Archival Literacy and Intellectual Access to Online Archives:

A Content Analysis of 12 Presidential Library Websites

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Archival Literacy

User comprehension of:

- Archival terminology
  - Accession
  - Scope and content
  - Linear feet

- Archival organization
  - Provenance
  - Original order
  - Material type

- Archival reference tools
  - Finding aids
For Yakel and Torres, ability to understand and use archival terminology is crucial for users to gain full intellectual access to an archival collection. Correct usage of terminology signifies the user has internalized the rules and the "underlying meaning and concepts" of the archive.

Example from Yakel and Torres study:
- novice researchers described the finding aids with a physical description
- experienced researcher described the finding aid by its function
Moving beyond information about the archives and their holdings to a deeper understanding of how the collection was created, the relationship between the series within the collection and how this collection relates to the archive itself \(^2,^3\)
Archival Reference Online: Challenges

- Broader user population
  - Traditional users:
    - Researchers of interpretation\(^4\) - academics, historians, & genealogists
  - New users:
    - Researchers of fact\(^4\) - general public, novice users

- Range of information seeking behaviors
  - Browsing vs. searching for specific facts
  - “panning for gold”\(^4\) vs. speed

- Range of user expertise and experience

- Multiple access points
  - There is no “Gatekeeper” or “Mediator”
    - How to promote archival literacy?
Educate or Translate?

Materials-centered
- Provenance
- Standardized finding aids
- Archival terminology
  - Glossaries

Strength
- Promotes archival literacy; transferable knowledge

Weakness
- Requires online surrogate for archivist

User-centered
- Subject organization
- Multiple methods of retrieval
  - Indexes, search engines
- Translation for user
  - “What’s in the collection?”

Strength
- User directly accesses collection without archivist intervention

Weakness
- Requires in-depth knowledge of users
Research Questions

Content analysis of the 12 Presidential Library Websites:

- Provide digital access
- Accommodate information-seeking behaviors and user expertise level
- Promote archival literacy
- Evaluate effectiveness of materials-centered or user-centered approach
Findings: Archival Literacy

- 100% of archives’ websites
  - archival terminology
  - information on archival research, reference services, and access policy
  - collection guides (83% had finding aids)

- Suggests a materials-centered approach, but only
  - 1 web site offered a glossary
  - finding aids had varying formats, inconsistent terminology, and levels of description
Findings: Missed Opportunities

- Multi-access points for users not taken advantage of
  - Reference FAQs not accessible from every page of website

- Assumed user knowledge of archival terminology
  - No glossary
  - No translation in user language

- Recommendation
  - Add glossaries or hyperlinks to define archival terms
  - Make glossaries and reference FAQs accessible from every part of the website
Findings: Missed Opportunities

Sample finding aid record from JFK Library website

**Archives & Manuscripts**
This is the most current list of Archives and manuscript holdings. It was last updated on March 18, 2008. New accessions, changes and other updates to collection information are made to this document between published editions of Historical Materials in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The most recent edition of that publication was issued in October, 2000. You can also call our reference staff at 617-514-1629 for information.

Collections that have online finding aids available are linked to the finding aids from this page and from the finding aids index page.

Collections are listed alphabetically as follows:

**COLLECTION TITLE** date of birth - date of death [if known]  
Collection type [Papers, Records, etc.], date range, (bulk date range) (Collection Number).

Profession or occupation. Specific title(s) held or activities (dates). Description of materials. Size of collection in cubic feet [1 foot equals roughly 2,000 pages] or number of rolls of microfilm. National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) number or National Archives record group number (RG) [where applicable]. Collection status. Cross references to other collections or oral history interviews in the Kennedy Library.

**Recommendation**
- Add sample finding aid record with explanation
- Use web design principles to enhance usability of sample
Findings: Missed Opportunities

- Finding aid records rarely able to convey provenance and relationships of series and sub-series to the whole
  - Sample record from FDR library web site

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>Keller, Helen</td>
<td>KELLER, HELEN - COPIES OF CORRESPONDENCE WITH FRANKLIN AND ELEANOR ROOSEVELT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller, Helen</td>
<td>Correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller, Helen</td>
<td>Correspondence with Franklin D. Roosevelt</td>
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Hierarchical record

White House Press Office

Scope and Content Note

The White House Press Office records fill approximately 420 containers and contain information on a wide range of functions. These files contain material on both domestic and foreign issues, press conferences and press briefings, all aspects of the operations of the Press Office, including the staff’s interaction with members of the media. The collection consists of Secretary Marlin Fitzwater's Files, the Press Office Files, and the Lower Press Office Files.

Series and Subseries List

I. Marlin Fitzwater's Files (147 Boxes)
   1. Series: Subject File (34 Boxes)
      a. Subseries: Alpha File Boxes 1-31
      b. Subseries: Bush Alpha File Boxes 32-34
   2. Series: Correspondence File (19 Boxes)
      a. Subseries: Alpha/Chron File Boxes 35-41
      b. Subseries: Chron File Boxes 42-44
      c. Subseries: Alpha File Boxes 45-53
   3. Series: Guidance File (74 Boxes) Boxes 54-128
   4. Series: Trip Boards (18 Boxes) Boxes 129-147

II. Press Office Files (148 Boxes plus Staff Files)
   2. Series: Press Releases Boxes 36-50
Findings: Provenance

Recommendation

- Re-conceive finding aids for use in digital realm
  - Use visuals representation to convey provenance and relationship between records and collections
    - Hierarchical records
    - “Family-tree” or organizational chart of the collection
    - Use navigational tools to alert users to where they are in the web site or finding aid
      - Breadcrumbs - hierarchical outline at the top of each page
Summary

Strengths:
- Digital access:
  - Variety of materials - finding aids & digitized material
  - Multiple access points
- Information seeking behaviors
  - Browsing and search functions
  - FAQs, online exhibits, finding aids & collection guides

Weaknesses:
- Assumed user knowledge of archival terms & concepts
- Inability to convey provenance and relationships between records
Reference List


Contact

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