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PRO-ACTIVE AND USER-CENTERED ARCHIVES SERVICES

Abstract

Purpose: *The provision of user services and the granting of access to documents are key elements of the archival mission. Until the emergence of information technology and the internet, user services were oriented towards a limited audience. This changed drastically. The article analyses the profound change and offers perspectives for framing pro-active and user-centred services of archives with focus on the digital area.*

Methodology: *The method used is based on a literature review and the analysis of archival practice due to technology changes. The paper also takes into consideration international best practice, standardisation initiatives and archival codes of ethics. Based on the analysis, the article formulates principles for modern pro-active and user-centred services of archives.*

Results: *The provision of services to users has changed dramatically since the emergence of information technology and the advent of the internet. User services expanded from reference services to a limited audience of specialised scholars towards a new role for archives as information broker in the digital information society. From an information monopoly, archives moved towards a networked moderator and facilitator role in promoting open and equitable access.*

Conclusions: *The democratisation of access through the internet brings numerous and diverse user communities to the archives. A pro-active approach towards users is required that conceives users as protagonists and actors. User services, thus, become participatory, interactive, communicative, outreaching, and educating.*

Keywords: *historical archives, user services, reference services, access, digitisation, digital access*

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SERVIZI ARCHIVISTICI PROATTIVI E INCENTRATI SULL'UTENTE

Abstract

Scopo: *La fornitura di servizi agli utenti e la concessione dell'accesso ai documenti sono elementi chiave della missione archivistica. Fino alla comparsa delle tecnologie informatiche e di Internet, i servizi agli utenti erano orientati verso un pubblico limitato. La situazione è cambiata radicalmente. L'articolo analizza il profondo cambiamento e offre prospettive per inquadrare servizi archivistici proattivi e incentrati sull'utente, con particolare attenzione all'area digitale.*

Metodologia: *Il metodo utilizzato si basa su una revisione della letteratura e sull'analisi delle pratiche archivistiche dovute ai cambiamenti tecnologici. Il documento prende inoltre in considerazione le migliori pratiche internazionali, le iniziative di standardizzazione e i codici etici archivistici. Sulla base dell'analisi, l'articolo formula i principi per servizi archivistici moderni proattivi e incentrati sull'utente.*

Risultati: *La fornitura di servizi agli utenti è cambiata radicalmente dall'avvento delle tecnologie informatiche e di Internet. I servizi agli utenti si sono ampliati, passando dai servizi di consultazione rivolti a un pubblico limitato di studiosi specializzati a un nuovo ruolo degli archivi come intermediari di informazioni nella società dell'informazione digitale. Da monopolisti dell'informazione, gli archivi hanno assunto un ruolo di moderatori e facilitatori in rete, promuovendo un accesso aperto ed equo.*

Conclusioni: *La democratizzazione dell'accesso attraverso Internet porta numerose e diverse comunità di utenti agli archivi. È necessario un approccio proattivo nei confronti degli utenti che li consideri protagonisti e attori. I servizi agli utenti diventano così partecipativi, interattivi, comunicativi, di sensibilizzazione e di educazione.*

Parole chiave: *archivi storici, servizi agli utenti, servizi di consultazione, accesso, digitalizzazione, accesso digitale*

PROAKTIVNE IN NA UPORABNIKA USMERJENE ARHIVSKE STORITVE

Izvleček

Namen: *Nudenje uporabniških storitev in omogočanje dostopa do dokumentov sta ključna elementa poslanstva arhivov. Do pojava informacijske tehnologije in interneta so bile uporabniške storitve usmerjene v omejeno občinstvo. To se je drastično spremenilo. Članek analizira to temeljno spremembo ter ponuja perspektive za oblikovanje proaktivnih in na uporabnika usmerjenih arhivskih storitev s poudarkom na digitalnem okolju.*

Metodologija: *Uporabljena metoda temelji na pregledu literature in analizi arhivske prakse v povezavi s tehnološkimi spremembami. Prispevek upošteva tudi mednarodne dobre prakse, pobude za standardizacijo in arhivske etične kodekse. Na podlagi analize članek oblikuje načela za sodobne proaktivne in na uporabnika usmerjene arhivske storitve.*

Rezultati: *Zagotavljanje storitev uporabnikom se je od pojava informacijske tehnologije in prihoda interneta temeljito spremenilo. Uporabniške storitve so se od referenčnih storitev za omejeno občinstvo specializiranih raziskovalcev razširile v novo vlogo arhivov kot posrednikov informacij v digitalni informacijski družbi. Iz položaja informacijskega monopola so se arhivi premaknili v omreženo vlogo moderatorjev in posrednikov, ki spodbujajo odprt in pravičen dostop.*

Zaključki: *Demokratizacija dostopa prek interneta v arhive prinaša številne in raznolike skupnosti uporabnikov. Potreben je proaktiven pristop do uporabnikov, ki jih razume kot protagoniste in akterje. Uporabniške storitve tako postajajo participativne, interaktivne, komunikativne, odprte in izobraževalne.*

Ključne besede: *zgodovinski arhivi, uporabniške storitve, referenčne storitve, dostop, digitalizacija, digitalni dostop*

INTRODUCTION

The provision of user services and granting access to archives are key components of the mission of archival institutions. The obligation of public institutions to make their archives accessible to research and the interested public is framed by law and supported by international standards, codes of ethics and best practice of the archival profession (Iacovino, 2006, 27).

Until the emergence of information technology in the 1970s, user services of public archives were oriented towards a limited and well knowledgeable audience that comprised mainly historians, genealogists, and other specialised scholars. They knew archives, their mission and operations, and how to use them. The scholars came to the reading room equipped with academic references and titles to consult finding aids and inventories. Once accepted and registered, they requested, consulted archives, and published the results of their research in scientific articles, monographs or edited volumes. Archives were the only and exclusive place, where scholars could find relevant primary sources for their research (Theimer, 2018, 6).

Information technology and the internet changed everything. From information scarcity, society moved to information overflow, and the information monopolies of archives and libraries began to diminish. Nowadays, user services of archives go well beyond just the provision of access to primary sources. They move towards pro-active and diverse services in promoting and offering open and equitable access, minimising access restrictions, and formulating appropriate access policies for users (UNESCO, 2011; SAA, 2020).

The democratisation of access through the internet brings many more users to the archives, and diversifies and widens drastically the user communities, which have become much more heterogeneous than ever before. In the digital sphere, users become protagonists and actors, and the centre of attention moves from the archives and its holdings to the individual and their story. Archives become a participatory, interactive, communicative, outreaching, and educating space (Theimer, 2018, 8–10).

1. USER-CENTERED ARCHIVES SERVICES

Until the emergence of information technology in the 1970s, the model of reference and user services in public archives targeted a small and highly knowledgeable audience: mainly historians and genealogists. Historians learned during university studies how to consult archives and use the primary sources for their research. They consulted finding aids, inventories, then requested and consulted the sources, and finally interpreted and published the results of their research in articles or monographs. This small and elite audience had no other choice than to come to the archives and obtain in the reading room what they were looking for. Today, this model does not work any longer. With the introduction of information technology and the internet in archives, users have much more information at hand than ever before, leading rather to information overflow instead of information scarcity. Archives lost to a certain extent their monopoly status for information and knowledge catering to a variety of available other types of sources. Researchers today may even go as far as deciding to write only about those topics, for which they find information online (Theimer, 2018, 6–7).

User services in modern archival institutions go far beyond just the provision of access to primary sources, and archives have a strong interest in providing pro-actively diverse services to the users. Archivists must understand the user needs, the principles of law and ethics, the requirements of their organisation, stakeholders, and depositors, and on the other side the rights and needs of researchers and citizens in obtaining open and equitable access. Archives aim at minimising access restrictions and formulate appropriate access policies guided by openness, creativity, and flexibility in user services. Open-mindedness and willingness to continuous learning are other prerequisites, and also the technological aspect is key, as the availability of appropriate digital tools for accessing the archives are necessary components (ICA, 2012; SAA, 2020).

Often, scholars need to consult archives that are remote from their place of work or residence. They may travel for more than a week to access archives and consult their holdings, so the physical stay in archives becomes a race against time. This indicates the value of remote access to finding aids so that the researchers can immediately upon arrival dedicate their time to the actual consultation. Consultation in many cases means taking numerous photos of documents and

then sorting them out after returning home. These users, therefore, create digital archives themselves, disconnected from the original context and provenance. Researchers may organise these documents in completely different ways and add a personal methodology to these individual and private archives located in offices, universities or private homes in the form of digital files. Such archives may be called ‘second hand’ archives, organised, maintained, structured according to the individual users’ gusto, acting as personal virtual reading room on the personal computer of the individual user (Benedetti, 2019, 18–20).

The digitisation of services offers solutions also here. Initiatives, such as the digitisation on demand, offer successful opportunities to improve user services. The presence of archives in this sense evolves from giving just practical information, through making available finding aids, towards offering interactive tools and spaces for the consultation of archival copies (Schlenker, 2021, 11). Under the new concept of ‘open archives’, the archival institutions may offer unlimited and free accessibility to their sources, while respecting necessary access restrictions: “Im Kern geht es allen diesen Aktivitaeten um eine umfassende Bereitstellung, eine unkomplizierte Zugänglichmachung und eine unproblematische Weiterverwendung von Informationen.” (Gillner, 2018, 14).

The democratisation of access through the internet brings many more users to the archives than in the previous analogue world. Researchers can access inventories online and harvest sources directly through online portals and platforms. Thereby, they create their own individual digital archives with copies from different original sources. In servicing these heterogeneous audiences, archives become pro-active service providers. Their online platforms become spaces of learning, knowledge sharing and education. This new user-centred approach engages directly with the digital user and turn archives into a virtual research environment. Users become active protagonists, and the individual moves to the centre of attention, not the archives and its holdings. In this way, archives become inspiring participatory, interactive, communicative, outreaching, and educating digital communities (Theimer, 2018, 8–10; Gillner, 2018, 15–17).

Archives empower their users by providing equal access to vital information and knowledge. This is still true today, since the digital environment is genuinely characterized by the ubiquity of access. Archives continue to have stable, or even

growing, numbers of users, and play an active role in the transformation towards the modern information society. They are understood as democratic public spaces with a role in citizens' participation, empowerment, and community building (Audunson, 2020, 2–4).

With the user at the centre of the digital dissemination campaigns of archives, some principles appear as relevant guides for archivists: the offer must be well thought and simple, clear and well construed, finding aids must be coherent and standardised, all user access should be channelled to one platform, and results should be displayed within their context. In this sense, the archives must consider the forms of search and consultation already before drawing the finding aids and uploading digital copies to the internet (Gueit, 2021, 11).

In the light of digitisation, archives fulfil their societal mission far beyond just the information collection and dissemination by becoming platforms for participatory interaction amongst user communities. In addition to the traditional roles of preserving and promoting cultural heritage through public access, archives become arenas that sustain democratic values of societies, visible in two major trends; one being the social turn with an upsurge in physical meetings, discussions and debates, and the other being digitisation and its enormous growth in social media platforms, blogs, internet-based news media and streaming platforms (Audunson et al., 2020, 166).

2. NEW ROLES FOR ARCHIVES AND ARCHIVISTS

Archival institutions traditionally operate a reading room to host individual users to consult archival items in presence. The user communities may consist of local or regional spread, or go up to national or international levels, depending on the mission and holdings of the archival institutions concerned. While the frequency of on-site consultations in public archives continue to show upwards trends, the most important growth in user services has developed in past years in the digital sphere of the internet. Due to the growing digital user community that takes an interest in archives, a strong and pro-active digital user service strategy towards the development of archival databases and digital consultation and download platforms have become priority (Schlenker, 2016, 61).

Archives have a primary value as evidence of actions and events, while their secondary value refers to the dissemination of information, creation of knowl-

edge and preservation of documentary heritage. Previously, the dissemination activities were directed towards the professional community of historians, while in recent decennials the user communities expanded. Particularly modern machine-written or printed archives that are still relevant for current politics see growing public interest. The communication value of archives, thus, gained momentum with the emergence of digital tools (Audunson, 2020, 8).

The evolving user services also reflect the new roles of archivists as mediators between the producing entities and their holdings on the one side, and the users on the other. Previously, their mediation work remained attached to the reading room, and users were mostly left alone copying autonomously with digital databases, platforms and systems. The number of online users increased largely and quickly, compared to the stable ratio between archivists and onsite users in reading rooms. The digital user was also left alone trying to understand the complexity of archival inventories. New ways of interaction are introduced nowadays that transform the archivists' role in adapting to the digital sphere (Gueit, 2021, 15–16).

In the digital world, archivists have to implement coherent and standardized approaches to the user services. In preparing archival descriptions, they may comply with International Standards, such as the International Standard for Archival Description ISAD(G) and the International Standard for Archival Authority Records ISAAR(CPF). A common approach in archival description is paramount to produce coherent quality metadata for online databases providing archival descriptions to users. This requires the harmonisation and standardisation of the metadata structure, the style of descriptions prepared by the archivists, and the terminology, vocabularies and thesauri used.

Archival authority records following the ISAAR standard help to clarify the identity of producing entities and the relationships between archival holdings. Analysing the descriptions, archival institutions may detect that the individual archivists' touch and style, the difference of cultural backgrounds, education and training of archivists, as well as reforms of archival description approaches throughout time can be considerable. Inconsistencies in the use of terminology and acronyms used for the same organisations or people are frequent. Many variations can be in use and lead to difficulties in information retrieval in databases by search engine technologies.

Archivists can measure the impact and user-friendliness of their services by launching regular user satisfaction surveys directed in particular towards the on-line user community. Survey questions cover the overall quality of the service, the ease of use of finding aids, databases, platforms and portals, and the quality of search, retrieval, consultation and download of archival material.

Archives perform their principal mission by aggregating public and private holdings for appraisal, selection, disposal, long-term preservation and access. Further to securing access to these holdings, they also offer services to the research community by adding new holdings or accruals to existing ones and making them available for public consultation. In modern archival institutions, the availability of new archival collections is communicated pro-actively to scholars and the interested public to raise interest in consulting these documents and trigger new research approaches and projects. Database systems are used to upload descriptions, full inventories and other finding aids to facilitate first orientation for researchers before they register for consultation. Archival items that are either available in digital copy or that are consultable as digital-born records, are made available in dedicated online platforms linked to the databases hosting the archival descriptions (Schafer, 2011, 102; Schönherr-Mann, 2014, 16–24).

A modern online approach implies not only access to descriptions and selected digital files, but also an environment controlled by information security, offering personalised services, such as individual log-on, a personal space, where users can navigate, search, save queries, consult and download, register for the reading room and see the history of consultations and downloads.

Another pro-active aspect of user services concerns the issuing of prizes, grants, or awards to researchers that wish to consult archives. Stakeholders, public and private organisations, foundations and associations may be interested in issuing such grants for the consultation of archives and the subsequent publication of the results in dedicated journals, books, and for presenting these results in academic or public journals. These programmes can be named after important public individuals or relevant organisations and repeated on a yearly basis.

Archives should maintain close and intense relations with academic institutions, mainly universities and other research institutes, that have an interest in the holdings. Such relations can be pro-actively deepened to relevant university faculties.

The Archives may organize workshops in situ or remotely to present holdings, research methods, tools and relevant topics. They can offer introductory sessions and guided visits to beginners and offer remunerated or unpaid trainee- and internships to students to get insight to the work of archives. All these pro-active measures serve the purpose of raising the numbers of users onsite and online and to embed the Archives in the scholarly research community and the interested public sphere.

3. DIGITAL USER SERVICES

The emergence of information technology in the 1970s had an important impact on the user services of archives, which accelerated quickly with the invention of the internet. Visibility and user-oriented activities online have become essential elements for archival user services. At the beginning Archives used the web just to give access to practical information on how to access the reading rooms onsite, in a second stage they published inventories and finding aids. In a later phase they started adding dynamic databases and finally gave direct online access to digital documents. In the digital information society, user communities expand quickly via archival portals, databases, download platforms, social media accounts and websites towards non-expert citizens, who require simple and user-friendly search and retrieval tools and online help and support. Archival institutions are constantly called to improve, extend, and modernise their user services (Gueit, 2021, 7, Hofman 2012, 26–28; Boadas i Raset, 2010, 105).

Besides practical information and inventories or finding aids in a digital environment, users expect access to digital copies in virtual environments. This requires the launch of digitisation campaigns on the side of archival institutions, the development of virtual reading rooms, and the availability of support for the reading, translation and interpretation of digital archival material. A side effect of the democratisation of access and the ongoing move of user services towards the digital environment is the loss of skills necessary to use traditional finding aids (Chenard, 2014, 195).

In the digital age, new and diverse methods for the consultation of documents evolved that did no longer require the physical presence of users in an archival reading room. New technologies offer numerous opportunities to support users in

virtual reading rooms (Dryden, 2014, 65; Bountouri, 2017, 29).

The new digital methods also bring risks and challenges, in particular in terms of information security, data protection, copyright, intellectual property and storage capacities, which need to be gauged against the broad advantages of better preservation of the original archives, increased access to archival material, and the availability of specific public and private funding for relevant digitisation projects (Weber & Dörr, 1997, preface; Moss & Currall, 2004, 124–126).

Digitisation helps improving the preservation conditions of original archives and the online availability of digital copies reduces the need of researchers for travel and costly archival consultation visits. It also broadens access, by offering digital copies online, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The files are accessible to multiple users at the same time and can be searched and retrieved using search engine technology, which raises the need for professional archival description, a sound metadata policy and the systematic publication of inventories online. (Kemp, 2016, 57, and Borghi & Karapapa, 2013, 11–13).

Also on the side of research and university teaching, the use of digitised sources has evolved gradually. More and more scholars use the digital research sphere for both, research and teaching. Sometimes, research on digital archives is driven more by the question of what is available and can be researched than of first defining the topic and then looking for online available sources. In defining digitisation campaigns responding to the needs and priorities of scholars, archivists need to consult with relevant research institutes or their project teams, and vice-versa should scholars that plan research projects get in touch with archives beforehand to seek synergies (Engehausen, 2020, 155–156).

To enlarge the range of potential users even more, archival institutions nowadays have new partnership options with new types of digital memory institutions that aim at raising digital access to specific thematic, regional or chronological holdings. Various such platforms have evolved in the past years on national or regional levels in Europe. The most ambitious project, the European Archives Portal APE, promotes archival holdings from local, regional, national to international institutions under one European roof (Kirchhoff, 2008, 251–263).

With the growing availability of digital copies online, expectations have grown from the user side requesting full availability of collections online. The Archives

are expected to be pro-active and present on the internet to guide and assist the users in the new digital environment. While the core of archivists' work will continue to be the appraisal, selection and description, their role moves from the guardian of cultural heritage to promotor and facilitator of open access, particularly facing restrictions towards public access by tendencies towards secrecy of public institutions, and limitations by intellectual property, copyright and data protection (Trinkaus-Randall, 2013, 16, Weber, 2008, 26–32, Moss & Currall, 2004, 127–131).

CONCLUSION

As key elements of the archival mission, the provision of services to users has changed drastically since the emergence of information technology and the advent of the internet. Under the legal obligation of public archives to make their historical documents available to the public, international standards, codes of ethics and best practice of the archival profession accompanied this transition towards the digital information society.

User services expanded from offering reference services to a limited audience of specialised scholars towards forming an information and knowledge hub that offers a range of pro-active support services. From an information monopoly, archives moved towards a networked moderator and facilitator role in the promotion of open and equitable access.

The democratisation of access through the internet brings many more and diverse user communities to the archives. The new pro-active and user-centered approach of archives conceives users as protagonists and actors at the centre of the attention. User services, thus, become participatory, interactive, communicative, out-reaching, and educating.

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Summary

The provision of services to archives users, and particularly granting access to documents, are key components of the mission of archival institutions. Until the emergence of information technology, user services of public archives were oriented towards a limited and well-informed audience of historians and other specialised scholars. Information technology and the internet changed everything. From information scarcity society moved to information overflow. The information monopolies of archives faded. Modern user services, therefore, move far beyond just the provision of access to primary sources and become pro-active, diverse and user centred. In the digital sphere, users become protagonists and actors, and the centre of attention moves from the archives to the individual. Archives become a space for participation, interaction, communication, outreach, and education.

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