

# Perimeters with Fences? Or Thresholds with Doors? Two Views of a Border

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The Society of American Archivists annual meeting in Birmingham in late August 2002 featured a session reporting the results of three recent research projects investigating user communities and their experience in archives.<sup>1</sup> Expanded and revised papers from that session appear in this issue. Many readers may be tempted to ask, "Why all the fuss about users anyway?" And for some, the question is not merely rhetorical but points to a widespread concern. Investigating users in order to become more knowledgeable about their characteristics seems bound to be inherently unsatisfying from the start, especially for hard-working professionals who must choose to give priority attention to one need whose claim is just as real as another. Even in the best of times there is scant room for research that has no concrete target or guarantee of a usable return. The area covered by the idea of the uses of archives and their users is vast. Which user group would we choose? How could we classify their questions and topics in ways that would allow them to be profitably studied? Users don't come to archives wearing labels that reveal their predisposition, experience, true purpose, or knowledge. How then are we to describe them collectively in ways that provide information useful in serving them? Is there somewhere to be found an eponymous user whose experience might focus investigations?

Let us suppose that we were able to do such research and that it provided us with new information about users and their needs. The positive returns that might come from that hard-won new knowledge would be outweighed most likely by the costs to achieve it. Given the many real needs for resources, for preservation for example, expenditure on user studies would need to be justified by a clear likelihood of concrete returns. And even supposing that additional funds made research projects possible, if we were to do user studies, what real use would come from the information we would acquire? We already know that many users can have unrealistic expectations. The gap between what they want and frequently need, and the level of service we are able to offer may be

<sup>1</sup> This text was prepared as a commentary for that session, which was held on Saturday, 24 August 2002.

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very wide indeed. Why, then, should archives do user studies that may be fruitless and frustrating? Before beginning a study, where would archivists find the guarantees of success that they need?

These sentiments may not do full justice to the real barriers in the workplace that inhibit use and user studies, but they do echo faithfully many of the sentiments often expressed in conversations on the shop floor; and probably they are believed to be true, at least in substantial part. Why else have we taken so long to heed calls to explore this area? Certainly the archives literature in the past twenty years or so demonstrates persistent interest in the uses of archives and the needs of clients we recognize as being more than casual visitors. These many calls for user research have taken us to the shore of an intriguing pool, but not many yet have been persuaded to sample the water.

This reluctance to investigate the nature of our clientele and their needs for primary sources may be changing. The papers by Helen Tibbo, Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, and Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson show how valuable such research can be when it is methodically pursued to answer specific questions. Archivists are pragmatic, they want maximum value for their efforts, the one- or two-person operation perhaps even more so than those in larger shops. The most compelling reason these papers provide for studying use and users is the practical application of research to meet concrete institutional objectives.

Archives of whatever size allocate the resources they have according to their real needs and, if they are prudent, with a plan for their future. Multiyear plans and budgets are like concept designs for buildings—to be useful they should be crafted with a vision of how each facet supports the other. For example, most archives have developed techniques to relate their acquisitions to appraisal and preservation, but few have taken further steps to relate these functions to the use of their archives and to users who are their current and/or expected clientele.

The archival universe has three main points of reference: appraisal of records to determine what should be acquired and what should not come to the archives; preservation of records over a long term, far longer than the customary life span of such items; and making these records available for use and supporting users' access to them. Most would agree that these are the three key functions of any archival program. But not everyone agrees on where to place them in relationship to each other. Are they merely the points on a compass, describing directions, places, and things without a more profound relationship? Or are these better seen as points in a sequence of time, one necessarily preceding the other two? Does one aspect of our work naturally lead the other two—one at the cutting edge and the others following along in due course?

If we were to put this question in another way, what is the relationship that ties appraisal to preservation and use? What threads unite them? Do appraisal

and acquisition take precedence? Or, by contrast, should the archivist's first priority be the preservation of resources, acquisition being a way that this is done? Or should both be driven by the needs of those who use our resources? What is the point of spending time, talent, and treasure on appraisal, acquisition, and preservation if nothing is used? What if we don't acquire what the user wants? Is "society" the user, or are the individuals who visit our archives, tour our exhibits, and consult records the user? Whatever answer to these questions an archives may choose, all aspects of a program must be related in some systematic way if the main functions of an archives program are truly to support each other. Viewed from the perspective of long-term planning, use and user studies are not luxuries but rather practical necessities.

The papers by Tibbo, Yakel and Torres, and Duff and Johnson present the results of three separate research projects: the first two directed to historians (in the United States) and the third to genealogists (in Canada). These interests are among the most commonly pursued by users of archives. Each project used different tools to do the investigation and to collect data and analyze their main features. Diversity demonstrates not a lack of clarity in purpose, but rather the variety of methods that are available for such research and the data that can be acquired for analysis to advance our understanding of user behaviors. Although quantitative data is clearly important for describing movements from small to large and for pursuing statistically valid conclusions from numerate data, they are clearly not well suited to exploring individual experiences and reasons for personal preferences. Qualitative research has recently acquired popularity, and a number of software tools can locate patterns in large texts, lengthy narratives, and oral exchanges. Anecdotes are not data; but qualitative information has the advantage of illuminating attitudes, concerns, and experiences. These characteristics often better determine the quality of relationships with users than statistics of use or avoidance. The conclusions in these papers about the habits of archival research of historians and genealogists, collectively archives' most numerous clients, sparkle with implications for building stronger ties between an archives program and those communities it identifies as being its users. My comments are directed to the larger implications their findings suggest—I have six points to make.

Tibbo, Yakel and Torres, and Duff and Johnson identify key attributes of distinct communities of use—special features of their interests and behavior that differentiate the unique cultures of the historian and the genealogist. These communities have levels of belonging that are marked by characteristics of searching to negotiate expected and unexpected barriers. Experienced members have a deep knowledge of topics and sources and use surrogates with facility. They have complex strategies to mitigate uncertainties, they have techniques for overcoming ambiguity, and they have strong associative skills to make fruitful connections among sources where none are obvious. Yakel and

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Torres and Duff and Johnson show these at work in historians and genealogists, largely using their own words as clues. Although we know more or less about the culture of the archivist, these papers suggest that we would be well served by similar types of empirical research into the archival community. Are we one or are we many? What distinguishes experts from novices? How is expertise transferred? And what features of successful archivists set them off from their colleagues?

My second observation, which reiterates suggestions found in these papers, is that the borders of any community are established largely by a special language that marks a culture and provides an entree to its values, concepts, and perspectives. Language reflects both the explicit and tacit knowledge a community acquires in education and the workplace. Words and phrases evolve in experience to become a shorthand technical jargon for larger concepts that members know but rarely articulate in full. Unfortunately, the fast and convenient reference this language accomplishes for experts is a barrier that neophytes negotiate only with difficulty. How can languages be shared between cultures without draining words of their anchors of meaning in specific experiences? We may all speak and read English in our finding aids, Web sites, and records, but it seems that the meaning of any professional text or archival document is more thickly layered than the even the most devout postmodernist believes.

The barriers posed by professional languages to outsiders lead to my third observation about the implications of these papers: each underscores the critical importance of knowing the nature of community borders if we are to understand users more fully and address their needs as best we can. Border management, if I may use this phrase in a transposed circumstance, emerges as a key archival activity in user services and in providing historical sources appropriate to the different types of communities that see and use them. Border management can be marked by strong policing, or by rule-bound scripts that need to be followed for admission, or by neglect and disinterest. These papers, having sketched aspects of the archival borders as these are seen by different groups of users, then provide conclusions about the ways and the means for better border management by archives. User-centered finding aids, organized as a system with an open access portal for people at many levels of knowledge and expertise, are clearly called for by all three. While the papers suggest key features of such guides, clearly more research is needed to fully understand how the user can be put at the center, especially users whose level of knowledge of archives, of sources, and of contexts, are at different levels of sophistication.

This leads to my fourth observation, which at this stage points to questions rather than to conclusions. How would we go about operationalizing the findings from user studies, such as those presented in these papers or from those that archivists might be inspired to undertake in the future? What techniques

do we have to move realistically from research, through planning, to program development or modification? What is the point of studying use and users if, in the end, we cannot use this hard-won new knowledge to make the archival enterprise better? But this begs the question, better from whose perspective and for whose purposes? These papers collectively point to the high potential of formal programs of instruction to better manage our borders and to transfer archival expertise and knowledge to our users. Rather than catering to the unique and vast number of specific information needs of many individual users—a phantom grail we can never achieve—we should use the information we acquire from studying their patterns of use and habits of research to develop cross-border objects—whether these be programs, electronic portals, targeted exhibitions, archival instruction, or a combination of such strategies.

My next observation relates to the role of research as a tool for the archives community and as an attribute of the expert archivist. No one else but archivists will cultivate their community's knowledge and guide its development over time. They have a role in facilitating primary research by others, especially by helping users negotiate the barriers they may find in archives' special language, its shorthand jargon, and its rules and standards whose rationale and presentation may cater to insider experience. We have other inescapable responsibilities, too, such as researching records and documents to uncover the full complexity of relationships and contexts surrounding them in their time. We also have an implied responsibility to understand our users, and it seems that empirical research is the most likely candidate to do this effectively.

We should not, however, expect user studies to accomplish everything. They can tell us much about who uses archives, how they manage their research, when and why they come, what they use, and what needs they have for information. But user studies by themselves will not create or craft programs and services. Archivists and managers must do this. And in this task they need above all to be able to evaluate what these programs achieve. Research skills may provide real service to the professional, revealing the nature of problems, suggesting alternative solutions, and providing measures to evaluate success, satisfaction, and impact over the long term. All of these uses of research, I would argue, demonstrate its potential to be a pragmatic tool for an archives. User studies are especially emphatic in illustrating the potential value of empirical research that is well defined and whose data are carefully and exhaustively analyzed for its meanings and implications.

I would like to conclude with a sixth and final point: by focusing on users—their behaviors, opinions, experiences, and needs—these papers have both pointed and indirect criticisms of the state of archives, their finding aids, and their services to regular and new user communities. Qualitative research that interrogates users and probes for opinions is bound inevitably to expose weaknesses, to reveal gaps where none may have been seen, and to make the

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researcher in us painfully aware of our shortcomings in the eyes of others. However, these revelations should not be taken as a full inventory of our strengths and weaknesses. Over many generations we have built up unrivaled expertise in keeping the records from the past as sources for historical research that users encounter as close to their contemporary contexts as we can keep them. Some may see us as managers of information. We may, by contrast, see our prime role as providers of user services. But above all, we choose and keep safe for use past records in their contexts of documents and source. The knowledge we acquire in making choices and managing these resources is unparalleled and it needs to cross the borders of communities. We can do this using many techniques and methods, from exhibitions to finding aids, in reference services and in innovative document delivery. Knowing habits of use and the cultures of users helps in crafting ways and means that we can afford and that have a higher probability of successful outcomes, perhaps not to be achieved perfectly and at once, but to be built cumulatively, by imaginative innovation as well as by the modest adjustment of existing services and more consistent evaluation of the satisfaction we provide. Knowing use and users, however, does not supersede the imperative to know ourselves, nor should it take precedence over knowing our records in their contexts of function and provenance. This is also part of the knowledge we need to transfer to others.

The perimeter of the archives may be perceived as a fence, protecting what is inside from the unknown on the outside, or it may be viewed as a place of meeting that invites users to cross, where barriers to be overcome are transformed into thresholds of discovery. Only archivists can decide which space they want to create and which space they want their users to inhabit. If we decide to build better border crossings, then our first task is to undertake systematic and methodical research designed to answer well-formulated questions. And as the papers in this issue demonstrate, the use of archives and the habits and needs of users provide concrete information that would support the ways and means we might choose to make our perimeters into more inviting thresholds. Electronic communications and wider access to finding aids and documents are fast becoming working realities in archives. Tibbo points to the bandwagon coming down the street and notes our eagerness to get on board, but she rightly cautions us to be prepared before leaping. Electronic communication is not a magic bullet. Research, by contrast, is a tried way to build knowledge and preparedness. Useful connections between archivists and their user communities should be a priority for us if historical sources are to have a public profile beyond commercial repackaging as mass entertainment. A better understanding of communities and their needs through research should help us to open up our borders by making knowledge transfer less a lonely struggle and perhaps more engaging, useful, and even fun!