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FROM MEMORY TO IMPACT: ARCHIVES AS A STRATEGIC ACTOR IN A TRANSFORMING DIGITAL WORLD; A STUDY OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AND THE EMIRATE OF SHARJAH EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Purpose: *This paper examines the conceptual and functional transformation of archives from static repositories of institutional memory into strategic actors that support digital governance and decision-making. It highlights the role of archives in building the knowledge economy, focusing on the pioneering experience of the United Arab Emirates and, in particular, the Emirate of Sharjah and the Sharjah Archives.*

Method/approach: *The paper adopts a descriptive-analytical approach based on a review of the conceptual literature on archives and digital governance, combined with an examination of the institutional practice of the United Arab Emirates and the Emirate of Sharjah in adopting emerging technologies within archival systems.*

Results: *The analysis shows that archives in the United Arab Emirates have evolved from repositories for preserving records into strategic actors within the governmental ecosystem, contributing to knowledge production, institutional transparency, and evidence-based decision-making. Emerging technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, and cloud computing, have become decisive factors in enhancing archival efficiency, while institutional, technological, human-resource, and legal challenges continue to shape the pace of this transformation.*

Conclusions/findings: *Archives have become an essential component of national knowledge infrastructure, contributing to institutional sustainability, transparency, and innovation. Realizing this transformation requires comprehensive institutional development, investment in professional capacity, and the adoption of innovative approaches to archival management.*

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Keywords: *Digital Archives, Strategic Archives, Digital Transformation, Digital Governance, Artificial Intelligence.*

OD SPOMINA DO VPLIVA: ARHIVI KOT STRATEŠKI AKTERJI V SPREMINJAJOČEM SE DIGITALNEM SVETU – ŠTUDIJA IZKUŠENJ ZDRUŽENIH ARABSKIH EMIRATOV IN EMIRATA SHARJAH

Izvleček

Namen: *Prispevek obravnava konceptualno in funkcionalno preobrazbo arhivov iz ustanov za hrambo institucionalnega spomina v strateške akterje, ki podpirajo digitalno upravljanje in sprejemanje odločitev. Poudarja vlogo arhivov pri razvoju gospodarstva, temelječega na znanju, pri čemer se osredotoča na izkušnje Združenih arabskih emiratov, zlasti emirata Sharjah in ustanove Sharjah Archives.*

Metoda/pristop: *Prispevek temelji na deskriptivno-analitičnem pristopu. Združuje pregled strokovne literature o arhivih in digitalnem upravljanju z obravnavo uvajanja novih tehnologij v arhivske sisteme Združenih arabskih emiratov in emirata Sharjah.*

Rezultati: *Analiza kaže, da so se arhivi v Združenih arabskih emiratih iz ustanov za hrambo dokumentarnega in arhivskega gradiva razvili v strateške akterje v sistemu javne uprave. Prispevajo k ustvarjanju znanja, preglednosti delovanja institucij in sprejemanju odločitev na podlagi dokazov. Nove tehnologije, zlasti umetna inteligenca, velepodatki in računalništvo v oblaku, so postale pomemben dejavnik učinkovitosti arhivske dejavnosti. Na hitrost te preobrazbe še naprej vplivajo institucionalni, tehnološki, kadrovski in pravni izzivi.*

Sklepi/ugotovitve: *Arhivi so postali pomemben del nacionalne infrastrukture znanja ter prispevajo k trajnostnemu delovanju institucij, preglednosti in inovacijam. Za uresničitev te preobrazbe so potrebni celovit razvoj institucij, vlaganje v strokovne kompetence in uvajanje novih pristopov k upravljanju arhivov.*

Ključne besede: *digitalni arhivi, strateška vloga arhivov, digitalna preobrazba, digitalno upravljanje, umetna inteligenca.*

DALLA MEMORIA ALL'IMPATTO: GLI ARCHIVI COME ATTORI STRATEGICI IN UN MONDO DIGITALE IN TRASFORMAZIONE; UNO STUDIO SULL'ESPERIENZA DEGLI EMIRATI ARABI UNITI E DELL'EMIRATO DI SHARJAH

Abstract

Obiettivo: *Il presente articolo esamina la trasformazione concettuale e funzionale degli archivi da depositi statici della memoria istituzionale ad attori strategici a sostegno della governance digitale e del processo decisionale. Esso evidenzia il ruolo degli archivi nella costruzione dell'economia della conoscenza, concentrandosi sull'esperienza pionieristica degli Emirati Arabi Uniti e, in particolare, dell'Emirato di Sharjah e degli Archivi di Sharjah.*

Metodo/approccio: *Il documento adotta un approccio descrittivo-analitico basato su una rassegna della letteratura concettuale sugli archivi e sulla governance digitale, combinata con un'analisi delle pratiche istituzionali degli Emirati Arabi Uniti e dell'Emirato di Sharjah nell'adozione di tecnologie emergenti all'interno dei sistemi archivistici.*

Risultati: *L'analisi mostra che gli archivi negli Emirati Arabi Uniti si sono evoluti da semplici depositi per la conservazione dei documenti a attori strategici all'interno dell'ecosistema governativo, contribuendo alla produzione di conoscenza, alla trasparenza istituzionale e al processo decisionale basato su dati concreti. Le tecnologie emergenti, in particolare l'intelligenza artificiale, i big data e il cloud computing, sono diventate fattori decisivi nel migliorare l'efficienza archivistica, mentre le sfide istituzionali, tecnologiche, relative alle risorse umane e giuridiche continuano a determinare il ritmo di questa trasformazione.*

Conclusioni/risultati: *Gli archivi sono diventati una componente essenziale dell'infrastruttura nazionale della conoscenza, contribuendo alla sostenibilità istituzionale, alla trasparenza e all'innovazione. Per realizzare questa trasformazione sono necessari uno sviluppo istituzionale globale, investimenti nelle competenze professionali e l'adozione di approcci innovativi alla gestione archivistica.*

Parole chiave: *archivi digitali, archivi strategici, trasformazione digitale, governance digitale, intelligenza artificiale.*

INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing rapid digital transformation that has fundamentally reshaped the concepts of information and knowledge management, creating an integrated and interconnected digital environment. Within this context, archives are no longer merely static repositories of records; rather, they have become pivotal components of national digital infrastructure and key enablers of decision-making and governance (Rahman et al., 2024).

The United Arab Emirates represents a leading model in this field through its adoption of comprehensive digital transformation strategies and the development of advanced archival systems. Likewise, the Emirate of Sharjah, through the Sharjah Archives, exemplifies an advanced model for transforming archives into active institutions that support knowledge-based and cultural development (United Arab Emirates Government, 2024).

This paper seeks to answer the following research question: how can archives evolve from institutional memory into influential strategic actors in the digital world, considering the experience of the United Arab Emirates and the Emirate of Sharjah?

1. THE CONCEPTUAL TRANSFORMATION OF ARCHIVES: FROM MEMORY TO IMPACT

The concept of archives has undergone a fundamental transformation, evolving from a mechanism for preserving documents into an active contributor to knowledge production and strategic decision-making. Traditionally, archival institutions focused primarily on collecting, classifying, and preserving records to safeguard national and institutional memory. However, digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped this role, positioning archives as integral components of comprehensive digital ecosystems that enable immediate access to and analysis of information (ISO 2016; Rahman et al., 2024).

In the United Arab Emirates, this transformation has been reflected through the integration of archival practices into digital government strategies. Documents are no longer regarded merely as administrative records but as strategic knowledge assets. Within this framework, the Sharjah Archives has emerged as a model of this transformation by developing modern records management systems that

facilitate efficient access to archival materials while strengthening the role of archives in supporting governmental operations and cultural development (United Arab Emirates Government, 2024; Sharjah24, 2025).

Consequently, archives are no longer viewed as "silent memory" but rather as "active memory" that contributes to influence, innovation, and future development.

2. ARCHIVES IN THE TRANSFORMING DIGITAL WORLD

In the era of global digital transformation, archives have undergone a fundamental repositioning, becoming inseparable components of the digital infrastructure of governments and institutions. They are no longer isolated entities dedicated solely to document preservation but have become essential elements within digital government systems, information management frameworks, and knowledge economies.

Within this evolving digital environment, archives play a vital role in organizing data flows, ensuring their sustainability, and providing reliable access according to recognized standards. This significantly enhances institutional efficiency and improves administrative performance (ISO, 2016).

Moreover, archives have evolved into producers of knowledge through their ability to transform records and data into analytical resources that facilitate pattern recognition, foster innovation, and support evidence-based strategic planning.

Digital openness has also expanded the reach of archival collections beyond geographical boundaries. Archives are increasingly accessible through open digital platforms that provide global access to information, thereby strengthening international cooperation, facilitating knowledge exchange, and contributing to the development of a shared global knowledge environment (National Archives of Singapore, 2026; The National Archives, 2025).

In this sense, archives have become fundamental pillars in shaping global knowledge systems and key actors in supporting the transition toward more interconnected, transparent, and sustainable digital societies.

In the United Arab Emirates, archives constitute one of the foundations of smart government, where they are integrated into information management systems and digital governance frameworks.

In the Emirate of Sharjah, the Sharjah Archives has played a significant role in regulating governmental data flows and ensuring their preservation according to modern archival standards, thereby enhancing institutional efficiency. Archives have also become valuable sources of knowledge production through document analysis and data extraction that support strategic planning.

Furthermore, digitization has broadened public access to the UAE's archival collections, strengthening the country's position within the global knowledge landscape while fostering cultural and scientific cooperation. As a result, archives have evolved from local repositories into global knowledge platforms (National Library and Archives, 2019).

A comparison with leading international experiences demonstrates that the United Arab Emirates has adopted an advanced approach to digital archiving that aligns with global best practices while reflecting its own national priorities. In Estonia, archival development has been closely linked to the country's comprehensive digital government ecosystem, where interoperability and secure digital information exchange form the foundation of public administration. Singapore has focused on strengthening data governance and digital public services, positioning archives as part of a broader framework for institutional efficiency and information management. In South Korea, archival modernization has been integrated into national smart government strategies, emphasizing digital preservation, information accessibility, and support for evidence-based policymaking. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom has prioritized public access to archival heritage through extensive digitization programs and open digital platforms managed by The National Archives. Within this international context, the United Arab Emirates distinguishes itself through the integration of archives into digital governance, knowledge management, and national innovation agendas (Federal Law No. 7 of 2008, 2008; United Arab Emirates Government, 2024). Furthermore, the experience of the Emirate of Sharjah and the Sharjah Documentation and Archives Authority illustrates how archival institutions can evolve into strategic actors that support institutional excellence, sustainable knowledge development, and digital transformation.

Comparative Overview of Leading Digital Archival Models:

Country	Key Characteristic	Role of Archives
Estonia	Integrated digital government ecosystem	Core component of national digital infrastructure (National Archives of Estonia, n.d.)
Singapore	Strong data governance and digital services	Supports institutional efficiency and information management (National Archives of Singapore, 2026)
South Korea	Smart government and digital transformation	Facilitates evidence-based decision-making and digital preservation (National Archives of Korea, n.d.)
United Kingdom	Digitization and open access initiatives	Expands public access to archival and historical resources (The National Archives, 2025)
United Arab Emirates	Integration of archives with digital governance and innovation	Strategic actor supporting knowledge management, decision-making, and sustainable development (United Arab Emirates Government, 2024)

3. ARCHIVES AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

Archival practice is undergoing a qualitative transformation driven by emerging technologies that have fundamentally reshaped its methods and operations. Artificial Intelligence (AI), in particular, has significantly enhanced archival processes by enabling the automatic indexing of records, analyzing textual and visual content, and improving the accuracy and speed of information retrieval.

In addition, Big Data technologies have empowered archival institutions to process massive volumes of records and extract valuable indicators and knowledge patterns that support strategic decision-making. Cloud computing has likewise provided flexible and secure environments for storing and managing archival data, ensuring accessibility while reducing operational costs.

However, this technological transformation has also introduced increasing cybersecurity challenges, necessitating the adoption of advanced policies and mechanisms to protect archival records, preserve their integrity, and ensure their long-term accessibility.

Consequently, emerging technologies have become decisive factors in improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and strategic value of archives within the digital environment.

In the United Arab Emirates, archival institutions are increasingly incorporating these technologies into their digital transformation strategies, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and improving archival services. Big Data analytics facilitates the extraction of strategic insights from archival records, while cloud-based

solutions provide flexible environments for digital preservation and access. At the same time, cybersecurity remains a national priority, requiring comprehensive protection strategies aligned with the country's digital governance policies.

4. ARCHIVES AS ACTORS IN DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Within the transition toward digital governance, archives have emerged as fundamental components of modern public administration. They play a pivotal role in providing accurate and reliable information that supports evidence-based decision-making and public policy formulation.

Archives also enhance institutional transparency by documenting governmental activities and providing lawful access to official records, thereby reinforcing accountability and strengthening public trust in governmental institutions.

Furthermore, archives contribute to institutional integration by connecting diverse information systems and unifying data sources, ensuring the seamless flow of information among government entities.

Accordingly, the role of archives extends far beyond their traditional preservation function, positioning them as essential pillars of sound governance in the digital era.

In the United Arab Emirates, archives constitute a cornerstone of digital governance by providing reliable data for decision-making, promoting transparency, and supporting accountability. The Sharjah Archives contributes to this vision by integrating government entities within a unified records management framework, thereby enhancing data integration and improving governmental performance.

Moreover, archives strengthen public confidence by facilitating access to information, fully aligning with the principles of open government.

5. CHALLENGES IN THE TRANSFORMING DIGITAL WORLD

Despite the opportunities created by digital transformation, archival institutions continue to face a range of interconnected challenges that affect their performance and long-term sustainability.

From a technological perspective, the rapid pace of innovation necessitates continuous modernization of archival systems and digital infrastructure, requiring substantial financial and technical investments.

On the human resources level, the shortage of specialized digital archival professionals represents one of the most significant obstacles, highlighting the need for continuous education, professional development, and capacity building.

Legally, issues concerning data governance, privacy protection, and information security require the continuous development of legislative and regulatory frameworks that are compatible with the evolving digital environment.

Organizationally, institutions continue to face challenges related to resistance to change, fragmented coordination among stakeholders, and insufficient institutional integration, all of which may hinder the effective management of digital records.

Although archival practices have advanced considerably at both national and international levels, these multidimensional challenges reveal the complexity of transitioning from traditional archival models to digitally integrated systems. Consequently, they underscore the need for comprehensive reengineering of archival institutions to facilitate a genuine transformation from preservation-oriented organizations into strategic institutions capable of creating value and generating societal impact.

In the United Arab Emirates, many of these challenges have been addressed through investments in professional training, legislative modernization, and enhanced institutional integration. Nevertheless, continuous development remains essential. In the Emirate of Sharjah, the Sharjah Archives is well positioned to play a leading role in this transformation by developing advanced models for digital knowledge management.

6. PROSPECTS OF ARCHIVES

Considering accelerating global trends, the future of archives can be envisioned as an intelligent and integrated system that increasingly relies on advanced digital technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data analytics. Archives are also expected to promote the concept of open access, enabling broader availability of information while maintaining appropriate legal and security frameworks. Furthermore, the archival field is anticipated to expand through the establishment of international cooperation networks that facilitate knowledge exchange and the harmonization of professional standards. Archives are also expected to play an increasingly significant role in supporting the digital economy

by providing reliable data that fosters innovation and value creation. Consequently, archives are evolving into active components of the broader transformation toward an integrated digital society.

In the United Arab Emirates, the future of archives is directed toward the development of smart archival systems powered by Artificial Intelligence, the promotion of open digital access, the expansion of international partnerships, the support of the digital economy, and the transformation of archives into platforms for innovation.

7. RESULTS

This study demonstrates that archives have evolved from being mere repositories of institutional memory into strategic actors. It also confirms that modern technologies have become decisive factors in enhancing the efficiency of archival work and expanding its sphere of influence. The findings further indicate that achieving this transformation requires comprehensive institutional development and the adoption of innovative approaches to archival management.

The findings reveal that archives in the United Arab Emirates have undergone a significant transformation, enabling them to move beyond their traditional function as repositories for preserving records to become strategic actors within the governmental ecosystem, contributing to knowledge production and supporting digital governance. This transformation is reflected in the effective integration of archives with the digital government framework, which has enhanced information management and facilitated the seamless flow of information among government entities.

The study further demonstrates that modern technologies have become critical enablers of archival efficiency and effectiveness. Archives have also proven their pivotal role in promoting institutional transparency and supporting evidence-based decision-making by providing accurate and reliable information upon which public policies can be developed.

Moreover, the growing adoption of emerging technologies - particularly Artificial Intelligence and advanced digital systems - has significantly strengthened archival capabilities, enabling archives to meet the demands of the evolving digital environment. This development underscores the role of archives as an essential

component of the knowledge infrastructure supporting sustainable development, while highlighting the need to restructure archival institutions and adopt innovative approaches based on institutional integration and continuous innovation.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing discussion, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of archives in the digital environment. First, comprehensive national strategies for digital archiving should be developed to keep pace with the rapid transformation of information management. Second, Artificial Intelligence applications should be integrated into various archival processes to enhance operational efficiency and improve service quality.

Furthermore, investment in professional training and human capacity building is essential to ensure sustainable development and continuous improvement. Legislative and regulatory frameworks should also be updated to align with the evolving digital environment while effectively addressing issues related to privacy and data protection.

In addition, strengthening international cooperation has become increasingly important for promoting knowledge exchange and harmonizing professional standards. Finally, empowering the Sharjah Archives, particularly in the Emirate of Sharjah, as a regional knowledge center represents a strategic step toward reinforcing leadership in digital archiving at both the regional and international levels.

9. CONCLUSION

The rapid pace of digital transformation confirms that archives are no longer static institutions concerned solely with preserving the past. Rather, they have become vital components in shaping the present and anticipating the future. By adopting innovative strategic visions, archives can strengthen their position as key actors in supporting governance, fostering knowledge creation, and advancing sustainable development within an increasingly dynamic digital world.

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SUMMARY

Archival institutions have undergone a profound transformation in the context of accelerating digital transformation and globalization. Historically confined to the preservation of institutional memory, archives are increasingly recognized as strategic actors that support digital governance, evidence-based decision-making, and the growth of the knowledge economy. This paper set out to answer a central research question: how can archives evolve from institutional memory into influential strategic actors within the digital world, drawing on the experience of the United Arab Emirates and, in particular, the Emirate of Sharjah?

The paper began by tracing the conceptual transformation of archives, showing how they have shifted from a passive, preservation-oriented function toward an active role in knowledge production and strategic planning. In the United Arab Emirates, this shift has been embedded within national digital government strategies, where documents are treated as strategic knowledge assets rather than purely administrative records. Sharjah Archives was presented as a leading example of this transformation, having developed modern records management systems

that improve access to archival materials while reinforcing the role of archives in governmental and cultural development.

The analysis then examined the position of archives within the broader digital ecosystem, highlighting their role in organizing data flows, ensuring sustainable access, and supporting institutional efficiency. Archives were shown to have become producers of knowledge, converting records into analytical resources that support pattern recognition and innovation. Digital openness was identified as a further driver of transformation, expanding the reach of archival collections beyond national borders and strengthening international cooperation and knowledge exchange.

A central theme of the paper was the impact of emerging technologies on archival practice. Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, and cloud computing were discussed as decisive enablers of more efficient indexing, retrieval, and analysis of archival records, while cybersecurity was identified as an accompanying and growing challenge that requires continuous policy development. The paper further explored the role of archives as actors in digital governance, arguing that they contribute directly to institutional transparency, accountability, and the integration of information systems across government entities. In the United Arab Emirates, archives were shown to constitute a cornerstone of digital governance, providing reliable data for decision-making and reinforcing the principles of open government.

The paper also addressed the range of challenges that continue to affect archival institutions during this transformation, spanning technological, human-resource, legal, and organizational dimensions. These include the financial and technical demands of continuous modernization, shortages of specialized digital archival professionals, the need for updated legislative and regulatory frameworks, and organizational resistance to change. Despite these challenges, the United Arab Emirates has made considerable progress through investment in professional training, legislative modernization, and institutional integration, positioning the Sharjah Archives to play a leading role in future development.

Looking ahead, the paper envisioned the future of archives as an intelligent, integrated system built on advanced digital technologies, open access, international cooperation, and support for the digital economy. The results confirm that archives in the United Arab Emirates have moved beyond their traditional preservation

function to become strategic actors within the governmental ecosystem, contributing to knowledge production, institutional transparency, and evidence-based policymaking. Based on these findings, the paper recommends the development of comprehensive national strategies for digital archiving, the integration of Artificial Intelligence into archival processes, sustained investment in professional training, the modernization of legislative frameworks, and the strengthening of international cooperation. Ultimately, the paper concludes that archives have become an essential component of national knowledge infrastructure, contributing to institutional sustainability, transparency, and innovation, and that realizing their full strategic potential requires continuous institutional development and innovative approaches to archival management.

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