

Old Myths in New Clothes: Expectations of Archives Users

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article aborde la question du service offert au public par les dépôts d'archives dans un nouvel environnement informatique alors que l'Internet multiplie les attentes de la clientèle. Il traite de l'importance de garder une distance objective pour analyser le potentiel réel des archives dans cet univers informatique. On discute d'abord de l'accès à distance aux documents d'archives dans leur contexte historique pour passer ensuite en revue le marketing destiné à promouvoir l'accès informatique, effort dont les messages ne sont pas totalement nouveaux et encore moins désintéressés. On suggère toutefois de repenser minutieusement la place des services d'archives au sein de ce marché de l'information. L'auteure soutient que la multiplication des technologies de l'ordinateur et des communications crée des opportunités sans précédent aux archives en permettant d'élargir la clientèle – tout en demeurant fidèles aux valeurs essentielles – à la condition que l'on rejoigne ces nouveaux usagers et ces fureteurs occasionnels du cyber-espace qui errent sans autre objectif défini que celui d'explorer. Les dépôts d'archives peuvent occuper un créneau spécial au sein de ce marché croissant de l'information électronique en portant une attention particulière à la création de services pouvant répondre à tous ces niveaux d'intérêt et de connaissance. Des études de clientèle et des outils de recherche appropriés permettront des ajustements du service au public, changements non plus laissés au hasard mais réalisés sur la base d'une planification réfléchie.

ABSTRACT This article discusses public service issues for archives within the new electronic environment, given a clientele increasingly conditioned, in particular, by expectations raised by the Internet. The article suggests the importance of standing back objectively to analyze the true potential of archives in an electronic world. It begins by discussing access to archives material from remote sites within its historical context and briefly reviews market promotion surrounding electronic access, suggesting that its messages are neither totally new nor entirely disinterested. It suggests, however, that we carefully rethink archives' place in an information marketplace. The author contends that the proliferation of computer and communications technologies provide an unprecedented opportunity for archives to extend our client base (while remaining true to core values) – providing that we reach out to new clients, including even casual visitors roaming cyberspace without a set purpose beyond exploration. Archives may secure a special niche in the growing market of electronic information if careful attention is paid to designing services catering to the many levels of interest and knowledge. User studies and effective research tools will make service adjustments matters less of chance than purposeful planning.

The description for the conference session at which this paper was originally presented depicts archives in the future as marginal, outmoded resources, largely uncompetitive with other information providers and condemned by their own methods to fall short in meeting the needs of their users.¹ Although technology is not directly accused, it would not be wrong to identify it as one source of our current ennui. But is this gloomy prospect a new script just waiting to be played? Or is it, in reality, an updated version of the familiar scenario in which it is assumed that conflicting demands and distinctions exist between select services for an elite clientele and popular appeal and services for the many? Before suggesting possible action for the future, I will begin by returning to the past to understand the context for the current situation. Many no doubt can recall the surprised looks of new visitors to archives – a surprise sometimes expressed by seasoned users as well as novices – when they discovered that all its vast holdings were not on microfilm! In the 1960s microfilm was touted as providing wider access to information as well as solving storage burdens created by hard copy records by greatly reducing the volume and space these occupied. Microfilming, in fact, became a kind of mania, infecting even normally sober administrators, who bought and used the technology without much careful consideration. We all have seen examples of office applications for microfilm – cancelled cheques, even time reports – which were apparently implemented without the benefit either of planning or costing. Miniaturizing records through micro reformatting remained popular with administrators for some time although, with more years of experience, came discrimination in its application. And of course it is a technology still in use today for special purposes.

In the 1980s the computer quickly replaced microfilming as the preferred alternative to paper, largely because film was solely a technology for duplicating material, while computers integrated many office functions with electronic communications and created a greatly improved ability to analyze and use information sources. The shift from film to computers underscored again the claims that technology can make access to information easy, instant, and tangible. Many knowledgeable people are convinced that digital technology is a prime solution to the age old problem of access to archives, in the past inhibited largely by costs of travelling to archives, of duplicating unique documents, or of distributing multiple hard copy products. There are unspoken corollaries to many propositions about digital records. One important notion is that information which is not accessible electronically is worthless. Another is that information in older formats is a prisoner of unenlightened custodians who have wilfully declined to get aboard the electronic bandwagon.

The status of information in our society is heightened by new digital technologies. A recent cartoon in the *New Yorker* featured a perplexed household pet, poised indecisively between three bowls: which to tackle first? what nourishment to consume? the food, the water, or the information? This dog's quan-

dary speaks to modern circumstances in which information is as necessary to business as are food, water, and shelter to life. Of course, information has always been an important resource, but it is only recently, with the spread of computers, that the concept of information has saturated our culture. The realities of digital records-making are combining with market hype to generate new versions of the standard myth that technology will solve the problems of information work.

The belief that computers will pave the way to democratic and instant access to information is perhaps widespread, but this credo is not universal. Knowledgeable commentators express concern about misinformation about information, some of which is innocently propagated, but some a wilful campaign by commercial interests. William Miller's "Point of view" in the 1 August issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* takes aim at three myths: that all information is now available electronically; that all information is available free somewhere on the web if only you are clever enough to find it; and that libraries and librarians, including archivists, are unnecessary. Miller, as president of the Association of College and Research Libraries, could be considered to be biased. However, it is not only those with a vested interest in current information services who are techno sceptics. Recent articles in the *Globe and Mail* express a deepening concern, as one title expressed it, about the fate of "People Who Slip Through the Net."² These include most of the inhabitants of the third world who will probably never have the same level of access to information technologies as populations in developed countries. Along the same line, Andrew Nikiforuk's "The Digerati are Bluffing," exposes the fallibility of the argument that more computers means better education.³

Last summer the Archives and Archivists listserve exchanged tales about users' expectations for access raised by the computer and its commonly perceived potential.⁴ Consider these assumptions about computers and access selected from the series of whingeing exchanges. "Why, given our technology, are all of those records [read land records, birth records, vertical files] not yet on the internet?" Or "I hear that Harvard has digitized everything they own." Or "What is the web address for Eagle River, population 32?" Or "Can't you just tap into the database and give me everything on ... ?"⁵ Archivists' frustrations in dealing with these misconceptions are legitimate and understandable. But it is crucial that the energy behind our concern not dissipate in complaining. Whether we take a main road into the future or pursue a byway depends very much on how we come to terms with the many visionary ideas to which the internet has given birth. First we need to disconnect the hype that surrounds the business of "getting connected" from the legitimate expectations that the net encourages. The many varieties of myth surrounding information technology contain a core of reality for users and for archives. I see at least four real issues that archives should consider – and consider sooner rather than later.

The first question is a conceptual one. How do we understand the place of archives within an economy increasingly dependent on information products which are bought and sold, consumed, and replaced like commodities? Should we change our core values and beliefs about archives, rejecting these as ideas about information which were formed in another era? Should we start thinking in terms of information commerce? Should we explore the theories of market place economics as appropriate intellectual frameworks for discussing archives and their management? Should our traditional assumptions about records be adjusted to bring these into line with the forces of an information market?⁶

The second question is practical – how can archives provide remote services to users? This question is not new. Many archives developed special programmes to increase their accessibility; the diffusion of finding aids and records on microfilm and the creation of education packages for schools are two reasonably familiar examples. But digital technology allows us to consider new initiatives. Some archives are now providing a partial range of reference services electronically. In the fullness of time it is entirely likely that remote access to documents will be demanded: we must soon be planning for the eventuality. This leads to a third question – how can archives increase the number of their users or visitors without, at the same time, swamping their resources? This, in turn, raises a fourth question – how can we get a fix on the real wants and needs of users and cater for these through the archival services we provide in the future?

First I would like to deal with archives in an information economy. Although there are many avenues within the economic model which warrant exploration, I will only point to several areas. First of all, we must ask ourselves, what kind of commodity are archives? As might be expected, there are a number of possible concepts of the archives which we could possibly employ. We might see them as durable, lasting, even permanent goods. Adopting this view would suggest that we see archives as enduring fixtures in our culture. By contrast, another possible idea is that archives should be viewed as perishable items which, within their limited life span, are either left unused or consumed. The old and leftovers are then regularly discarded in favour of other, more “relevant” information which better meets society’s immediate needs. The idea of archives as a product which is sometimes used, sometimes not, seems to fit the notion of socially contingent value which underpins accession reviews and archival ideas of re-appraisal.

Perhaps more subtly, appraisal methods grounded on well articulated needs for documentation, whether these are immediate needs, more enduring organizational needs, or the more traditional requirements of a broad research community, assume that what has precedence is the subject or object to be documented. This issue, as well, deserves exploration. By contrast, another view reverses this polarity: it is the web of documents and their relationships

which have priority, their meaning being fixed by their origins. To phrase this philosophical distinction another way, the subject contents of records provide windows into their context rather than context being a framework for understanding the records and their relationships.

A final example of an issue warranting exploration is drawn from political philosophy and its concept of social resources. Some social resources are allocated to society for consumption. Others, by contrast, are protected as capital goods. Information resources are understood to belong within this latter category and, in the best of worlds, to be common to – belong to – society as a whole because they are fundamental to the proper functioning of democracy. In line with this train of thinking, the Australian archivist, Frank Upward, following the resource model of sociologist Anthony Giddens, suggests that we should promote the authoritative value of archives as fundamental to social well-being, hence their status as communal rather than allocatable resources. There is much to recommend this view of archives in an information economy because it recognizes that archives' special nature as evidence, much of it critical, warrants protection.⁷

I want now to turn to the second issue, a practical one of delivery of archival services to users. Whether we decide to see archives as information commodities or as more durable social resources, whether we regard them as information valued in the markets of popularity, or whether, by contrast, we continue to see them as more fundamental instruments of law and action in broad human activity and institutional administration, we must in all cases consider carefully how we can best deliver our archival goods to all users. This decision is imperative if archives are to participate in the growing reality of digitization and electronic communications. But who are these users? Certainly that category must include people who are already regular consumers of our services – genealogists, students, academics, public servants. Users could also legitimately include other, potential clients, for example, people working in broadcast networks and new cultural industries.⁸ Or there may be a whole new type of user we have rarely encountered in the past, a recreational visitor who comes to us electronically, perhaps to tour our site or ask a question of us electronically. In fact, in the future all categories of user, real and virtual, actual and potential, need to be factored into our public service equation.

But what should these services be and how can they be best delivered? The theme of archives public services was explored at the Association of Canadian Archivists meeting in Banff in 1991. I recall one session devoted to the new phenomenon called “instancy” – or the demand for quick delivery of small bits of information – and the difficulties that archives have in serving the “one minute researcher.”⁹ There is now even more pressures on archives to compete in a race to deliver information goods – a competition, many argue, is futile because archives are bound to loose. By its nature, archives consist of information bound to its origin; consequently, the foremost imperative in ser-

vice must be to deliver this information with key contextual attributes preserved and knowledge of its origins adequate, understandable, and accessible. Uniting data to context may be easy to say, but it is difficult to achieve quickly, compactly, and seamlessly so that information is actually delivered to the user whole and intact.¹⁰

It is well to remember that the problem of delivering information in context is not new. What is new now are demands to provide access to archives equitably to all users on-site and remotely. Technology deepens our long-standing problem. Users' expectations are more and more conditioned by their experiences on the internet and in libraries, most of which are highly automated. The assumption that a reply to a question or communication will be instant, or at the very least speedy, is a reality of the information environment in which archives must live. Unfortunately, the surface similarities between many different information providers supports expectations that archives too shall become a "McDonalds of information" as Terry Cook famously described a new fast food vision of archives at Banff. Technology may contribute to unreasonable expectations, although no one seriously suggests that it will ever replace the traditional elements in user service. However, technology can also support client service by allowing us to deliver more of our services on-line and off-site.

An example will illustrate this point. A recent study of e-mail reference service at one archives reported a growth in use, generally with beneficial results for both the archives and their clients.¹¹ For the past eighteen months the Centre for Research in Information Studies at the University of Toronto has been operating a toll free national 1-800 number for reference to health and medicine archives. Associated with the telephone service is a small web-site. Both the low and high tech options have proved effective in delivering reference on demand. The 1-800 number receives an average of twenty calls a month, of which there are, on average, eight to ten requests for in-depth reference. The web-site has provided some very interesting and unexpected results. It is visited regularly by what I call "accidental users," people attracted by the name or by curiosity alone. Many visits, of course, are mistakes, but the majority are intentional. The experience of other archives with web-sites and software that track requests and visits, confirms the phenomena. People visit electronic archives sites for many reasons and one of them is site browsing for its own sake.

All of these findings suggest that archives have the potential to be highly visible properties on the information highway. While we may not want to be seen as the "memory drive-thrus," we need to make our heritage property accessible, interesting, intriguing, and intelligible to the visitor and not just to seasoned habitués. We are beginning to exploit technology to cater to the needs of customary users – the academic, the public servant, the genealogist. The development of the Canadian Archives Information Network (CAIN) is

an important step in this process because CAIN will provide a gateway for users to access finding-aids and documents. But the web phenomenon should perhaps also prompt us to consider other types of service. How do we exploit our prime real estate on the "information highway" to attract people who have never been direct consumers of our products? Archives do not have a monopoly on memory – Hollywood and its films and other sources of remembrance and nostalgia play their own large parts – but we do have a unique memory, one that is woven into the fabric of Canadian society, a memory that is not mediated directly by big cultural industries – only indirectly through research-based cultural products such as books and documentaries. Institutional archives in both the public and private sectors provide a multiplicity of views on our world. Collectively this is our great strength as an information source.

Moving on from opportunities provided by information technologies, I want to consider the issue of what users – both the intentional user and accidental visitor – want and need from archives. How can we find out? How can we differentiate want from need? These questions raise philosophical issues suggesting the need to discuss our roles not just as purveyors of a commodity but as teachers and educators in society. But perhaps even more basically, we are brought up against issues of process and method. A tried and true way to tackle at least some questions about services is to invite those being served to participate in its assessment. This is not an uncommon tactic in business, government, and information organizations, particularly in libraries. Archives, however, generally lag behind in this area – largely, I feel, because formal studies require considerable time and resources. Registration and reference interviews are common in archives, but the results of experience are not readily accessible in published form. It has not been customary for us to share our analyses of our clients – who they are, what they use, and what they want.

Beyond the problem of lack of access to the fruits of these more informal user studies is the larger question of the appropriate method or methods for studying our users and their requirements. Formal user studies are neither easy to conceptualize nor simple and inexpensive to do. Initially there is always the need to establish the scope of the study and, in the light of the needs that have been identified, determine the right evidence to answer the questions posed. Ultimately, there is no guarantee that assessments will lead to better services or to different ideas. Several large studies of archives users have been funded in the past ten years, the largest being Paul Conway's project at the National Archives in the United States, published in 1995 as *Partners in Research*.¹² As well, in 1996–97, I undertook a national survey focusing on users of health and medicine archives to assess their needs for a guide to primary sources in health care history.¹³ The future potential for such studies is endless; one possible topic is exploration of users' preferences regarding how information is displayed in electronic finding aids – a good project given the archives community's investment in RAD.¹⁴ One such study has already been taken.

However, I am convinced that we need not always consider large studies as the preferred model; these are time consuming and expensive. Smaller projects can deliver useable results and are within the current capability and resources of most archives, regardless of size and budget. It seems to me that measuring gives a common meaning to the experience of diverse users. No service organization can escape the imperative to measure – how many served, how big the job, how long did it take, how high the turnover, and so on. This suggests that one fruitful way to address the needs and wants of users is by measuring the level of satisfaction for services received. Gauging satisfaction allows us to combine numbers with qualitative measures based on reactions to a service which is in place.¹⁵ This produces sound evaluation of services and places the process of program revision or redesign on a firm footing by enlisting users' input on what they can best testify to – their direct, personal experience and satisfaction. This approach allows archives to make substantive, practical adjustments in service based on concrete evidence. The impact of any new service will be better understood if measures for satisfaction are built into service delivery processes. One possibility might be short questionnaires built into call slips (or other types of order forms) which are then completed and returned by users.

Clearly, my conclusions run counter to the scenario of growing marginality for archives in the future. But confidence in the continuing relevance of archives should not be construed as counselling the *status quo*. The speed and saturation of information technologies, specifically the Internet and world wide web, may overtake the traditional values of archives in society by securing and exploiting the past as a source for more purely entertainment goals. In the electronic future there is all the more need to promote the unique quality of archives vigorously and confidently as information in context. The Internet and the web provide us with a golden opportunity to serve our traditional users more fully, providing services that are no longer dependent on mail, phone, or direct access to archives facilities and that can assist users in remote locations. But resting there will realize only a small part of the potential of information technologies. Web-sites will draw many "accidental users" and if we manage their visits well, we may convert them into regular visitors and we may realize our larger goal of education. Electronic service may unleash the power of archives as many faceted social memory by directly reaching thousands, perhaps even millions, in web-based exhibits which explain and interpret the past of our people, our communities, and our nation.

Notes

* This article has been revised from a paper delivered to the invitational conference, "Archives and Their Public: New Ways, New Approaches," 1 November 1997.

1 "Archives Practices in Serving Researchers," Session 4 "Archives and Their Public."

2 Doug Saunders, "People Who Slip Through the Net," *Globe and Mail* (22 August 1997).

- 3 Andrew Nikiforuk, "The Digerati are Bluffing," *Globe and Mail* (4 October 1997).
- 4 The posting to the discussion list, *Archives and Archivists* included the following topics: "WWW Patron Inquiry," "End user searching and EAD," "7/97 Web Site Survey – Medium Long," "Manuscript Use Studies," and "References Services – Common Complaint."
- 5 Also see "electronic/digital expectations," a series of postings on the *Archives and Archivists* list in the late summer of 1997.
- 6 I am grateful to a reviewer for directing my attention to Mark Brogan's "Regulation and the Market: a Micro-Economic Analysis of Strategies for Electronic Archives Management," *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 2 (1994), pp. 384–94. Brogan's discussion of economic theory suggests a new perspective on archives functions. Its implications are less developed than Frank Upward's exploration of archives which was conceived, using as its model, sociologist Anthony Giddens's structuration theory of society. Nevertheless, it bears discussion largely because of the dominance of economic ideas in the expanding information business.
- 7 See for example, Frank Upward and Sue McKemish, eds., *Recordkeeping for accountability* (1994), pp. 7, 47–48.
- 8 The strong showing of new channels dedicated to biography and history should alert us to the heightened need to educate the public, vigorously and vocally, on the differences between the nature of authority in archives and the nature of authority in the artistic creation of author, editor, or promoter.
- 9 See Terry Cook, "Viewing the World Upside Down: Reflections on the Theoretical Underpinnings of Archives Public Services," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91), pp. 123–34.
- 10 See Barbara L. Craig, "What Are the Clients? Who Are the Products?" The Future of Archives Public Services in Perspective," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91), pp. 135–41.
- 11 The e-mail reference survey was posted to the discussion list *Archives and Archivists* under the heading "E-mail reference questionnaire (long)," 4 May 1997.
- 12 Paul Conway, *Partners in Research* (Pittsburgh, 1995).
- 13 The survey asked the history of medicine community for information about their use of existing guides and their preferences for information in any future new guides or research tools. See "What Research Tools do Historians of Canadian Medicine Use? What Do They Want and Need for the Future? Report and Analysis of a Survey, 1996–1997," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* (in press 1998).
- 14 A research study of users' preferences in the display of archival description was recently undertaken by Wendy Duff of the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto. [See the article by Wendy Duff and Penka Stoyanova, "Transforming the Crazy Quilt: Archival Displays from a Users' Point of View," in this issue of *Archivaria* – Ed.]
- 15 Fred R. Reenstjerna, 17 September 1997 posting to the discussion list *Archives and Archivists* concerning adept/inert service and satisfied/dissatisfied searchers.