



News Media Section

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## Digitization of the Faroese National Heritage

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### Abstract:

*Faroe Islands is a small self-governing country within the Danish realm, consisting of 18 islands in the North Atlantic, and a population of just 50.000 people. In March 2015 The National Library of the Faroe Islands made 17 Faroese newspapers, along with 23 previously scanned journals, available on the internet as open access in a web archive called tidarrit.fo. In this archive there are currently 600.000 pages, and despite it sounding like a small quantity, it covers nearly all the Faroese newspaper titles from 1852-1999. The past digitization projects including the digitization of titles for the web archive, was done through participation in other Nordic digitization projects and with the help of external partners. Since then, there has been a lot of interest from Faroese publishers wanting to participate and include their titles in the newly founded archive. As a result of this interest, The Faroese Ministry of Culture decided to fund a pilot project where the Library digitized Løgtingstíðindi (1880-), which is an annual publication of Faroese matters of parliament, taking up 70.000 pages. Despite the Library having no IT-staff, several digitization projects are already up and running for both preservation and presentation purposes, such as digitizing the entire Faroese Manuscript Department. This paper presents how digitization can be realized even with little to no funding.*

**Keywords:** Heritage, Newspapers, Faroe Islands, Library

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### Introduction

The Faroe Islands is a small self-governed country within the Danish realm. With a population of roughly 50.000 inhabitants, the Faroes can be considered a demographic sand corn compared to the neighboring countries. Located between Iceland and the United Kingdom, at 62 degrees North, In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the country is made up by 18 islands. Travelling back and forth between the islands can often be quite challenging. The people who commute on the ferries between the islands, or drive across the mountains,

are often logistically challenged by the forces of nature, especially during the stormy winter season, where hurricanes and snow blizzards can paralyze traffic from several hours, up to a few days. More than 19.000 people live in Torshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands, and this is where *Søvn Landsins* and its institutional subjects are physically located. The English institutional name for *Søvn Landsins* is Faroese National Heritage, and it is the umbrella body and general administration for the National Library, National Archive, National History Museum and Natural History Museum. One should think that a harsh climate and logistics would affect the way citizens frequent the cultural institutions, but in 2016 Torshavn City Library reported having a record breaking fiscal year, seeing 138.000 visiting patrons, a 16% increase from the year before<sup>1</sup>. The climate is harsh and obviously getting to and from *Søvn Landsins* institutions is a chore if you live in one of the populated areas outside of the capital. But this is similarly comparable to neighboring countries, where distances will be far greater, and therefore getting to one of these national heritage institutions can prove just as difficult.

One of the many arguments for digitizing library holdings, is to democratize access to certain collections. If patrons living in the peripheral regions should be able to have equal and instant access to content and knowledge found in library holdings, as the patrons who live close by the institutions physical location, the digital technology can assist library professionals to reach and accommodate these users, in ways which we a few decades ago, only could have imagined.

### **The National Library**

Faroe County Library (Føroya Amtsbókasavn), which later gained the title National Library of the Faroe Islands (Føroya Landsbókasavn), and the institutional name *Landsbókasavnið*<sup>2</sup>, was founded as an independent institution in 1828. Today it is the oldest remaining active institution in the country. Jens Davidson, one of the founders of the Library, remained until his death in 1878, the only Librarian. After his death, the library went into a state of disarray, as there was no Librarian to manage it, and eventually the books were boxed down from the shelves and stored until a new Librarian could take over. This didn't happen until in 1920, where Mads Andrias Jacobsen finished his library degree, and carried on the work of Jens Davidson. With his appointment came a new area of librarianship on the Faroe Islands, one that brought with it a rebuilding of the library based upon the ideology of public libraries in other Nordic countries and America. In 1948, shortly after the Second World War, the Faroe Islands became a self-governed country in the Danish realm. Four years later in 1952, the first library law was drafted, and the same year the promulgation regarding legal deposits of all published materials was set in effect.

Jump forward to 2016, and there are 15 permanent employees at the Library, whereas 8 of these are librarians. There are 15 public libraries, and 11 school libraries on the Faroe Islands, and the National Library is by law the main library for these institutions. One of the statutory responsibilities as the main library, is to promote the distribution of information, knowledge and enlightenment. This is in part achieved by having a curated collection of materials available to all other libraries. Interlibrary loans are a big part of the everyday responsibilities handled by staff, and in addition to sending books back and forth between the islands, a big part of the interlibrary loans arrive from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Borrowing material from neighboring countries has for many years been a service the library provides, free of charge for all the other libraries and their patrons.

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<sup>1</sup> Býarbókasavnið (2015) pp 3-9

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth just referred to as, the Library

## The digital projects

In the Faroes the first real attempts regarding digitization of periodicals happened in the late 90s. The Faroese Parliament decided to allocate 40.000€ to digitize *Løgtingstíðindi* which is an annual publication from 1880 until today, in which draft legislations and changes, were published in a multi-volume work. From 2009 onwards *Løgtingstíðindi* has been published in HTML on the parliament's website *www.logting.fo*. The actual digitization of these volumes was done in cooperation with an external partner in Norway, with the physical volumes being shipped overseas for digitization. Later in 2014 attempts were made to perform OCR on these scanned images, but the quality of the images are so poor that acceptable OCR wasn't deemed possible, even with today's software, which resulted in a re-scan of this publication in 2015, performed by the National Library of the Faroe Islands. A few years after the scanning of *Løgtingstíðindi* was completed, the Library took the first steps into the brave new world of digitization.

In 2000 a Nordic project called VESTNORD was established. The national libraries of The Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland were the participating institutions. It was the first major library collaboration project in the North Atlantic, with the purpose being to establish a digital library where residents of the three countries, through the internet, had access to several thousand pages of digitized printed heritage, which was already preserved in the collections of the three libraries<sup>3</sup>.

Faroese participation in the project faded out, as funding was pulled. In the end Iceland remains the only active institution and took up all the administrative and financial aspects of the VESTNORD library project, today called *timarit.is*. At the time of writing there are 5.104.190 pages in the digital library in comparison to roughly 300.000 pages in 2006, where the Faroe Islands still was a part of the project.

Digitization wouldn't be on the agenda again, until 2013, where the current national librarian Erhard Jacobsen, received an offer of participation from a grand scale digitization project, managed by the State and University Library in Aarhus, Denmark. The purpose of the project was to digitize all the Danish newspapers from microfilms, and the project scope was 32 million newspaper pages. A request was sent to the Faroese Ministry of Culture for a grant of 100.000€ by the library. The request was accepted and work on the project began immediately. The project was delayed a few times, but the 8th of May, 2014, Landsbókasavnið and the State Library signed a contract of cooperation. In the end, 450.000 pages of Faroese newspapers were digitized as part of this project. The State Library launched their digitized newspaper portal on *mediestream.dk*, but with restrictions on all material younger than 100 years only being accessible within the physical location of the library. However on the Faroe Islands, it had been arranged so that all newspapers up until 1999 were to be open access. Work began on finding a suitable partner to develop and deliver a platform upon which the digital library could be built. After a long selection process, the Danish company, Infomedia, was chosen. The basis of choosing Infomedia was a long lasting professional relationship in the past with providing library services, and the fact that they turned out to be the only feasible choice compared to the other suitors, simply because of the funds remaining from the digitization budget. The 25th of March, on the day the Faroe Islands call *Native Language Day (Móðurmálsdag)*, which is a celebration of the Faroese language, the digital library *tidarrit.fo* was launched. The Minister of Culture at that time, Bjørn Kalsø officially opened

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<sup>3</sup> Dalsgarð (2002a)

*tidarrit.fo*. At the event, select speakers held presentations and it was the largest gathering for any event held by the National Library for many years, 140 people showed up at 10:00 in the morning.

### **The importance**

One of the arguments for the importance of providing access to the materials within the digital library, *tidarrit.fo*, was that in these titles, it is the first time one could encounter poems and short stories written in Faroese, and it is also the first time long prose texts are published in Faroese. It is within these periodicals that the very foundation of the Faroese literary cultural heritage exists<sup>4</sup>. It is important to point out that the Faroese written language is very young by comparison to other Nordic countries. Despite being spoken and shaped since the settlement of the islands, it wasn't until 1898 that a written form of Faroese was agreed upon<sup>5</sup>. The newspapers reflect this part of Faroese history, where the choice between two dominant orthographies was to be seen in various newspaper titles throughout the years up until 1898<sup>6</sup>. By 1899 all the newspapers had decided to follow suit, and an important era in Faroese history concludes. There are many such examples in newspaper history. In 1890 the population of the Faroes was 12.995 and the population was scattered and isolated, the papers played a huge part in shaping the society and reaching settlements in the isolated regions of the country. The newspapers turned political at the beginning of the 20th century, and the Faroese national movement changed from a cultural movement, to a political, with political parties being formed. The big newspapers pledged allegiance to specific political ideologies, and these newspapers remain until this day the primary source, for the research in Faroese political history.

Today you can access this content from anywhere in the world, absolutely free. The willingness from the Faroese publishers to allow their titles to be a part of this digital library has been unified, and the media attention it got, both domestically and abroad has been surprising.

The purpose of digitizing the Faroese newspapers was originally a preservation project. Many of the newspapers conserved in the national department, are in fragile condition, and are restricted from public access. The microfilms are marked by decades of usage, and with some titles, the negatives have been lost to time, as these obviously were not part of the legal deposit demands, but created by the library, to spare the original physical newspapers. So one way to funnel attention to these materials, from outside the library domain, was to mediate the need to rescue these fragile heritage objects.

In 2009 The Danish heritage agency (Kulturarvsstyrelsen) published a report concerning digitization of the Danish cultural heritage. In regards to the necessity of taking steps towards digital preservation, the report argues that the majority of heritage material in Denmark, is in such condition that there is no immediate threat of any cultural loss, as long as the materials are cared for, with proper storage and handling. Although it is important that conservation requirements are not negligible when you have to prioritize efforts on digitizing, the focus of digitization for preservation purposes, still takes a backseat to accessibility considerations. In the long term there is little doubt that digital accessibility is a precondition for digitization of

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<sup>4</sup> Næs (2006) p. 44

<sup>5</sup> Dalsgarð (2002b), p. 25

<sup>6</sup> cf. Lenvig (2009)

literary heritage<sup>7</sup>. Though the digitization of the Faroese newspapers started as a preservation project, along the way, and with media attention, it became a project focused more upon giving access to the Faroese history locked away in newspaper pages. As an example of this double view, the Faroese Prime Minister in 2014, Kaj Leo Johannesen, mentioned the digitization, in his speech during the National Day of the Faroe People (Ólavsøka), on July 29th. He pointed out that the reason for the project was “... to preserve this cultural heritage, and make it accessible to the public<sup>8</sup>” Bjørn Kalsø, the Minister of Culture emphasized the importance of open access to the digital library *tidarrit.fo* and the titles contained within, during his opening speech at the launch in 2015.

*“This will facilitate access to the relevant information and knowledge on Faroese society. And will without a doubt influence both school papers, research, the news media, fiction and conversation. The newspapers are an important source of contemporary society - not just in news flows but also in terms of language, culture and society as a whole. Easier access to this valuable source material means that it is easier to use, and digitization of newspapers also means that they will be preserved for posterity.”<sup>9</sup>*

### **Success?**

How do you measure if the digitization has been a success? An obvious method would be to look at quantifiable data, and compare the increase in the usage of the newspapers after they have been retro digitized, compared to usage when they were accessible on microfilms.

The National Librarian, Erhard Jacobsen, spoke at the opening of the digital library as well, and ended his speech by saying: “*I see a lot of you here who frequent our library often, take a good look around you everybody, for you’re never going to see these people here again!*”. Although uttered as a joke with the purpose of making people smile, some people evaluate the usage of libraries solely on statistics, and losing the physical visits of these patrons obviously influence the statistics for library visits. Libraries often argue that the digital library is as much a part of the library as its physical framework, and that these statistics need to be valued equally.

The library had 417 patrons check out 837 microfilm rolls for use in the library microfilm machines during 2012<sup>10</sup>. The majority of the newspapers now accessible within *tidarrit.fo* are digitized images made from the microfilm collection, meaning it is pretty much the same content, just remediated. In 2015, 12.773 unique visitors had 35.900 sessions at *tidarrit.fo*, and the average page view was 37 pages per session<sup>11</sup>. That’s close to 2 million page visits during the first year. If a comparison is made in regards to page visits to the digitized newspapers online, with other Nordic countries, such as Iceland and Denmark, it’s quite clear that the Faroese 40 visits per capita is significantly higher than Mediastream with 9, and Timarit with 18<sup>12</sup>. The usage statistics for the Faroese newspapers online show that increased

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<sup>7</sup> Kulturarvsstyrelsen (2009) pp. 8-9

<sup>8</sup> Løgmansskrivstovan (2016)

<sup>9</sup> Speech given by the Faroese Minister of Culture at the time, Bjørn Kalsø. Transcript personally received by mail from the secretary, at the Ministry of Culture [15/2-2016] (own translation)

<sup>10</sup> Statistics are gathered manually by the on duty library assistant at the National Library. One of her/his responsibilities is to check out the microfilm roll for patron usage, and make sure it is returned after use.

<sup>11</sup> Søvni Landsins (2016)

<sup>12</sup> Statistics from Mediastream 17/2-2016, Timarit 27/1-2016, Tidarrit 10/2-2016, personally received, and compared with census data for 2013-16, retrieved from statice.is, hagstovan.fo and dst.dk [14-02-2016]

accessibility does facilitate usage, and I think it is important that libraries make an effort of promoting different forms of digitization.

In hindsight, if one is to speculate about the reason for the large amounts of visits, I think a big contribution to the success of the first year, has been a curiosity, stirred by media attention, and also in part by the library's ability to promote the digitization project. Several radio- and television interviews, and mentions in political speeches, helped create hype around the opening of the digital library. Demographically, Faroe Islands is a tiny country. Something that makes the newspapers so special in the Faroe Islands, is that the saying: "everybody knows everybody" is close to being a reality, and nearly everyone is mentioned in the newspapers at some point. It is a norm, even today, that family and friends send in announcements to the newspapers, during memorable- and special days. Also obituaries, reader letters, sale and purchase of items, and so on, have always been a big part of the newspaper content. So actually, not being mentioned in the papers is a rarity. It is something that makes newspapers in small communities very special, and an absolute gold mine for interest associations, such as genealogists.

### **2016, and the years to come**

In 2015, the library received 40.000€ from the Ministry of Culture to re-digitize the publication *Løgtingstíðindi*, which as explained earlier had been scanned in the past, but in such poor quality that OCR wasn't possible. Immediately it was treated as a task having to be outsourced. But after receiving offers from potential external partners, a comparison was done in regards to the financial aspects of doing the scanning, and data treatment in-house instead. The conclusion was, that the funds received towards this project, could be used to establish an internal digitization workflow, to purchase software and hardware required, and for the staff to gain the skills needed to digitize. And the fact that all the aforementioned, could be achieved at a fraction of the price asked by the digitization companies, swayed the decision towards letting the Library digitize the title instead of outsourcing the task.

Through the National Archive, another of the institutions in *Søvn Landsins*, the library had access to a book scanner, purchased 9 years prior. Therefore it was estimated that the actual scanning of the physical materials could be done by simply hiring staff to scan the 63.000 pages.

Without any prior knowledge of digitization, and without IT-staff and an IT-department, the National Library of the Faroe Islands took the first steps into retro digitizing. Library assistants were hired to perform the actual scanning, but when the manual work started with digitizing the pages, it took just 3 days, until the book scanner broke down. There was no contingency plan in place for a machine break down. Communicating back and forth between the manufacturer and the library, and getting technical help from tech companies, was a long and slow process. After 3 weeks of downtime, it was decided to buy a new book scanner, the cheapest model available which cost roughly 6.700€ Work on repairing the other book scanner could then continue, without it delaying the project further. The scanner arrived 2 weeks later, and scanning commenced. When the scan was complete, it showed that it took just over 400 hours to scan the 63.000 pages. Originally the idea was to process the TIFF images from the scan manually via select software, but after an in-depth look at the time required for this, it was decided to acquire software which could automate this process completely, and set up human verification as part of the workflow instead, to assure the quality of the finished data, was readable. The images were processed and verified, accepting

or declining the processed images. The images that didn't pass the verification were treated manually by the on duty library assistant. The project was complete and the images had been packaged and ready for delivery to the external partner, Infomedia, responsible for hosting and administering the digital library located at *tidarrit.fo*.

During the scan of *Løgtingstíðindi* the library was contacted by several Faroese publishers wanting their materials published on *tidarrit.fo*, not just newspapers, but a wide variety of periodicals. When the scanning of *Løgtingstíðindi* was complete, a deal was made with *Skúlablaðið*, a publication published by the Faroese teacher's union. An agreement was reached, to scan the title, and include it in *tidarrit.fo*. As a result of enquiries made by the publishers, there is a genuine possibility of creating a new digitization project, a project where the scope could be to digitize the library's entire periodical collection, which contains all the published Faroese periodicals. At the moment there are only five newspaper titles, which have not yet been digitized. These titles are small publications, and scanning them wouldn't take long, which would result in having every single Faroese newspaper digitized and available through the library's digital platform. At the moment, it is being discussed how best to approach the last stretch. The library is in a good position to do this, it has acquired the necessary skills required to further digitize the library holdings.

In 2016 there are two large digitization projects currently underway at the library. One is the digitization of manuscripts from the manuscript department, and the other is digitization of periodicals from the national bibliography. Due to the technical and financial requirements of hosting and presenting the scanned images and data online, Infomedia have warned the Library that they would not like to see the contract extended. For them, it was a trial made, to see if it was something they could invest money and time into, and create a business model around. Obviously a lot can happen in 4 years, but as it currently stands, the hosting contract, is set to expire in 2020. Work has already begun to handle the hosting and presentation of the digitized newspapers, and other materials on the library's own servers, and be ready to take over hosting in the near future. One such example is *handrit.fo*, which contains digitized Faroese manuscripts accessible online. It was created, developed and maintained by a team of 3 librarians. But until the time where the library is capable of taking control of hosting and presenting large amounts of data online, a dependence on external partners is unavoidable.

### **Responsibility**

It is very important to not get scared off by the complexity of digitization. Digitization can be achieved in a way that doesn't cost more than the work it takes for the manual scan of the physical publication. Obviously a scanner capable of high resolution images and software is needed, but these can be acquired at a moderate price, and most libraries or archives are already in possession of such. The transformation of old, hidden collections, to digital accessible library services, can now be regarded as a professional activity for many academic and research libraries<sup>13</sup>. It could also be seen as a way to institutionalize digitization of the cultural heritage, and a way of taking responsibility in regards to developing a professional framework and procedures for digitization.

There exists an outside pressure to digitize the cultural heritage originating from two different roots. One is a regard for conservation and dissemination of the cultural heritage, the other is the possibility of making knowledge available over the net<sup>14</sup>. Digitization is a challenge

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<sup>13</sup> Lund (2012) p. 149

<sup>14</sup> Lund et al. (2009) p. 165

libraries are forced to confront. And it's one of the main tasks the libraries will be responsible for, in the near future<sup>15</sup>.

*“The love of language and culture is the foundation of the development and thrive of the mother tongue, and we use this day to shed light on the great work that is being put into making our language active and vibrant. A part of this work is to preserve and make our heritage digitally accessible. Digitization will be important in the future, and it is important that it is an area which remains a priority.”<sup>16</sup>*

Despite the political interest in digitization, looking at the Finance Act for the year 2016 and the planned allocation of grants until 2018, there isn't set aside funding towards digitizing at The National Library of the Faroe Islands<sup>17</sup>. Despite the Minister of Culture saying it is something that will remain a priority. The National Library has taken it upon itself to further work with digitization despite the lack of funding.

*“We have a social obligation. The task is comprehensive, but not difficult. It is the National Library's responsibility to assume this task, on behalf of the nation, society, our scholars, knowledge professionals, writers and citizens, both now and in the future<sup>18</sup>.”*

The National Library of the Faroe Islands, have decided to leap into digitization head first, and learn hands on.

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<sup>15</sup> Savn (2016) p. 1 (own translation)

<sup>16</sup> Speech given by the, at the time, Faroese Minister of Culture, Bjørn Kalsø during *Móðurmálsdagin*. Transcript personally received by mail from the secretary, at the Ministry of Culture [15/2-2016] (own translation)

<sup>17</sup> Fíggjarmálaráðið (2016) p. 163

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