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## Review

Greg Bak and Marianne Rostgaard, eds., *The Nordic Model of Digital Archiving*

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***The Nordic Model of Digital Archiving.*** Greg Bak and Marianne Rostgaard, eds. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2024. 312 pp.  
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These days, the work of digital archives and preservation, not to mention the broader worlds of archives and records management, is guided by a heady internationalism. Attend any large gathering of specialists and you will hear International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards numbers and rarely-spelled-out acronyms for metadata schemas rhymed off with ease and mutual understanding across borders. Standards like OAIS, ISO 15489, and PREMIS<sup>1</sup> create shared vocabularies and frameworks that encourage a sense of global community among professionals. In 2017, I was lucky enough to hop on a plane, land in Kyoto for the International Conference on Digital Preservation (iPRES), and easily converse with Japanese archivists because of this lingua franca (alongside a little help from Google Translate). But standards are nothing without adoption, and their actual use happens in very situated, local contexts, interpreted by humans living in specific places at specific times. *The Nordic Model of Digital Archiving* makes a compelling case for studying the theory, policy, and praxis of records and archives at a regional scale. Drawing together threads of historical context, current practice, and innovative thinking from across the Nordic countries, the contributions to this collection will interest a broad audience of scholars and practitioners engaged in digital records-related fields and beyond, from government recordkeeping and service delivery to web archiving, linked data, and participatory archives.

1 Acronyms and abbreviations refer to the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) reference model; ISO 15489, Information and Documentation—Records Management; and the PREMIS Data Dictionary for Preservation Metadata, initially developed by the Preservation Metadata: Implementation Strategies working group, from which the acronym was derived.

*The Nordic Model of Digital Archiving* was published as an output of a research network funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (IRFD) called Digitization and the Future of Archives, which ran from 2018 to 2022. The 16 core chapters in the volume resulted from calls for conferences hosted by the network, and additional pieces were solicited for the book by editors Greg Bak and Marianne Rostgaard. A postscript reflection by Elizabeth Shepherd rounds out the set. Of the 22 contributors, seven are practitioners at heritage institutions, while 15 are academics. The editors provide four groupings for the chapters: “Evolutions in Nordic Digital Archiving,” “The Value of Standardization,” “Gaps in Nordic Digital Archiving,” and “Cultures of Records Professionals.” While these themes are intended to surface some common underlying concepts, approaches, or methods among the essays in each set, I found that the topics the authors explicitly address fall into two key groups.

The first topic is government recordkeeping, the volume’s predominant focus. This is a key feature of the Nordic model, as the editors define it, which has emphasized a strong preference for a centralized control of public records that is not easily transferable to private records. Contributors provide useful snapshots of archival contexts, practices, and challenges in Denmark (chapter 2, Marianne Rostgaard); Sweden (chapter 3, Samuel Edquist); Denmark and Sweden (chapter 4, Ann-Sofie Klareld and Marianne Paasch); Sweden and Norway (chapter 5, Herbjørn Andresen); Norway (chapter 8, Martin Ellingsrud); Finland (chapter 7, Pekka Henttonen); and Iceland (chapter 17, Ragna Kemp Haraldsdóttir). These essays will appeal to practitioners and academics engaged with public records as they offer succinct introductions to the positive aspects and limitations of their respective national recordkeeping regimes. The writers consider digital archival practice not at the level of files and formats but at the higher level – the ways that legislation, policies, and standards (both national and international) contribute to or hinder effective digital records capture, management, preservation, and access. However, they share an understanding that the specific challenges and opportunities that digital records present must no longer be afterthoughts but are now integral to all planning and execution of records management and archiving programs. Another common concern among these authors is the legacy of centralized registry systems commonly adopted in European jurisdictions (though digital records management systems are also arguably a type of register). While registry systems, where metadata about records is recorded in a single place, have the advantages of both control and transparency, they have

proven challenging to maintain in the face of the proliferation of digital records in formats like email correspondence.

Greg Bak's comparative essay on digital archival practices at national public archives in Canada and Denmark provides a bridge between these larger-scale examinations of public recordkeeping and a set of essays that focus more closely on digital records themselves. In the same vein as his two previous articles on the history of Canadian digital archival discourse, Bak's essay carefully considers the consequences of early decision-making on the actual outputs and progress of these two digital records programs to the present (no surprise: the Danes mostly did it better). The six additional chapters fill in important gaps and pose excellent critiques. Olivia Robinson, Asbjørn Romvig Thomsen, Nicolai Rask Mathiesen, and Barbara Revuelta-Eugercios recount the tantalizing possibilities of linking census records and other vital statistics to draw portraits of the lives of individual citizens (chapter 9). Asbjørn Skødt questions the Danish National Archives' practice of requiring file format normalization for incoming materials as opposed to preserving records in their original forms (chapter 10). Caroline Nyvang and Eld Ziedrau's summary of Nordic approaches to web archives offers a portrait of the current state of practice that will interest enthusiasts in this domain (chapter 11). Bente Jensen discusses methods to engage small communities in participatory archiving by collecting contemporary social photography (chapter 12). A complementary chapter by Isto Huvila considers participatory archives from a theoretical perspective and argues that Nordic archivists have failed to embrace the truly collaborative spirit of this work (chapter 14). Lastly, Aviaq Fleischer contributes a passionate call for the preservation of audiovisual archives in Greenland as a resource for Indigenous language revitalization and community memory (chapter 13). As a former practitioner (and still an instructor) in digital archives and preservation, I found these chapters the most rewarding in terms of advancing and challenging my own thinking and knowledge around pressing concerns and new approaches in the field because they delve into the details of digital archives at the ground level.

Finally, two additional chapters about archival associations in Sweden (chapter 15, Lars-Erik Hansen and Anneli Sundqvist) and archival education in Nordic countries (chapter 16, Anneli Sundqvist) do not focus substantively on digital themes but provide engaging entries into these topics that could be productively compared with similar studies in other countries. What is missing is greater space for Indigenous and underrepresented voices (Fleischer is the

lone exception). As the editors note in the introduction, several planned pieces addressing Nordic colonization and decolonization could not be completed in time for publication.

An intriguing aspect connecting the contributions in the collection is the level to which Nordic writers are engaged with archival thinkers from across the globe. Four essays cite Terry Cook's seminal 2013 article "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,"<sup>2</sup> and four also cite Devon Mordell's 2019 addition to Cook's list of "archives-as-data" in "Critical Questions for Archives as (Big) Data."<sup>3</sup> Contributors frequently refer to other thinkers that have challenged the traditional separation between records management and archives and offered integrated or post-custodial models including David Bearman; Australians like Frank Upward and Sue McKemmish, associated with the records continuum model; and Jeannette Bastian and Andrew Flinn, associated with community-centred work. It is hard to say whether these commonalities result from editors' nudges toward specific readings or from a general awareness of these writers in the zeitgeist; if the latter, it is interesting to see how archival studies scholarship is now a global conversation. That said, the authors also engage closely with archival studies scholarship closer to home: a strong benefit of the volume is the access it provides, even indirectly, to knowledge and ideas from Nordic-language writers thanks to the translation that many authors have undertaken when quoting and discussing these works in English.

A second strength of the book is the quality of many individual contributors' engagement with the histories of archival practice in their respective countries and of their comparison of these features across these countries. Too often, international standards can have a flattening, decontextualizing effect that erases the memory of their creation and creates a sense that the ideologies embedded within them are neutral or natural. This book does much to unsettle this condition, showing conclusively how regional contexts have created unique archival cultures, internationalism aside. That said, this feature of the book also challenges the implications of its title. As the editors argue, the Nordic model can be summarized as a combination of strong regulatory frameworks and centralized methods for information control; close connections between records

2 Terry Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms," *Archival Science* 13, no. 2–3 (2013): 95–120.

3 Devon Mordell, "Critical Questions for Archives as (Big) Data," *Archivaria* 87 (Spring 2019): 140–61.

management and archives (including the power of national archives in policy-making and systems implementation ahead of records creation); a commitment to freedom of information and government transparency; and a determination to develop standards or implement existing standards for digital records across their lifecycles. This model could arguably apply to all records, regardless of format, but the apparent Nordic resilience in maintaining these values in the face of ever-growing numbers of digital records is presumably what makes it a digital model. While individual chapters show considerable variation, at the national or local levels, as to undermine some aspects of the model (a fact that the editors also acknowledge), the claim that enough features align them to enable the “commonalities [to] snap into focus” is justified (p. 8). But given how embedded the Nordic model is within a specific cultural, political, and social context, it is hard to imagine its wholesale application to any other. It is a model here in the sense that it is an exemplar, pleasing to the eye, rather than a plan that can be repeated somewhere else. What readers must decide is which aspects of the Nordic model are both desirable and achievable in their own small parts of the world.