen and Edvard Munch. But that was not necessarily what the researchers wanted, and we were using quite a lot of time photocopying letters and manuscripts from lesser known authors, scientists and artists.

In 2009 I became head of section, and I quickly realized that we were trying to do too many things simultaneously. Converting the card catalogue alone would take about twenty years, a lot longer with all the interruptions from "other tasks" that were becoming the norm. At the same time, there was a breakthrough in the digitizing of handwritten material, which meant that everything we digitized could be made available online in a few weeks.

Digitization used to be a pay-service, but now a new digitization policy was decided on, where material that could be digitized and made freely available on the internet, were

digitized for free. That meant all material in the public domain, as well as material where permission was given from copyright holders.

So we decided to make a workflow around the digitizing of material, which took up an ever increasing amount of time, even though we only prepared the material, and were not doing the scanning or photographing ourselves.

[SLIDE 4]

Making a new workflow means changing the old one. We stopped converting alphabetically, and we tried to avoid photocopying. Instead, we started to convert catalogue cards of persons that were of interest to researchers or to other parts of the library. Researchers were now offered digitized material instead of photocopies, free of charge, and in the same amount of time. All material used in exhibitions, were sent to the conservation department, and then digitized ahead of the exhibition, and we were trying to process archives that we knew would be interesting in forthcoming commemorations.

We also started to make work plans several years ahead, where we are identifying upcoming commemorations, planning conservation needs, reboxing and converting catalogue information in advance of the jubilee year, and digitizing all, or some of the material. We have learned that a promise to digitize a whole archive is not the smartest thing to do, especially not with larger and more complex archives. Instead, we are trying to find a few central pieces, or important letter conversations, and digitize those in advance. Local enthusiasts and researchers will often be asking for more material to be digitized, but we have now learned to ask back for specifications. Most of the time, they are asking mostly because “it would be nice” if everything was digitized. When asked to take the time to browse the – often extensive – catalogue – and specify documents of interest, there is often a marked lack of response. That gives us time and resources to digitize material for other projects. Or, they do come back with very definitive requests for a planned research project, and then we digitize and often get a very good partnership out of it.

As Rebecca will tell you more about, this preparedness has also given us a better place in the planning and execution of the numerous commemorations now held at the National Library. When we are discussing upcoming anniversaries, the manuscript department will now most

of the time be able to say that all known material is already in the electronic catalogue, and the information is available to all on the internet. We are also seeing the advantage of substituting digitizing for photocopying. More obscure scientists and authors also have jubilees and anniversaries, and often the researchers have contacted us in advance. On several occasions we now see that we already have digitized material of interest to local committees. We are also trying to digitize letters where both correspondents will be of interest. That way, if we are lucky, we digitize material for two jubilees at the same time.

Now Rebecca will give some examples of how we have worked with official commemorations during the last few years.