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Archives and Machine-Readable Data from Public Administration in the Federal Republic of Germany

My subject is machine-readable data in German public administration. Because the experience of the federal and state archives in West Germany is very limited in this field, I will keep my remarks appropriately brief. Until now the Bundesarchiv has acquired only about fifty magnetic tapes from federal agencies and other institutions. The archives of the West German states possess an even smaller number of such tapes. This is a very unsatisfactory situation, which merits a brief explanation.

German archivists discovered computers relatively early, but their main interest for many years was limited to the use of Automated Data Processing for straightforward archival work such as the indexing of records. For example the Hessian State Archive (Hessisches Staatsarchiv) in Marburg has developed a computerized system to sort and print out the personnel data for Hessian soldiers who fought for the English government in the American War for Independence[1]. In the Bundesarchiv a computerized index has been assembled to maintain data files on the researchers who have been given access to our holdings and on the studies they untertake.

To reconstruct missing personnel records we have a computerized register of over 300,000 persons who are mentioned in surviving records. This file enables us to answer numerous inquiries for documentation of previous public employment or military service. Another computer project of the Bundesarchiv is documentation of the destinies of Jewish inhabitants of the Third Reich, who were living there in 1939. This latter work will hopefully be finished in about two years.

The main purpose of archival use of Automated Data Processing in the Federal Republic has been the indexing of records. Frequently the archivists have gone far beyond this task by expanding their indexes with additional evaluative information. In the Bundesarchiv, for example, a personnel data file is being assembled with information about persons who faced judicial hearing (Spruchgerichte) in the British zone after 1945. 20,000 of a total of 32,000 personnel files on hand have already been processed. Included for each defendant are, among other items, the name, birth date, religion, education, position in the National Socialist Party and its related organizations, position in public service and the decision of the court. While this is not presently available for research, it is being used for archival purposes and will eventually be made available for quantitative evaluations by historians.

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[1] Hessische Truppen im amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg, in: Veröffentlichungen der Archivschule Marburg, Vols. 1 to 5, Marburg 1972/74/76.

The internal archival uses of ADP may partly explain, but not totaly excuse, the failure of West German archivists to acquire machine-readable data produced in public administration. Actually German archivists are formulating expert guidelines for transfering German census data, on both the federal and state levels, to the archives in machine-readable form. Given our relative lack of experience on this field, numerous problems remain to be solved.

One major problem we have already confronted is the legal one. We had to ensure the right of the Bundesarchiv to acquire machine-readable data on magnetic tape. The Bundesarchiv has always had the mandate to preserve paper records as prescribed in the Registraturanweisung, the registration ordinance. In 1975 the definition of „records", that is „Schriftgut", was expanded to include all kinds of data irrespective of their form[2]. Since then we have had the clear legal responsibility for handling machine-readable data from German federal agencies.

This regulation appears at first glance to be very simple and self-evident. Nevertheless, it entails some difficulties. Above all, certain rules which are appropriate for paper records are now valid for machine-readable files as well, although such rules are inapplicable to the new technology. Paper records, for example, are generally closed for thirty years from the time the records are taken out of service. A computer file which is continuously updated would therefore remain perpetually closed. In my opinion, if we allow for the protection of individual privacy, machine-readable files could be opened for research much earlier than the current thirty year regulation permits.

The regulation which requires agencies to turn over their magnetic tapes to the archives fails to mention questions of the costs which arise in the process. The relinquishing agencies regard the deposit of their paper records as a favor. Their ever-growing mountains of paper files in storage practically force them to deposit their records in the archives. With machine-readable data we are not concerned with used-up paper, but reusable magnetic tapes. Until now the Bundesarchiv has received its few magnetic tapes at no cost, although always with the reservation that, for the long term, a solution must be found in the budget of the federal administration. A decision remains to be made in this matter.

A major problem which has been solved for the Bundesarchiv concerns the technical control and conservation of machine readable data. In January 1976 the Bundesarchiv rented a small computer system, which includes a 1600 bpi, nine track magnetic tape unit, a disk with 67.5 million bytes and four displays. Although our set-up is relatively small, it offers the most important services which we require in the handling of machine-readable data. We are able, for example, to check magnetic tapes, to copy them for conservation purposes at regularly timed intervals, and to manipulate the data fields. Individual fields can be taken out of the record. For instance, protected personal data might be rendered anonymous by eliminating the

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[2] Registraturanweisung (Anhang I zur Gemeinsamen Geschäftsordnung I), Gemeinsames Ministerialblatt 1975, No. 27, p. 594.

name field. In order to handle very large amounts of data, especially when a high blocking factor is used, we are obliged to rely on a larger computer of the federal administration in Bonn.

A precondition for the accession of magnetic tape data is, in every case, the determination of an archivist that the data are worth preserving because they are of historical value. For non-machine-readable data, the Bundesarchiv was able to rely on guidelines set by Professors Scheuch and Schmölders in Köln. This set of rules is not applicable to machine-readable data. With this data it is rather useless to test a sample since the problem of quantity is no longer a hindrance as it was formerly in the case of traditional card files. Through the possibilities of computerized evaluations, in my opinion, data can be worth preserving, although in non-machine-readable form the same data would be regarded as expendable. In coming years it can be predicted that the state archives will take over more machine-readable data than is necessary. The state archives may justify the acquisition of tapes from computer centers in terms of providing security storage for machine-readable files. This means that state archives will also have to accept machine-readable data of limited or even no historical value in the coming years. The appraisal of these files will have to be undertaken at a later date based on experience accumulated in the interim.

Based on what I have said, one might draw the conclusion that institutions other than state archives should concern themselves with machine-readable data produced in public administration in order to prevent this data from being lost to historical scholarship. Even if I admit that the state archives in West Germany have perhaps been insufficiently concerned with this problem, I cannot therefore accept as preferable the view that data of state provenance should be given over to institutions such as universities or other centers for advanced research. Allow me to support my position with four arguments:

1. German state archives acquired their present function about 150 years ago. Since then they have been the only institution within public administration to have a broad overview of the archival needs of all areas of the administration. This tradition allows them to appreciate the full range of historically valuable data. A research institute of university center normally specializes in a particular field and prefers to concern itself only with the data in this field. A state archive with its precisely defined responsibility possesses the prerequisites and facilities for pursuing a broadly conceived program to cover all areas of public administration.

2. In most cases the introduction of data processing does not correspond to the introduction of a new administrative task. Data which had previously been handled manually are now transferred to automated processes. Before this procedural change was introduced, written data, handled in the traditional manner (e. g. on index cards), came to the state archives. It could not serve any reasonable purpose to select a different archival destination only because the data are now computer-generated.

3. It may be objected that machine-readable data is easy to copy and can be preserved without difficulty in two or more places. It must, however, be pointed out that information from public administration, independent of the storage

medium, can only be made accessible to the public under certain conditions. These conditions are fixed in the „Benutzungsordnung" (i. e. rules governing the use of West German archives). These rules have proven their worth until now. Some changes may be necessary for the special conditions which obtain for machine-readably data, as I have discussed previously in relation to the practice of keeping records closed for a specified number of years.

4. The legal situation which governs the transmission and use of data about individual persons, as evidenced in West Germany's Federal Privacy Act (Bundesdatenschutzgesetz), is becoming increasingly restrictive. Given the technicalities of the law and the difficulties inherent in acquiring and utilizing machine-readable data bearing upon individuals the problems will multiply in the varying circumstances of institutions other than state archives.

My last few statements might be understood as suggesting that a conflict of interest exists between the state archives and the academic research facilities. This impression would be wrong. I believe that the state archives and all institutions for higher learning and research have common interests. Their common interests, however, are best served, in my opinion, by a separation in their functions. The state archives have as their primary task the acquisition and conservation of machine-readable data from public administration and only secondarily to pursue their own scientific research. Universities and research institutes can surely only profit by concentrating their efforts on data evaluation and research. Here the differentation is very clear.

In closing I would like to mention the problem of handling the immense amounts of data of non-state provenance. State archives can by no means claim exclusive competence for acquiring and keeping this data. In this field it should be possible to arrange satisfactory forms of cooperation which will be fair to all interested parties.