

Perceptions and Understandings of Archives in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Archivists have investigated public perceptions of archives through a variety of means, including the recording of anecdotes, surveys of those both within and outside of the profession, and most commonly through the examination of representations of archives and archivists in writing, television, and motion pictures. Archivists have also devoted a significant amount of research to evolving digital technologies, most notably the Internet, resultant changes in the information-seeking habits of the public, and the influence of these developments on the archival profession. Drawing on both bodies of research, this study set out to ascertain the public image and understanding of the profession and to begin to identify possible links between these perceptions and use of digital technologies. The article discusses the results of a survey of the Western Washington University campus community designed to identify possible correlations between Internet usage, other means of encountering archives, and perceptions of archives. Findings provide an overall picture of perceptions of archives, including expectations for access, perceptions of the value of archives, and the general image and understandings of archives and archivists. Results also show correlations between these perceptions and expectations for digital access to information, as well as with the places respondents encountered archives.

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KEY WORDS

Writings about archives, Technology

What do most people imagine when they think of archives? Assuming they imagine anything at all and are not simply bewildered by the unfamiliar term, they might think of a dark, windowless room hidden somewhere in a basement, accessed through back doors and dim stairways, piled floor to ceiling with disorganized boxes and file cabinets overfilled with old folders, messy stacks of yellowed papers, and tattered, crumbling ledgers, all with a thick coating of dust. The inhabitant of such a space might be equally odd, a shuffling, nervous sort of person, as aged as some of the papers in her care, better suited to attending to the records than to other people, partially hidden behind thick glasses and a thin veil of dust stirred up by her every movement and perhaps even shaken from her own moth-eaten clothing.

Archivists are familiar with this type of imagery through firsthand experience, studies of the portrayal of archives and archivists in the media, and even a few surveys of those outside the profession.¹ However, formal studies of perceptions of archives among the general public are relatively uncommon and may not provide a full understanding of how the public perceives archives or of any possible alterations in these perceptions. Rapid advances in information technology over the past few decades, key among them the Internet and the World Wide Web, have contributed to a number of changes in society.² The traditional image of archives—dark, dusty stacks filled with ancient papers—could not contrast more with the bright, new technologies of the information age. Yet, the provision of information is one of the key functions of archives and is certainly the one the public most easily recognizes. Given the recent changes in information technology, and the consequent changes in how people access, exchange, use, and think about information, it would seem reasonable to expect that the popular image of archives might also be in flux.

Going on this assumption, I set out to examine the intersection of public perceptions of archives and Internet use. To do this, I first scrutinized existing literature on perceptions of archives and archivists and the effects of Internet technology both on society as a whole and on archives in particular. I then conducted a survey through the Western Washington University email system. The results show increased expectations for the provision of information and materials online and a correlation between expectations and perceived value of archives, and they provide insights into the public's image of archives and their understandings of what archives are and do. Though this study was designed to investigate correlations between Internet usage and perceptions of archives, it also shows some of the ways exposures to archives, most notably through conducting research and through the entertainment media, may affect perceptions of archives. More generally, this study provides information on perceptions of archives and archivists held by one segment of the population.

Traditional Stereotypes of Archives

Arlene Schmuland gave the composite image of the fictional archivists she studied as “a middle-aged, visually impaired person in badly chosen clothing,” an image she linked to a set of “specific character traits” associated with archivists.³ Key among these are intelligence, dedication, and isolation or social awkwardness. In terms of personality, Margaret Turner suggested the public imagines archivists as odd, introverted, and single.⁴ The lack of social interaction on the part of archivists may be seen both as a symbol and as a result of their devotion to their work. When associated with the work of history, their dedication may become heroic.⁵ On the other hand, archivists may be viewed as territorial, possessive of their collections, or condescending toward those seeking information.⁶

Intelligence is seen as another crucial trait for an archivist. Archivists are expected to be well educated and inquisitive and to enjoy cultural pursuits.⁷ Though portrayed as intelligent, many fictional archivists are depicted as lacking influence within their organizations, or as treated with less respect than their position might be expected to garner.⁸ In fact, a number of images of archivists suggest they are not quite worthy of respect. David Gracy wrote that the public perceives archivists as “permanently humped, moleish, aged creatures who shuffle musty documents in dust-filled stacks for a purpose uncertain.”⁹

Dust is the most widespread and common feature of the set of stereotypes associated with archival repositories.¹⁰ The image of dust may even transfer to the personage of the archivist, as the dust itself would rub off on her in her daily work.¹¹ In part, dust and dirt in archives help reinforce a sense of age and history.¹² Paul Duguid recounted a trip to the Portuguese archives in which each container he opened held “a fair portion of dust as old as the letters.”¹³ The images of dust and dirt also suggest that archives are seldom used. Schmuland noted one striking example in which the fictional archives of the East India Company were left to rot in piles in the damp basement of the East India House, accessed through a single door rusty from disuse.¹⁴ The dust and dark of basement archives may suggest other associations, such as that noted by Schmuland between archives and “death and the tomb.”¹⁵

Archives also bear a resemblance to other institutions. The link between archives and libraries is fairly obvious. Notable resemblances also exist between archives and shrines, temples, and even prisons.¹⁶ The out-of-the-way location of some archives, or the impressive architecture of others, combined with people’s lack of knowledge about archives and the fact of closed stacks may lend a sense of intrigue. Levy and Robles wrote that to people who do not know much about archives, they may “sound grand but mysterious.”¹⁷

The contents of archives are most commonly understood to be papers of various kinds. The public may also think of archives in terms of less tangible holdings. In fiction writing, “archives,” both the records and the repository, are often “equated with history” and in certain instances, the records may be viewed as “history itself.”¹⁸ In particular, archives may represent history as secrets or truth. Karen Buckley found that “invariably, in popular culture, the archival record represents the truth and the truth represents power.”¹⁹

Many of the stereotypes about records speak to their value. Certainly, the most concerning stereotype about archival holdings is that they are useless, little better than trash, or, as one cartoonist put it, “a dump without seagulls.”²⁰ Fortunately, signs suggest that this is not the general view among the public. In a 2000 public opinion survey commissioned by the Australia State Records Authority of New South Wales, 90% of respondents thought archives are useful, 89% saw them as valuable, and 72% saw them as interesting.²¹

Stereotypes serve as explanatory systems, helping people to make sense of causes and effects and making categories understandable as a whole so people do not have to understand each individual member.²² In doing so, they draw on the features of a group that are most visible, familiar, or distinctive and may use stereotypes of other, similar groups in forming understandings of unfamiliar groups.²³ Viewed as explanatory systems, archival stereotypes illustrate that, like the libraries to which they are compared, archives keep information. In fact, they are often pictured as packed with information in the form of paper, either loose, bound, or corralled in boxes. More specifically, archives keep historical information. Age and dust are the most prominent indicators of this. Archivists may personify these traits through their intelligence and their age, both of which may be represented visually through the wearing of glasses. Dust also suggests that archives are seldom used, a suggestion backed up by the out-of-the-way locations of many archives. Once again, archivists may personify this through their lack of social interaction, a trait that can also be linked to their intelligence and dedication. Their passive nature and apparent dedication to work without wealth or influence explain why archivists and the institutions they oversee are unlikely to have much of either.²⁴

Online Information Seeking and What It Means for Archives

The Internet has contributed to a range of changes in current society. A number of basic activities, from shopping to social interaction to work—“essentially everything that people do”—have shifted to online spaces.²⁵ In 2006, 75% of American adults used computers, and nearly as many, 73%, were Internet users.²⁶ By April 2012, 82% of American adults used the Internet, still behind the 95% of American teenagers who did so by July 2011.²⁷

One of the biggest changes brought about by the Internet was the introduction of the Web as a source of information. The Web is now the first place that many turn to fill an information need.²⁸ Online, a person can retrieve information from the other side of the world as easily as if it were located next door, making access “independent of location.”²⁹ And he or she can get online from just about anywhere. Rather than a visit to the local library, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser wrote, research for digital natives means a Google search and a visit to *Wikipedia*, and most prefer their information delivered digitally rather than in print.³⁰

Though these changes are society-wide and affect a number of institutions, they present unique challenges to archives. Archivists worry that such technologies will make archives and similar institutions obsolete. As Randall Jimerson wrote, archives may “become quaint anachronisms in a world of instant data communication, high technology, and rapid change.”³¹ In comparison to sleek databases and search engines that quickly produce digital results, print materials and the institutions that hold them may seem more than quaint and old-fashioned, they may become inconvenient enough for people to avoid altogether. Because of the time and effort required to digitize records, archivists generally agree that most archival holdings will never be digitized.³² The ease with which they can post their own materials online and the number of materials they have posted, however, may lead members of the public to believe the archival materials they want should be there as well. Taken to the extreme, some may question, as they have of libraries, whether archives are necessary at all because they believe that all information is online, or will be soon.³³

When archivists do post materials online, users may fail to recognize the hand of the archivist in the information they receive. Online researchers can “bypass” the archivist, locating and viewing finding aids and materials independently, and thus not realize the role the archivist continues to play as mediator between researchers and the materials they view.³⁴ Archivists and other information professionals are also concerned about whether researchers are able to identify reliable information, or if they care about information quality. Many Web users do not appear to care about the source of the information they access online or whether they can trust it.³⁵

In some ways, new information technologies, including but not limited to the Internet, may be promoting archives without the input or consent of archivists. Public use of the words “archive” and “archives” has increased in the last few decades.³⁶ In part, this is because the need for understandable names for new digital phenomena has led to the novel use of familiar words, among them “archive(s).” With increased use comes a certain amount of increased understanding; most people recognize, for instance, that archives deal with information or things considered old or valuable.³⁷ William Maher posited a corresponding

increase in the value of archives, reflected in the eagerness of those outside the profession to apply the word to personal collections or databases.³⁸

Unfortunately, this creates somewhat of an identity crisis for archives. Archivists traditionally cite three possible definitions of “archives”: as the building or part of a building containing archival materials, as the records themselves, and as the institutions responsible for collecting, arranging, and preserving the records. In the past, those outside the profession used the term to refer to “any collection of documents that are old or of historical interest, regardless of how they are organized.”³⁹ Today, “archive(s)” can refer to backup data or data stored offline, the portion of a website containing older content, “virtually any collection of information,” and, in the case of “archive,” the action of transferring data to be stored offline.⁴⁰ Often, these new “archives” do not take into account provenance or the need for long-term, reliable access.⁴¹ Though clearly some of these new aspects correspond to traditional ones, they raise questions about what the key characteristics and most important functions of archives are perceived to be.

Methodology

Previous writings on Internet and computer technologies and the archival image suggest three main areas to examine for possible changes in perceptions of archives: expectations for access to information; definitions of archives and understandings of what they are and do; and the traditional archival stereotypes examined in previous studies of the archival image. I designed and conducted my survey with these in mind.⁴² The survey was organized into four sections. The first section collected basic demographic information. The second focused on respondents’ understandings of the word “archive” and some of the influences on these understandings. The third section focused on perceptions of archives as physical spaces and institutions, of archival materials, and of archivists. The final section dealt with respondents’ experience with technology and the Internet, as well as expectations regarding information. I developed an overall picture of respondents’ understandings of and views on archives from the answers in the last three sections. I determined possible correlations between exposure to the Internet and computer technologies and perceptions of archives by cross-tabulating the amount of time respondents spend online, where they encounter the term “archive,” and, in certain cases, their expectations for information access and how they define the word “archive” with the results of questions from sections two and three.

The relative scarcity of surveys on the public opinion of archives and the different focus of my study led me to develop most of the questions based on readings on the image of archives and the Internet. These included questions

on the definition respondents most often associate with archives, where they encounter archives most, and some of the written response questions. Where possible, survey questions drew on those in previous studies. For instance, the question asking respondents to select adjectives describing archives is similar to one in the telephone survey conducted for State Records, New South Wales.⁴³ However, I added options like “dusty” and “confusing” to the list of adjectives to test claims by other writers that archives are viewed as such.⁴⁴ Though Levy and Robles’s study on the image of archivists was based on interviews with resource allocators rather than a structured survey, the results informed my choice of adjectives offered to respondents. Levy and Robles found that resource allocators view archivists as “well educated” and “as having full command of the contents and operation of their collections” and noted an expectation of traits such as intelligence, curiosity, management and organizational skills, patience, and attention to detail.⁴⁵ As in the multiple-choice question on adjectives describing archives, I included traits that I found in other writings on archivist stereotypes as well. With the exception of two traits, “resistance to change” and “possessiveness of collections,” I tried to avoid including traits that would be viewed as linked with negative stereotypes of archivists, such as social awkwardness, as I suspected that many respondents would be reluctant to apply such negative stereotypes, whether or not they subscribed to them. In these cases, I generally opted to include the opposites of such traits, in this case “social skills.”⁴⁶

I included short-answer questions to flesh out multiple-choice questions, give respondents an opportunity to use their own words to describe archives and archivists, and gauge respondents’ understandings of the profession without the aid of prewritten multiple-choice selections. These responses provided qualitative data on people’s views and understandings of archives. They were also coded based on a list of common themes and traits developed from an initial reading of the responses to allow for quantitative analysis of them. To do this, I read and assigned keywords to each response signifying the themes and traits it exhibited. For instance, I noted if a response referred to archival holdings in terms of information, data, or physical materials; included possible uses of archival materials; or used “archive” as a verb to describe archival processes as a whole rather than listing them individually (see Tables 7 through 9 for a complete list). To ensure consistency, I coded each response three separate times.

I distributed a sample survey to friends and acquaintances. Their feedback resulted in the rewording of some of the questions and multiple-choice options to be more clear and concise and the addition of answer options, such as “banking information/official documents,” for where people encounter the word “archive” most often.

I designed the survey for a population with minimal experience with archives and a great deal of familiarity with information technology. I received permission from the Western Washington University institutional review board to distribute the survey through the campus email system. I chose the Western community because members could generally be expected to fit my criteria for survey population and be easily and systematically reached for surveying.⁴⁷ I sent the survey out through the campus email system to a random sample selected by the Registrar's Office of 35% of the active population for spring term 2012, 4,790 potential respondents. To encourage email recipients to respond to the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of two Amazon.com gift certificates after completing the survey. The survey received 413 full or partial responses, which is a response rate of 8.6%. A number were too incomplete to be useful, so I excluded them from analysis, which brought the number of responses down to 389 and the response rate to 8.1%.⁴⁸ All percentages cited here are for those who answered a given question.

Limitations

Though I hoped the prize incentive would encourage a more diverse group of respondents, some of the responses suggest that people who had previous experience with archives responded to the survey at a higher rate than those who did not have such experience. Just over 40% of respondents stated that they had visited an archives in person, and 53.2% stated they had visited an archives' website. Thus, survey responses were likely skewed toward those who had actual archival research experience and whose perceptions may have been colored by these experiences rather than, or in addition to, representations of archives from outside the profession.

While the population surveyed was largely made up of digital natives, and thus provided a good pool for testing for correlations between Internet usage and perceptions of archives, it did not represent the U.S. population as a whole. Overall, the population surveyed was younger, better educated, and likely, though the survey did not test for this, from less diverse backgrounds than the general U.S. population. The fact that most respondents were probably digital natives also limited the comparisons that could be made between those who did and did not spend time online.

Most of the questions asked respondents for their opinions; however, several asked respondents to self-report information like the amount of time spent online and where they encounter the word "archive" most often. Respondents may not always have been accurate in their answers to such questions. In some instances, responses either referred to or may have been influenced by experiences with recently developed information technologies other than the Internet.

Finally, though the number of responses was greater than in many other studies on perceptions of archives, many of the cross-tabulated results could not be determined to be statistically significant because of too few responses in one or more categories. Results with a confidence level of 95% (a P value less than 0.05) were considered statistically significant for this study. Responses for the multiple-choice questions contain a margin of error of no more than $\pm 5.3\%$.

Experience with Technology

The majority of respondents reported being very comfortable with computer technology and the Internet. Most (60.2%) consider themselves “tech savvy,” while only 12.7% do not. Very few respondents (3%) reported spending less than 1 hour a day online, with the most (43.2%) reportedly spending 3 to 4 hours a day online, as shown in Table 1. Responses suggest time spent online has increased people’s exposure to the word “archive” if not to actual archives. Over a third of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they encounter the word “archive” more often online than offline, and 22.6% agreed or strongly agreed that such online encounters play a significant role in shaping their understandings of archives (see Table 2).

Table 1. Hours Spent Online per Day

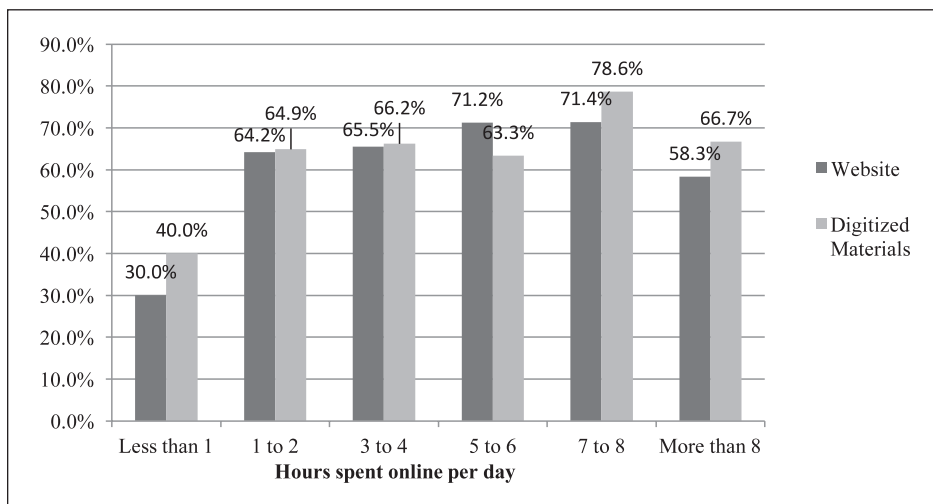
| | | |
|-------------------|-----|-------|
| Less than 1 hour | 10 | 3.0% |
| 1 to 2 hours | 95 | 28.3% |
| 3 to 4 hours | 145 | 43.2% |
| 5 to 6 hours | 60 | 17.9% |
| 7 to 8 hours | 14 | 4.2% |
| More than 8 hours | 12 | 3.6% |

Expectations of Archives

Much of what archivists have noted about people’s expectations for finding information online appears to hold true. Most respondents (58.9%) believe that all the information they need is already available online, and 55.8% believe it should be available. As far as these beliefs translating to expectations of archives, respondents generally expect an archives to post a website and digitized materials from its holdings online, though few expect an archives to post a Facebook page (see Table 2). While expectations of archives increase slightly among those who spend between 1 and 8 hours a day online, only those who spend less than 1 hour a day online show an appreciable difference in their expectations (see Figure 1).

Table 2. Agreement with the Following Statements:

| | Re-sponses | Strongly agree | | Agree | | Neutral | | Disagree | | Strongly disagree | |
|---|------------|----------------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|----------|-------|-------------------|-------|
| I consider myself very "tech savvy." | 339 | 61 | 18.0% | 143 | 42.2% | 92 | 27.1% | 35 | 10.3% | 8 | 2.4% |
| I can find all the information I need online. | 338 | 52 | 15.4% | 147 | 43.5% | 76 | 22.5% | 56 | 16.6% | 7 | 2.1% |
| All the information I need should be available online. | 335 | 78 | 23.3% | 109 | 32.5% | 85 | 25.4% | 57 | 17.0% | 6 | 1.8% |
| If I cannot find the information I need online, I will check off-line sources. | 338 | 102 | 30.2% | 162 | 47.9% | 48 | 14.2% | 20 | 5.9% | 6 | 1.8% |
| I would expect an archives to have a website. | 338 | 81 | 24.0% | 138 | 40.8% | 101 | 30.0% | 17 | 5.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| I would expect an archives to post material from their holdings online. | 337 | 69 | 20.5% | 149 | 44.2% | 86 | 25.5% | 31 | 9.2% | 2 | 5.9% |
| I would expect an archives to have a Facebook page. | 338 | 5 | 1.5% | 20 | 5.9% | 104 | 30.8% | 124 | 36.7% | 85 | 25.1% |
| I encounter the word "archive" more often online than off-line. | 338 | 29 | 8.6% | 87 | 25.7% | 129 | 38.2% | 74 | 21.9% | 19 | 5.6% |
| My understanding of archives is derived largely from online encounters with the term. | 337 | 15 | 4.5% | 61 | 18.1% | 101 | 30.0% | 116 | 34.4% | 44 | 13.1% |

**FIGURE 1.** This bar graph shows the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed they would expect an archives to post a website and digitized materials by time spent online.⁴⁹

Accessibility

Responses suggest providing access to information or primary sources is viewed as one of the most important functions of archives. 43.5% of the descriptions of the services provided by archives and 18.1% of tasks attributed to archivists focus on the ultimate goal of providing access to materials. Respondents explained the role of archives and archivists in wording such as acquiring information, then finding “ways to organize this information so that it can be easily accessed by the public.”⁵⁰ Some also noted that archives do not maintain materials just for use in the present. For instance, one respondent wrote of the role of archivists as “preserving the past and the present for access in the future.”⁵¹

However, when judging how accessible archives actually are, respondents were divided. While only 11.7% selected “inaccessible” to describe archives, compared to 32.3% who selected “accessible,” more selected “secretive,” “mysterious,” or “confusing” than “welcoming” or “friendly” as can be seen in Table 3. Expectations for online access to information and selection of “accessible” as an adjective to describe archives may be related. Those who believe that they should be able to find all the information they need online selected “accessible” to describe archives less often than those who do not believe this, as illustrated in Figure 2; however, too few respondents in some of the categories made it difficult to determine whether these results are statistically significant.

Table 3. Adjectives Selected to Describe Archives (341 responses)

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-----|-------|---------------|-----|-------|
| Accessible | 110 | 32.3% | Musty | 68 | 19.9% |
| Boring | 39 | 11.4% | Mysterious | 81 | 23.8% |
| Bright | 4 | 1.2% | Old | 175 | 51.3% |
| Clean | 45 | 13.2% | Old-fashioned | 70 | 20.5% |
| Confusing | 55 | 16.1% | Organized | 227 | 66.6% |
| Current | 31 | 9.1% | Popular | 11 | 3.2% |
| Dark | 30 | 8.8% | Quiet | 106 | 31.1% |
| Disorganized | 18 | 5.3% | Relevant | 92 | 27.0% |
| Dusty | 73 | 21.4% | Secretive | 55 | 16.1% |
| Forbidding | 17 | 5.0% | Unimportant | 2 | 0.5% |
| Friendly | 19 | 5.6% | Useful | 203 | 59.5% |
| High Tech | 25 | 7.3% | Useless | 5 | 1.5% |
| Historical | 289 | 84.8% | Valuable | 211 | 61.9% |
| Important | 203 | 59.5% | Welcoming | 16 | 4.7% |
| Inaccessible | 40 | 11.7% | Other | 7 | 2.1% |
| Interesting | 143 | 41.9% | | | |

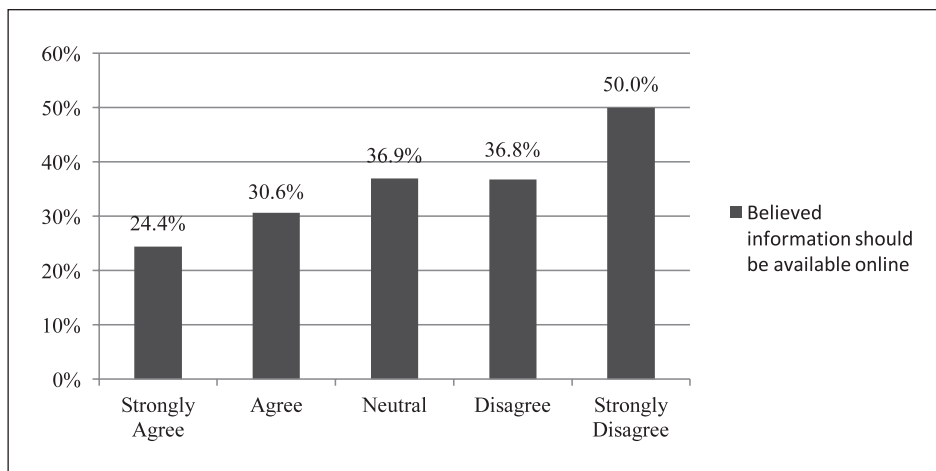


FIGURE 2. This bar graph shows the percentage of respondents who selected “accessible” as an adjective to describe archives by whether they agreed that all information they need should be online.⁵²

Of those who had visited an archives in person, 33.1% selected “accessible,” while 12.7% of this group selected “inaccessible.”⁵³ Hopefully, a trip to the archives would show researchers that archives are indeed accessible; however, these results suggest this may not be the case. The written responses illustrate some possible reasons for this. One of the respondents who had visited an archives and who selected “inaccessible” as an adjective, described archives as slow and noted that they are “useful but never as streamlined or efficient as I would like.”⁵⁴ Others may have had disappointing customer service experiences that led them to form a poor opinion of archives’ accessibility. In response to the question on the role of the archivist, one respondent wrote, “What they do when they’re not giving me dirty looks for touching their things, I’m not sure. I assume it’s important, because I always seem to be keeping them from something they’d much rather be doing.”⁵⁵

The Value of Archives

Overall, respondents have a positive view of the value of archives. After “historical” and “organized,” which were the two most popular adjectives chosen to describe archives, the most-selected adjectives had to do with their value. Respondents generally characterized archives as “valuable,” “useful,” “important,” “interesting,” and “relevant.” Very few selected “useless” or “unimportant” (see Table 3).⁵⁶ In fact, 23 respondents (8.1%) referred to the value of the materials kept by archives as the reason for their preservation and use, writing, for instance, that archives contain “documents that are saved due to their importance.”⁵⁷

Beliefs about the availability of information online show a correlation with the selection of adjectives denoting value to describe archives. Those who believe all information should be readily available online selected “boring,” “unimportant,” and “useless” more often and “important,” “interesting,” “relevant,” “useful,” and “valuable” less often, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentages of Those Who Agreed with the Statement, “All the Information I Need Should Be Available Online,” by the Adjectives Relating to Value They Selected to Describe Archives⁵⁸

| | Boring | Important | Interesting | Relevant | Unimportant | Useful | Useless | Valuable |
|-------------------|--------|-----------|-------------|----------|-------------|--------|---------|----------|
| Strongly agree | 20.5% | 52.6% | 26.9% | 17.9% | 2.6% | 47.4% | 5.1% | 51.3% |
| Agree | 13.0% | 61.1% | 41.7% | 25.9% | 0.0% | 57.4% | 0.9% | 53.7% |
| Neutral | 8.3% | 59.5% | 45.2% | 29.8% | 0.0% | 65.5% | 0.0% | 65.5% |
| Disagree | 3.5% | 68.4% | 56.1% | 35.1% | 0.0% | 73.7% | 0.0% | 80.7% |
| Strongly disagree | 0.0% | 66.7% | 66.7% | 33.3% | 0.0% | 33.3% | 0.0% | 100.0% |

What Is an Archives?

As those outside the archival profession appropriate the word “archive,” it seems likely that people will think increasingly of archives in nontraditional senses. To determine whether this is the case, respondents were asked to choose which definition they most often associate with the term “archive.” All of the traditional definitions received more responses than those based on computer technology. The overwhelming majority chose “Documents or materials preserved for future use because of their public or historical value,” as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Definitions Associated with the Word “Archive” (389 responses)

| | | |
|---|-----|-------|
| To store data offline | 27 | 6.9% |
| The building (or portion thereof) housing archival collections | 31 | 8.0% |
| Documents or materials preserved for future use because of their public or historical value | 262 | 67.4% |
| A file that has been transferred off the computer into long-term storage | 15 | 3.9% |
| An organization that collects the records of individuals, families or organizations | 28 | 7.2% |
| The portion of a website containing older content | 19 | 4.9% |
| Other | 7 | 1.8% |

Those who encounter the term while browsing online were most likely to select the definition of “archive” as a portion of a website, with 17.3%, nearly three times the rate of the next closest group, choosing this definition. This group also selected the other computer-technology-driven definitions at relatively high rates. However, even among this group, the most popular definition was “materials preserved for future use” (see Table 6).

Table 6. Definitions Associated with the Word “Archive” by Where Respondents Encounter the Word “Archive” Most Often⁵⁹

| | Building | | Materials | | Organiza- tion | | Verb (stor- ing data) | | File stored offline | | Part of website | |
|-----------------------------|----------|-------|-----------|-------|-------------------|-------|--------------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|
| Movies/TV/ Fiction | 6 | 16.7% | 22 | 61.1% | 5 | 13.9% | 1 | 2.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Doing research | 10 | 5.0% | 149 | 74.1% | 15 | 7.5% | 15 | 7.5% | 4 | 2.0% | 6 | 3.0% |
| The news | 1 | 16.7% | 3 | 50.0% | 1 | 16.7% | 1 | 16.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Browsing online | 3 | 5.8% | 31 | 59.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 5 | 9.6% | 3 | 5.8% | 9 | 17.3% |
| Banking/of- ficial docs. | 2 | 8.3% | 14 | 58.3% | 4 | 16.7% | 1 | 4.2% | 3 | 12.5% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Don't re- member | 3 | 7.9% | 26 | 68.4% | 2 | 5.3% | 3 | 7.9% | 2 | 5.3% | 2 | 5.3% |
| Other | 6 | 18.8% | 17 | 53.1% | 1 | 3.1% | 1 | 3.1% | 3 | 9.4% | 2 | 6.3% |

In terms of what archives and archivists do, respondents focused heavily on storage, preservation, organization, and accessibility. They most commonly associate providing access with archives, with 43.5% mentioning it in their descriptions, as can be seen in Table 7.

Responses varied a little more in ascribing tasks to archivists, which included the organization of materials or information, the overall management of archives or the materials therein, helping researchers to locate and understand materials, providing general access to the contents of archives, acquiring materials for archives, preserving archival holdings, appraising potential holdings, storing materials, and describing holdings (see Table 8). Eleven respondents (3.9%) simply used “archive” as a verb to describe the activities of archivists.

When asked about the materials kept by archives, 19.7% of respondents suggested that archives keep published sources such as books or periodicals that would be more appropriately held by a library (see Table 9). However, 52.1% listed the sorts of unique materials that archivists would consider within their purview, either in general terms such as records or documents, or specific

Table 7. Written Descriptions of Services Provided by Archives (276 responses)

| | | |
|--|-----|-------|
| Described archival services in terms of acquisition of holdings | 9 | 3.3% |
| Described archival services in terms of description of holdings | 5 | 1.8% |
| Described archival services in terms of discovery of materials or information | 2 | 0.7% |
| Described archival services in terms of management of archives and holdings | 1 | 0.4% |
| Described archival services in terms of organization of holdings | 28 | 10.1% |
| Described archival services in terms of preservation of holdings | 25 | 9.1% |
| Described archival services in terms of providing access to holdings | 120 | 43.5% |
| Described archival services in terms of providing assistance | 15 | 5.4% |
| Described archival services in terms of storage of materials | 69 | 25.0% |
| Described archival services in terms of study of holdings | 1 | 0.4% |
| Related archival services to their needs as researchers | 1 | 0.4% |
| Related archives to another profession (other than libraries) | 1 | 0.4% |
| Related archives to libraries | 4 | 1.5% |
| Described archival holdings in terms of data | 26 | 9.4% |
| Described archival holdings in terms of information | 104 | 37.7% |
| Described archival holdings in terms of physical materials | 80 | 29.0% |
| Described archival services in terms of intangible objects (e.g., knowledge, window to the past) | 14 | 5.1% |
| Referred to age when describing archival holdings | 35 | 12.7% |
| Referred to the duration for which archival materials were kept | 1 | 0.4% |
| Referred to the evidentiary nature of archival holdings | 3 | 1.1% |
| Referred to specific uses for archival materials in their descriptions | 19 | 6.9% |
| Referred to specific user groups in their descriptions | 7 | 2.5% |
| Referred to history in their descriptions | 49 | 17.8% |
| Included computer technology in their descriptions of archival services | 12 | 4.3% |
| Referred to archives as a physical location | 9 | 3.3% |
| Included a judgment of the value of archives | 72 | 26.1% |
| Included anecdotes/personal experiences/other commentary in their descriptions | 21 | 7.6% |
| Used "archive" as a verb | 1 | 0.4% |
| Stated they were unsure of the services provided by archives | 13 | 4.7% |

types and content such as birth certificates or records pertaining to lawsuits. Forty-seven (16.5%) listed both archival and nonarchival materials.⁶⁰ Though the majority of respondents listed traditional, paper-based materials as examples of what archives keep, some listed other types of media. These include audio and video recordings, "servers with data in them," databases, software, and "early computers/video games."⁶¹

Table 8. Written Descriptions of the Role of an Archivist (282 responses)

| | | |
|---|-----|-------|
| Described archivist's role in terms of acquisition of holdings | 45 | 16.0% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of appraisal of holdings | 21 | 7.4% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of description of holdings | 20 | 7.1% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of discovering materials or information | 16 | 5.7% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of gatekeeping | 13 | 4.6% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of management of archives or holdings | 56 | 19.9% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of organization of holdings | 156 | 55.3% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of outreach | 4 | 1.4% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of preservation of holdings | 44 | 15.6% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of providing access to holdings | 51 | 18.1% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of providing assistance | 53 | 18.8% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of soliciting donations | 2 | 0.7% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of storage of holdings | 21 | 7.4% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of studying holdings | 10 | 3.5% |
| Described archivist's role in terms of their needs as researchers | 1 | 0.4% |
| Referred to the specialized knowledge of archivists | 27 | 9.6% |
| Related archivists to librarians | 17 | 6.0% |
| Related archivists to another profession | 28 | 9.9% |
| Described the personality of archivists | 10 | 3.5% |
| Described what archivists act on as the archives | 49 | 17.4% |
| Described what archivists act on as data | 23 | 8.2% |
| Described what archivists act on as information | 67 | 23.8% |
| Described what archivists act on as physical materials | 94 | 33.3% |
| Described what archivists act on in terms of intangible objects (e.g., knowledge, window to the past) | 13 | 4.6% |
| Referred to the age of the holdings | 68 | 24.1% |
| Included computer technology in their descriptions | 13 | 4.6% |
| Used "archive" as a verb | 11 | 3.9% |
| Included a value judgment of archives/archivists | 15 | 5.3% |
| Included anecdotes/personal experiences/other commentary in their descriptions | 11 | 3.9% |
| Stated they were unsure of the role of archivists | 11 | 3.9% |

Archives Stereotypes

Responses did contain the archival stereotypes discussed earlier. However, while many respondents chose adjectives associated with archival stereotypes, these were less popular than "historical" and "organized" and, for the most part, those adjectives having to do with the value of archives, as can be seen in Table 3.⁶²

Table 9. Written Descriptions of Archives' Holdings (284 responses)

| | | |
|--|-----|-------|
| Described archival holdings as data | 36 | 12.7% |
| Described archival holdings as information | 91 | 32.0% |
| Described archival holdings as physical materials | 150 | 52.8% |
| Described archival holdings in terms of intangible objects (e.g., knowledge, window to the past) | 9 | 3.2% |
| Gave examples of original, unpublished works in their descriptions | 148 | 52.1% |
| Gave examples of published works in their descriptions | 56 | 19.7% |
| Gave specific examples of types of records kept by archives | 52 | 18.3% |
| Included computer technology in their descriptions of archival materials | 22 | 7.7% |
| Noted the types of records kept by archives could vary | 35 | 12.3% |
| Described archival records as no longer in use | 11 | 3.9% |
| Described the types of information contained in archival records | 29 | 10.2% |
| Described materials in terms of their age | 57 | 20.1% |
| Referred to specific uses for archival materials in their descriptions | 3 | 1.1% |
| Referred to the duration for which archival materials were kept | 1 | 0.4% |
| Referred to the evidentiary nature of archival holdings | 2 | 0.7% |
| Referred to history in their descriptions | 52 | 18.3% |
| Referred to the quantity of materials held by archives | 25 | 8.8% |
| Referred to the fact materials were kept by archives as a defining characteristic of those materials | 17 | 6.0% |
| Referred to the physical location of archives | 7 | 2.5% |
| Included a value judgment of archives | 23 | 8.1% |
| Related archival materials to their needs as researchers | 11 | 3.9% |
| Included anecdotes/personal experiences/other commentary in their descriptions | 11 | 3.9% |
| Stated they were unsure of the type of materials kept by archives | 5 | 1.8% |

The traditional stereotypes were also evident in written responses. One respondent trying to explain the role of archivists wrote, “I don’t know what they do in there honestly . . . be mysterious?”⁶³ Though only 2 respondents included “dust” in their descriptions, 113 included the age of archival materials, describing them as “old data/records/stuff” or even “medieval texts.”⁶⁴ One respondent wrote of the services provided by archives:

I imagine an older person, sitting at a desk doing a crossword puzzle in the sub-sub basement of an old building most don’t know the use for. When you approach the desk, they hand you a torch without looking up and say something like, “3 doors down, first on the left. Oh, and don’t disturb the bats.”⁶⁵

Another respondent imagined archives as similar to the warehouse pictured at the end of *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, while yet another pictured “a big warehouse with many isles [sic] of alphabetized file cabinets.”⁶⁶

Where people encounter archives may be influencing the stereotypes they associate with them. The relationship was most clear among those who encounter archives in TV, movies, and fiction. This group selected adjectives associated with traditional stereotypes, such as “dark,” “mysterious,” “musty,” “old-fashioned,” and “quiet,” at the highest rates, as shown in Table 10. Fiction, either written or televised, may also have influenced respondents’ understandings subconsciously. One respondent, who could not remember where he encountered the term “archive” most, wrote that the contents of archives are “mostly fantastic things, like obscure information that leads to solving a murder case or uncovering a villain’s weakness.”⁶⁷

Except for “old” and “forbidding,” those who encountered archives while conducting research selected adjectives associated with the traditional archival stereotypes at a lower rate than those who encountered archives in the entertainment media. They selected “friendly,” “welcoming,” and “high tech” more often by a small margin, but also selected “confusing” at the highest rate (see Figure 3). The fact that some of these stereotypes persist in this group suggests that archivists themselves may be inadvertently helping to promote them. For instance, one respondent described a trip to an archives in which the reference room was “spacious,” but the stacks were “super forboding [*sic*], dimly lit and extremely confusing.”⁶⁹

Those who encountered “archive” most often online also seem divided. In comparison to the other two groups analyzed here, they selected adjectives associated with traditional archival stereotypes at median or lower rates. However, they also selected adjectives that might be linked to an alternate understanding of archives, such as “current,” “high tech,” or “welcoming,” at lower rates than either those who encounter “archive” most often in the media or while conducting research.⁷¹

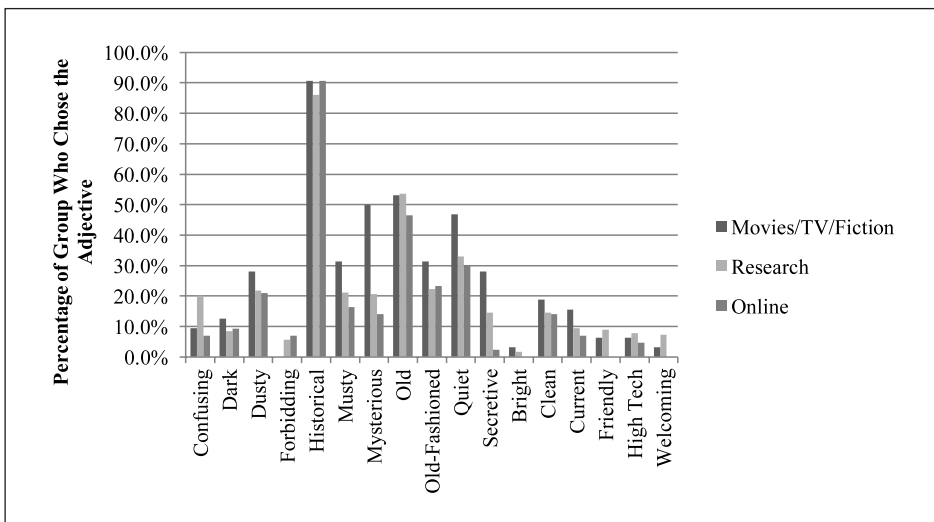


FIGURE 3. This bar graph shows stereotype adjectives chosen to describe archives by where respondents encounter the word “archive” most often.⁷⁰

Table 10. Adjectives Chosen to Describe Archives by Where Respondents Encountered the Word “Archive” Most Often⁶⁸

| | Movies/ TV/Fiction | | The news | | Research | | Browsing online | | Banking | | Don't re- member | | Other | |
|---------------|-----------------------|-------|----------|-------|----------|-------|--------------------|-------|---------|-------|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Accessible | 10 | 27.8% | 2 | 33.3% | 60 | 29.9% | 14 | 26.9% | 8 | 33.3% | 9 | 23.7% | 7 | 21.9% |
| Boring | 3 | 8.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 19 | 9.5% | 6 | 11.5% | 3 | 12.5% | 6 | 15.8% | 2 | 6.3% |
| Bright | 1 | 2.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 3 | 1.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Clean | 6 | 16.7% | 1 | 16.7% | 26 | 12.9% | 6 | 11.5% | 2 | 8.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Confusing | 3 | 8.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 36 | 17.9% | 3 | 5.8% | 3 | 12.5% | 6 | 15.8% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Current | 5 | 13.9% | 0 | 0.0% | 17 | 8.5% | 3 | 5.8% | 3 | 12.5% | 2 | 5.3% | 1 | 3.1% |
| Dark | 4 | 11.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 15 | 7.5% | 4 | 7.7% | 2 | 8.3% | 4 | 10.5% | 1 | 3.1% |
| Disorganized | 2 | 5.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 8 | 4.0% | 3 | 5.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 5.3% | 3 | 9.4% |
| Dusty | 9 | 25.0% | 1 | 16.7% | 39 | 19.4% | 9 | 17.3% | 6 | 25.0% | 5 | 13.2% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Forbidding | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 10 | 5.0% | 3 | 5.8% | 1 | 4.2% | 1 | 2.6% | 2 | 6.3% |
| Friendly | 2 | 5.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 16 | 8.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 4.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| High tech | 2 | 5.6% | 1 | 16.7% | 14 | 7.0% | 2 | 3.8% | 2 | 8.3% | 4 | 10.5% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Historical | 29 | 80.6% | 3 | 50.0% | 154 | 76.6% | 39 | 75.0% | 16 | 66.7% | 27 | 71.1% | 21 | 65.6% |
| Important | 20 | 55.6% | 2 | 33.3% | 110 | 54.7% | 23 | 44.2% | 18 | 75.0% | 15 | 39.5% | 15 | 46.9% |
| Inaccessible | 1 | 2.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 27 | 13.4% | 1 | 1.9% | 2 | 8.3% | 6 | 15.8% | 3 | 9.4% |
| Interesting | 11 | 30.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 84 | 41.8% | 15 | 28.8% | 9 | 37.5% | 13 | 34.2% | 11 | 34.4% |
| Musty | 10 | 27.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 38 | 18.9% | 7 | 13.5% | 4 | 16.7% | 5 | 13.2% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Mysterious | 16 | 44.4% | 1 | 16.7% | 37 | 18.4% | 6 | 11.5% | 7 | 29.2% | 10 | 26.3% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Old | 17 | 47.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 96 | 47.8% | 20 | 38.5% | 11 | 45.8% | 16 | 42.1% | 15 | 46.9% |
| Old-fashioned | 10 | 27.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 40 | 19.9% | 10 | 19.2% | 2 | 8.3% | 5 | 13.2% | 3 | 9.4% |
| Organized | 23 | 63.9% | 1 | 16.7% | 121 | 60.2% | 30 | 57.7% | 19 | 79.2% | 17 | 44.7% | 16 | 50.0% |
| Popular | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 16.7% | 8 | 4.0% | 1 | 1.9% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 2.6% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Quiet | 15 | 41.7% | 1 | 16.7% | 59 | 29.4% | 13 | 25.0% | 4 | 16.7% | 10 | 26.3% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Relevant | 8 | 22.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 59 | 29.4% | 7 | 13.5% | 7 | 29.2% | 8 | 21.1% | 3 | 9.4% |
| Secretive | 9 | 25.0% | 1 | 16.7% | 26 | 12.9% | 1 | 1.9% | 7 | 29.2% | 7 | 18.4% | 4 | 12.5% |
| Unimportant | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 3.1% |
| Useful | 18 | 50.0% | 2 | 33.3% | 115 | 57.2% | 25 | 48.1% | 11 | 45.8% | 16 | 42.1% | 16 | 50.0% |
| Useless | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 3 | 1.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 6.3% |
| Valuable | 19 | 52.8% | 3 | 50.0% | 119 | 59.2% | 23 | 44.2% | 15 | 62.5% | 14 | 36.8% | 18 | 56.3% |
| Welcoming | 1 | 2.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 13 | 6.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 4.2% | 1 | 2.6% | 0 | 0.0% |

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Overall, archivists are viewed as organized, detail oriented, intelligent, knowledgeable about the collections in their care, and efficient (see Table 11). Most respondents (63.1%) selected “computer skills” as a trait archivists should possess, while only 7.1% selected “resistance to change,” making it the lowest-ranked trait. This may indicate that, for some at least, computers have become such an integral part of daily life that everyone, archivists included, is expected to be familiar with them on some level.⁷²

Table 11. Skills and Traits an Archivist Is Expected to Possess (339 responses)

| | | |
|--|-----|-------|
| Appreciation of culture | 208 | 61.4% |
| Attention to detail | 280 | 82.6% |
| Computer skills | 214 | 63.1% |
| Curiosity | 146 | 43.1% |
| Customer service skills | 122 | 36.0% |
| Dedication | 210 | 61.9% |
| Desire to help others | 147 | 43.4% |
| Efficiency | 236 | 69.6% |
| Extensive knowledge of collections | 267 | 78.8% |
| Focus | 192 | 56.6% |
| High level of education | 137 | 40.4% |
| Intelligence | 242 | 71.4% |
| Knowledge of current trends and events | 133 | 39.2% |
| Management skills | 162 | 47.8% |
| Organization skills | 315 | 92.9% |
| Patience | 218 | 64.3% |
| Possessiveness of collections | 78 | 23.0% |
| Resistance to change | 24 | 7.1% |
| Sense of humor | 41 | 12.1% |
| Social skills | 71 | 20.9% |
| Other | 4 | 1.2% |

The second and third least-selected traits of archivists, respectively, were a “sense of humor” (12.1%) and “social skills” (20.9%). One respondent even included the lack of social interaction in his explanation of the role of the archivist, writing that the archivist is the “person in charge of keeping track of everything in the archive, organizing it, and being lonely.”⁷³ Six of those who left comments noted that they selected traits they believe most archivists would possess or that would be helpful on the job, or that they know archivists vary in personality and skills. Like the resource allocators surveyed by Levy and Robles, respondents appear reluctant to classify archivists by what they know to be stereotypes.

Conclusions

Among the survey population, expectations for access to digital information followed a pattern very similar to that predicted by archivists, with increased expectations for being able both to find information in general and information and materials from archives online. The responses suggest that overall access to information is important to respondents and that they view providing access to the information in archives' care as central to their mission. Despite the focus on the role of archives and archivists in providing access to information resources, archives are not always viewed as accessible. Given the number of those who had visited an archives who selected "inaccessible," and the fact that at least one respondent felt archivists were displeased that he was using the materials, archivists may need to be more cognizant of how they approach researchers. Though of concern when combined with unrealistic expectations, the focus on the role of archives in providing public access to materials may be seen as positive because it suggests a connection between archives and their communities and presumably that members of a community would want to use archives.

A link may also exist between these increased expectations and perceptions of accessibility and the value of archives. Though the small number of responses cannot confirm such a trend, the results suggest that those who believe they should be able to satisfy all their information needs online may not view archives as accessible. And though archives generally seem to be viewed as valuable, those who expect to satisfy all their information needs online may be less likely to agree.

Overall, the responses suggest that members of the Western community have a fairly realistic though very basic understanding of the mission and tasks of archives and archivists. Most respondents still think of archives in terms of their traditional definitions, and they described traditional tasks and materials. If the Internet is affecting this understanding, it seems more likely to cause a shift in focus between the multiple roles of archives, for instance, privileging certain tasks, like organizing materials and providing access to them, over others, rather than prompting outright misunderstanding of the profession. This is not surprising, as the new uses of "archive(s)" introduced by computer and Internet technology rely on traditional understandings of archives to explain and give them meaning.

The traditional imagery associated with the archival profession is also still clearly evident. Generally, this imagery is not the most important aspect of archives for respondents. Those who encounter archives most often in television, movies, and fiction appear most likely to subscribe to this imagery and are the only group who show a clear pattern in their choice of adjectives linked to traditional archival stereotypes.

Previous writings on the effects of information technology on archives assume a largely unchanging and homogeneous conception of archives. This posits a view of archives as mired in the past while other organizations advance

with technology. In reality, while not viewed as cutting-edge by those surveyed, archives and archivists are not seen as completely separate from the contemporary world, relegated to some dusty basement where time stands still. Many expect them to participate in and adapt to the changes happening around them. The expectations for the posting of materials online reflect this, along with the belief that archivists should possess computer skills and the sorts of materials that some respondents believe archives preserve in their holdings.

Nor is the archival image homogeneous across the population. The results suggest the possibility of multiple images of archives affected by multiple influences. Though they present interrelated images, each place that people come in contact with archives suggests a slightly different view of them. Online encounters represent only one of these influences. Fictional portrayals of archives continue to play a discernible role in shaping respondents' perceptions of archives, often by perpetuating traditional stereotypes. At least in the population surveyed, research is another likely avenue to encounter archives. Personal experiences with archives help shape how people view them, fostering both positive and negative views, and both dispelling and confirming stereotypes.

While this survey helped shed some light on perceptions of archives, more extensive studies are needed to fully understand the impact that the Internet and broader advances in information technology are having and may have on the image and understanding of archives. Such studies could draw from a larger, more diverse sample pool and could include more in-depth questions to better assess respondents' views and understandings of archives and the factors that may be affecting them. A larger respondent pool in particular would increase the validity of the quantitative analysis. Differently designed or more in-depth questions and possibly even interviews could help clarify which responses were influenced by experience with the Internet, which were influenced by other recent advances in information technology (as may have been the case regarding some of the materials respondents believe archives hold, or respondents' expectations that archivists possess computer skills), and which were influenced by other factors.

Though the survey mainly focused on the Internet as a more manageable subcategory of the information technologies possibly affecting understandings of archives, it is likely that any shifts in perceptions are not attributable solely to the Internet but also to other recently developed technologies. As the technologies themselves overlap, it may be impossible to fully distinguish which are responsible for affecting certain perceptions. Information technology will continue to evolve, creating new opportunities and expectations and introducing members of the public to archives, or at least to conceptions of archives. In this climate, an understanding of both general perceptions of their profession and how these perceptions are formed and modified will be useful to archivists as they attempt to influence these perceptions, promote their institutions, and assist members of the public.

Appendix A: Survey Invitation Email

SUBJECT: ARCHIVES, INTERNET AND PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

Dear Western Community Member,

As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting a survey of the Western community on the topic of internet technology and public perceptions of archives. Please take a few minutes to fill out the linked survey. After completing the survey you may choose to enter for a chance to win one of two twenty-dollar Amazon gift cards.

Survey link: _____

Thank you,

Caitlin Patterson

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Archivists have been interested in public perceptions and understanding of archives for several decades and in recent years have become aware of new factors possibly affecting these perceptions. The purpose of this study is to track public perceptions of archives and some of the influences on these perceptions. The results of this study will help archivists better understand how members of the public view their profession and the institutions they operate and point to ways in which they might influence these views.

This survey will include a series of multiple choice and short answer questions. It should take under 15 minutes to complete. There are no anticipated risks or discomfort. Participation in this survey is voluntary. You may choose not to answer certain questions or withdraw from participation at any time.

All information is confidential. No personally identifiable information will be associated with survey responses. Those who wish to take part in the raffle for the Amazon.com gift cards will be asked to submit an email address at the end of the survey. Email addresses submitted as part of the raffle will be used only to contact raffle winners. They will not be associated with survey responses, published, or shared in any way. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this survey.

For any questions about this survey please contact Caitlin Patterson at _____. If you have questions about your participation or your rights as a research participant, you can contact Janai Symons, WWU Research Compliance Officer at _____. If during or after participation in this study you suffer from any adverse effects as a result of participation, please notify the researcher directing the study or the WWU Research Compliance Officer.

- I am at least 18 years of age, have read the above description and agree to participate in this study.

Appendix C: The Survey

PART 1

Age

- 18–20
- 21–24
- 25–29
- 30–39
- 40–49
- 50 or Over

Gender

- Male
- Female

Affiliation with Western

- Undergraduate student
- Graduate student
- Faculty
- Staff
- Alumni
- Other _____

PART 2

Which definition do you most often associate with the word “archive”? (choose one)

- To store data offline
- The building (or portion thereof) housing archival collections
- Documents or materials preserved for future use because of their public or historical value
- A file that has been transferred off the computer into long-term storage
- An organization that collects the records of individuals, families, or organizations
- The portion of a website containing older content
- Other _____

How confident are you in your understanding of this term?

- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- Not very confident
- Not confident at all

Have you ever visited an archives in person?

- Yes
- No
- I can't remember

Have you ever visited an archives' website?

- Yes
- No
- I can't remember

Where do you encounter the word "archive" most often?

- Movies/TV/fiction
- The news
- Doing research
- Browsing online
- Banking information/official documents
- Don't remember
- Other _____

Comments _____

PART 3

Which adjectives best describe archives? (choose all that apply)

| | | | |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| Old | Useful | Old Fashioned | Important |
| Dusty | Popular | Clean | Disorganized |
| Secretive | Useless | Bright | Historical |
| Valuable | Confusing | Musty | Forbidding |
| Accessible | Dark | Organized | Boring |
| Current | Friendly | Welcoming | Mysterious |
| High Tech | Relevant | Quiet | Unimportant |
| Inaccessible | Interesting | | Other _____ |

How would you describe what sort of services are provided by an archives?

What would you expect to find in an archives?

How would you describe the role of an archivist?

What skills and traits would you expect an archivist to possess? (choose all that apply)

| | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Dedication | Extensive knowledge of collections | Knowledge of current trends and events |
| Social skills | Customer service skills | Intelligence |
| Attention to detail | Desire to help others | Possessiveness of collections |
| Sense of humor | Resistance to change | Efficiency |
| Organization skills | High level of education | Curiosity |
| Patience | Management skills | Appreciation of culture |
| Focus | Computer skills | Other _____ |

Comments _____

PART 4

How many hours a day do you spend on the Internet?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 5-6 hours
- 7-8 hours
- More than 8 hours

How do you usually use the Internet?

| | Often | Sometimes | Never |
|--------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Homework/Research | | | |
| Watching movies/TV shows | | | |
| Listening to music | | | |
| Social networking | | | |
| Getting the news | | | |
| Browsing | | | |
| Banking | | | |
| Other _____ | | | |

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How strongly do you agree with the following statements:

| | Agree strongly | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Disagree strongly |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| I consider myself very "tech savvy" | | | | | |
| I can find all the information I need online | | | | | |
| All the information I need should be available online | | | | | |
| If I cannot find the information I need online, I will check off-line sources | | | | | |
| I would expect an archives to have a website | | | | | |
| I would expect an archives to post material from their holdings, such as scanned documents and photographs, online | | | | | |
| I would expect an archives to have a Facebook page | | | | | |
| I encounter the word "archive" more often online than off-line | | | | | |
| My understanding of archives is derived largely from online encounters with the term | | | | | |

Comments _____

End of Survey

Thank you for taking part in this survey!

To take part in the raffle for the Amazon.com gift cards, please enter your email address below. Your email address will be used only to deliver the gift card should you win. It will not be associated with your answers, be published or shared in any way, or be used to contact you for any purpose besides delivering the gift card should you win.

NOTES

- ¹ See David B. Gracy II's "Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution," *The American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984); "Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep," *The American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989); or Margaret Turner's "Is the Profession Still Attractive?," *Comma* 2/3 (2003) for examples of anecdotal evidence of public perceptions. Studies of representations of archives and archivists in the media include Margaret Procter, "What's an 'Archivist'? Some Nineteenth-Century Perspectives," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 31, no. 1 (2010); Sally J. Jacobs, "How and When We Make the News: Local Newspaper Coverage of Archives in Two Wisconsin Cities," *Archival Issues* 22, no. 1 (1997); Richard J. Cox, "International Perspectives on the Image of Archivists and Archives: Coverage by the *New York Times* 1992–93," *International Information and Library Review* 25 (1993); Arlene Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography," *The American Archivist* 62 (Spring 1999); Karen Buckley, "The Truth Is in the Red Files': An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture," *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008); and Tania Aldred, Gordon Burr, and Eun Park, "Crossing a Librarian with a Historian: The Image of Reel Archivists," *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008). Surveys include Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984); and two conducted on behalf of State Records in New South Wales, Australia: Environmetrics, *Telephone Survey for State Records*, January 2001; and TA Verner Research Company, *The View from the Top: Qualitative Research to Investigate Chief Executive Attitudes, Opinions and Behavior* (November 2002).
- ² Here "Internet" refers to the worldwide interconnected network connecting computers using a common set of interconnection standards (Gary P. Schneider and Jessica Evans, *New Perspectives on the Internet*, 7th ed. [Boston: Course Technology, Cengage Learning, 2009], 2). "World Wide Web" (the Web) refers to the subset of the Internet in which servers are connected to share hyperlinked documents (Schneider and Evans, *New Perspectives*, 2). Internet technology underpins the Web, and the Web is often the most recognizable face of the Internet. Though my survey included questions about both the Internet and the Web, as well as a couple that touched on computer technology more generally, my examination of the results focuses more closely on the Web as the questions related to the Web produced more compelling answers. The literature review includes studies focused on both the Web and the Internet. In discussing other writings, I have used the terms "Internet" and "Web" as the authors use them.
- ³ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 36, 34.
- ⁴ Turner, "Is the Profession Still Attractive?," 131.
- ⁵ Procter, "What's an 'Archivist'?", 22.
- ⁶ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 38; Levy and Robles, *The Image of Archivists*, 46; Aldred, Burr, and Park, "Crossing a Librarian with a Historian," 76.
- ⁷ Levy and Robles, *The Image of Archivists*, 35. One of the resource allocators interviewed by Sidney Levy and Albert Robles expressed the belief that archivists would have "a Ph.D. in history or close to a Ph.D." Levy and Robles, *The Image of Archivists*, 34.
- ⁸ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 38–39.
- ⁹ Gracy, "Archives and Society," 8.
- ¹⁰ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 42.
- ¹¹ Procter, "What's an 'Archivist'?", 22.
- ¹² Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 45.
- ¹³ John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), 173.
- ¹⁴ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 45–46.
- ¹⁵ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 44. Schmuland notes that the fact that most of the people and organizations whose records are contained in archives are deceased or defunct may further suggest such an association.
- ¹⁶ See Eric Ketelaar, "Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 221–38; James M. O'Toole, "The Pope and the Archives: A Study in Archival Public Image," in *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists*, ed. Elsie Freeman Finch (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 251.
- ¹⁷ Levy and Robles, *The Image of Archivists*, iv.
- ¹⁸ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 29.

- ¹⁹ Buckley, "The Truth Is in the Red Files," 103.
- ²⁰ John J. Grabowski, "Keepers, Users, and Funders: Building an Awareness of Archival Value," *The American Archivist* 55 (Summer 1992): 466. Grabowski cites this description as appearing in Jeff MacNelly's *Shoe* comic strip, November 30, 1990.
- ²¹ *Telephone Survey*, 10.
- ²² Craig McGarty, "Stereotype Formation as Category Formation," in *Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formulation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups*, ed. Craig McGarty, Vincent Yzerbyt, and Russell Spears (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18–19; Patricia M. Brown and John C. Turner, "The Role of Theories in the Formation of Stereotype Content," in *Stereotypes as Explanations*, 78; Ramirose Ilene Attebury, "Perceptions of a Profession: Librarians and Stereotypes in Online Videos," *Library Philosophy and Practice* 12, no. 2 (2010): 1.
- ²³ Vincent Yzerbyt and Steve Rocher, "Subjective Essentialism and the Emergence of Stereotypes," in *Stereotypes as Explanations*, 57; Russell Spears, "Four Degrees of Stereotype Formation: Differentiation by Any Means Necessary," in *Stereotypes as Explanations*, 129.
- ²⁴ It should be noted that despite these prevalent stereotypes, some members of the public may not know enough about archives to have formed even this basic of an understanding. See *Telephone Survey for State Records*, 7; Turner, "Is the Profession Still Attractive?," 131; Levy and Robles, *The Image of Archivists*, 20.
- ²⁵ Mary E. Samouelian, "Embracing Web 2.0: Archives and the Newest Generation of Web Applications," *The American Archivist* 72 (Spring/Summer 2009): 47.
- ²⁶ Lee Rainie, "Web 2.0 and What It Means to Libraries" (presentation, April 2007, Computers in Libraries 2007 Conference), 9, <http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Presentations/2007/2007%20-%204.16.07%20-%20Web%20.0%20-%20Computers%20in%20Libraries%20-%20final.ppt.ppt>.
- ²⁷ Pew Research Center, "Internet Use Over Time," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, <http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/internet-use/internet-use-over-time/>; Pew Research Center, "Internet Use Over Time," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, <http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/teens/internet-use/>.
- ²⁸ Richard V. Szary, "Encoded Finding Aids as a Transforming Technology in Archival Reference Service," in *College and University Archives*, eds. Prom and Swain, 247.
- ²⁹ Avra Michelson and Jeff Rothenberg, "Scholarly Communication and Information Technology: Exploring the Impact of Changes in the Research Process on Archives," *The American Archivist* 55 (Spring 1992): 253.
- ³⁰ John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 6.
- ³¹ Randall C. Jimerson, "Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society," *The American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989): 333.
- ³² Christine L. Borgman, *From Gutenberg to the Global Information Infrastructure: Access to Information in the Networked World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); Michelson and Rothenberg, "Scholarly Communication," 291.
- ³³ Borgman, *From Gutenberg*, 184.
- ³⁴ Elizabeth Yakel, "Managing Expectations, Expertise, and Effort While Extending Services to Researchers in Academic Archives," in *College and University Archives*, ed. Christopher J. Prom and Ellen D. Swain (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2008), 278.
- ³⁵ Palfrey and Gasser, *Born Digital*, 161; Kate Theimer, "What Is the Professional Archivist's Role in the Evolving Archival Space? (A talk given in Christchurch, NZ)," *Archives Next*, archivesnext.com/?p=3829.
- ³⁶ William J. Maher, "Archives, Archivists, and Society," *The American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 253; Marlene Manoff, "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 9; Emily Monks-Leeson, "Archives on the Internet: Representing Contexts and Provenance from Repository to Website," *The American Archivist* 74 (Spring 2011): 40.
- ³⁷ Maher, "Archives, Archivists, and Society," 253; Monks-Leeson, "Archives on the Internet," 40.
- ³⁸ Maher, "Archives, Archivists, and Society," 254.
- ³⁹ Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, The Society of American Archivists, archives.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=156.

- ⁴⁰ Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*; Theimer, "What Is the Professional Archivist's Role?"
- ⁴¹ Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "An Archival Bestiary," *The American Archivist* 54 (Spring 1991): 199; Daniel P. Dern, *The Internet Guide for New Users* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 470. Emily Monks-Leeson found that the online archives she studied more closely fit the definition of collections than archives (Monks-Leeson, "Archives on the Internet," 52).
- ⁴² See Appendix D for a copy of the survey.
- ⁴³ *Telephone Survey*, 10. The New South Wales survey was conducted by telephone. Respondents were read a list of adjectives and asked to respond with whether or not each described archives. Due to the number of adjectives in my survey and the fact that it was conducted online rather than by telephone, I asked respondents to select the adjectives they thought best described archives rather than give their opinion on each.
- ⁴⁴ A number of archivists have noted the tendency of the public to view archives as dusty. See Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 42; Richard E. Barry, "Report on the Society and Archives Survey" (January 29, 2003), mybestdocs.com/barry-r-soc-arc-surv-report-030129toc.htm; Gracy, "Archives and Society," 8. Elizabeth Yakel noted the need to educate users who have difficulty understanding archival tools and procedures. (Elizabeth Yakel, "Impact of Internet-based Discovery Tools on Use and Users of Archives," *Proceedings of the XXXVI Roundtable on Archives [CITRA] Meeting, Nov. 11–14, 2002, Marseilles, France, Comma 2*, no. 3 (2003): 198; Yakel, "Managing Expectations," 264–65.)
- ⁴⁵ Levy and Robles, "The Image of Archivists," 31, 35.
- ⁴⁶ The reluctance of respondents to stereotype archivists in this way, even while clearly being aware of the prevailing stereotypes, can be seen in the some of their comments. Six of the sixteen respondents who left comments at the end of this section of the survey noted that archivists' personalities could vary or that they only selected traits they thought would be useful on the job.
- ⁴⁷ Those with a college education, or in the process of obtaining a college education, are especially likely to spend time online. 96% of college graduates and 92% of those with some college education used the Internet in 2013, as opposed to 78% of those with only a high school education and 59% of those who had not graduated from high school. Pew Research Center. "Trend Data (Adults): Demographics of Internet Users," Internet Archive, [https://web.archive.org/web/20140112161203/http://www.pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-\(Adults\)/Whos-Online.aspx](https://web.archive.org/web/20140112161203/http://www.pewinternet.org/Trend-Data-(Adults)/Whos-Online.aspx).
- ⁴⁸ Though this may seem like a low percentage of respondents, in sheer numbers of respondents, it outstrips nearly all of the previously conducted surveys on perceptions of archives. The telephone survey conducted on behalf of State Records New South Wales interviewed 304 members of the public, while the survey of chief executives in New South Wales had 53 respondents, and Levy and Robles interviewed 44 resource allocators for their report. *Telephone Survey*, 4; Verner Research, "The View from the Top," 1; Levy and Robles, *The Image of Archivists*, 1.
- ⁴⁹ Though the distribution suggests a relationship, these results could not be determined to be statistically significant because too few respondents reported spending less than 1 or more than 8 hours online.
- ⁵⁰ Respondent 85.
- ⁵¹ Respondent 107.
- ⁵² While the pattern seems clear, these results had a P value of 0.3781 and therefore could not be determined to be statistically significant.
- ⁵³ 27.8% of those who had not visited an archives in person and 43.6% of those who could not remember if they had visited an archives in person selected "accessible." 11.4% of those who had not visited an archives and 10.3% of those who could not remember selected "inaccessible." These results could not be determined to be statistically significant.
- ⁵⁴ Respondent 316.
- ⁵⁵ Respondent 228.
- ⁵⁶ These numbers are quite a bit lower than they were in the 2001 study conducted in Australia, where 90% of respondents characterized archives as useful, 89% as valuable, and 72% as interesting (*Telephone Survey*, 10). However, this may be due to the difference in surveying methods—in the Australian survey, respondents were read a list of adjectives and asked to decide whether each did or did not apply to government archives. I asked respondents to select the adjectives they thought best described archives. Overall, those who had prior experience with archives selected adjectives

reflecting their positive value at higher rates, possibly bolstering these numbers; however, the difference was only statistically significant for those who selected “interesting.” Both those who had and who had not visited an archives selected “useless” and “unimportant” at similar rates.

⁵⁷ Respondent 294.

⁵⁸ The reason that those who strongly disagree do not always follow this pattern may be attributed to the fact that there were only 6 respondents in this group. Though when measured individually, only “boring” ($P = 0.0221$, $V = 0.185$), “interesting” ($P = 0.0085$, $V = 0.202$), and “valuable” ($P = 0.0009$, $V = 0.236$) are statistically significant (“useful” is close with a P value of 0.0613 and “useless” appears to be close with a P value of 0.0504 but too few respondents selected this adjective to calculate P reliably), when viewed together, they show a convincing pattern.

⁵⁹ These results have a P value of 0.0011 and are therefore statistically significant.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that due to the high number of respondents who had visited an archives, the general knowledge of the contents of archives represented here may be greater than would otherwise be the case.

⁶¹ Respondent 259; Respondent 349; Respondent 337; Respondent 20; Respondent 23.

⁶² I categorized the adjectives “confusing,” “dark,” “dusty,” “forbidding,” “musty,” “mysterious,” “old,” “old fashioned,” “quiet,” and “secretive” as associated with traditional archival stereotypes. I also included “historical” for some of the analysis. I categorized “bright,” “clean,” “current,” “friendly,” “high tech,” and “welcoming” as antithetical to traditional archival stereotypes.

⁶³ Respondent 218.

⁶⁴ Respondent 401; Respondent 126.

⁶⁵ Respondent 290.

⁶⁶ Respondent 151; Respondent 379.

⁶⁷ Respondent 117.

⁶⁸ Only the responses for “inaccessible” ($P = 0.0386$), “mysterious” ($P = 0.0023$), and “secretive” ($P = 0.0081$) were statistically significant, though “relevant” was close with a P value of 0.0687.

⁶⁹ Respondent 302.

⁷⁰ “Mysterious” and “secretive” were the only statistically significant responses, “mysterious” with a P value of 0.0023 and a moderate association ($V = 0.206$) and “secretive” with a P value of 0.0081 and a weak association ($V = 0.174$). When calculating statistical significance for cross tabulations involving the selection of adjectives, I calculated each adjective separately. This is how the P values above were produced. However, for the cross tabulation in this figure, I also calculated P for each place where respondents encountered “archive,” with the adjectives grouped together. In this second analysis, those who encountered “archive” most in the entertainment media were the only group who were statistically significant. This second analysis was only intended to be illustrative.

⁷¹ In fact, this group selected all the adjectives provided at relatively low rates. On average, each person who encountered the term “archive” most while browsing online selected 5.26 adjectives to describe archives, as opposed to 6.63 selected by those who encountered the term in TV, movies, or fiction and 6.54 selected by those who encountered it while conducting research.

⁷² Given how few respondents selected “high tech” to describe archives, it seems unlikely that many would view archivists as having exceptionally advanced computer skills.

⁷³ Respondent 259.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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