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POPULARISING ARCHIVAL THEORY AND PRACTICE IN MALTA: THE ROLE OF NGOS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

Purpose: *While archival theory is based on very fundamental and core principles that apply globally, the science is very much rooted in national customs and traditions that are reflected in governance structures. While archival theory in Malta faced an almost total extinction during the second half of the twentieth century, practice developed in a haphazard manner in a changing background of a post-independence society. The post-1990 reforms had fundamental impacts on both archival theory and practice, and the rise of NGOs militating in favour of the sector and of an ever-growing social media society provided the profession with new challenges.*

Methodology: *The study employs a mixed approach, analysing existing literature on archival theory and practice in Malta and drawing from the author's personal involvement and observations during the last three decades in which he was involved in the sector. The author, who played an active role in setting up of the main NGO in Malta militating in favour of archives and is also involved in the social media development of the National Archives of Malta provides insights based on firsthand experiences.*

Conclusion: *The findings reveal a significant transformation in archival theory and practice in a Maltese context. While the theoretical basis was not in any way taught or promoted in Malta, it has now become a core component on the curricula at the University of Malta. The study also revealed how the work of the Friends of the National Archives of Malta had considerable impacts on the public perceptions towards archives and contributed to political and legislative reforms. The ever-growing pressures for more access to archives and the valorisation of archives as both cultural riches and tools for good governance made it crucial to revisit archival theory and practices world-wide. In the case of Malta,*

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the findings from this study underline the role non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social media platforms can play not only in raising public awareness about archival theory and practice, but also in the transformation of such theory and practices for the benefit of the sector and society at large.

Keywords: *archival outreach; social media; cultural NGO's; archival metrics*

DIFFONDERE LA TEORIA E LA PRATICA ARCHIVISTICA A MALTA: IL RUOLO DELLE ONG E DEI SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

Scopo: *Sebbene la teoria archivistica si basi su principi fondamentali e basilari applicabili a livello globale, questa scienza è profondamente radicata nelle usanze e nelle tradizioni nazionali che si riflettono nelle strutture di governance. Mentre la teoria archivistica a Malta ha rischiato l'estinzione quasi totale nella seconda metà del XX secolo, la pratica si è sviluppata in modo casuale nel contesto mutevole di una società post-indipendenza. Le riforme post-1990 hanno avuto un impatto fondamentale sia sulla teoria che sulla pratica archivistica, e l'ascesa delle ONG che militano a favore del settore e di una società sempre più orientata ai social media ha posto nuove sfide alla professione.*

Metodologia: *lo studio utilizza un approccio misto, analizzando la letteratura esistente sulla teoria e la pratica archivistica a Malta e attingendo dal coinvolgimento personale e dalle osservazioni dell'autore negli ultimi tre decenni in cui è stato coinvolto nel settore. L'autore, che ha svolto un ruolo attivo nella creazione della principale ONG a Malta che milita a favore degli archivi ed è anche coinvolto nello sviluppo dei social media dell'Archivio Nazionale di Malta, fornisce approfondimenti basati su esperienze di prima mano.*

Conclusioni: *I risultati rivelano una trasformazione significativa nella teoria e nella pratica archivistica nel contesto maltese. Sebbene le basi teoriche non fossero in alcun modo insegnate o promosse a Malta, ora sono diventate una componente fondamentale dei programmi di studio dell'Università di Malta. Lo studio ha anche rivelato come il lavoro degli Amici dell'Archivio Nazionale di Malta abbia avuto un impatto considerevole sulla percezione pubblica degli ar-*

chivi e abbia contribuito alle riforme politiche e legislative. Le pressioni sempre crescenti per un maggiore accesso agli archivi e la valorizzazione degli archivi sia come ricchezza culturale che come strumenti per il buon governo hanno reso fondamentale rivisitare la teoria e le pratiche archivistiche in tutto il mondo. Nel caso di Malta, i risultati di questo studio sottolineano il ruolo che le organizzazioni non governative (ONG) e le piattaforme dei social media possono svolgere non solo nella sensibilizzazione dell'opinione pubblica sulla teoria e la pratica archivistica, ma anche nella trasformazione di tale teoria e pratica a beneficio del settore e della società in generale.

Parole chiave: divulgazione archivistica; social media; ONG culturali; metriche archivistiche

POPULARIZACIJA ARHIVSKE TEORIJE IN PRAKSE NA MALTI: VLOGA NEVLADNIH ORGANIZACIJ IN DRUŽBENIH OMREŽIJ

Izvleček

Namen: Čeprav se arhivska teorija opira na temeljna in univerzalna načela, ki veljajo globalno, je znanost močno vpeta v nacionalne običaje in tradicije, ki se odražajo v upravljaljskih strukturah. Medtem ko je arhivska teorija na Malti v drugi polovici 20. stoletja skoraj popolnoma izginila, se je praksa razvijala stihijsko, v spreminjajočem se okolju post-kolonialne družbe. Reformni procesi po letu 1990 so imeli temeljne učinke tako na arhivsko teorijo kot na prakso, vzpon nevladnih organizacij, ki so si prizadevale za ta sektor ter vzpostavitev vse bolj vplivne družbe družbenih omrežij pa je arhivskemu poklicu prinesel nove izzive.

Metodologija: Študija uporablja kombiniran pristop – analizira obstoječo literaturo o arhivski teoriji in praksi na Malti ter črpa iz osebne vpetosti in opazovanj avtorja v zadnjih treh desetletjih njegovega delovanja na tem področju. Avtor, ki je igral aktivno vlogo pri ustanovitvi osrednje malteške nevladne organizacije, ki si prizadeva za arhive, in ki sodeluje pri razvoju družbenih omrežij Nacionalnega arhiva Malte, ponuja vpoglede, ki temeljijo na lastnih izkušnjah iz prve roke.

Zaključki: Ugotovitve kažejo na pomembno preobrazbo arhivske teorije in prakse v malteškem kontekstu. Čeprav se teoretične osnove na Malti sprva sploh

niso poučevale ali promovirale, so danes postale sestavni del univerzitetnih učnih načrtov na Univerzi v Malti. Študija je pokazala tudi, kako je delo Društva prijateljev Nacionalnega arhiva Malte bistveno vplivalo na javno zaznavo arhivov ter prispevalo k političnim in zakonodajnim reformam. Naraščajoče zahteve po večjem dostopu do arhivov in vrednotenju arhivov kot kulturne dediščine ter kot orodja dobrega upravljanja so arhivsko skupnost po svetu postavile pred potrebo po ponovnem premisleku o teoriji in praksi. V primeru Malte ugotovitve te študije poudarjajo, da imajo nevladne organizacije (NVO) in družbeni mediji ključno vlogo ne le pri ozaveščanju javnosti o arhivski teoriji in praksi, ampak tudi pri njihovi preobrazbi v korist sektorja in širše družbe.

Ključne besede: *arhivski doseg; družbeni mediji; kulturne NVO; arhivska metrika*

1 INTRODUCTION

Archival theory and practice have traditionally been confined to academic institutions, limiting public understanding, engagement and involvement. Expanding outreach through NGOs and social media not only democratizes access but also fosters participatory record-keeping, ensuring that a broader range of voices is preserved for future research and cultural memory.

This study analysis the way an NGO focused on supporting the national archives and the use of social media by the same national archives have impacted archival theory and practice in the country. It does so by analysing the change in outlook of the national archives as mapped through the same writings of the author over the last three decades, the case study of the Friends of the National Archives of Malta, and another case study on the use the National Archives is making of social media to sustain its visibility and reach and widen the base of its users.

2 THE CHANGING OUTLOOK OF ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS

The literature review around the topic of this paper indicates a sector that is changing in its outlook – both ‘internally’ and ‘externally’. The term ‘internal’ in this context refers to the way the creators and those handling records perceive the theoretical and practical perspectives of archives. The ‘external’ dimension is the interaction of the repositories of records with users – and the term users has completely changed its significance over the last few decades. The user of thirty years ago was the one physically visiting the reading room and browsing through a limited number of items within a limited opening hours bracket, constrained by reprographic limitations of all kinds. The user of today is different – it is everyone, anywhere and demanding access in any form or medium.

Thus, reaching back to my writings on the topic, I referred to one of my first participations at the European Archives Conference in Poland way back in 2006. The overarching topic of that conference was ‘Archivist: Profession of the Future in Europe’. The topic I chose for that event was ‘The Archivist in Today’s World: Regulator or Facilitator?’ Going back to the text reminded me of the priorities, urgencies and preoccupations our profession had three decades ago. It dwelled on the roles of regulating in the form of legal rights and guardianship duties but

also on the ever-increasing need of facilitating access. The closing words of that presentation I found still relevant for the arguments we have today and thus I quote verbatim:

“... today’s European archivist has to keep a very delicate balance between the regulator and facilitating functions. Never before has this been as challenging to the profession. In so doing “communication” is the name of the game. We need to communicate better. An inward looking profession is difficult to survive in a Europe much more competitive and striving for excellence than ever before. I am convinced that our dictum ‘preserving the past to manage the future’ will not let us down even in these new circumstances.” (Farrugia, 2006).

Those perspectives reflected a time when the European archives had come together and forged new collaborative infrastructure units such as the European Archives Group and the European Board of National Archivists. It was still a delicate phase when archives (especially national ones) were struggling to think European instead of national. National archives especially felt that the legal basis which endows them with legitimacy and authority could not be tempered with. At times the rigidity of the legal instrument might have hampered the institution by narrowing its possibility of being flexible in its strategic goals to catch up with the rapid changes in the demands of society (Farrugia, 2014).

Thus, the interplay between the legal obligations and the ever-growing need of openness and catching up with the trends in the GLAM¹ sector were top pre-occupations for the professions. But most studies did hint that the archivist had come out from the bunkers protecting records and positioned him/herself as an important role player in society. In a study published 10 years after the Polish conference I felt confident enough to title my paper ‘Lone Rangers no more’ as archival cooperation had become the order of the day (Farrugia, 2016).

Over the years archival institutions started also focusing on the pressures societies were exerting on public entities that derive funding from governments (Farrugia, 2024). Safeguarding the traditional archival obligations of guaranteeing transparency through the preservation and access to accurate documentation and providing access in line with the Recommendation on Access to archives promot-

1 Acronym GLAM stands for galleries, libraries, archives and museums.

ed by the EU (Recommendation No. R (2000) 13, 2000) and the Universal Declaration on Archives agreed upon and promoted by ICA (International Council on Archives, 2011) was not enough.

During the last decade or so archival institutions became much more conscious that the services offered are not just a bureaucratic function. The real constituent raw material of archives is not parchment or paper but humans. The records we hold tell the story of humans and are consulted by humans to further shape the educational, cultural and political destiny of society. That explains the shift in focus on the role of archives as agents of social change, activism and the protection of rights of marginalised groups. The increase in studies on trauma induced archives and archives and emotions can be framed as part of this new thinking (Farrugia, 2024).

However, such shifts within the *modus operandi* of archives does not happen by chance. Archives themselves, although moulded together by legal frameworks and national/local customs and traditions are made up of humans. And thus, the training and empowering of the personnel is crucial as much as the willingness of the political class to endorse change, update legal frameworks and strive towards archival institutions that answer to the needs of society and have the tools to fulfil such needs. Two dimensions of the empowering mechanisms to make this change studied in this paper are the roles of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) and Social Media platforms. By focusing on the interaction with and application of the National Archives of Malta with these two dimensions, this study analyses to what extent these were agents of change.

3 THE IMPACT OF NGOS

Today NGOs occupy a strategic position between institutions and the public. They attempt at forming public opinion, gain support for causes they feel are worth promoting, and pave the way for action by governments. This type of activism has impacted also the world of archives. A number of organisations militating in favour of archival institutions have shown that due to their community-driven missions and agile structures they are effective in conducting workshops, curating local memory projects, and mobilizing volunteers. When NGOs harness social media strategically—through targeted campaigns, interactive storytelling,

and crowdsourced archiving—they can effectively translate archival theory into accessible practice for non-specialists.

The archives sector has a very uneven and unstructured relation to NGOs and the situation varies greatly from country to country. It is rather ironic that the leading international organisation guiding archives is an NGO. The International Council on Archives operates an amazingly successful structure that derives a lot of strengths from the fact that it is an NGO. While offering benefits to its members such as a network of colleagues, specialized advice and a tool kit of products and publications, its main benefits are political, psychological and intangible (Farrugia, 2022).

The scope of this study is not a focus on International Council on Archives (ICA) and other literature regarding that topic does exist. It is more focused on NGOs within countries or linked to specific archives that help the sector. The case study of Malta will be zoomed on with the scope of assessing the impact NGOs can have in settings where both the national archives institution and the academic teaching of archives is relatively young. Thus, we will be assessing what happened in Malta through the setting up and development of The Friends of the National Archives (FNAM) over the last 25 years.

Up to 1990 Malta did not have a formal national archive, notwithstanding the rich archival holdings it holds. The visit to Malta and report compiled by world-renowned archivist Hilary Jenkinson in 1944 underlined the need of such an institution. However, that was difficult before Malta attained its Independence from Great Britain in 1964. The origins of the institution date back to the early 1970s when a unit was opened in Santa Venera. This later moved to Valletta and became known as the Palace Archives. However, all changed in 1987 when the archives organization was put under the Ministry for Education, and three restored historical buildings were identified to house the holdings. The first archival legislation enacted in 1990 gave a legal framework for the management of the institution. This framework was completely revamped in 2005 when the entity was bestowed with a distinct legal personality, and the office of national archivist was established (Farrugia, 2022).

As soon as the institution sorted its legal framework and its repository infrastructure it started shifting its focus on building bridges with the community. In so doing the setting up of the Friends of the National Archives took place in 2000. It was actually the coming together of a small group of University students, a

high-ranking employee of the Central Bank of Malta trained in records management and the author of this paper who established the organisation (Cassar & Pullicino, 2025).

The objectives of the association as stipulated in the statute are the following:

- a. To support the activities of the National Archives of Malta to acquire, preserve and make available archival records of national significance;
- b. to promote awareness of Malta's archival heritage and the programmes and activities of the National Archives of Malta; and,
- c. to carry on related business activities. (FNAM, 2000)

The impact on the Maltese archives sector of the work carried out by The Friends of the National Archives of Malta is summed up in the publication compiled by Martin Hampton and edited by Cassar and Pullicino (2025). The organisation has been successful on the following three dimensions:

- a. Outreach for the sector;
- b. Fundraising at a time when such concept was not popular within public entities;
- c. Advocacy with the political class.

In terms of outreach an NGO can venture to organise events that might not be possible through the official channels. It also has more rapidity of decision making and can reach out to all. Over the years the organisation has networked a lot with like-minded organisations from the voluntary sector. It has also created and delivered talks or courses to specific cohorts of interest within society ranging from schools, old-people's homes, retired personnel, youth centres or cultural organisations. In this way, the profile of archives was strengthened.

Fundraising was also a top priority during the early years of the organisation. Due to public funding regulations, as a government department it was impossible for the National Archives to embark on any fundraising initiatives. These were taken up by FNAM who developed a wide range of fundraising actions including membership fees, publications, cultural visits and adopt volumes schemes. In particular, support was strong when it came to digitisation and also purchase of holdings for the archives. The focus on fundraising has lately become more of a lateral operation for FNAM as in the new entity structure of the post-2005 law the national archives has its own legal persona and can carry out such activities itself.

Advocacy with the political class was one of the biggest achievements of FNAME. Contrary to the national archives which is part of the machinery of government, an NGO can reach to all political groupings. A target achieved in 2005 was changing the archives law completely just after 15 years from its enactment. The second target was getting the need of a state-of-the-art building for the archives in the electoral manifesto of the main political parties. This also happened in the run up of the 2013 elections and is also on the cards of the organization as this project has not yet materialized.

4 THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Since joining the European Union in 2004, Malta has witnessed significant legislative and cultural shifts in archival access. EU membership spurred reforms that improved transparency, introduced digital finding aids, and standardized collection management practices while also putting more focus on non-traditional media such as photographic archives (Lopez, 2017). These changes have enhanced public engagement, yet challenges persist in resource allocation and the digitization of private-sector records.

Over the last two decades the National Archives of Malta has involved itself consciously in grassroots archiving. It has developed methodology of oral history based on guidelines issued by international organisations and applied it locally. Its Memorja project has opened its training to applicants coming from several NGOs who have pioneered community-centred archival initiatives. In so doing, the institution guaranteed that oral history initiatives have a robust academic base and that the creation of content and gathering of records complement the accessioning / collecting policy of institutions. These projects demonstrate the potential of NGOs to mobilize non-traditional contributors and spotlight under-represented narratives in Malta's collective memory.

Concurrent with these developments social media platforms have emerged as critical repositories of contemporary culture and grassroots activism. Institutions face legal, technical, and resource-based constraints when archiving social media content, which can impact the representativeness of collections. Participatory approaches, where communities actively contribute to the selection and preservation process, help mitigate biases and enrich archival holdings.

When questioned about the social media strategy of the National Archives, the manager in charge of Public Engagement identified these three targets:

1. Promote the work of the National Archives of Malta;
2. Build bridges with communities;
3. Reach and interact with wider audiences in a faster manner.

In order to assess the current output of social media three figures are published here. The focus was on Facebook which is the medium most effectively used by the National Archives of Malta also as it is still stronger with Maltese audiences than other platforms such as Instagram. Backend statistics from the first 6 months of 2025.

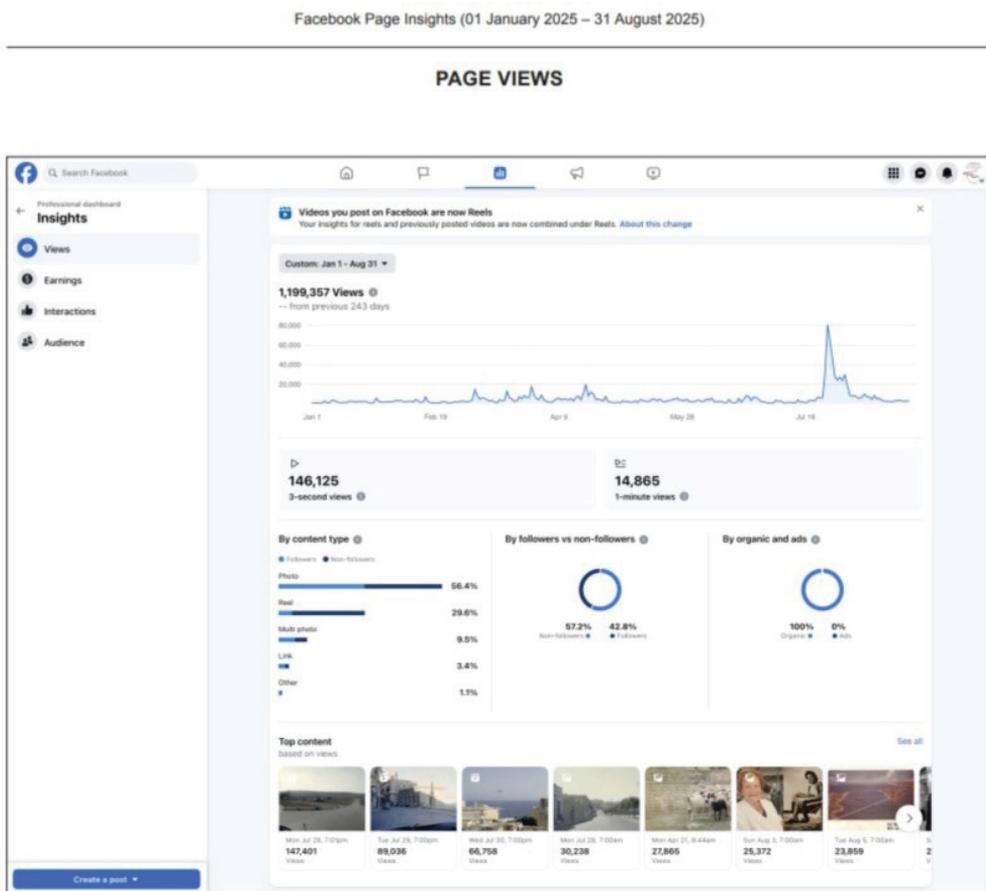


Figure 1: Facebook Insights – 1 January to 31 August 2025 (Source: National Archives of Malta)

Statistics such as the number of followers can be dissected in detail to get insights on how the online client cohort interacts with the online content. This article is

not intended to go into that detail. However, the graph above does indicate the amazing potential of social media. During the previous year, the main reading room of the National Archives in Rabat hosted 1974 on-site research sessions. While it would be unfair to compare onsite research sessions with on-line browsing or visiting, the data do show that social media has the potential to reach out to numbers / clients that is unthinkable in the traditional mode of functioning.

Facebook Page Insights (01 January 2025 – 31 August 2025)

AUDIENCE OVERVIEW

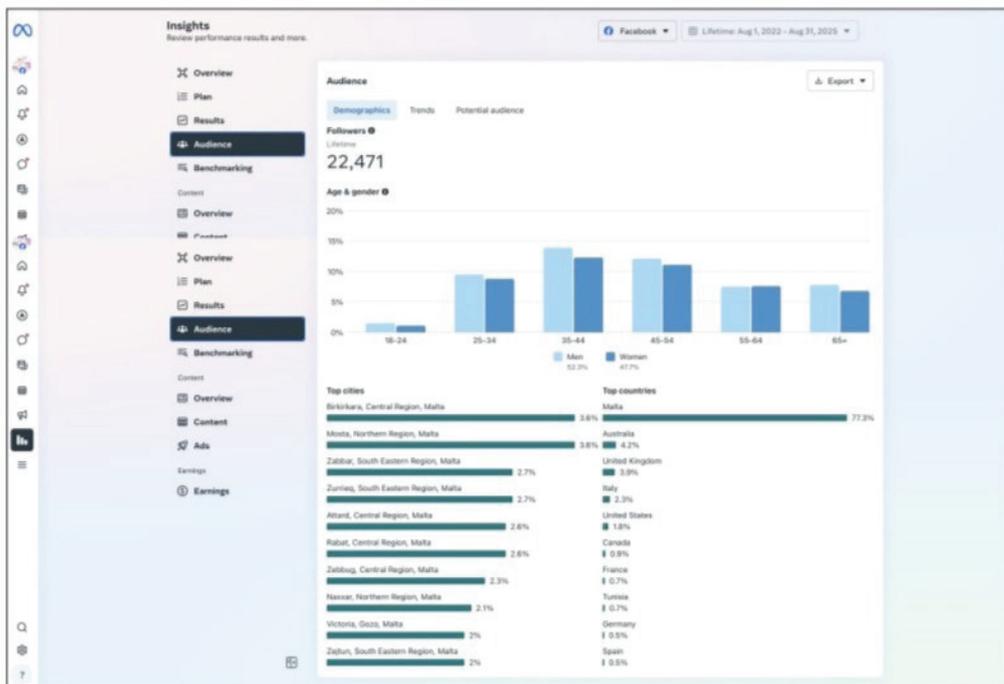


Figure 2: Audience Distribution (Source: National Archives of Malta)

When it comes to the distribution of the online clients that is also provided in detail from our backend the data provides us with an understanding of the importance of the diaspora in our efforts of service provision. Malta has more Maltese living in foreign territories than in Malta. That explains why Australia tops the list in terms of remote access. The Maltese migrant communities in Australia, Canada and US are extensive and still feel the need to connect with their roots. Within Europe, the largest use of service derives from Italy which is quite under-

standable considering the long-standing relations and geographical proximity of the two countries.

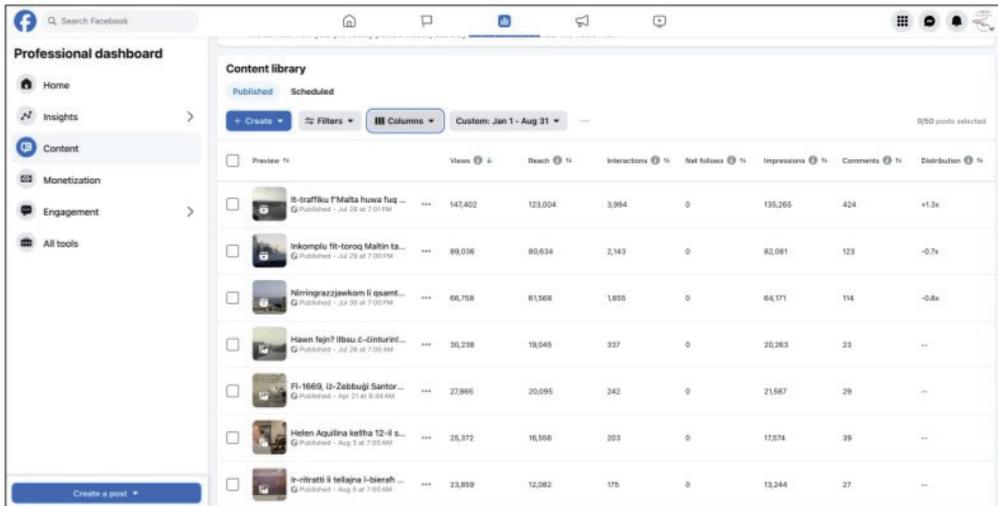


Figure 3: Top Performing Content (Source: National Archives of Malta)

The statistics about the top content that was accessed and interacted with during the period under study puts the reels from old films at the top of the list. Our team learned a lot from their interaction with the public and what was traditionally the ‘jewels of the crown’ in terms of documents does not necessarily attract public interest and attention as much as audio-visuals. This has encouraged us to invest more in our Memorja project and also in the National Audio-Visual Institute that the National Archives has established during the last decade.

5 DISCUSSION

Social media campaigns do come at a cost. While at face value promoting archives through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X and others are free of charge, there are costs for institutions. One needs to create content that is accurate, engaging and ethically and politically sound. The ‘immediateness’ culture that such systems create puts pressures on institutions. My experience with the social media at the National Archives of Malta is that the public does not only expect constant uploads but immediate feedback to the interaction that the institution creates. It is often that we get notifications on our mobiles from the main platform where the client is asking ‘is there someone to chat with?’ While such statements are living

testimony to the success of reaching out via these methods, it also underlines the challenges of today's user which earlier on I described as 'anyone, anywhere' and to which the social media culture has also added 'anytime'.

Resource constraints top the list in limitations on the use of social media for archival outreach. Many initiatives rely on volunteer time and expertise. Digital literacy also plays a role and needs to be assessed from both the creator's side (internal) and the user experience (external). The whole process also exposes institutions to ethical issues; to what extent is an archive justified in involving itself in social causes? Finally, the shift of focus on the digital interaction with clients needs also to be framed within a pragmatic assessment of sustainability. Thus, any action taken should be assessed for long term sustainability and impact.

Projects like Memorja and its involvement in it by volunteers demonstrate how NGOs and institutions can facilitate community-authored archives, empowering diverse voices and enriching national memory. Platforms like Facebook are providing archives with invaluable opportunities to promote archival content—ranging from crisis documentation to heritage preservation—amplifying both reach and participatory potential.

The learning experience so far has inspired the National Archives of Malta to invest in training to members of NGOs who support the sector. While training so far was predominantly on tasks such as archival description, transcriptions of interview and minor preservation actions, we are now venturing into more high-level training such as joint courses with departments from universities, on-site exposure to practice in foreign archives and online training in specific specializations such as the role of AI in archival theory and practice.

On the social media front we are investing in the creation of multimedia content (videos, captions, stories) to make archival materials more engaging and accessible. This is in line with the data of interaction with content that clearly hints at what the public is after. These processes are helping in strengthen ties between academic institutions, NGOs, communities and the media to align archival theory with public engagement. We are also working towards using the methods and content outcomes from the Memorja oral history project as resources in schools and universities to contextualise local history and community narratives.

6 CONCLUSION

In Malta, NGOs and social media are becoming valued partners for making archival theory and practice public-facing and participatory. Through local initiatives—from the activism to change the archives law and the building of a new national archives to Memorja’s oral histories—archival work is being revitalised. With targeted support, ethical stewardship, and innovative outreach, Malta is positioning itself as a model for inclusive, accessible, and community-driven archival practice. By uniting the reach and flexibility of NGOs with the connective power of social media, archival theory and practice can transcend institutional boundaries in Malta and beyond. This collaborative model not only broadens public engagement but also enriches archival collections with diverse perspectives. Future efforts should focus on formalized partnerships, training programs, and sustainable digital strategies to ensure that the collective memory is both preserved and shared. This practice-based focus cannot be sustained if it is not echoed in our curricula of archival courses at universities and other training institutions.

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Summary

Archival theory and practice are very much rooted in national customs and traditions that are often the result of the rigid governing structures that produce them. The last few decades have witnessed archives emerging from an inward-looking mentality and shifting towards participatory archiving and strong outreach approaches. The study aims to assess these shifts through the case study of Malta and the impact that NGOs and social media had on the archives sector. In particular, the paper focuses on the Friends of the National Archives of Malta and assesses to what extent this organisation helped in the shift towards more participatory archival theory and practice. It also assesses the use of social media by the National Archives of Malta to reach beyond traditional communities and in so doing raise public awareness towards the sector. The findings reveal a significant transformation in archival theory and practice in the Maltese context and confirms that two contributing factors for this were the impact of this specific NGO militating in favour of the sector and the effective use of social media by the archives.

Typology: 1.04. professional article