

Chapter 18

Hooligans in the Archives: Easing Restrictions and Partnering with the Users

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ABSTRACT

Archival reference has changed dramatically with the advent of the Web, which challenged archivists to rethink their role as gatekeepers of archival materials. Traditionally, archival reference tools and materials were difficult to gain access to or required mediation by archivists. Archivists moved from gatekeepers to innovators, by putting reference tools and digital surrogates of collections online. But as with any new step, there are challenges. The traditional archival tension in trying to balance access and preservation has morphed. As access has changed, preservation concerns have given way to control concerns. Archivists are now poised to take the next step by engaging the users, sharing control over collections, and potentially empowering the users to become true partners in the reference and research experience.

INTRODUCTION

Online access has radically changed the nature of archival reference. In a few short years archivists moved from a traditional framework of controlled access of archival reference tools and collections

to a new mindset of making materials more accessible online. With the onset of digitization, archivists debated whether they should make digital surrogates of collections available online since it was counter to their traditional role as gatekeeper to collections. Archivists worried that the online world would inhibit their ability to maintain the safety and intellectual control of the original items.

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Archivists soon learned that digitization helped protect collections from frequent handling while allowing them to reach a worldwide audience. With some preservation concerns subsiding, focus shifted into control concerns.

Over time, there has been increasing pressure to make more collections available online and allow more user interaction. In this new climate archivists need to balance their traditional concerns of maintaining physical and intellectual control over their collections with the changing nature of user expectations and curation of digital objects and collections. Users are demanding and expecting increased access to and interactivity with the collections. Archivists now need to expand their approach and create tools to empower users to find, use, and engage the archives.

BACKGROUND OF ARCHIVAL REFERENCE

Prior to the Internet, archival reference was typically a one on one, personal interaction that was highly controlled. Archivists served as the gatekeepers of archival materials. While providing reference assistance to researchers, archivists knew who, when, and for what purpose materials in their repositories were being used. Those interested in collections were typically required to physically visit the repository. During a visit, access to materials was mediated by archivists through special appointments, strict security, and supervised interaction with the materials. Rules and regulations helped archivists strike a balance between preservation of and access to archival materials. It is the archivists' duty to preserve archival materials to ensure our history can be researched and studied now as well as by future generations. The online environment has radically changed archival reference and the traditional role of archivist as gatekeeper by figuratively opening up the gates and allowing unmediated access to collections on the Web via digitization.

ARCHIVAL REFERENCE MOVING TO ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Early Development of Online Archival Reference Tools

With the advent of the Internet, archivists began to move print reference materials to the online environment. One of the first archival reference tools that moved online was the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC). NUCMC was created in 1958 to provide the location of and bibliographic information for manuscript collections. From 1959 to 1993, 29 volumes were printed and provided descriptions of approximately 72,300 collections in 1406 repositories (National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections [NUCMC], 2009). Researchers could go to their local library and page through the volumes of NUCMC to learn about manuscript collections throughout the country. Now available online, NUCMC has over 1.5 million records for archival and individual manuscripts and is available to the public for free through OCLC WorldCat (NUCMC, 2010). Moving this reference tool to an online environment allowed researchers to discover archival collections more easily; however the brief bibliographic information provides only a glimpse at the content contained in collections comprised of hundreds and even thousands of cubic feet of materials.

Finding aids are another example of a print reference tool used in archival repositories that moved to the Web. They describe the scope and provenance of collections and list the contents according to the physical arrangement of the collection. Typically finding aids were available in the reading room and were used as a starting point for the researcher and a means of controlling access to/preservation of the collection for archivists. A researcher would not have to browse through an entire collection to see what is contained within. Rather, they browse the finding aid and then request particular boxes. Some archives would

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