Principles for a future tradition archive

As foreseen by Norwegian Ethnological Research

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At Norwegian Ethnological Research, we have spent many hours pondering the challenges of digitalisation, and we have formulated some principles that we believe will be crucial to our future work. The principles are quite general, but in this chapter they will be approached from a particular point of view. I will even get personal.

When I applied for my current job, I was a pen for hire. The advertisement for the position specified two requirements: 1) I had to be comfortable with the entire line of production, from collection methodologies through archive management to research and popular presentations. 2) I had to handle the immediate need to digitalise collection methods. At the job interview, the retiring head of the archive, eminent folklorist Ann Helene Bolstad Skjelbred, explained that in order to survive as a living cultural archive Norwegian Ethnological Research had to digitalise its functions, but she hadn't felt on top of the new media situation, and now the challenge was left to the next generation. In August 2010, I settled in at the archive, and, by mid-October, I was sending our first application for funding new, digitalised collecting tools–the first of many. And by and by, I have come to realise how the two challenges pointed out by Ann Helene are connected.

Digitalisation highway

In some respects, Norway has had a head start in digitalising our cultural records. By the year 2000, ambitious plans were made for libraries, museums and archives to convert their informational resources to digital formats to make them available to the public through the internet. Consequently three different public portals have been successfully created.

- On 'The bookshelf' (Bokhylla.no) one will find printed texts secured by the National library. By April 2016 more than 230,000 books had been digitalised and made public. The ambition is that by the end of 2017

the entire corpus of books printed in Norway from 1900 to 2000 will be searchable and readable from one's own mobile device.

- 'The digital museum' (DigitaltMuseum.no) contains information and pictures of more than 1 760,000 objects belonging to 171 museums. The service is run by the firm KulturIT. It started as the IT department of two museums, and it is presently owned by a handful of Norwegian and Swedish museums. The service is built around the participating institutions' catalogue information about items and photographs. 'The digital museum' is branching out with a series of new, attractive products based on this core. One of the new products is a media platform for broadcasting to mobile devices, useful in museum exhibitions. Another is a platform for keeping track of the conservation histories of the museum objects; for instance, allowing a museum carpenter to document repairs on a historical building directly to the museum catalogue while working.

- 'The archive portal' (Arkivportalen.no) is created and run by the national archive. Similar to the digital museum, it is based on the catalogue information of various archives. It contains information about more than 2,933,000 archival items. Of this huge corpus, more than 29,500 documents have been digitalised and are available online. As in so many other digitalisation projects, an online catalogue is developing into an online public archive.

These three programs – for libraries, museums and archives – have shown good results and are establishing national standards for data maintenance. For the institutions, a common digital infrastructure makes digitalisation projects manageable, secure and less expensive. For the audience it is helpful to have a few portals disseminating all the relevant information within the sectors. All this good work should presumably make our task quite easy. Why don't we just choose a platform and start publishing? Actually, these successful projects don't seem to be solving our problems.

The digital museum, library and archive follow the same basic principle: information stored on paper is converted to digital formats and made available to the public online. Now, for a cultural archive, digitalising collection methods and how we cooperate with the public in creating new documentation is more basic than converting and publishing established collections. A solution that does not integrate the generation and dissemination of new documentation must be deemed critically short sighted. At this stage, a presentation of Norwegian Ethnological Research – the ways in which we operate and the purposes we serve – is probably in order.

Mass interviews by correspondence

When our archive was established in 1946, its pronounced purpose was to document life experiences from the older agrarian communities that were dominated by manual labour. It was anticipated that this knowledge would be lost with the people who had been living in such communities. The domain of the archive was defined in contrast to its elder sibling, the Norwegian Folklore Archives that dealt primarily with narrative culture and celebrations and rituals. The primary concerns of our archive were the skills, practices and experiences of daily life. The endeavour to collect such information from living memory was in part linked to museum collections. It was observed that many of the museum items could be explained in a fuller sense by people who had depended upon such items in their everyday activities.

The new institution was modelled on the ethnological research department of the Danish national museum – in turn inspired by a similar department at *Nordiska museet* (the Nordic museum) in Sweden. These initiatives established nationwide networks of respondents to topical qualitative questionnaires, issued regularly by the institutions.[1] Though Norwegian Ethnological Research has initiated and participated in fieldwork and interview-based documentation, maintaining the network of respondents, issuing new questionnaires, and doing research based on the collections generated in this manner has remained our basic concern. I usually characterize this method as 'mass interviews by correspondence'. Even if both the topics and the responses and the terms for the exchange have undergone modulations through the seventy years we have been operating, the continuities are more striking than the changes.

Initially, the goal was to have regular respondents in all municipalities. Though this was never really achieved, we still enjoy the benefits of the initial efforts in a broad and far-reaching network, though we must admit that the two most northern counties have never been well covered. The size of the network has varied with the capacity of the archive. At most we have had about 500 correspondents and at the lowest ebb we had about 70. We average around 200 per survey.

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1   The earlier stages of cultural documentation through the use of qualitative questionnaires is described in Bringéus 1988; Ekrem 2014; Grønstad 2013; Kjus 2013; Kjus and Grønstad 2014; Lilja 1996; Moestue 1996; Moestue and Kvideland 1998; Rehnberg 1947; Skott 2008; Österman 1991. The studies mostly follow individual institutions and/or researchers. A more comprehensive and comparative study would be welcomed.

People use our documentation with both practical and analytical intentions. Some look for guidance in how to make good traditional beer, traditional wells or even fences. Others may wish to find out how the upbringing of children has changed in Norway since the 1930s and how it is evolving today. We suspect the practical end of the scale will get increased importance as the work with the UNESCO-2003 convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage gains momentum.

One of the most striking developments when comparing old answers to new, is that the manner of answering has become more streamlined. Today we generally ask our respondents about their own personal experience, knowledge and memory. While many of the old answers are similar in attitude and point of view, other respondents were acting more as local researchers – gathering and ordering information, conducting interviews, sampling literature on local history, and going in to archives – to find answers to the questions posed by the archive. There are several explanations for this development. For a long time, the questions posed were generally quite objective. They weren't so much about personal perspectives and evaluations, but more about facts and realities: 'How was the table laid at a wedding? Who was invited? How did the guests contribute to the table?' The archive also showed particular interest in the oldest customs, probably not well remembered, and this invited further investigations. In addition some of the early respondents were recruited among the contacts of the Norwegian Folklore Archives, and many of them should probably be considered the folklorists and historians of their local communities.

The first thirty years, the questionnaires were historically framed, and often seeking to access the earliest layers of memory. Every now and again, questions relating to contemporary life would sneak in, but as exceptions to the general rule. Our first thoroughly contemporary topic, issued in 1976, was 'How potatoes are used today' (NEG 123). The turn towards contemporary topics and questions has been gradual. The 1971 special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* titled 'Toward new perspectives in folklore' stirred up a considerable turmoil in Nordic ethology and folklore. The importance of studying cultural performance and contemporary culture, and the purposes and the usefulness of archives, was ardently discussed, and even more so in Sweden than in Norway. In 1977 Swedish museum ethnologists founded a network for the documentation of contemporary culture, and in 1986 one of the foremost figures in this movement, Göran Rosander, was employed by Norwegian Ethnological Research. Even if documenting contemporary culture was brought to the forefront of the methodological debate, our archival practices invite to the exploration of social phenomena through time. Through repeated

documentation, we can often follow patterns in social customs for more than a century. I will mention a few topics to show how this works.

The topics of hygiene and cleanliness are a classic example. The pioneering cultural historian and social scientist Eilert Sundt carried out extensive questionnaire-based documentation, on which he largely based the book he considered his principal work, *On cleanliness in Norway* (Sundt 1869). More recently Sundt has been followed by ethnologist Ingun Grimstad Klepp in a benchmark study of laundry and historical modulations of cleanliness (Klepp 2006). In the years 2014 – 2015 we made a new series of documentation on this topic, and the responses are presently being investigated by two master's students at the University in Oslo.

The celebrations of the year – and of the life – cycles are among our strongest fields. Tradition complexes examined include childbirth (Weiser-Aall 1968; Skjelbred 1972), confirmation (Johnsen 1985), courtship and weddings (Kjus 2015; Nordby 2007), and the celebrations of Christmas (Skjelbred 2014) and midsummer (Wyller 1987). Appropriately, this was also the terrain in which the German researcher Wilhelm Mannhardt pioneered the method of correspondence based mass interviews with his inspiring studies of harvest celebrations. In all the Nordic countries, questionnaire-based documentation projects have provided the ground for comprehensive works on burial customs. The Norwegian variant, titled 'living with death' (*Å leve med døden*) was written by folklorist Bjarne Hodne in 1980. I always bring this book with me when I am going to explain the work we do. In 2012 I followed up our older materials with a new documentation of burial customs that has shown good results. Fifty years from now, if our archive is still functioning and if

Fig. 1. 'I am sitting at my kitchen table, writing answers for NEG.' Laila Rostadmo 1991.

Fig. 2. Lily Weiser-Aall (1898-1987) at work for Norwegian Ethnological Research in 1967.

there are still folklorists around (though they may be known by some other name), they will wish to repeat the exercise.

Our way – and how to find it

Norwegian Ethnological Research is a small institution with two archivist/ researchers and one archivist/secretary. With all three positions filled, the business has been going well. The work is based on cooperation with external resources. The building and maintaining of the network of correspondents is a constant concern. Cooperation with external researchers is also vital, as more or less half of our documentation projects are assignments for others. For a cultural archive, it is a constant challenge to keep the whole line of knowledge production in good working order. If the activities of collection, conserva- tion, dissemination and research are allowed to develop into separate spheres, they can end up no longer motivating each other. For a well-functioning small institution, where all employees out of necessity are involved in the various tasks, this is probably easier to avoid than in large institutions with separated and specialised departments. The research capacity of our own researchers is of course limited, and our work benefits greatly from connecting the knowl- edge and curiosities of historians, sociologists, linguists and botanists to the knowledge and experiences of our respondents.

    This is what we need to digitalise: the way we function as a knowledge- broker between the general public and the republic of learning, serving the needs of both the performer and the researcher. Gathering support and funding for such a transition has been our constant concern (and recurring headache) over the last six years.

    While applying for funding for more comprehensive digital tools, we started out digitalising our work with tools readily at hand. In 2012 the museum implemented a digital archive system called 'Public 360', and we started to use this as our main archive. One of us had some previous experi- ence with collecting research data with the rent-based questionnaire system Survey Monkey, so we started experimenting with using this online service to invite qualitative, text-based answers. We actually went digital with three separate systems: 1) The information about our projects and the invitation to participate are distributed from the museum web pages. 2) Then our project pages lead participants to the electronic forms provided by Survey Monkey. 3) The responses are finally transferred manually to 'Public 360'. This last process is rather time consuming. We have measured that the archiving of each response takes on average 4 minutes. Even so, this makeshift and limited

digitalisation has been a success. We have built a list of more than 1000 email addresses from people who wish to contribute to our documentation projects. For our most popular projects we now receive more than 700 responses and the content is of high quality.

During the first three years of applying for funding, our vision was basically a transformation of the *paper based* communication practices of Norwegian Ethnological Research to a digital platform. I still think this would have worked fine, even if aspects of our ambitions seemed hard to explain to people working with the digitalisation of museum collections. Large quantities of private and personal information is collected in the museum sector, but mainly through *face to face interviews*, whereas we mainly do *mass interviews by correspondence*. Would a solid investment in our particular documentation method really be relevant for the whole of the museum sector? Out of regard to personal privacy, we aren't going to publish all collected documents on the internet. A considerable part of the material will only be accessible after an agreement on ethical use has been signed. Is it defensible to use public money to collect materials that aren't going to be freely open to the public?

The Culture Council doesn't explain why they reject an application, but after three years of rejections we decided to expand the vision for our project and to modify our application strategy: *Our future digital solution will be multi-institutional and must accommodate a variety of documentation methods*. We want it to be a solution for all institutions and initiatives aiming to document cultural practices and experiences from private persons. To reach this goal, we need to build long-term alliances with institutions with tasks that correspond to our own, though our methods and aims don't have to be identical.

We still need to find substantial funding for such a multi-institutional, publically oriented tradition archive, and we must face the fact that we may have to build our future digital habitat gradually and over a rather long time-span. This means that both technical details and design features of our future interactive archive system will be hard to predict. In order to give this work a sense of direction, we have formulated some principles, to serve as guidelines, as we expect to spend at least some of our future days knee-deep in work and worries, just trying to get the work done within the time and budget constraints.The first principle has already been mentioned:

The solution is multi-institutional

There will be several benefits if we manage to create a well-functioning multi-institutional tradition archive. We will get value for money. Many institutions

have similar needs. Even if the topical interests can differ, if one primarily wishes to document craft techniques, musical performances or migration experiences, the fact that one wishes do so in cooperation with living people creates similar basic conditions for how a practical and ethical documentation platform might function and what it might look like.

A multi-institutional platform will be less vulnerable to technical aging in many areas including modifying user interfaces, taking new measures for data security, or updating design fashions. Small cultural institutions have their ebbs and flows. A multi-institutional solution will have a better chance to prevail in the long run. You really shouldn't start a public cultural archive if you don't have plans for how it should be maintained in the future.

Then we will have benefits for the users of the archive materials, both for the specialized researchers and for the general public. Today it is quite difficult to understand what materials are available from which institutions in a rather fragmented archival field. A shared platform will increase retrievability because the end users won't have to navigate their way through a jungle of various institutional solutions for sharing documentation. With a multi-institutional archive platform, many researchers are likely to find a wider range of angles and perspectives on the social phenomena they wish to examine within the limited time frames most research projects have for gathering sources. And creating intersections with other informational infrastructure, both nationally and internationally, would be simplified.

When you start thinking about it, the advantages of a multi-institutional solution are strong and many. Is the principle in fact self-evident? Is it superfluous to argue for it? Alas it is not. Cultural institutions are accustomed to view their collections as their assets. The collections are the reasons why museums, archives, and libraries exist – and reasons for their continued authority. If one looks around, one will find that multi-institutional archive portals aren't that common. Losing control over an institution's assets is obviously not a good plan, but there are examples that show how multi-institutional publication platforms can be created without diminishing the collecting institutions' hegemony or integrity. 'The digital museum' (*Digitalt Museum*) is one example that shows how our present technological situation actually allows institutions to have their proverbial cake and eat it. The platform is multi-institutional, but this doesn't reduce the significance of the institutions. They deliver and maintain the data in clear and visible ways because the data belong to them. They guarantee for the accuracy and authenticity of the data, and they guarantee for the legal and ethical terms on which the data is published. The institutions, in short, have editorial authority and responsibilities. All this would apply in the same way to a multi-institutional cultural archive.

We can fear that a multi-institutional platform might become unwieldy, as wide consensus will have to govern adjustments and developments. On the other hand the documenting institutions will actually have a say in the functionalities and architectures that are developed – more so than if we have to depend on rental services (like Survey Monkey) or solutions primarily developed for other needs (like *arkivportalen.no*). In addition, it is likely that the interdependence for the development of a common future will motivate methodological and ethical discussions that can only strengthen our work, and that common interests could ignite this field with a common zeal.

The solution is project based

In our daily work, we need to distribute considerable amounts of information about our documentation projects in addition to the actual documentation materials we aim to collect and disseminate. It's rational to establish our documentation projects with all the necessary contextual information in the archive, and then do our collection work from the archive.

On one hand, we owe information to the people who contribute to our documentation projects. Here we find good guidance in the official *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, law and the humanities* (2006). When private persons are invited to contribute to research, we need to tell them:

- What are the analytical aims of the project?
- Who is responsible for the research?
- What have you planned to produce with the collected materials?
- Where will their contributions be stored?
- Who is in charge of the safeguarding of their contributions?
- On what terms will other people have access to their contributions?

It must be made clear that contributors are free to change their minds and withdraw materials they have contributed. Contributors to research also have a right to have the results from the research made available to them. All this must be communicated in language that is easily understood. And last but not least, in addition to all this, we need to communicate the topics of our documentation projects in ways that invite participation.

On the other hand, all this contextual information constitutes important aspects of the situation in which the documentation materials are collected. Storing necessary project information along with the collected documents will shorten the pathways to understanding, accessing, and interpreting the

documentation we aim to store. Getting access to the collected materials through the documentation project is a shortcut to source criticism. In the days of paper archives, the lack of such contextual access has been deplored by many (Skjelbred 1994; Anttonen 2013). Knowledgeable archivists have, in fact, been the main resource upon which researchers have depended to contextualise archive documents. In our future digital archive, project-based access could counteract the increased distance between the archivist and the archive user, and this would benefit both the clergy and the laity.

A photo from the archives of *Nordiska museet* can illustrate the hazards of distributing archive materials released from their production contexts. The photo was produced in a series of photographic illustrations of popular magical practices. The people in the photos have dressed up as peasants and are pretending to perform magic. But because some writers did not know this, the pictures have been published as ethnographic documentation of magical practices. We should fear that similar transformations can and will happen to any documentary item that is made public after being separated from its context of production, which is done in staggering numbers and with accelerating speed these days.

Fig. 3. *Smyging*, a folk-medicine practice where a person is passed through a hole in a tree, while the illness hopefully will be left behind. Illustration photo produced by Nordiska museet.

Maintaining the centrality of the context in presentation and interpretation of material is particularly vital when we come to the documentation of traditions, as people show strong inclinations to essentialize and commodify traditions, and they seem more than happy to use archive documents to do so. Our didactic challenge is to make clear that the archive never will capture representative images of a tradition. We simply cannot sample and store a tradition. We can, however, capture and store how a tradition was made visible at a certain time and at a certain place, for certain people, under certain social conditions.

It would be an added bonus if archiving the produced documentation within the apparatus of knowledge-production, the context of its creation, also could us help clarify how the archives need to work comprehensively with research, collection, preservation and dissemination in order to function properly. It could help us foster meaningful connections between these areas of activity so they don't develop into bonded and separated spheres.

My perspective so far has mainly been on creating new documentation, but project-based publication would also be most useful to increase the understanding and the value of previous documentation projects. Today the materials produced from one and the same historical field expedition will often be spread in different sections of the archives: the photos are in the photo collection, the items are in the museum magazines, the letters are in the correspondence archive, the published research reports are in the library and the interviews are in tradition archive. Re-uniting these bits and pieces would benefit the interpretation of each of them. We have seen some interesting and valuable printed monographs that do this kind of work (for instance Hodne 1979; Christiansen 2013; Ó Catháin 2014), but digital presentation would work even better for the actual tying together of historical fieldwork materials.

Understanding the circumstances for the creation of the documents will always be helpful for the interpretation of them, though in some cases it is even more important than in others. In our archives we keep documents that have been created under circumstances that are not in line with present day methodological and ethical standards. Not making such documentation available would be a form of historical censorship that we should not get involved in. Publishing such documents within the contexts and within the points-of-view in which they were created would make their publication less problematic.

I have argued that a digital, publically oriented, multi-institutional tradition archive should have a project-based architecture and should provide access to the collected documents through the projects that generated them. At the same time I would like to make it clear that we should also build good

functionality for searching and finding simple files. But I believe that project-based access will most often be preferred by researchers and other advanced users.

The solution is ownership and responsibility shared between contributors and collectors

As our work is based on cooperation between researchers and private persons, we obviously need to contemplate how ownership and responsibility is distributed in these cooperative ventures.

In Norway, the field of cultural documentation is presently in a paradoxical and unfortunate situation. From the early 1990s, since the establishment of the national committees for research ethics, there have been growing concerns for the protection of personal privacy. An independent government institution called *Datatilsynet* (data supervision) is responsible for these developments. In our field, much responsibility is given to another independent government-funded company called *Norwegian Social Science Data Services* (NSD). They supervise practically all of the major research institutions dealing with personal privacy and data security, and NSD demands that when documentation regarding the lives of private persons is collected, the data must be totally anonymized or deleted when the research is completed. This principle regulates the power researchers get over data from the lives of private persons, and this is a good thing. But when people see it in their own interest to cooperate with researchers in order to share the knowledge and experiences life has given them with their societies and with generations to come, the principle is not sound. Neither is it necessary. The Personal Data Act is built on the principle of consent, and after the digital revolution, we can build cultural archives – serving as national memory banks – where private persons can control the traffic on their own accounts from the comfort of their own homes. The principles of NSD are not adapted to these possibilities, and this is no surprise as the possibilities are still only theoretical.

Our present regime of research ethics, as it is supervised by *Datatilsynet* and the NSD, means that cultural documents that should have been kept – that are judged by the originator to have archival value and by the archive institution not to be harmful to any third person – have been deleted. I believe the present regime also makes researchers insecure about the ethical dimensions of active documentation work, and that many consequently abstain from such work. As a result, private persons who would have liked to share information with their societies through research-based archive institutions are prevented from doing so.

If we, the advocates of cultural archives, wish to continue our collaborations with private persons in collecting research data, there is probably no way around giving the contributors more direct and continued ownership and authority over the materials they wish to share with their societies through our services. This is in keeping with the overall democratization of the archive sector, where it is more and more the standard that you own your own data, and you can access them and manage them from your own mobile device. Still, even if the balance of power between collectors and contributors may be shifting, the editorial responsibilities of the collector/publisher are not diminished.

The whole corpus of data generated by a project may be ethically unsuited for publication, for instance if the researchers want to examine sensitive subjects or if they want to take a critical stance towards the practices they examine. Individual contributions may be ethically unsuited for publication, for instance if they could be harmful to a third party or if they could be harmful to the contributor in ways he or she may not have considered. Often we have contributors who wish to help research, but who do not wish their contributions to be published on the internet. Still we should be able to safeguard documentation such as this, and we should keep in mind that information that is sensitive today will not be sensitive indefinitely. If we manage to establish infrastructures for documentation that allow us to keep and safeguard information that today should only be available for research so that the cultural data are not lost for posterity, I guess future generations will say we did well.

From vision to reality

During the spring of 2016 we have been busy making preparations. This fall, after more than six years of thinking, discussing, drawing sketches and applying for funding, we are opening our own integrated and interactive documentation platform. The project is called 'minner.no' (memories). As IT development goes, it is a low-budget project. So far we have spent about 450,000 NOK (roughly 50,000 EUR) on it. The company doing the technical development is the above-mentioned KulturIT, and we can do this on a fairly low budget because *Nordiska museet* has already provided a foundation in a sister project called 'minnen.se'. The idea is that together we will develop the 'memories' platform to be a versatile multi-institutional tool for collecting, storing and distributing cultural documentation.

In the beginning, the platform will not have all the features we deem necessary. The functions for administering the archive are rudimentary (but a

brilliant and high-quality back-end solution is on the drawing board). The project pages initially won't have the flexibility we wish for. The solutions for searching and displaying files will have to be improved. What we hope for now is that our first documentation projects with Minner.no will show the possibilities and potential in this line of work, and that it will create a demand and a wish to participate in our efforts among other cultural research institutions, and that this will give us the energy and the resources we need to realize the plans presented in this text.

When writing this text, I obviously don't know how the story ends. In a multitude of ways, this train can be derailed. When you read the text, you are in a different position. You can simply type minner.no into your web browser, and then see what happens. If this action leaves you staring into an empty void, please send us some friendly thoughts. At least we tried.
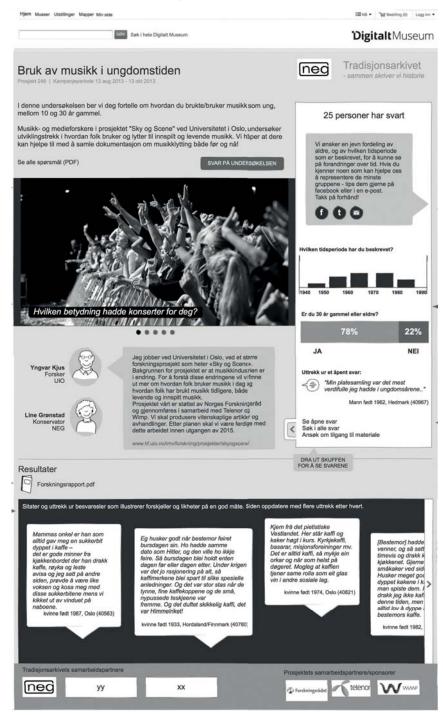
Concept sketches and design ideas:

Fig. 4. A project page, incorporating project information, collected materials and research outcomes.
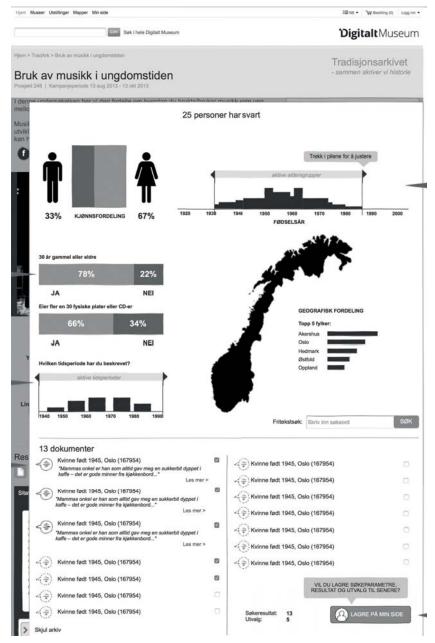
Fig. 5. 'The archive drawer'. To access the collected materials, you need to open the 'archive drawer' from the project page. Here you can get an overview of both the documents that are available to all, and the documents that are for research only. The infographic display of the contributors' sociological data (gender, year of birth, place of habitation) will help the overview. One of our more inventive design ideas is that these infographic displays also should function as search filters. Used in combination with a social practices thesaurus (not yet developed) and open text search, this would increase the searchability of the collections.

Fig. 6. 'My memories'. Logged in, the contributors should be free to manage their shared documents. They can change their minds and withdraw documents they previously have shared, or publish documents they previously have marked for research only. By and by, we should offer our contributors additional services through 'My memories'. We could for instance facilitate the production of 'My autobiography'.

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