DIGITIZING PUBLIC ARCHIVES IN GHANA: WHAT IS PRAAD'S PROBLEM?

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Abstract

Knowledge of the past is necessary to shape the present and to predict the future. Archival materials are evidence of what happened in the past. Archives connect past to the future by informing future generations what had happened. Individuals, organisations and governments use archives for varied purposes. Owing to the intrinsic value of archives, society is required to preserve them and it has been doing that over the years. However, the advancement of technology is putting demand on institutions responsible for preserving archives to digitize their resources and operations. The argument is that digitized archives are more appealing, have the potential to be preserved for longer period and could easily be accessed from anywhere, anytime. In response to the demand, many countries especially in the developed world have digitized their public archives. In Ghana, Public Records and Archives Administration Department is responsible for protecting, preserving and making public archives accessible to users. The department is responsible for digitizing public archives in Ghana but those materials are still not digitized. The purpose of this study was to investigate the problems faced by PRAAD in digitizing public archives. The main question the study sought to answer was: What problems prevent PRAAD from digitizing public archives in Ghana?

To answer the above question, the study employed a case study strategy and a questionnaire method to collect data from 23 PRAAD staff, at the head office in Accra. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistical methods and with the aid of SPSS. The study revealed that the main challenge by PRAAD in digitizing publics is lack of funds and appropriate technologies. So, to overcome the challenge PRAAD should be supported with the needed funds and the necessary ICT infrastructure.

Key word: Digitizing, public, archives, Ghana, PRAAD, Problem

INTRODUCTION

It is argued that knowledge of the past is necessary to shape the present and to predict the future. Archival materials are evidence of what happened in the past. Archives connect past to the future by informing future generations what had happened. Individuals, organisations and governments use archives for varied purposes. Owing to the intrinsic value of archives, the society is required to preserve them and it has been doing that for decades, albeit manually. However, the advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is putting demand on institutions responsible for preserving archives to digitize their resources and operations for varied reasons.

Ikeuchi and Miyazaki (2008) noted that globally a number of cultural heritage objects are being deteriorating or destroyed by natural disasters, hence digitizing those objects will help to preserve them and prolong their lives. Bountouri (2017) opined that digitization of archival resources offers many advantages to both archival institutions and users. The author observed that digitized contents are accessible 24/7 and such accessibility could be multiple and parallel. The author further argued that digitization offers users opportunity to download content and reuse later. Owing to these and many other advatages many institutions, public or private, have initiated projects to digitize their archives but most of those institutions face some challenges (Keneley, Potter, West, Cobbin & Chang 2016; Viken, 2017). This is partly because digitization is an additional task for archival institutions that needs extra commitment of human, financial,

and technical resources (Bountouri, 2017).

Scholars have investigated the challenges institutions, especially the public bodies, face in attempt to digitize their archival resources. For instance, Astle and Muir (2002) examined the relationship between access and preservation in digitization projects in public libraries and archives in the UK and found that there had been a significant increase in access to those materials, but many materials have not been digitized due to copyright restrictions. Keneley, Potter, West, Cobbin and Chang (2016) described a project initiated in Australia to digitize archives. The authors observed that the main challenge encountered in carrying out the project was prioritizing the items for digitization, the study therefore, proposed a model to tackle the problem. Viken (2017) described digitization initiatives at the Norwegian Centre for Traditional Music and Dance. The purpose of the project was to safeguard audio-visual archival materials but intellectual property laws and ethical issues were hindering the smooth running of the project.

In the developing world and Africa in particular, the story is not different. Yadav (2016) investigated the process, principles and challenges of digitizing and maintaining archives in developing countries and found lack of funds to be the number one problem that confronts archival institutions in less developed economies. In Ethiopia, Adane, Chekoleand Gedamu (2019) explored the challenges and opportunities of digitizing cultural heritage. The study found inadequate funds, lack of policy and appropriate technology to be some of the factors militating against digitization of cultural heritage in Ethiopia, though successful digitization of cultural heritage in Ethiopian could lead to enhanced preservation and accessibility of those materials. In a related study, Balogun and Adjei (2019) investigated the status of archival digitization in the National Archives of Nigeria to ascertain the prospects and challenges in digitizing those Collections. The study found that there had been an initiative to digitize archival materials in Nigeria and that doing so would be beneficial to the nation as a whole, but lack of policy, personnel and funds were factors militating against the process. All these are efforts made in different countries to find out the challenges faced by archival institutions in those countries in digitizing archival materials. The purpose of this study was to investigate the problems of the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in digitizing public archives in Ghana.

Problem Statement

The increasing processing and storage capacity of ICT offers an opportunity for archival institutions to create digital archives and to digitize the non-digital archival materials in their possession. The argument is that digital archives are more likely to be preserved well, to live longer, and more accessible anywhere, anytime. PRAAD, which is a public institution responsible for managing public records and archives in Ghana, and is aware of the benefits digitizing national archives but public archives in Ghana are still in hard copy format and no study to the best of the author's knowledge has been conducted to find out what the problems are. This study is to fill the knowledge gap.

Research questions

The main research question the study sought to answer was: What is PRAAD's problem in digitizing public archives in Ghana? Other questions are:

- Has PRAAD a policy for digitizing public archives?
- Has PRAAD enough resources (human, financial, technology) to digitize public archives in Ghana?
- How can PRAAD be empowered to successfully digitize Ghanaian public archives?

Hypotheses

H1. There is no problem against digitizing public archives in Ghana H2. PRAAD faces challenges in digitizing public archives in Ghana.

Justification

The importance of archives in human society cannot be over emphasised. Archives contribute greatly to the advancement of human society and the development of many economies. That is why those materials must be preserved and make accessible to users. Arguably, there is no better way of preserving and accessing public archives in the 21st century that through digitization. This study is therefore justified because it geared towards overcoming challenges in digitizing public archives in Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a case study strategy and a questionnaire method in its investigation. The case selected for the study is the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD). PRAAD is a public institution responsible for managing public records and archives in Ghana. The department has branches across the country though not in every regional capital. However, the headquarters is located in Accra, the national capital. This study was conducted at the headquarters. PRAAD was chosen for the study because it is typical of the cases to be studied as far as the problem under investigation was concerned. In Ghana it is unique when it comes to managing public archives, so its employees constituted the target population for the study. Again the Head office was chosen as the study site because that is where major decisions in PRAAD are taken.

The archive division at the Head offices is made up of digitization unit, search room, editorial unit, preservation unit and reprographic unit. These units perform varied functions in the archival division of PRAAD. The total employees of the various units under the archival division were 30, which constituted the population for the study. All the population was considered for the study, however only 25 were available to participate in the study. The rest were on leave. 25 questionnaires were physically administered to 25 participants to collect the required data, but only 23 were completed and returned. The collected data were analysed using quantitative statistical methods and SPSS tool.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study. The presentation is based on the respondent's profile, the presents of archive digitization policy in PRAAD, PRAAD goal of digitizing public archives, types of archival materials intended to digitize, the presence of ongoing digitization projects, challenges faced in digitizing archives and how those challenges can be overcome.

Respondents' profile

Three questions were asked to be briefly described by the participants of the study, in terms of their gender, age range and the number of years spent working in PRAAD. The results show that the respondents were made of 14 (60.9%) male and 9 (39.1%) female. The highest age range of the respondents was 21-30 (34.8%) and lowest 41-50 (17.4%). The majority of them are at the early stage of their career as 8(34.8) of them have spent 6-10 years working with PRAAD.

Presence of digitization policy in PRAAD

The table below represent response to a question whether PRAAD has a digitization policy. 17 (73.9%) responded no, while 6 (26.1%) said yes. This clearly shows that PRAAD has not formal

policy for digitizing public archives. The No responses could mean those respondents did not understand the question. This finding corresponds to the finding that the National Archives of Nigeria lacks of policy for digitizing its archives (Balogun & Adjei, 2019). This implies that many public archival institutions in the developing world are yet to have policies on digitizing their archives.

Table 1 Digitization policy

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	6	26.1	26.1	26.1
	No	17	73.9	73.9	100.0
Total		23	100.0	100.0	

PRAAD goal of digitizing public archives

In relation to digitization policy, the researcher wanted to find out the goal of PRAAD in digitizing national archives. As shown in the table below, the highest goal of PRAAD for digitizing public archives is to enhance preservation of archival materials, which represents 21.9% of the responses. A follow up goal is to provide access to materials that can no longer be accessed in the original format (20%). The third highest response (19%) is to make archives accessible online. This implies that PRAAD is more concern of its core mandate to preserve and make accessible to public archives in its possession.

Table 2 Goal Frequencies

PRAAD goal of digitizing public archives	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
To make archives accessible online	19	19.8%	90.5%
To integrate digital collection to a wider interpretable context	14	14.6%	66.7%
To reuse metadata and content			
To provide access to materials that can no longer be accessed in the original format	5	5.2%	23.8%

	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
To promote online access to government information by public	20	20.8%	95.2%
To enhance preservation of archives by reducing wear and tear on the originals for reference and reproduction	17	17.7%	81.0%
	21	21.9%	100.0%
Total	96	100.0%	457.1%

Archival materials to be digitized by PRAAD

A question was to ascertain the types of archival materials PRAAD intends to digitize in case it has the means and resources. The table below show that 20 (39.2%) wanted materials that users consult often to be digitized, while 17 (33.3%) wanted damaged materials to be digitized. The two major responses are closely related, in that materials that are consulted frequently are more likely to be damaged and damaged materials if not digitized are likely to be destroyed beyond usage.

Table 3 Materials Frequencies

Materials to be digitized	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Archival materials that users often request	20	39.2%	100.0%
Archival materials that are damaged	17	33.3%	85.0%
Archival materials that are used for educational purposes	14	27.5%	70.0%
Total	51	100.0%	255.0%

Archival digitization initiatives or projects

A yes or no question was asked to find out whether PRAAD has been embarked on any archival

digitization projects. The results from the table below indicate 52.2%) yes responses and 30.4% no. The No responses could be lack of information, on the part of some respondents, about the project as it is a pilot project.

Table 4 Digitization projects

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 0	1	4.3	5.0	5.0
Yes	12	52.2	60.0	65.0
No	7	30.4	35.0	100.0
Total	20	87.0	100.0	
Missing System	3	13.0		
Total	23	100.0		

Challenges faced by PRAAD in digitizing archival materials

A question was posed to find out the various challenges faced by PRAAD in carrying out it archival digitization projects. The table below represents the responses to the question. Lack of fund representing 45.7% was the major challenge, followed by lack of appropriate technology which recorded 23.9%. Similar result was found in Nigeria (Balogun & Adjei, 2019), in Ethiopia (Adane, Chekole & Gedamu, 2019) and in many other countries in the developing world (Yadav, 2016). This implies that inadequate fund is a major hindrance archival digitization projects in the developing world.

Table 5 Challenges Frequencies

Challenges PRAAD in Digitization	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Faces inadequate personnel	10	21.7%	47.6%
Lack of professional	4	8.7%	19.0%
Lack of appropriate technology	11	23.9%	52.4%
Lack of funds	21	45.7%	100.0%
Total	46	100.0%	219.0%

Finally, participantes were asked to respond to a question of how the identified challenges could be overcome. From the table below the results show that making funds available and provision of appropriate technologies have the highest responses, thus 33.9% each. This implies

that for PRAAD to be empowered to successfully digitize public archives in Ghana the powers that be and benevolent stakeholders to support it to obtain the needed funds and technologies.

Table 6 How to overcome challenges

Overcoming the challenges	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Adequate funds should be made available to PRAAD	20	33.9%	90.9%
Enough personnel should be recruited	9	15.3%	40.9%
Staff should be appropriately trained for archival digitization	10	16.9%	45.5%
PRAAD should be supported to acquire the appropriate technologies	20	33.9%	90.9%
Total	59	100.0%	268.2%

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the challenges faced by PRAAD in digitizing public archives in Ghana. The paper found that PRAAD has not yet a formal policy for digitizing public archives. However, it has started a pilot projects a few months ago. PRAAD intends to digitize archival materials that users frequently consult and those that are damaged. The goals of the digitizing those archival materials are to enhance their preservation, to provide access to materials that can no longer be accessible in the original format and to make archives in Ghana accessible online. However, lack of adequate funds and appropriate technologies is a challenge. This challenge can be overcome if Ghana government and other stakeholders support the institution to obtain the needed funds and the necessary ICT infrastructure for digitization purposes.

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