

# Under a new archival umbrella – the investment in a national search engine and its implications for the use of archives

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## 1. Introduction

This paper initiates a discussion about archives and search engines. More specifically: what implications may new search possibilities have for archives visibility and use? The archival domain offers a particularly interesting perspective on search technologies because archival search differs substantially from web search.

## 2. Background

The Swedish National Archives was recently granted SEK 46.4 million to develop the existing National Archive Database (NAD) (Riksarkivet n.d.) into a national research infrastructure, making “more handwritten archival documents searchable with AI and strengthen access to data for new research in several areas”. The goal is to move away from offering individual document images to making entire archival holdings available as machine-readable data to be useful for academic researchers (Riksarkivet 2026) as well as the public (Riksarkivet 2026b), thus providing access “under a new umbrella” (Karlberg Lundin 2026). A beta-version will be launched continuously and users encouraged to give feedback.

## 3. Research problem & related research

A core challenge for developers is that the logics of search engines differ from the logics of the archival principle of provenance, including its application in digital environments (Bak, 2024). While a google search is often perceived as intuitive, NAD was recently described as “coarse-grained and more of a directory (...) about the archives, not about data that the archives contain” (SOU 2021:65, p. 209-210). The National Archives responded that this was inaccurate “Many institutions provide detailed accounts of the contents of the archives in the form of archive inventories” (Riksarkivet 2022, p. 2). This misalignment in understanding and expectations is an obstacle to overcome: NAD must convey to users how to search. Project owner Karlberg Lundin (2026) says there is need for more context than what the search form allows. Users starting their search via google will therefore arrive at a ‘landing page’ with basic information about what the archive includes and how to use it. This stance aligns with previous research highlighting the need to consider how the roles and limitations of new technologies should be communicated to users to avoid misplaced expectations (Finn & Khosrowi 2026, p. 2), and to promote digital archival literacy (Strandgaard Jensen 2021). Rather than viewing NAD as a purely technical solution, we therefore examine how its development is linked to broader ideas about access to information, research, and the societal role of archives. Our research questions are: RQ1: How was

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the development of NAD problematized, justified, and linked to visions of future archival search? RQ2: How are the needs and expectations of users considered in the development process?

## 4. Material and method

We first examine three key policy documents: the Swedish Government Official Report (Arkivutredningen 2019), the Swedish National Archives' funding application to the Swedish Research Council (Karsvall 2025), and the Council's decision to fund the project (Vetenskapsrådet 2025). We then follow the development of the beta-version of NAD through interviews with, and documentation from, the development team.

## 5. Contribution

Our contribution provides insights about how archival search engines are introduced to a broader audience, and what user needs and expectations need to be considered for archival search engines to become more widely usable.

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