

Archives for the User:
Analyzing and Incorporating User Needs in Archival Description

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Richard Cox writes, “Enabling the researcher to use archival records effectively and efficiently is the central tenant of the modern archivist’s mission.”¹ While archival theory originated with a focus on the materials themselves, archivists in the past thirty years have begun a movement arguing for more research and implementation of user behavior and needs in the archives. Because archival description is the point where the archival materials intersect with the user, efficient and clear description is necessary for archival use. However, the majority of the voices reviewed in archival literature here argue that traditional description in archives fails to incorporate the needs of users, or it incorrectly assumes it understands what users prefer. Further, the literature reviewed analyzes archival description, as well as finding aids, in both analog and digital collections, to portray the suggestions made by archivists from small historical societies, university archives, and digital repositories, among others.

The review is categorized by three major topics: the foundational literature that began this conversation, the implementation of such suggestions in digital description, and a unique suggestion of redefining archival description completely by minimizing the description for our users. While there are a number of unique views and methods for change, the authors all indicate that understanding our users is one of the most critical aspects of archival practice.

I. Foundations: A Call for Change

In the 1980’s, many theoretical articles were published by prominent names in the field who critically analyze the previous practice of avoiding any user input or behavior when describing archival materials. “Archivists and Research Use,” written by William Joyce is one of the earliest

1. Richard Cox, “Researching archival reference as an information function: observations on needs and opportunities,” *RQ* 31, no. 3 (1992): 387, http://go.galegroup.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA12112345&v=2.1&u=upitt_main&&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w.

pieces that advocates for a revolution in archival thinking.² Here, Joyce identifies the purpose of archives as one of culture. Archivists have an obligation to their researchers, because “it is the research value of documentation that invests this essentially cultural purpose.”³ To better understand the needs of their users, Joyce suggests that archivists themselves become researchers and should “carefully study the documents in their collections.”⁴ He believes that the most critical problem in the profession today is a lack of understanding of researcher needs and suggests that we fill that gap by understanding who our researchers are and how they research.⁵ Further, Joyce believes that finding aids—the method of archival description that allows users to locate materials in collections—do not adequately describe collections for the range of researchers using them.⁶ To solve this problem, finding aids should be written with an analytical viewpoint and act as independent scholarly publications. Joyce’s article encourages a significant change in the archival profession so that archivists can fulfill their roles as cultural custodians. However, his suggestion for archivists to become the scholars themselves and process collections at item-level description with their own analysis completely alters the traditional notion of the archivist. Rather than preserving and describing records for user access, Joyce asks archivists to analyze describe the records with a critical eye. Not only would this task create enormous backlog for archivists due to their need to process

2. William Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 2 (1984): 124–133, <http://archivists.metapress.com/index/U0675R6X8577470W.pdf>.

3. Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” 125.

4. Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” 126.

5. In “Listening to Users,” Elizabeth Yakel reiterates this point throughout her own literature review and study about how researchers identify and use archives. Her study identifies a key problem within archives: archivists simply do not understand their users and therefore are not fully serving their needs. From her study findings, she suggests that archivists begin to rectify the problem with user education. By allowing users to understand basic archival terms and practices, they can better research within the collections.

6. William Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 2 (1984): 124–133, <http://archivists.metapress.com/index/U0675R6X8577470W.pdf>.

collections at item level, but it also assumes that if an archivist describes a document with a certain viewpoint, then it will benefit all users, which is unlikely.

Lawrence Dowler makes a similar argument against the traditional viewpoint of focusing on the record for archival decisions.⁷ Dowler advocates for turning our attention on ways to improve access for users, doing so “can provide a better conceptual basis for archival practices and principles.”⁸ To accomplish this, archivists must understand the multiplicity of users who frequent their holdings. He also recognizes the possible ramifications of such a proposition; this could cause a divide in the archival profession between archivists who see records as mere documents and those who see records as “sources of information.”⁹ However, his explanation here of the divide is short-handed, leaving readers unsure what distinction he is trying to make. To most effectively respond to the redefinition of their primary focus, Dowler advises that archivists combine reference and process.¹⁰ This suggests that the finding aids will become not only helpful tools for research, but also the principle means of description. Further, Dowler gives specific advice for how archivists can alter their description practices, moving from collection-level description to subject indexing—an idea, rarely, if ever, previously documented. Dowler’s recommendation for change is one of merit; he recognizes and identifies the ongoing issues in archives and then provides concrete reasoning for these changes. Unlike Joyce, Dowler proposes ideas that will speak to the diversity of users.

7. Lawrence Dowler, “The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles : A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use of Records,” *The American Archivist* 51, no. 1/2 (1988): 74–86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293198>.

8. Dowler, “The Role of Use,” 76.

9. Dowler, “The Role of Use,” 75.

10. Dowler also analyzes the use of subject indexing in archival description, believing that describing archival records in bibliographic description will improve access and the use of records. He also argues that the current descriptions are too individualized for researchers to adequately access the information they need.

Elsie Freeman, like William Joyce and Lawrence Dowler, recognizes that previous archival theory is flawed in its methods of description for researchers, specifically by thinking that archivists accomplish their work with researchers in mind.¹¹ Freeman identifies this problem in a number of misassumptions: one being that archivists consider historians to be the most prominent and educated archival users. Rather, Freeman finds that they demonstrate unfavorable search habits and use the archives less than other researchers, such as genealogists.¹² The issue then becomes that archivists produce finding aids and descriptive tools for users whom they do not understand. Freeman proposes challenging and positive changes for the profession: to change the standards of description to encompass all researchers—academic and otherwise, to systematically examine researchers and their user habits, and to create finding aids that do not require archival education. Freeman’s findings indicate a troubling realization: there is a significant divide between archivists and their researchers.¹³

11. Elsie T. Freeman, “In the Eye of the Beholder : Archives Administration from the User’s Point of View,” *The American Archivist* 47, no. 2 (1984): 111–123, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40292652>.

12. Wendy Duff and CA Johnson, “Where Is the List with All the Names? Information-seeking Behavior of Genealogists,” *American Archivist* 6 (2003): 93, <http://archivists.metapress.com/index/1375uj047224737n.pdf>.

There have been few studies surrounding specific archive users, such as historians and genealogists. For an in-depth research study on historians and their use of archives, see Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson’s “Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives.” Duff and Johnson find that historians often use finding aids as documents themselves in research and consider the finding aid to be not only useful, but also valuable tools of archival description. This viewpoint differs from any of the other literature reviewed; other studies and articles have found finding aids to hinder archival research. Duff and Johnson also conduct a separate research study on user behavior in genealogists in “Where is the List with the Names? Information-Seeking Behavior of Genealogists,” Duff and Johnson find that, unlike historians, genealogists regard finding aids as difficult to use and prefer “informal sources of information.” Further, Duff and Johnson identify genealogists as the largest user base of archivists, contrary to previous beliefs.

13. For a study conducted regarding how archivists review user studies, see “Archivists’ Views of User-based Evaluation: Benefits, Barriers, and Requirements.” Here, Wendy Duff et al. find that archivists support the evaluation in theory, but worry about challenges such as a lack of experience surveying users and a fear that users only respond when they have negative feelings.

In “Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives,” Paul Conway articulates that his method to rectify the lack of user voice in archives is the “first attempt to structure a comprehensive, profession-wide program of user studies.”¹⁴ While this article mirrors the views of previous archivists such as Freeman and Joyce, it uniquely argues for a change in the entire profession for rather than for individual archives.¹⁵ Further, Conway suggests standardization in user studies to become better acquainted with users and does so by implementing a framework for user studies that all archives can adopt. However, Conway acknowledges this framework will only be successful when it is shared among several archives to create universal methods of understanding users. While Conway’s article does not address the role of user studies in archival description specifically, his suggestions can be utilized in archival description practices.¹⁶

The majority of literature surrounding archival description argues for archivists to consider the needs of their users and rediscover basic archival principles in collection description. While Terry

However, Duff et al. provide archivists with suggestions for implementing the practice to better serve their users.

14. Paul Conway, "Facts and frameworks: an approach to studying the users of archives," *American Archivist* 49, no. 4 (1986): 394, <http://archivists.metapress.com/index/P21825JP21403087.pdf>

15. Cox, “Researching Archival Reference,” 387. Richard Cox identifies Paul Conway’s work as “landmark in the field of archival use studies.” Like Conway, Cox recognizes the importance of user research in archival practice. He identifies a unique problem in user studies as a basis for description: that the studies conducted usually only are too specific to their archive to be comparable to other studies or archives. Although Cox’s article focuses on altering the reference process rather than description, it still lends valuable information for archivists seeking to improve their description to fit the needs of their users.

16. Randall Jimerson has a similar approach in his article, “Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society.” Here, Jimerson identifies the overload of information in society and advocates that by redefining our identity for our users, we can remain relevant in society and provide users with a valuable resource. Jimerson also reviews Conway’s article as an important design for user studies. While Jimerson’s view is not focused on archival description specifically, he does identify the importance of finding aids, because they are the link between the archivist and the user. One could argue that they are the link between the archivist, the user, *and* the document.

Cook supports user-based decisions, he proposes a challenge to “public programming,” which he uses for the phrase “user-based decisions.”¹⁷ Upon his review of the literature, Cook fears that archives will adopt business models to attempt to please every customer, and in doing so, will sacrifice not only the quality of research, but also the archival mission.¹⁸ Cook argues for a focus on the context; by seeing items as a part of an entire collection, users will understand the information in its original form, as designed by the creator. While his writing may seem contrary or elitist, Cook indicates that he is only advocating for archivists to “step forward to providing researchers with relevance, meaning, understanding, and knowledge.”¹⁹ Cook’s argument provides a fresh and critical viewpoint of user-based decision making in archival description. Rather than subscribing to every user demand, archivists should instead express why archives are culturally significant.

II. Users and Online Description Practices

There are a number of studies and theories that argue for archivists to alter their methods of description according to new means of technology, such as digitization and online finding aids. In “Observing Users: An Empirical Analysis of User Interaction with Finding Aids,”²⁰ Joyce Celeste Chapman conducts a user study at the Southern Historical Collection in North Carolina to analyze user behavior in online finding aids.²¹ The major findings indicate that the users with the least

17. Terry Cook, “Viewing the World Upside Down: Reflections on the Theoretical Underpinnings of Archival Public Programming,” *Archivaria* 31 (1990): 123, <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/viewArticle/11725>.

18. Cook, “Viewing the World,” 127.

19. Cook, “Viewing the World,” 131.

20. Joyce Celeste Chapman, “Observing Users: An Empirical Analysis of User Interaction with Online Finding Aids,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 1 (2010): 4–30, doi: 10.1080/15332748.2010.484361.

21. Edward Mensah Borteye and Martin Porres Maaseg, “User Studies in Archives: The Case of the Manhyia Archives of the Institute of African Studies, Kumasi, Ghana,” *Archival Science* (July

amount of archival experience had the most trouble researching. The most significant challenges were the confusions associated with not understanding archival terminology, as well as the frustration of clicking item information only to learn that the items themselves were not there. Chapman's study finds that users prefer searching to navigating the finding aid, and they expect a clear indication of the availability of items online. Here, Chapman demonstrates that users can attain successful results if they are technologically proficient. Chapman's study lends more credit to novice users, indicating that web finding aids can be a successful means of description for users, as long as users create the aids with user preferences as a priority.

Krystyna Matusiak's perspective towards archival description is rooted in one specific archival material: digital image collections.²² While Matusiak echoes the issue of disjointed vocabularies in online searching that Chapman highlights, she offers a unique idea: that users, rather than archivists, can describe the items they view online. Matusiak believes this option will give faster access to the items and allow the images to be identified as individual items as well as items that are grouped by similar characteristics. Matusiak's study is one of the few conducted on user-description. However, she argues that by not using the language of the users, archivists are alienating their means of support.²³ Matusiak also recognizes the possible obstacles of user -description: users will be

26, 2012): 2, doi: 10.1007/s10502-012-9185-2.

Similar to Chapman's study, Edward Mensah Borteye and Matrin Poress Maaseg conduct a user-study in Ghana that recognizes analogous disconnections between users and archivists in African archives. Borteye keenly remarks, "The information needs of users of archives can best be accommodated only when we understand our users." In this study, Borteye and Maaseg assess their users based on forms they fill out upon entering the archives. They learn that their most frequent users are Ghanaian men of all professions who usually seek to learn about their family history. Their most surprising realization is that academic researchers rarely use the archives, an indication that they have little understanding of their users. Borteye and Maaseg suggest digitizing their holdings and even perhaps their entire collections to provide access to more users.

22. Krystyna K. Matusiak, "Towards User-centered Indexing in Digital Image Collections," *OCLC Systems & Services* 22, no. 4 (2006): 283–298, doi: 10.1108/10650750610706998.

23. Matusiak, "Towards User-centered Indexing," 289.

uninterested in tagging, the tagging may become disorderly, and the varying amounts of synonyms will not allow for easy searching. Matusiak's study is a valuable perspective on online description, but because this is limited to only photographic collections and it has not addressed the possible challenges to the practice, it may not be feasible profession-wide.

Elizabeth Yakel also has conducted studies evaluating user-input in archival description.²⁴ In her study on users and Encoded Archival Description in finding aids, she creates a study evaluating user experiences with EAD interface design in finding aids. Yakel gauges the experiences of users with varying levels of archival expertise and computer skills in both analog and digital research.²⁵ Like Matusiak, she also points out that little studies have been composed surrounding this method of archival description. Her results indicate that even those with higher education—students studying for Master's degrees in Library and Information Science—are unable to search in these systems. Some of the more notable challenges are difficulty understanding archival jargon, the inability to revise searchers, and content display problems. The problem that is identified from this search in finding aids and archival description is that these aids are not created with their end users in mind, despite the fact that they are produced for users themselves. Archivists expect a level of expertise from their users that is actually uncommon, so archivists and users both cannot connect.²⁶ Yakel's

24. Elizabeth Yakel has published a significant amount of articles analyzing user behaviors and needs in research to better archival description. For a study on archival expertise in researchers, see her article, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," published with Deborah Torres. This article highlights some of the same issues in other studies, such as archivist and user disconnect, as well as confusion in searching in finding aids for specific information.

25. Elizabeth Yakel, "Encoded Archival Description," *Journal of Archival Organization* 2, no. 1/2 (2004): 63-77, doi: 10.1300/J201v02n01_06.

26. In "Human-Centered vs. User-Centered Approaches to Information System Design," Susan Gasson takes a similar approach in information system design as a whole, rather than specifically archival description. While Gasson does not discredit designers as ignoring their users, she does argue that the human aspect of users is often overlooked. Users are analyzed by their clicks and behaviors in response to technology rather than their personalities or unique characteristics and creativity.

study reiterates an underlying problem of a lack of standards in archival description. However, unlike Chapman's research, it reveals that researchers with higher education but no archival experience cannot adequately search archival holdings and descriptions.

III. Combining Description and Processing

In 2005, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner proposed a unique method of description for archivists in their article, "More Product, less Process: Revamping Traditional Archives Processing."²⁷ Here, Greene and Meissner use description and process interchangeably, arguing that the two are synonymous. This theory seeks to streamline archival work so that materials are processed much more quickly to both eliminate backlog and make more materials accessible to users. Greene and Meissner contend that while the profession has collectively denied it, archivists usually practice item-level description, as indicated by excessive backlog and the low amount of processing accomplished annually. Greene and Meissner further their argument by supporting the opening statement by Richard Cox: that users and their research should be the central purpose of archival practice.

To better serve their users, they argue for maximum accessibility, stating, "The point of good description is to both reflect and explain the intellectual arrangement of the materials...so that users can efficiently determine whether any materials may interest them."²⁸ The MPLP theory is supported by a list of studies as well as multiple sources of research, further solidifying the change in paradigm for archival practice. Their description decisions suggest that archivists can change how they

27. Mark A, Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archives Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–263, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294290>.

28. Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 245.

describe to accomplish as little processing as possible, while making collections more accessible for their users.

In “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing model at the University of Montana,” Donna McCrea implements the MPLP theory in the University of Montana archives and documents her success in the university archives under this method.²⁹ McCrea fully advocates for MPLP, namely because it eliminates the chance for archivists to insert their own biases in description, which then gives researchers more objective finding aids for their research. She admits that the theory has been effective in practice, but the project is still in its early stages. McCrea also voices her support for Encoded Archival Description, where users can comment on online finding aids, as well. While McCrea’s study is only one instance of the MPLP theory in practice, she thoroughly anticipates any criticisms and responds to these issues with unique and honest views. In McCrea’s words, she has been “rediscovering a fundamental principle of archival processing.”³⁰ The small study conducted at the University of Montana provides an enlightening real-world approach to minimal processing in archival description.

In “Archives of the People, by the People, for the People,” Max Evans proposes a redefinition of the ways that archivists do description, as well.³¹ While he advocates for Greene and Meissner’s theory, his own practice of minimal description is rather unique. Evans suggests that archivists accomplish mass digitization so that all users have access to archival holdings. Rather than describing collections or individual items, he believes archivists should digitize items by request and give researchers the actual product they request online. Doing so will allow archivists to eliminate

29. Donna E. McCrea, “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 284-290, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294332>.

30. McCrea, “Getting More for Less,” 290.

31. Max J. Evans, “Archives of the People, by the People, for the People,” *The American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (2007): 387–400, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294576>.

the process of description and instead provide clear finding aids for their users alongside the simultaneous access to entire collections. This sounds applicable in theory; however, Evans does not consider the reasons for why archives currently do not operate in the manner. There are limitations in budget, labor, and means to digitize entire collections. While Evans' frustration with previous archival theory mirrors the opinions of other authors, his means of changing archival description seems unrealistically simple. Moreover, Evans argues for user-based decisions, but also proposes charging users for the first request of digitizing an item. This may be more unpopular for users he considers, especially considering the realization that most users are not professional researchers, but rather often amateurs such as students (in academic archives) or genealogists (in local archives), as we see in Freeman's study.

Conclusion

The central theme that connects the works reviewed here together is a desire for archivists to describe their archival materials with the needs of users in mind. While each article provides a distinct method for accomplishing this, we can see that current archivists are redefining archival theory to integrate a central goal of providing more understandable methods of description for a multiplicity of users. However, with the exception of Terry Cook's warning that archivists may be sacrificing quality for the masses, the literature presented does not consider using a critical eye towards this change. It incites worry of what questions or issues the authors are avoiding in their studies. However, despite Cook's article provides a much-needed reminder about the importance of meaning in the archives, it does seem that with the studies in the many types of archives on each kind of user, this move towards user-based decisions is a positive change for archival theory.

In "Observing Users: An Empirical Analysis of User Interaction with Online Finding Aids," Joyce Chapman acknowledges that there cannot be a set of standards that fits every archive. Nevertheless, individual archives—public, private, or academic—can adapt these standards for their

own use. While no one tactic of user studies or archival description will fit each archive, archivists can adjust the approach to fit their methods. One of the most promising and unique theories is minimal processing, or MPLP; although its practice has not had widespread documentation, the current literature surrounding the change in archival theory is optimistic, indicating that archives are changing their practices, not only with the technologies that they utilize, but also with the users they hope to serve.

The most beneficial future studies in archival description surrounding user-based decisions would be those that evaluate user opinions on the minimal description of materials. Because archivists give only brief descriptions, it will be up to the user to sift through the collections for possible relevant information, which may hinder the research process. Further, Cook's fear of an archive that seeks to please every user by giving them instant, short-answer results is one of merit. It would be useful for the profession if future studies analyzed how usage of the archives evolves with the varying behaviors of research in users.

While archives would profit most from redefining their role in a society that is changing how it views and accesses information, it is critical for the profession to remain true to its central principles. Such principles include deciding what materials to preserve for society as well as making those materials accessible to users in their research. If archivists keep the balance between their user needs and their responsibility of the information, they will remain relevant and vital members of our information culture.

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