

# Archivists' Views of User-based Evaluation: Benefits, Barriers, and Requirements

Wendy M. Duff, Jean Dryden, Carrie Limkilde, Joan Cherry, and  
Ellie Bogomazova

## Abstract

This article reports on the second phase of a study concerned with developing standardized questionnaires for user-based evaluation for archives. Based on a review of current practices used by archivists to gather feedback and focus-group sessions held with archivists, this phase of the study concentrated on archivists' attitudes and concerns about user-based evaluations. It identified archivists' opinions about user-based evaluation of archives including the type of feedback they value, methods they currently employ to gather feedback from users, benefits and problems posed by conducting formal evaluation studies, and ways archivists would use standardized questionnaires for user-based evaluation if these tools were available. The paper also provides some recommendations to help archivists evaluate their services and systems.

## Introduction

Archival institutions require a greater knowledge of the needs of their users and potential users as well as a better understanding of how users interact with archival institutions' services and systems. This paper reports on research with archivists that sought to understand the kinds of feedback about archives that they would like to get from their users.<sup>1</sup> The research originally focused on digital archives;<sup>2</sup> however, the participants broadened the discussion and provided information on the type of feedback they currently gather about both their physical and digital archives, as well as the challenges that conducting user-based evaluation research poses. Here we

<sup>1</sup> An Ontario Premier Research Excellence Award (PREA) and an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant funded the research.

<sup>2</sup> We define digital archives as "the content and services that archival repositories provide to users via the Internet."

report the current literature on user-based evaluation and the methodology employed for this study. Our findings include the type of feedback the participants value, how they currently gather feedback from users, the benefits and the problems that conducting formal evaluation research poses, and the ways they would use standardized questionnaires for user-based evaluation if these tools were available.

The archival literature suggests that archivists value research on archival users and evaluation research, but few archivists carry out this work. Jacques Grimard notes "that despite a long tradition and expertise in appraising and in evaluating information and in collecting data on their activities, archivists have not seriously addressed evaluation of their programs, either from a theoretical or from a methodological perspective."<sup>3</sup> Evaluation is a process to determine whether a service or product meets a set of goals, and if not, why not. User-based evaluation research focuses on the nature and quality of the interaction between users and a site of use. Archives gather data about their users from registration forms, informal conversations at the reference desk, and exit interviews, but archivists rarely analyze this data systematically to evaluate whether their services or systems meet the archives' goals and users' needs. Evaluation is essential to enable archivists to design services and systems that meet users' needs and preferred ways of seeking information.

## Literature Review

For more than twenty years, archivists have called upon the profession to study their users.<sup>4</sup> Despite the increase in studies of specific user groups, user-based evaluation research of archival services and systems remains limited. Many archives collect numbers about users and materials used but seldom analyze these data to identify trends or barriers to use.<sup>5</sup> Archivists gather data about the use of archival material informally at the reference desk, which results in impressionistic accounts of the user experience. This anecdotal approach does not

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Grimard, "Program Evaluation and Archives: 'Appraising' Archival Work and Achievement," *Archivaria* 57 (2004): 69–87.

<sup>4</sup> William J. Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* (Spring 1984) 124–33; William J. Maher, "Use of Users Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 15–26; Lawrence Dowler, "The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles: A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use of Records," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter/Spring 1988): 74–95; Timothy L. Ericson, "Preoccupied with Our Own Gardens: Outreach and Archives," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91): 114–22; Richard Cox, "Research Archival Reference as an Information Function: Observations on Need and Opportunities," *RQ* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 387–97.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Richard Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43, no. 1 (1980): 64–75; see also Hinchey and McCausland, "Access and Reference," in *Keeping Archives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Judith Ellis (Sydney: Australian Society of Archives, 1993).

provide reliable evaluation data and leads to some erroneous assumptions about the needs of archives users.<sup>6</sup> When archives in North America conduct user-based evaluation research of their services and systems, they seldom publish the findings.<sup>7</sup> However, exceptions exist. For example, archivists have undertaken usability studies of EAD finding aids,<sup>8</sup> and the Claude Pepper Library of Florida State University conducted and published the findings of a usability study of the online finding aid to the Pepper Collection.<sup>9</sup>

The United Kingdom developed a system to support user-based evaluation. In Great Britain, the Public Service Quality Group for Archives and Local Studies (PSQG), an informal network established in 1996 to improve management and delivery of archives' public services, initiated the National Survey of Visitors to U.K. Archives in 1998. PSQG has conducted this comprehensive survey of archives user satisfaction and demographics every eighteen months since 2001.<sup>10</sup> This longitudinal study tracks changes in the demographic characteristics of visitors to archives in Great Britain and their levels of satisfaction with archival services. For example, Table 1 reveals that some responses to 2006 survey questions were more positive than the responses to the 2004 survey. However, the report does not indicate whether or not the differences are statistically significant. It remains to be seen if a similar structure would meet the needs of North American archives.

The studies of U.K. archives visitors and North American studies on the usability of finding aids are encouraging, but overall, evaluation research of North American archives services and systems remains limited. In North America, user-based evaluation studies tend to be conducted in larger institutions, and often the findings are not widely distributed.<sup>11</sup> In general, the existing literature comprises "thought pieces" by archivists who may or may not

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, Subject Indexing Working Group, *Subject Indexing for Archives: the Report of the Subject Indexing Working Group*, 20–21.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Public Archives of Canada, "Major Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Researcher and Public Service Component Evaluation Study" (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1985); Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, "Report on the Visiting User Survey," and "Report on the Write-In User Survey" (Fredericton, N.B.: Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, 1998); Deborah Holder, Betty Jo Moore, Brenda L. Roach, and Paul Thomas, "Archives of Ontario, Client Survey (29 September–11 October 1997): Final Report" (Toronto: Archives of Ontario, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, "Encoded Archival Description: Are Finding Aids Boundary Spanner or Barriers for Users?" *Journal of Archival Organization* 2, nos. 1–2 (2004): 63–77; Christopher J. Prom, "User Interactions with Electronic Finding Aids in a Controlled Setting," *American Archivist* 67 (Fall/Winter 2004): 234–68.

<sup>9</sup> Burt Altman and John Nemmers, "The Usability of On-line Archival Resources: The Polaris Project Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 64 (Spring/Summer 2001): 121–31.

<sup>10</sup> See PSQG "Survey of Visitors to UK Archives 2006," available at [http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research\\_and\\_development/survey/](http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research_and_development/survey/), accessed 7 April 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 19.

**Table I** Feedback on Staff and Services from the National Survey of Visitors to U.K. Archives, 2004 and 2006<sup>1</sup>

National Survey of Visitors to UK Archives	Rating of Good or Very good	
	2006	2004
Quality and appropriateness of staff advice	95%	89%
Helpfulness and friendliness of the staff	95%	92%
Overall quality of service	94%	93%

<sup>1</sup> PSQG "Survey of Visitors to UK Archives 2006" [http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research\\_and\\_development/survey/](http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/research_and_development/survey/), accessed April 7, 2007.

have access to unpublished reports of research findings.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the current state of knowledge about archival users comes mainly from interacting with users in a physical archives. Today many users access finding aids and archival resources via the Internet,<sup>13</sup> and we understand little about how the use of archival material changes when accessed in a digital environment.<sup>14</sup> Current research, however, of which this paper is a part, seeks to rectify this situation.

## Methodology

The research reported here is neither a user study nor an evaluation of an archival service or system. Rather, it explores what archivists think about conducting user-based evaluation and what they currently do. We must understand the viewpoints and actions of archivists, as well as their concerns, if we are to build robust tools to aid in gathering user feedback. What do archivists want to know from their users? What would they do with user feedback if they had it? What barriers do they face in gathering this information? What type of infrastructure is needed to support sharing this data?

We held five focus-group sessions between January and March 2005: two in Toronto<sup>15</sup> and one each in Ottawa,<sup>16</sup> Vancouver,<sup>17</sup> and Edmonton.<sup>18</sup> We

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives," *Archivaria* 31 (1990/91): 101–13.

<sup>13</sup> Usability studies of online finding aids are helping to increase our knowledge of the use of these resources.

<sup>14</sup> Though the aim of the broad project is to develop tools to gather feedback from users of both physical and digital archives, this current study began with a focus on users of digital archives that was broadened by the participants.

<sup>15</sup> Focus group sessions 1 and 5 were held in Toronto.

<sup>16</sup> Focus group session 4 was held in Ottawa.

<sup>17</sup> Focus group session 2 was held in Vancouver.

<sup>18</sup> Focus group session 3 was held in Edmonton.

recruited participants by means of an email message (Invitation to Participate (Archivists)) to the ARCAN-L listserv, the three provincial archival association listservs, and the heads of institutions in the cities where the focus groups were to be held. Thirty archivists volunteered to participate in the focus groups.

One of the authors conducted each session, which lasted between two and two and a half hours. At the beginning of each session, the participants completed a brief background questionnaire to provide information about their experience conducting studies of their users, along with their age, education, and residence. They also completed a ranking exercise to stimulate thinking about what archivists' need to know about the users of digital archives—such as demographic characteristics, computer skills, and uses of archival services—to meet users' needs. The sessions were semistructured; the script was organized around a framework of three broad areas:

1. What do you need to know about the users and uses of your digital archives?
2. What would you do with that information if you had it?
3. What are the best way(s) of getting feedback from digital archives users?

We used a number of probes to explore more detailed aspects of each area. The sessions were audio recorded and transcripts were prepared professionally. We analysed the transcriptions using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo,<sup>19</sup> to identify themes and concepts.

Two researchers separately coded the transcript of the first focus-group session and then discussed their coding. They compared the coding of each paragraph to ensure agreement on the concepts to be coded, and they determined the level of detail with which to code each concept and what terms to use to represent a concept or theme. When the coders identified different concepts in the text, each researcher discussed her reasons for coding the concept or using a term in a particular manner. After they agreed upon the terms or concepts identified in the coding of the first transcript, they defined each concept and entered it into a coding dictionary. They subsequently used the dictionary to code the other transcripts. When the coders identified new concepts, they defined these concepts together and added them to the data dictionary. This process allowed themes to emerge from the transcripts rather than having them imposed on the data.

Once we coded and entered all the transcripts into NVivo, we examined each paragraph that contained a concept, noting patterns and frequency of concepts across the five focus-group sessions. We identified quotations that illustrated the various concepts and then consulted the full transcript of a

<sup>19</sup> NVivo is software that aids in the analysis of text-based information. It facilitates the analysis of both small and large units of text and aids in the identification of themes and concepts in the text, as well as relationships among the various units of text. For more information, see [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx).

session to understand the broader context in which participants discussed them. We consulted both the coded data and the transcripts until we arrived at a solid understanding of the participants' thoughts and feelings about user-based evaluation.

### **Benefits and Limitations of Focus-Group Research**

We used the focus-group method, which dates from the 1930s, because it offers many benefits pertinent to the study. We wanted to explore issues around user-based evaluations and archivists' thoughts and feelings about them, and we felt that directed conversation among participants would broaden the discussion. As Ted Palys points out, focus-group sessions can provide unanticipated insights and identify issues important to the participants.<sup>20</sup> Richard A. Krueger suggests that this type of research can "produce believable results at a reasonable cost."<sup>21</sup> He notes that the method is particularly appropriate when the goal of the research is to explain how people regard an experience, idea, or event. Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman also suggest that focus-group research is particularly useful in program evaluation.<sup>22</sup>

Although focus-group research has many benefits, it also has some limitations. The dynamics of a focus-group session may influence the thoughts and feelings participants express. Individuals speak in a specific context (in this case, in a session with their colleagues in a study organized by archival researchers), and this context may influence what they say. Participants may hold back their true feelings or thoughts because they do not want to share them with others. This is more likely for individuals who are concerned about protecting their image.<sup>23</sup>

### **Participants**

Before each focus-group session commenced, the participants provided background information. As shown in Table 2, most of these archivists had worked in archives for a number of years; only four indicated they had done

<sup>20</sup> Ted Palys, *Research Decision: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives*, 3rd ed. (Scarborough, Ont: Thomson Nelson, 2003.)

<sup>21</sup> Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Newbury Park,: Sage, c. 1988), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2006.)

<sup>23</sup> Palys, *Research Decision*.

**Table 2** Profile of Archivists in the Focus Groups N=30

<b>Years worked in an archives</b>	5 years or less	4
	5–10 years	11
	11–15 years	8
	16–20 years	5
	21–30 years	2
<b>Type of archives worked in during career</b>	National	8
	Provincial	9
	Municipal/County/Regional	12
	Religious	6
	University	16
	Corporate	7
	Museum	6
	Library	3
	Other	3
<b>The highest level of education completed</b>	High school	2
	Community College	3
	Undergraduate	2
	Master	21
	PhD	2
<b>Type of professional education received</b>	Archival studies	15
	Library and Info Studies	6
	Other	10
	None	4
<b>Age</b>	26–35	6
	36–45	13
	46–55	6
	56–65	4

so for five or fewer years. More than half of the participants (16 of 30) had worked in a university archives at some time in their careers, and 12 indicated that they had worked in a municipal/county/regional archives. The participants were well educated, with 50% (15) having completed a master's degree and two having completed a doctorate. The participants had received different types of professional education, with 50% (15) having formal archival education. The participants were relatively young; only six indicated they were forty-six or older. Twenty-eight of the thirty participants worked in an archives that had a website.

## Findings

Each focus-group session included both an exercise in which the archivists ranked the importance of gathering different types of feedback from users, and a discussion of the benefits and problems of conducting user-based evaluation research.

### *The Ranking Exercise*

Each participant completed a ranking exercise before the focus-group session began.<sup>24</sup> We presented participants with a list of the types of information gathered by previous surveys (see appendix A) and asked them to rank and discuss the various types.<sup>25</sup> We grouped the types of data into four categories:

1. Records and services used;
2. Aspects of the website;
3. Information about users; and
4. Information about uses.

We asked participants to put an **X** beside the item in the “Important” column if they thought it was important for the evaluation of digital archives;<sup>26</sup> if they did not think the term was important they were to leave it blank. We also asked them to rank the top three “Important” items within each group, marking the most important as 1, the second most important as 2, and so on. Figures 1–4 present the results of the ranking exercise. We converted the rankings into numbers so that a single number represented the frequency with which participants ranked each item on the list as important.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The ranking form was developed from an analysis of the research instruments gathered from archives. Prior to the focus group, we requested examples of instruments used by archives to obtain user feedback about services. We sent our request through listservs to archival communities in Canada, the United States, Britain, and Australia, and we received questionnaires, focus-group scripts, interview scripts, and comment forms. An analysis of these instruments shows that many archives are already gathering some kind of feedback from users and have in place some procedures or practices for acquiring feedback. The quality of instruments and processes for administering them varies widely. Many archives design instruments for their specific programming purposes or to assess the success of recent changes to services. The feedback, often gathered on an irregular basis, could not be used for improving more general or routine services. The feedback instruments commonly asked users to rate their general satisfaction with services rather than posing more specific questions about the services used.

<sup>25</sup> We did not define any of the types of information, and no participant asked about the meaning of any of the categories.

<sup>26</sup> As previously noted, the study began with a focus on digital archives, but the participants also wanted to discuss user-based evaluation of both physical and digital archives. We report their comments on gathering feedback on both types of archives.

<sup>27</sup> There were thirteen elements to be ranked in the “Records of services used” category so we assigned a score of 13 each time a service or type of information was ranked first, a score of 12 each time a service or type of information was ranked second, and a score of 11 each time a service or type of information was ranked third most important service or type of information to gather feedback on. The category “Aspects of the website,” however, included only seven aspects of a website for the participants to rank. Therefore we assigned a score of 7 each time an aspect was ranked first, a score of 6 each time an aspect was ranked second, and a score of 5 each time an aspect was ranked third most important aspect to gather feedback on. The category “Information about users” contained eleven types of information about users so we assigned a score of 11 each time a type of information was ranked first, a score of 10 each time a type of information was ranked second, and a score of 9 each time a type of information was ranked third most type of important to gather feedback on. Finally, the category “Information about uses” contained nine types of information so we assigned a score of 9 each time a type of information was ranked first, a score of 8 each time a type of information was ranked second, and a score of 7 each time a type of information was ranked third most important type of information to gather feedback on.



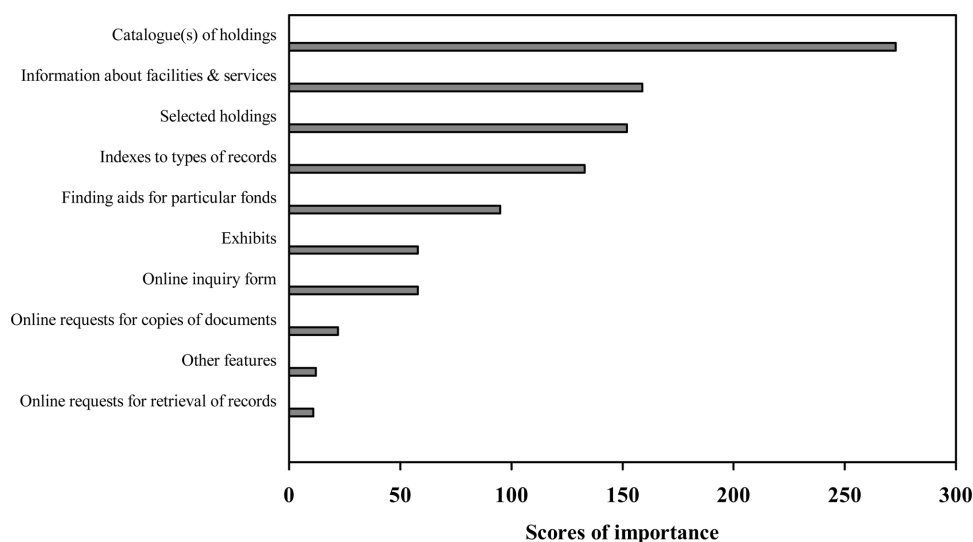


FIGURE 1. Importance of feedback on “Records and services used.”

In the section of the questionnaire on the archives’ records and services, participants considered “Catalogue(s) of holdings” to be the most important service to evaluate. It received an overall score of 273. The participants also thought it important to gather feedback about “Information about facilities and services,” “Selected holdings,” and “Indexes to types of records” with overall scores of importance of 158, 153, and 133 respectively. Participants saw “Exhibits,” and services that support remote reference (the “Online inquiry form,” “Online requests for copies of documents,” “Online requests for retrieval of records,” and “Online requests for ILL of microfilm”) as being less important. These findings suggest that the archivists in the focus groups think it more important to evaluate functions related to disseminating information to users (the catalog of holdings, facilities, and some select holdings) than functions that support remote reference (e.g., “Online inquiry form”). In other words, they rate activities that involve users accessing information provided by the archives more highly than activities in which their users actively request information from archives.

All participants identified content as an important part of the website to evaluate, though not everyone evaluated it as the most important. This aspect of the website received the highest overall score at 152. Navigability was the second most important aspect, with an overall score of 145. Participants rated presentation (look and feel) of the website and search function (for the catalogs)<sup>28</sup> as

<sup>28</sup> The ranking sheet (see appendix A) specified this category was for search engines for catalogs.

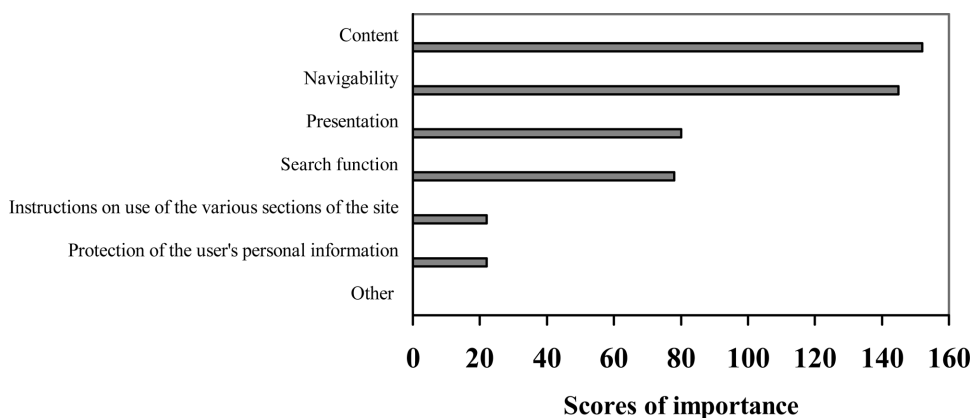


FIGURE 2. Importance of feedback on “Aspects of website.”

somewhat less important, with overall scores of 80 and 78 respectively. These participants judged gathering feedback on the types of instructions or the protection of personal information to be far less important. They rated the navigability of the website higher than searching for information in the catalog. However, participants rated the importance of getting feedback on “Instruction on use of the various sections of the site” and “Protection of the user’s personal information” much lower than the website’s functions.

Archivists rated the importance of various types of information about users. “Experience doing research,” with a score of 229, received the highest ranking in this group. Archivists also ranked “Computer skills” (126), “Education” (116), “Occupation/employment status” (99), and “Residence” (98) as important information to gather about users. Information about “Language” and “Ethnic group” received overall lower scores, and no participant ranked the user’s “Sex” as one of the three most important types of information. The focus-group sessions also provided insights into why the participants want to gather feedback from their users, and this will be discussed later in this paper.

In the category “Information about uses,” the archivists considered the “Success of the user’s most recent search or visit” to be the most important, with an overall score of 179. Participants also thought it important to gather information about the “Impact of use of archives on the user’s research” (116) and his or her “Purpose of research” (104). Closely related to “Purpose of research” is the “Subject of research,” and participants also rated this aspect as important, with an overall score of 73. They rated information related to the information-seeking behavior of users—“How the user found out about/got to the archives website” (61) and the “Connection between online visit and onsite visit” (49)—slightly less important.

The data from the ranking exercise indicate some agreement about the important elements in evaluating digital archives. For example, most of the

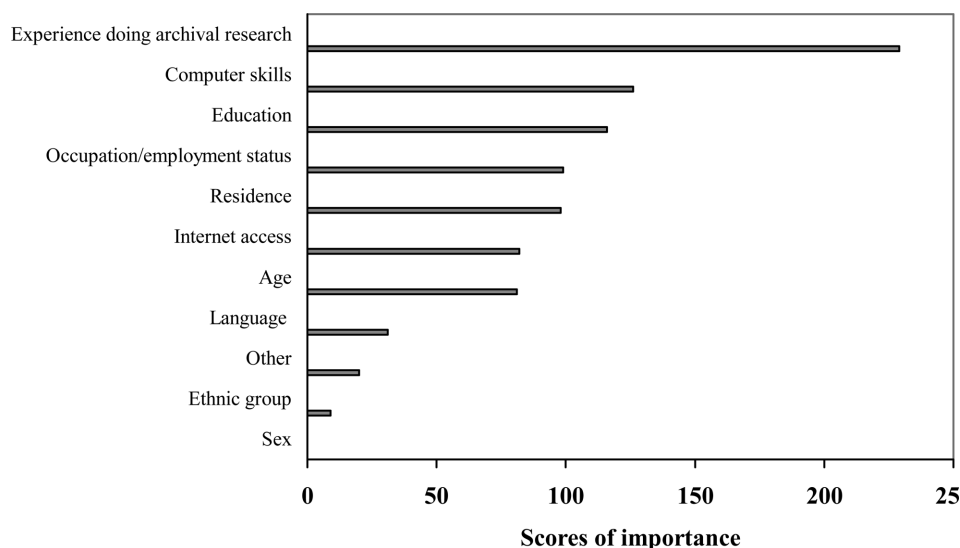


FIGURE 3. Importance of gathering “Information about users.”

participants ranked “Catalogue(s) of holdings” very important in the category “Records and services used.” In the category “Information about users,” the highest ranking type of information was “Experience doing archival research.” Opinions differed, however, on rankings in the category “Aspects of the website”; “Content” received the highest score as an important characteristic of a website to evaluate, and “Navigability” received a score almost as high. Finally, in the category “Information about uses,” the “Success of the user’s most recent search/visit” received the highest overall score, and the “Impact of the use of the archives on the researcher’s research” and the “Purpose of the research” also received overall high scores. Comparing the ranking exercise with the discussion that followed, we identified several issues that helped us better understand the needs of archivists in terms of user-based evaluation.

### ***Focus-Group Discussions***

#### *What archives are currently doing*

Many participants pointed out that both on-site and remote users provide feedback to archivists in a number of informal ways. Some participants suggested that users share stories over the phone, via email or at the reference desk about how the archives helped them with their research or had an impact on their lives. Our participants feel that stories or personal testimonies are a very powerful source for indicating the value of archives. A participant in Focus Group 3 stated,

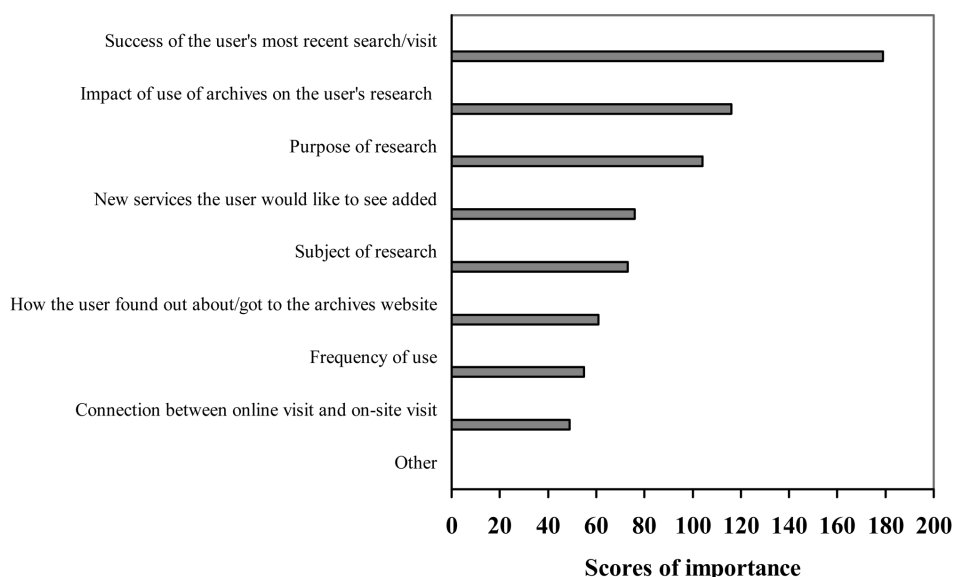


FIGURE 4. Importance of gathering "Information about uses."

If I showed up to the committee that I reported to, with even half a dozen personal testimonies of folks from all throughout [the name of a province] and [the name of a province] whatever, yeah, they either liked the site, thought the site was helpful, or found something through the site. I'd be looking so good because there's a connection there, very much in our reality, a personal connection between the person in the [the type of institution the archives is part of] and the archive.

A personal story or testimony that indicates the value of the archives is very important to this participant. However, some of the archivists noted that users also provide information about their concerns and problems either via email or at the reference desk. One participant from Focus Group 3 noted, "If they can't find what they're looking for they'll send me an e-mail and that kind of stuff. So I think I . . . get feedback. . . but it's the usage numbers that are really encouraging for us." Many participants mentioned that they analyze their Web server logs and track their website's usage through them. One participant stated that though the use of his bricks-and-mortar archives could not compare to the use of a library or a museum in his community, the use of his digital archives could.<sup>29</sup> Another archivist suggested that gathering data with Web logs could demonstrate use of the archives without placing an undue burden on personnel

<sup>29</sup> For information on some of the problems of using Web logs to gather use statistics, see Diane Harley and Jonathan Henke, "Toward an Effective Understanding of Website Users Advantages and Pitfalls of Linking Transaction Log Analyses and Online Surveys," *D-Lib Magazine* 13 (March/April 2007).

resources. An academic archivist noted that the special collections section is the most popular part of a university library website and that usage numbers demonstrate the value of archives to upper management, saying, “it was a seismic shift in thinking of management. . . [and resulted in them] throwing money at us” (Focus Group 1). Other participants, however, noted that Web server logs indicate the number of people who access a website, but not why they do so, whether or not they found what they needed, or whether they were satisfied. A participant cautioned, “High numbers of users does not necessarily mean [a] happy end-user.” To this comment another archivist replied, “But they are great for getting more funding” (Focus Group 4).

Registration forms are a useful source for information about on-site users.<sup>30</sup> More than one participant noted that they use the demographic data from these forms in their annual reports. Some noted that they found information about the broad research areas of their users very helpful.

Some participants use a variety of other mechanisms for gathering more formal feedback, including a short form with a few questions on their archives’ website, focus groups with experts or “friends of the archives” groups, a study conducted by a student from a local archives program, and a survey of users conducted by the archives. The archivist who gathered feedback from focus groups with experts emphasized the need to have knowledgeable users to help one prioritize services, but also cautioned, “I think there has to be also some balancing of allowing the user to set the priorities. Because they don’t know what they don’t know. They only know what they know” (Focus Group 2).

These findings suggest these archivists currently gather some information about their users from Web logs and their registration forms, and that they collect stories about use and the value of archives, but few conduct systematic studies of the use of their systems and services.

#### *Benefits of user-based evaluation*

Although few of the participants had conducted user-based evaluation research, many gather use statistics that they find useful.<sup>31</sup> Chief among the perceived benefits is the hope that high-use statistics<sup>32</sup> would result in getting more

<sup>30</sup> Though this study focused on user-based evaluation of digital archives, participants mentioned that they gathered important data about their on-site users from their registration forms. Obviously, an archives will not gather this type of information about users of their digital archives.

<sup>31</sup> As these archivists volunteered to participate in a study on user-based evaluation, it is not surprising that they understood the benefits of conducting these types of studies.

<sup>32</sup> User statistics are not normally considered user feedback but the participants considered it very important data to collect.

money for an archives.<sup>33</sup> Many participants suggested that they often use their use statistics when trying to make a case with upper management, or when trying to get funding for new initiatives. Some participants suggested that increased funding meant better resources. Some participants noted that gathering user-based evaluation data might even point to the value of archives. On the other hand, one participant reported using complaints or problems identified in user-based evaluation research to make a case for more resources to improve services.

The participants also noted that understanding user needs could help them prioritize decisions about which material to digitize. Developing and maintaining digital resources is expensive, and they want to make sure they digitize the material users want. One archivist noted that maintaining these resources is a new task and that users of digital resources might have very different needs than traditional users of archives. Therefore, archivists need to understand these new users better to ensure archives use their limited resources wisely. With so few resources, this feedback can help identify material to digitize or determine whether to undertake a project.

Some participants opined that user feedback could be helpful in documenting the use of their website or improving its design. One indicated that archivists in her institution need to show that the archives is using its website effectively. Another participant concurred; pointing out that her institution stresses the effective use of websites. Another archivist was more altruistic and said she just wants to be sure she delivers the best service. She hopes to deliver a service that her university would be proud of, and she wants a website that enhances the reputation of her department. Finally, a participant noted that user studies might also help raise the profile of the archives.

A few participants stressed the need to question one's preconceived notions of use and users or one's archivist-centric view of the archives. One stated, "To design a reference and service delivery around my view of what that should look like is, I think, a dangerous position." Input from users would "result in a much more useful product at the end of it" (Focus Group 1). Another archivist voiced an analogous belief. She suggested that she had preconceived notions of the use and users of archives and that if she did not ask questions, she would not know if she was right.

Participants also highlighted the importance of evaluating the use of digital resources and websites during a time of change. One suggested that current studies would give archives baseline data to measure against at a future

<sup>33</sup> We are not suggesting that high-level administrators consider usage statistics in allocating funds, just that some participants thought they could use the statistics to make the case to get more funds for their budget. As noted by one of the reviewers of this article, it would be interesting to discover whether "high-level administrators generally agree that they figure in usage statistics prominently in making funding allocations."

time, and another participant noted that this is the first generation of putting material online and that “this is a good time to step back” and evaluate how well we have done to date (Focus Group 1). Finally, an archivist suggested it is important to know how a significant administrative change would impact use. This participant works in an institution that had undergone a major restructuring and wonders how the administrative changes might impact the use of the archives. He noted that studies conducted before and after an important change might help identify this type of impact.

The participants in the focus groups see many benefits to conducting user-based evaluation, including obtaining more funds, obtaining input into setting priorities for digitizing material, improving their website design, and, to a lesser extent, improving services generally.

### *Barriers*

Although most archivists in this study see the value of obtaining feedback from users, they face many barriers that often stop them from carrying out these studies: money to hire outside experts, time to conduct user-based evaluation research in-house, and expertise. For example, archivists in Focus Group 1 noted, “And I think it’s primarily a case of a lack of resources, a lack of time, and really lack of time to think about such things” and “Too busy doing to measure it.” Moreover, these archivists noted that they face rising expectations created by Internet-based services, which, in turn, create an increased level of activity and workload. At the same time, they are preparing to meet the challenge of managing electronic records. These challenges leave archivists stressed and with little time to “sit back and reflect on the success or failure of the program” (Focus Group 1).

Closely related to lack of time is a lack of financial resources. A participant in Focus Group 4 suggested: “We can’t afford to either take the time or to do the testing because it costs so much and in the end, the best usability testing for websites is just launching it and then seeing, that’s the cheapest.” Many of these archivists work in small archives with extremely limited budgets. Being under-resourced causes archivists to undertake projects funded by grant money or to work with partners on projects that meet the partners’ needs, but that do not necessarily fit into the archives’ mandate. Furthermore, the increased demands of these projects leave little time for archivists to design or to conduct user-based evaluation research. Some archivists noted that they go from funded project to funded project with little follow-up. One participant suggested that the granting agencies are often interested in users’ experience and that grants should include money for studying users. Other participants remarked that undertaking research that required time and money is not possible, but as previously

noted, some participants gather use data from Web server logs. Furthermore, if someone collected and analyzed the data and presented it to them in a meaningful manner, they would use the results to try to improve their service. For example, a participant in Focus Group 3 remarked, "If there were changes we could make that would make the usability better, I think we would seriously look at that." A participant in Focus Group 2 observed, "If you don't have to sit down and spend a whole lot of time figuring out okay what stats exactly do we want to keep, how do we do this. . . it would be easier to do. . . ."

Lack of time and lack of money are not the only constraints; archives also lack expertise. Preappointment education, whether in archival studies or history, seldom provides education on conducting user-based evaluation research, although some do offer a research methods course. Many participants felt they do not have the required expertise to conduct surveys or lead focus-group sessions. A participant in Focus Group 5 stated:

Are we even qualified to do surveys when you think about it? . . . I was certainly never trained for it and I don't really assess peoples' needs and peoples' satisfaction.

One archivist suggested that research instruments developed by archivists might also be biased and reflect what an archivist wants to know. Outside experts and consultants could overcome this problem, but most archives simply do not have the money to hire them. The university archivists indicated that their institutions place a greater emphasis on user-based evaluation and analysis, and one archivist suggested that her university has expertise she could draw on. However, most archivists in this study have few resources to do this work.

Concomitant with a lack of resources, the demands of other priorities, and lack of expertise, focus-group members also expressed concern about recruiting users to complete questionnaires. Participants noted the difficulty of obtaining representative samples when conducting online surveys and that lack of time is not only a problem for archivists, but also a challenge for users. Participants also suggested that individuals who take the time to respond to surveys are often discontented, and that individuals unhappy with archival service are more likely to take the time to respond, which would skew the survey data with negative comments. For example, a participant in Focus Group 1 noted:

Anybody that's going to fill in an online survey is somebody who has got an axe to grind of some sort because they'll have a comment that they want to get said. And some people. . . they might have positive things to say or have actually really good positive feedback just can't be bothered taking the time to fill it in.

Participants worried that getting negative feedback from users would cause problems with their funding agency. A survey that obtained negative responses could potentially have a harmful effect on the archives. An archivist in Focus Group 2 discussed the concern:



*Participant:* I wonder also if we're going to get messages we don't want to hear.

*Interviewer:* They're not satisfied . . . do you think that would be a problem?

*Participant:* I think it might be a problem with the resource allocators who don't know or care about the archival program.

In contrast, as noted previously, one archivist suggested that negative feedback might help archivists get more money to improve services.

The primary focus of our study was to discover what feedback archivists want to get from users, but we also learned what type of information they do not want to get. The ranking exercise presented participants with various types of information about their digital archives and then asked them to rank each type according to how important it is to receive feedback on it. Though not specifically listed in the category "Information about uses," the participants noted that they would not want to ask a user if he or she was satisfied because the question is very subjective. They suggested a user might be dissatisfied because they could not find answers to their questions because the archives did not hold records that answered their question. Therefore, level of satisfaction is not the type of user feedback most of these archivists want. However, they identified satisfaction as being different from the success of an archival visit and the impact of archival services, both of which the ranking exercise reveal as desirable types of user feedback to get.

#### *Standardized tools*

The participants discussed the development of standardized tools to address some of the challenges of user-based evaluation research. Standardized tools could reduce the time taken to design a study and could help overcome a lack of expertise. A number of participants thought that access to standardized tools that facilitate the sharing of data and comparing institutional performance would have many advantages. Many participants indicated that comparing the performance of their archives with other archives or comparing the performance of their archives across time could be very helpful. They cautioned, however, that such a comparison must be made between similar types of archives, for example, academic archives must be compared with other university archives and not with municipal archives. Participants from academic institutions highlighted the need for consistent data collection. Many participants see the benefit of access to standardized tools that simplify the gathering of data to report to organizations such as the Association of Research Libraries or Statistics Canada.

Some participants noted the effect of the institutional context on user-based evaluation and highlighted the need to consider an archives' mandate when conducting studies. Archivists from different types of archives wanted to collect different types of data about their users. For example, some of the

participants work in archives with a national or regional mandate, and they need to demonstrate that they serve all their constituents. One archivist noted that knowing the ethnic group affiliation of archival users is very important for government archives in Canada that serve a multicultural society. This information is much less important to the participant who works in a business archives. Archivists with a mandate limited by geographic area said collecting data about residence is important, and municipal archivists want to be able to show that they serve the taxpayers in their cities. University archivists need to demonstrate that both students and faculty use their services and that the archives enhances the reputation of the university. Archivists with a mandate to serve school children find gathering data on the age of the user important.

## Discussion

Responses from the archivists highlight both the benefits and the challenges associated with conducting user-based evaluation research. The participants discussed many benefits accrued by conducting user-based evaluation research and indicated that documenting increases in use and/or the value of archives is particularly important. They also delineated numerous barriers to conducting these studies. On the surface, it might appear that the challenges are insurmountable. Though not negative about conducting user-based evaluation research, these archivists struggle with issues that affect their day-to-day operations and pose significant barriers to conducting user-based research and implementing change.

Participants thought user feedback might help them understand the value or impact of all their services. Counting the number of users visiting an archives, both physically and remotely, does not, however, indicate value of archival services or their impact. Impact is often defined as the "difference made,"<sup>34</sup> and we simply do not know if visiting an archives or using archival material remotely makes any difference in a person's life, and furthermore, if it does, how or what difference it makes. Some archivists in the United Kingdom are studying methods for measuring impact;<sup>35</sup> however, robust methods for measuring the impact of archival services and products are not yet available.

We also need to understand the arguments and evidence that influence resource allocators. No empirical evidence indicates that increased use increases funding. Many participants believe that if they had more visitors they would get more funds, but they did not provide any cases where this was true. Some told

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Horton and Jaqueline Spence, *Scoping the Economic and Social Impact of Archives* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales, 2006), 40.

<sup>35</sup> For example see, Horton and Spence, *Scoping the Economic and Social Impact of Archives*.

anecdotal stories of high-level managers who were impressed by a large number of hits on their websites or by emails that indicated satisfied users, but we need to move beyond anecdotal evidence. Archivists need to investigate more systematically and empirically the factors that lead to increases in their budgets.

Participants want data about their digital archives that would help them understand their “new” users and assist in setting priorities, especially with digitization projects. A few participants indicated that data from such studies would help them design better services. Some participants currently use server logs to track visits to their website, and many gather informal feedback such as stories from users. However, the participants indicated that they do not have the time, resources, or expertise to conduct user-based evaluation research. In addition, some archivists in this study fear that individuals who respond to surveys are more likely to be dissatisfied with archival services and systems. They expressed concern that criticism from users could have negative impacts on their institutions. Interestingly, the findings from the National Survey of Visitors to U.K. Archives found the overwhelming majority of respondents rated most archival services as very good or good. However, our participants indicated concern that low satisfaction ratings might affect their funding. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the systems and services might require modifications, and very few participants felt they have the resources or ability to make dramatic changes to the services or systems.<sup>36</sup>

We found that some of the benefits archivists identified for carrying out evaluation research, for instance, increased funding and making a case for the archives, differed from our project goals to improve archival systems and services and improve ease of access for archival users. Our findings highlight the problems posed by conducting user studies. We came to realize that we need to listen more carefully to archivists and to understand their concerns and problems if we are to develop tools for them to use. Our view of the benefits of user-based evaluation research differs from the views of these archivists. The majority want feedback to support their programs and get more funding, not to discover if users have problems with archival practices or if they are satisfied with the services the archives provide. Listening to and understanding archivists’ perspectives are important to working with them on user-based evaluation research. Only from listening to these archivists did we begin to understand that user-based evaluation can pose a threat as well as an opportunity for practitioners. Moreover, the findings from this study suggest archivists need inexpensive and easy-to-use tools to track usage of their websites and to help them understand about the success of a user’s visit, the purpose of a user’s research, and the

<sup>36</sup> We note that many of the archivists feel that some users do not like rules that restrict material for preservation or security reasons, while others indicated that their archives’ financial situation would not enable them to make dramatic changes to their processes and procedures. Educating users about archival issues and greater funding for archival projects might help alleviate some of these concerns.

impact that archives have had on users' lives. We learned that one standardized user-based instrument would not meet the needs of all archival institutions. Different kinds of archives require different types of feedback based on their mandates and are, therefore, interested in gathering different types of data from their users. As a result, our research partners on the Mellon project<sup>37</sup> are now planning to create standardized user-based instruments for each type of archival institution.<sup>38</sup> We also need to use methods to ensure that representative samples of users respond to our surveys. Archivists also need guidelines and training on using the instruments.

We should begin to develop standardized instruments by focusing first on the services and systems that archivists believe they can change at low cost, for example, the design of a website or an interface. We need to start by evaluating functions and areas where feedback can contribute to setting priorities and designing systems. If archivists have access to user feedback on services and systems that are easy to change, they might be open to evaluating other services. However, we also need instruments to help archivists capture the stories users tell and to identify the impact of archival holdings, services, and institutions. Some of the archivists in this study, particularly university archivists, were interested in comparing their performance with other archives, but they were also interested in getting rich data showing the value of archives to individuals to convince resource providers to increase funding. The informal feedback that archivists collect at the reference desk or through email may be anecdotal, but the participants believe it reflects the impact and value of archives, something use statistics cannot do. Semistructured protocols and rigorous analytic methods will help archivists capture and analyze such data. Quantitative data augmented with rich qualitative data will provide a better understanding of the interaction between users and archival systems and services, as well as more in-depth knowledge of the value of archives to users.

Listening is not enough. We also need to build a culture of assessment that invites comments and feedback from different types of users, both novice and expert. We should begin by focusing on gathering data about the users of our digital resources. Some participants in our study indicated that their traditional methods of talking to users in the physical archives helps them understand these users' needs, but they require tools to help them understand what users of their digital archives need. To carry out robust user-based evaluation research, archivists require

- money to support user-based evaluation research;
- training in user-based evaluation research, both as part of master's programs and continuing education workshops;

<sup>37</sup> For an update on this research, see <http://www.archivalmetrics.org>, accessed 7 April 2008.

<sup>38</sup> This would include a set of questions we hope all archives would use in surveying their users so we could gain an overall understanding of who uses archives, how they access them, and for what purposes.

- better understanding of how to measure the impact of archives and methods for gathering data on impact;
- baseline data on the use of archival systems and services. Baseline data is particularly important as we are in the first generation of digital archives;
- a free and easy-to-use tool that will help archivists analyze their Web logs; and
- partnerships between practitioners and academic researchers to develop instruments that gather the data that archives need.

Building partnerships and collaboration will be important to the success of this work; therefore, archivists need to build a strong network of researchers interested in studying users<sup>39</sup> and developing a culture of assessment. We need more research to understand archivists' assumptions about their users, the factors that influence upper management to allocate funds, and the impact of archival services.

<sup>39</sup> Wendy Duff, "Understanding the information-seeking behaviour of archival researchers in a digital age: paths, processes and preference," *Proceedings of the DLM-Forum 2002* (Barcelona, 6–8 May 2002); see also <http://www.axsnet.org/>, accessed 7 April 2008.

## APPENDIX A

### Ranking Exercise for Archivists

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Session No. \_\_\_\_\_

The following table is a list of items about which archivists have sought feedback from users of their digital archives. The items are divided into four groups.

1. If you think an item is important for the evaluation of digital archives, put an **X** beside that item in the column with the heading "Important"; otherwise leave it blank.
2. Then, *within each group*, rank the top THREE "Important" items in numerical order, with the most important being 1, the second most important being 2, and so on.

1. Information about users	Important	Rank
Residence		
Age		
Sex		
Education		
Occupation/employment status		
Ethnic group		
Language		
Computer skills		
Internet access		
Experience doing archival research		
Other (please specify)		
2. Information about uses	Important	Rank
How the user found out about/ got to the archives website		
Purpose of research		
Subject of research		
Frequency of use		
New services the user would like to see added		
Success of the user's most recent search/visit		
Connection between online visit and on-site visit		

Impact of use of archives on the user's research		
Other (please specify)		
<b>3. Records/ services used</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Information about facilities and services		
Catalogue(s) of holdings		
Finding aids for particular fonds		
Indexes to types of records		
Selected holdings, e.g., photos, vital statistics, enlistment documents, etc.		
Exhibits		
Online requests for copies of documents		
Online requests for retrieval of records		
Online requests for ILL of microfilm		
Online inquiry form		
Other features (e.g., related resources, site map, etc.)		
Other (please specify)		
<b>4. Aspects of the website</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Content		
Navigability		
Search function (for catalogues)		
Presentation (look & feel)		
Instructions on use of the various sections of the site		
Protection of the user's personal information/privacy		
Other (please specify)		