SI 580 Understanding Records and Archives: Principles and Practices

Week 11 – Users and Uses
Themes of this presentation

- Digital context
- Uses of archives (revisited)
- Users of archives
- “Facts and frameworks”
- What to study
- Lingering doubts
Relentlessly Digital

- Near collapse of microfilm and loss of AV media
- Overwhelming demands for online access
- Archives / museums bid for relevance

Themes
Digital context
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Picture removed
Kentucky, 1955
William Gedney Photographs and Writings
Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library
http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/gedney/
Digital Archives

Archives in the digital world equals digital archives.

- from digitization to managing digital assets
- applying tried and true archival principles
- both transformation and throw-back

Dramatic decline in the proportion of people who care about, seek out, and use original artifacts
Digital Preservation and Use

Digital preservation begins with the creation of digital products worth maintaining over time.

- value to a host of end users
- inaccessibility equals non-existence
- low use or no use could be fatal

For now, preserving digital archives for prospective use is unsustainable.
Archives and IT

Technology in archives plays competing roles...

- ... as museum exhibition
- ... as publishing and outreach tool
- ... as access system
- ... as guarantor of authenticity (integrity)

Only the latter role is distinctively archival.
Uses of Archives

Themes
Digital context

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- Evidential
- Informational
- Symbolic
Evidential value

Themes
Digital context

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- accountability -- internal / external
- protection of legal rights
- administrative continuity -- organizational memory
- operational utility -- coping with current issues, needs, problems
Informational value

Themes
- history
- scholarship
- social memory
- social identity
- personal identity / genealogy
- education
- enrichment

Uses of archives
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Symbolic value

Themes
Digital context

Uses of archives

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- ceremonial
- artifactual
Research Purposes

Figure 1: Research Purposes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrow</td>
<td>Group: Occupational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Group: Academic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Users of archives

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- **Direct User**
  - individual examiner of archival records (archives user)

- **Indirect User**
  - potential beneficiary of labors of direct user (consumer of user output: reader; tv viewer; movie goer; web surfer...)

"Facts and frameworks"
What Do Online Users Do?

- Discover relevant information anyplace
- Capture to their personal workspace
- Consult experts or engage scholarly communities
- Organize content (by concept, time, space, format)
- Cite works to track origins
- Manipulate found content (text and image)
- Distribute or publish to Web/paper
Origins

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- Followed a study of presidential libraries
- Bentley Library Mellon Fellowship
- No overt focus on standardization
- Establish a broad context for further study

Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives

PAUL CONWAY
Key Ideas

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… better understanding of users …
“seems less a problem of will than a problem of method.”

– archival reference is both a service and a fertile ground for evaluation
– fit appropriate methodology to stages of interaction with users
### User Study Framework

![Diagram of User Study Framework]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
<th>Stage 1 Registration</th>
<th>Stage 2 Orientation</th>
<th>Stage 3 Follow Up</th>
<th>Stage 4 Survey</th>
<th>Stage 5 Experiments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Task</td>
<td>• definition in terms of subject, format, scope</td>
<td>Preparation of Researcher</td>
<td>Search Strategies and Mechanics</td>
<td>Expectations and Satisfaction</td>
<td>Access and Non-use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>Knowledge of Holdings and Services</td>
<td>Intensity and Frequency of Use</td>
<td>Alternative to Physical Use</td>
<td>Format Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Agree to Rules</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership in Networks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>Intended Use</td>
<td>Significant Use</td>
<td>Impact of Use</td>
<td>Role of Historical Information in Society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can We Contact You?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Significant Info</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can We Tell Others?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Framework for Studying the Users of Archives**
What Still Resonates

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- Quality, Integrity, Value
- Stages of developing deeper understanding
- Fit methodology to stages
  - concrete to theoretical
  - comprehensive to selective
  - quantitative to qualitative
  - narrow to broad
What I Missed the First Time

- Limits of linear model
- Overly tied to reference processes rather than user behaviors
- Not conducive to program evaluation
- Not sensitive to time

NARA study “Partners in Research” was effort to address these issues – little traction either.
What Has Happened Since 1986

- SGML (ISO 8879) approved in 1986
- EAD finding aids
- Ubiquitous digitization
- WWW
- Digital libraries and digital preservation
- Tangible socio-technical transformations

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Quality of Access

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- Usability testing of websites, finding aids, and interfaces
- Fundamental critique of EAD as an appropriate access mechanism
- Connection between use of artifacts and use of digital surrogates
Integrity of Assets

- Credibility and trust
- Effectiveness of navigation and juxtaposition
- Context and its value for access
- Impact of transformed functionality
- End-user assembled collections

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Value of Archives

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“What’s the use?”
- Impact locally
- Value added (cost/benefit analysis)
- Impact of IP restrictions on scholarship and creativity, generally
User Collaboration

Since users are rarely autonomous actors …

- … motivation based on group norms
- … dynamics of collaboration
Managing Archival Functions

If delivering context to end users is fundamental…

If users rarely care about our organizational boundaries…

If collaborative digital library development is our only hope over the long term…

- “connecting the dots”
- “clairvoyance enhancement”

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Measuring & researching use: what’s wrong?

- Archivists do not keep enough data on users.
- Archivists do not study their users.
- Archives do not receive sufficient use to justify their expense.
- Archivists do not advertise their services, rarely engage in efforts to build and nurture a constituency, and do not aggressively support their primary clientele.
- Absence of “common reference points.”
Measuring & researching use: why is it wrong?

Misperceptions?
- archivists are oriented towards users
- archivists know who their users are
- archivists understand the nature of research
- archivists provide adequate help to those conducting research
Lingering Doubts

- Is standardization possible or worth the effort?
  - field consistency
  - content consistency
- Is quantitative data useful locally or beyond?
- Do metrics really contribute to justifying archives?
- Are research agendas for academics only?
Thank you!

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