

A FUTURE WITHOUT MEDIATION? ONLINE ACCESS, ARCHIVISTS, AND THE FUTURE OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

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Since the 1990s, the availability of online finding aids and digitised surrogates of original records has changed the landscape of archival research. Progress towards the virtual reading room has been uneven and sometimes contentious. Digitisation is portrayed either as the answer for the future of access to archives or, conversely, as a threat to traditions of rigorous research using primary sources. The roles of the reference function in archives and the reference archivist have changed with the advent of digitisation and Web 2.0 technologies, but how are institutions and archivists responding to these challenges? And how can reference archivists serve the new and old research paradigms simultaneously? This paper discusses the impact of online access to finding aids and archival records on users, archivists and institutions through a review of the literature.

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The increasing availability of archives online, including digitised copies of analogue originals, has meant significant changes in the ways users access the archival records they seek for their research. There are several issues in play here, including user expectations of instant and successful online searching, the difficulties for users in locating and using online archival records, and the reality of ‘uneven progress’ through digitisation programs to a predominantly online world of archives. Another less frequently acknowledged issue is the impact of changed access methods and preferences from users on the archivists who deliver reference services. Traditionally, reference archivists have played a critical role in mediating between users and the materials they wish to use. As Jane Stevenson notes, their users are increasingly accessing materials without making physical visits to the archives, but archivists remain focused

on the 'physicality of documents' and the attendant processes that make them available. This tension is compounded by the reality that many areas of research still rely on use of physical materials (2008: 91). In Australia, archival institutions generally continue to be concerned very much with physical holdings, although increasingly they are balancing this with managing digital surrogates produced by projects to digitise analogue records (Archives Survey, 2007). Sophisticated solutions for managing born digital records have been developed, for example, Xena by the National Archives of Australia and VERS by Public Record Office Victoria. And there are digital-only archives ranging in size, complexity, and archival input (Pymm, 2010).

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between online access, archivists, and the practice of archival research based on a review of the literature. It considers whether mediation is still required, whether reference practice needs to change, and whether archival institutions are adapting to provide services that fit changing patterns of research use. Its focus is on the work of archivists and hence it does not discuss the role of online family history services provided by genealogical organisations, nor the impact of WikiLeaks as a phenomenon of mediated access to records.

OUTLINING THE PROBLEM

In this paper, archival research means accessing and using original records, created by organisations or individuals and placed under archival control, as sources for intellectual enquiry. This definition does not prescribe the place in which research occurs. It also acknowledges that such research may take place in research libraries, museums and other institutions that house archives but may not be labelled or primarily identified as archival institutions. Archival research in the physical world of archives has been an interactive process involving remote and face-to-face contact between researchers and archivists (Duncan, 1990; Duff, 2010; Cox, 2007). Archival reference services encompassed serving distant users through the provision of written and telephone enquiry services, long before the advent of email (Cox, 2007). Mail and telephone services were critical because of the unique nature of archives, whereby particular records are held in a single physical location. They were essential for users who needed answers to such simple questions as 'do you have the records I wish to use?', when published guides to holdings were often in short supply and before the advent of online databases and other online finding aids. In her comprehensive exploration of the role of mediation in archival reference, Wendy Duff emphasises that this role has hitherto involved providing information about and from archives (2010: 115). In corporate archives settings, the expectation has usually been that the archivist will undertake the research for the organisation rather than point the internal enquirer to the finding aids or the records (Adkins & Benedict, 2011). The discussion of the issues of mediation and the user experience of online access to archives that follows focuses on public access to public records, although not exclusively so.

THE ACTIVITY OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

The traditional image of the activity of archival research is of the academic historian using the physical holdings of government or private archives or manuscript libraries for historical research leading to publication. However, this is a stereotype, and historians were and are not the only users of archives for research (Berzins, 2007: 315-317; ASA & CAARA, 2007). They were the pre-eminent group who no longer dominate the user statistics of many archives. Family historians are now the single largest user group in many archives (ASA & CAARA, 2007). Their information needs and their research practices are often different from those of academic historians. The apparent divergence of the needs of these two groups and how reference archivists should provide services to different user groups will be explored later in this paper.

Online access involves access to online information about archives (through websites, finding aids, and catalogues), as well as access to digitised surrogates of physical materials and to born-digital archives. (Duff, 2010). The report of the joint survey by the Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA) and the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) also noted 'Reading room and remote user services are more common than website services' and 'Websites are more likely to hold service information and catalogues, and offer research enquiry services, than provide archival content'. (ASA & CAARA, 2007: 54).

MEDIATION IN ARCHIVES REFERENCE WORK

The dictionary definition of mediation that most closely characterises the role of the archivist in supporting and enabling archival research says: 'Agency or action as an intermediary; the state or fact of serving as an intermediate agent, a means of action, or a medium of transmission; instrumentality' (Oxford English Dictionary). Mediation as practised by archivists providing reference services includes a range of activities designed to assist researchers to locate archival sources they wish to use for their research (Duff, 2010). It is, however, important to note that reference is not the only archival activity that involves mediation. As Pymm notes, there is mediation in the creation of archives, especially subject and topic-based ones (2010).

Mediation includes the reference interview, question negotiation, defining and refining search strategies, interpreting finding aids, and providing advice about tools and services (Pugh, 2005). 'Providing advice' can include providing assistance and training in how to use local finding aids, direct advice on 'what you need to look at', and suggesting alternative sources if the desired records are not held. Archival mediation that enables the researcher to find and use original records in their research implies the establishment of a relationship of trust, as described by Ciaran Trace, '[t]he concepts of reciprocity and confidence are factors that help establish a successful and effective relationship between an arch and researcher during the reference process' (2006: 139).

Archival mediation is a multifaceted activity and has complex characteristics that help emphasise the difference in the pre-online world between library and archives reference practice. Duff (2010) summarises the literature on the various challenges facing researchers who want to access archives and the related challenges facing archivists in trying to satisfy researcher needs and requests.

They include archives being disorganised or unique to each institution, and the problems of often lacking finding aids and of user unfamiliarity with archives. These challenges can be broadly divided into two groups of factors – those relating to the nature of the materials and their management and those more closely related to interactivity between user and the archivist. Both groups help to explain why mediation was critical to archival research – for researchers to understand what they were doing and to find what they wanted and for archivists to discharge their responsibilities as service providers. The location-derived specificity of archival reference practice and the uniqueness of the institutional context as well as the content of the records have also been identified as key qualities of archival mediation (Oetting, 1996). Then there is the notion of the archivist as the indispensable guide to the records (Chalou, 1984; NCCPH, 1989). This view is encapsulated by the Canadian writer and researcher Susan Crean who has written ‘...the real treasures are the archivists, the clue givers. ... The more complex your project, the further off the beaten track you stray, the more likely that you will depend on them’ (2011).

ARCHIVAL REFERENCE PRACTICE IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD

The reference interview is considered the cornerstone of archival reference work. It is critical to finding out what researcher wants to know, to finding the question behind the question and to starting the process often identified as ‘translating’ user subject-based queries into contextual (or provenance-based) search strategies (Pugh, 2005). Standard texts and reference practice manuals emphasise the importance of interviewing new researchers and portraying the reference interview as the key to a successful research experience (Pugh, 2005: 112-132; Yakel, 1994: 48). The pressure of dealing with users as customers is also acknowledged, including knowing how much or how little help to offer (Jeremy, Woodley & Kupke, 2008; Chalou, 1984). Overwork can lead to burnout (Kepley, 1989). Face-to-face archival reference work shares some of the characteristics of library instructional work identified as emotional labour by Julien & Genius (2009). Reference archivists thus need to combine their knowledge of holdings and institutional rules and policies with customer service skills in the physical archives world.

ONLINE ACCESS AND ITS IMPACT ON ARCHIVAL REFERENCE PRACTICE

Online access to finding aids and to records themselves has been a reality since the 1990s (Cox, 2007; Duff, 2010), but archival reference practice seems to have shifted slightly and slowly rather than significantly. Pugh notes the changes have been revolutionary rather than evolutionary, highlighting two important elements

of change, that the reference experience 'is no longer predicated on interaction between the user and the archivist' and that researchers now independently find information and records online (2005: 3). Pugh further notes that the Internet, with its promise of instantaneous access wherever you are and whenever you like requires archivists to better understand the information needs and research methods of their users (2005: 4). This is not a particularly new insight, as the Canadian archival theorist Hugh Taylor long ago predicted that archivists in a networked age would have to become more oriented to the user and learn to adapt to new technology to meet researcher needs (Cox, 2007).

Over the last two decades some larger archival institutions have made significant progress in the transition towards online access, from initial efforts to put finding aids online to providing access to the results of major projects to digitise high-use, high-demand physical records. One such example is the National Archives of Australia (NAA), which began by putting its item level Access Register (ANGAM) online, then moved to RINSE, then to the current RecordSearch and related tools, with digitised content such as the World War I service dossiers (Ling & McLean, 2004). Some archival organisations have moved to articulate policies that reflect the demands online access makes on their provision of services to the public. For example, in late 2010, CAARA published a 'Statement of principle: Online access to public records', designed to guide its members in providing access to the different types of information, including digitised records, they now make available online to the public. This document recognises that sensitivity of content needs to be considered and states 'Only records that are on open and unrestricted access should be made available online' (CAARA, 2010a).

ONLINE ACCESS AND ARCHIVES USERS

Paul Macpherson traces the history of public access to government archives. He is concerned with the social context and the economics of providing access to archives. Importantly for Macpherson, digitised records are more accessible than physical records produced for use in a reading room. His critique is in part based on an analysis of the relative spending by NAA on the two forms of access, where online access effectively cost one fifth of the amount spent on providing and maintaining reading rooms (2010: 64-65). Macpherson also advocates the view that a fundamental shift towards online access is required in the interests of equity. On the other hand, Crean disputes the notion of digitisation being 'an agent of equality', arguing that '...it is not really value-free' (2011). Paul Dalglish argues for a nuanced approach to online access, highlighting the tension between the drive to provide undifferentiated online access and the need to protect people whose personal information may be released to all (2011).

Along with other writers such as Cross, 1997 (cited by Cox, 2007), Macpherson warns of the danger of remote users being treated as second-class citizens and given second-class service. There are new types of user whose unfamiliarity with archives demands a response (Cox, 2007; Johnson, 2008), but this problem may be seen as a parallel to the unfamiliarity with using archives in the physical world argument (Duff, 2010). There is another important parallel with the pre-digital age. It has long been accepted that a large proportion of physical archival records

will remain on the shelves never used by researchers (previous or predicted use not being salient selection factors for retaining archival records).

The cost of digitising archival materials has long been identified as a problem, for example in the National Library of Australia's experience of digitising the papers of Prime Minister Edmund Barton (Waring, 2001). A more recent report from the United States university archives sector shows that staff time is still an important element of digitisation costs and that taking a planned approach to digitisation based on user profiles, rather than an opportunistic discrete project approach, is still unusual (Bantin & Agne, 2010). For smaller archives, digitisation can mean direct competition between different program activities and more pressure on staff who undertake the full gamut of duties, not only reference or digitisation (ASA RAPPISIG, 2010). Additionally, there is evidence that user engagement before and after project completion enhances use of digitised materials, yet in many cases institutions have not consulted users in deciding priorities for digitisation. (Marchionni, 2009). It has also been noted that digitisation per se does not mandate that use will follow (Palmer, 2009).

Unhelpful websites and finding aids that have not been redesigned has been identified as a problem for users of online archives by several writers (Macpherson, 2010; Johnson, 2008; Greene, 2008). Crean considers that the Library and Archives Canada website is unsuitable for neophytes as users need some knowledge of archival terminology and no helpful glossary is provided (2011). Randall Jimerson explains that '...content made accessible on a website is privileged over the vast majority of archival records. Finding aids and digitised documents require context and reference guidance, which are difficult to provide on websites' (2009: 322). Macpherson perceives this problem almost as one of deliberate omission, whereby online users are denied the opportunity to access the deeper knowledge possessed by reference archivists (2010: 67). The National Archives (UK) provides an example of a transitional phase, where online users are encouraged to do their research without having to pay for downloads onsite at Kew (Cooper, 2008). Perhaps Duff's assessment that reference services that assist both onsite and remote users are essential before 'the promise of universal access to archival material' articulates the solution, if not the pathway, to addressing the problem of serving the full range of archives users (2010: 115).

IS DISINTERMEDIATION HERE YET?

Library provision of online sources during the last two decades or so has brought major change in the reference role of librarians in the direction of disintermediation (Thomsen, 1999). 'Disintermediation by Google' has been identified as an example of the wider phenomenon of 'everything is online or it doesn't exist' (Geser, 2004). While the ease of locating and using published content online for those who are able to access it (for example through university or public library subscriptions) has been a huge boon, disintermediation is not necessarily a universal solution for library users. In some instances, it has required corrective action by library staff, as Boyd-Byrnes and Rosenthal report from their study of distance education students (2008). For archives, disintermediation

can exacerbate the difficulties faced by online users (Butterworth in Johnson, 2008: 152). In reporting her work on digital archives users' behaviour, Johnson demonstrates that users need to do more than locate information in archives; they also need assistance to ask questions and make sense of their results. Her goal is to influence system design to incorporate evidence about how users actually use digital resources into new systems that will help professionals to provide the services that online archives users need (2008). Geser (2004) expresses an ambitious hope that machines will be able to replicate the experience of serendipity in archival research that derives from the physical proximity of users and reference services staff in reading rooms (Trace, 2006; Berzins, 2007; Crean, 2011). However, a continuing role for human interaction in providing reference services has been forecast (Borgman, 2007: 157; Millar, 2010: 191).

Statistics maintained by archival institutions show that unique visits to websites (which are assumed to be unmediated) now vastly outnumber visits to reading rooms, but the rise in the former is not necessarily inexorable. Together, CAARA's ten members reported a fifteen percent decline in unique visits to their websites from 2009 to 2010 (CAARA, 2010b: 2). Understanding more about online users might well require an explicit discussion of the meanings of the terms 'unique visits', 'use' and 'research'.

WEB 2.0 AND ARCHIVES USERS

Archives may have been slower to embrace the potential of Web 2.0 than libraries (Cox, 2007), but this does not mean that archivists do not welcome the possibilities offered by inviting users to contribute and collaborate to their previously exclusive efforts of producing finding aids and other reference tools. Some path-breaking archives exemplars of Web 2.0 projects are documented in the literature, notably the Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections Project (USA) (Yakel, Shaw & Reynolds, 2007), The National Archives (UK), Your Archives (Palmer, 2009), and National Archives of Australia's Mapping our Anzacs (Sherratt, 2009). In her study of Web 2.0 applications in university and college environments in the United States, Mary Samouelian finds a wealth of projects and a keenness by archivists to use blogs, wikis, podcasts, tagging, and file sharing to expand the range of online services offered to users (2009). Kate Theimer notes the role the new technologies can have for archives to become more effective in their advocacy efforts and thus to transcend the traditional disadvantage of low resources (2011). This optimism may be contrasted to the tentativeness expressed by many Australian archives who in 2007 nominated establishing or improving on existing modest online services as major challenges for the next five years (ASA & CAARA, 2007). Cox notes that archives need to be proactive in using new technologies and at the same time to be open to re-evaluating their attitudes to reference services and to users (2007).

CONCLUSION

What does the future of archival research look like? The fact of irreversible change seems to have been accepted, although some paint it more positively than

others. It seems as if there are multiple conversations happening: one advising caution about abandoning mediation, one warning that access online needs to remember issues of sensitivity in the content of records, and another exploring and encouraging the potential for a different future for archival research in an online world. Stevenson (2008: 91) supports a continuing role for mediation in the provision of physical reading room services. Dalglish (2011) documents how policies need to be developed to protect people about whom records contain material of enduring sensitivity in a world where online access is the norm not the exception. Macpherson (2010) argues for a new paradigm based on free access to archives online, arguing that digital access should be considered the public good and physical access the privilege. Palmer (2009) considers that the adoption of new technologies needs to be accompanied by a shift towards 'a philosophy that privileges the user and promotes an ethos of sharing, collaboration and openness'. Pymm (2010) emphasises the need to welcome users and relax traditional curatorial, authorial control. Cox (2007) thinks the public understanding of archives has changed and like Pugh (2005) sees that providing access needs to happen earlier than it has previously done.

Will the future of archival research be a disintermediated one? Not yet would seem to be the answer. Larger archives will need to change their mindsets, as well as their reference service practices to meet the needs of different user groups. Small archives will continue to rely on mediation to deliver reference services. More research is needed to determine whether new content is leading to new uses of archives. Mediation will continue, but will need to adapt along with areas in archives practice as institutions refashion and renegotiate their relationships with users not just in the reference context, but also in others, such as the selection of records for digitisation and the appraisal process.

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