

PERSPECTIVES

What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?

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Abstract

At first glance the term “Archives 2.0” might refer to the use by archives of Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and Flickr. This article proposes a broader definition of Archives 2.0 that includes a comprehensive shift in archival thinking and practice that is related to, but not dependent on, the use of Web 2.0 tools. The article develops this interpretation and explains why this concept provides a useful starting point for conversations about future directions for the archival profession.

Soon after the term “Web 2.0” entered the popular vocabulary, a trend emerged for attaching “2.0” to all kinds of concepts—Government 2.0, Publishing 2.0, Health 2.0, Library 2.0, Museum 2.0, and so forth. While it might seem that these uses are only an attempt to create a catchy buzzword for marketing, many of them reflect a genuine attempt to consider a new phase in the development of a profession or a service. That was certainly my intent when writing the post “Archives 2.0?” on the *ArchivesNext* blog.¹ That initial post argued that the archival profession is in the process of a fundamental shift and that “Archives 2.0” is a useful term to characterize a related group of changes. The primary purpose of most blog posts is to promote discussion, and that initial post in 2008 has led to more discussions on my blog and in other forums. In this article, I will present a lengthier explanation of what I mean by Archives 2.0

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¹ Kate Theimer, “Archives 2.0?” *ArchivesNext*, 21 October 2008, <http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=203#more-203>, accessed 26 October 2010.

Open, Not Closed

Today, archives strive to make their physical spaces and access policies as welcoming and fair as possible to ensure the broadest possible use of their collections. In the past, archives as physical spaces were more restricted, or appeared restrictive, to many researchers. Physical or intellectual access was sometimes granted only to those researchers who were “qualified” for it.⁵

Transparent, Not Opaque

Believing in the professional value of intellectual neutrality, archivists in the past often strove to make their own activities and influence on their collections invisible to researchers. In contrast, today’s archivists increasingly realize that their own decisions regarding appraisal, processing, and description should be documented and made available to researchers.⁶

User Centered, Not Record Centered

Today’s archivists understand their mission to be serving researchers, not records. They seek to provide descriptive information in ways that meet their users’ needs, using systems and tools that users understand.⁷ In the past, many archivists saw identifying and preserving collections as their primary responsibilities. They assumed that intellectual access would be mediated, and they created descriptions and access tools designed to serve people who understood archival systems, often the archivists themselves.

Facilitator, Not Gatekeeper

Today, archivists see their primary role as facilitating rather than controlling access. Using social media tools, archivists even invite user contributions and participation in describing, commenting, and re-using collections, creating

⁵ On restricting access and screening researchers, see T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 232–35, and Howard H. Peckham, “Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscript Collections,” *American Archivist* 19, no. 3 (July 1956): 221–28.

⁶ For a discussion of the values of neutrality vs. objectivity, and the value of transparency, see Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 290–95 and 309–14. The most cited example of the call for increased transparency in processing is Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002): 216–30.

⁷ See, for example, Max J. Evans, “Archives of the People, by the People, for the People,” *American Archivist* 70 (Fall/Winter 2007): 387–400.

Iterative Products, Not “Perfect” Products

Something in the personality of most archivists makes them want their work products, such as finding aids and processed collections, to be perfect and final. But in the face of mounting backlogs and increasing user expectations, most archivists realize that “the perfect is the enemy of the good,” or perhaps, that something is better than nothing. Probably best characterized by the embrace of the “More Product, Less Process” approach to processing, as well as the more informal approach to information sharing common in Web 2.0 products, more and more archivists have come to expect and accept that the work they do will be revisited, revised, and corrected.¹¹

Innovation and Flexibility, Not Adhering to Tradition

Almost anyone who has worked in an archives has heard the justification “but we’ve always done it that way.” Just as localized practices for processing and cataloging have fallen by the wayside, so has unquestioning adherence to tradition in the face of changing work environments and user expectations. The need to work efficiently, collaboratively, and responsively has resulted in more flexibility and openness to new ideas.

Technology Savvy, Not Technology Phobic

The stereotype of an archivist more comfortable confronting papers than a computer has faded as more archivists are becoming visible participants in online culture, proficient at writing computer code, implementing and modifying open source software (such as Drupal and Omeka), and capable of producing their own software products (e.g., Archon and the Archivists’ Toolkit). While the archival profession has always had members who embraced technology, only recently have the voices of those members shifted from the minority to a majority.

The next two contrasts perhaps reflect more of a hope for the future than a statement of the current environment.

¹¹ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63. For a more recent example of this kind of iterative approach, see Robert S. Cox, “Maximal Processing, or, Archivist on a Pale Horse,” paper presented at the New England Archivists’ meeting, 20 March 2010, also published in *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (2010): 134–48.

Archives 2.0 as Evolution

Referencing a time in the past as “Archives 1.0” might raise the question, when did Archives 1.0 end and Archives 2.0 begin? As with most societal changes, no one moment represents a clear demarcation between the two. Archives 2.0 reflects a group of ideas and attitudes once espoused by only a small number of archivists that are now the mainstream values of the profession. As with any transition in values, it is important to note that the ideas themselves have been debated for many years, even decades.

The professional literature, a full review of which is beyond the scope of this article, supports and demonstrates this active discussion of the ideas of Archives 2.0. However, among the most prominent inspirations and demonstrations over the past decade are seminal articles from Greene and Meissner (“More Product, Less Process”), Max Evans (“Archives of the People, by the People, for the People”), Light and Hyry (“Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid”), and Richard Pearce-Moses’s presidential address, “Janus in Cyberspace: Archives on the Threshold of the Digital Era.”¹⁵ While it is impossible to discuss the roots and development of all the concepts included under the Archives 2.0 umbrella in this article, it is worth reviewing some of the historical precedents that led to our current professional practice.

One of the key components of Archives 2.0 is the profession’s interest in understanding and better serving our users, building on Elsie Freeman’s call for archivists to learn more about their users in the 1980s.¹⁶ Paul Conway made several valuable early contributions,¹⁷ and more recently Elizabeth Yakel, Wendy Duff, Helen Tibbo, and their students are providing a growing body of user studies resources.¹⁸

¹⁵ Richard Pearce-Moses, “Janus in Cyberspace: Archives on the Threshold of the Digital Era,” *American Archivist* 70 (Spring/Summer 2007): 13–22.

¹⁶ Elsie T. Freeman, “In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User’s Point of View,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 111–23 and “Buying Quarter Inch Holes: Public Support through Results,” *Midwestern Archivist* 10, no. 2 (1985): 89–97. See also Barbara Craig, “Old Myths in New Clothes: Expectations of Archives Users,” *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998): 118–26.

¹⁷ Paul Conway, “Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Survey,” *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (July 1986): 35–56 and “Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives,” *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393–407.

¹⁸ The literature of archival user studies is a rich one. An early example is William J. Maher, “The Use of User Studies,” *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 15–26. More recent examples are Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, “Genealogists as a ‘Community of Records,’” *American Archivist* 70, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 93–113; Wendy M. Duff and Allyson Fox, “You’re a Guide Rather than an Expert: Archival Reference from an Archivist’s Point of View,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 27, no. 2 (2006): 129–53; Helen R. Tibbo, “Primarily History in America: How U.S. Historians Search for Primary Materials at the Dawn of the Digital Age,” *American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003): 9–50. Increasingly, archivists also benefit from practitioners sharing the results of their user studies, for example, Christopher Prom, “User Interactions with Electronic Finding Aids in a Controlled Setting,” *American Archivist* 67 (Fall/Winter 2004): 234–68.

Standards are nothing new to the archival profession. The use of data standards for sharing archival information can be traced to the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)* in the late 1950s,¹⁹ followed in the 1970s by the *USMARC-AMC* standard and the publication of *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archives, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries* (known as *APPM*) by Steven Hensen in 1983. What has changed in recent years is that archivists have so fully assimilated the field of standards and how they are implemented that they can now discuss them on the level of Jenn Riley and Kelcy Shepherd's 2009 article, "A Brave New World: Archivists and Shareable Descriptive Metadata."²⁰ Notably, the current conversation is no longer aimed at educating archivists about using standards, but about what archives with their data in standard formats can do with them.

Similarly, the use of technology to create centralized databases of information about archival collections dates from the SPINDEX project in the 1960s and its successors.²¹ These early efforts faltered because access to hardware and software was limited to large archival and research organizations. While bibliographic networks like RLIN were important in the 1980s and 1990s, they still maintained information about collections in specialized databases accessible only through subscribing libraries. In the 1990s and 2000s, the advent and spread of the World Wide Web provided a platform that enabled archivists to make information about their collections accessible to virtually everyone. At the same time, the rise of software tools such as Archon and the Archivists' Toolkit allowed archivists to take advantage of the power of EAD's structure to create consistently formatted finding aids.

Changes in technology have certainly contributed to the evolution of the archival profession, as they have in virtually all professions. Widespread use of social media and other changes in the way people use the Web have led to opportunities that could barely have been imagined twenty years ago. Although new tools available to archivists on the Web have inspired archives to share their collections in new ways, I do not think that the tools alone have brought about the change from Archives 1.0 to Archives 2.0. Technology merely provided platforms and models for the kinds of interactions archivists hoped to provide. The explosion of information available on the Web, combined with the new ways that people find, retrieve, and use information, has fundamentally changed the

¹⁹ "Data Exchange Formats," in *Standards for Archival Description: A Handbook*, comp. Victoria Irons Walch (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1994), <http://www.archivists.org/catalog/stds99/chapter3.html>, accessed 26 October 2010.

²⁰ Jenn Riley and Kelcy Shepherd, "A Brave New World: Archivists and Shareable Descriptive Metadata," *American Archivist* 72 (Spring/Summer 2009): 91–112.

²¹ For information on SPINDEX and early automation projects, see Ann J. Gilliland-Swetland, "Automated Archival Information Systems," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* 48 (1991): 1–13.

users of archives. As our users change, it is natural that the way archivists work must evolve as well.

Another factor contributing to the rise of Archives 2.0 is the gradual increase in the professionalism of archivists in the United States. Recent decades have seen increases in the number of archivists with graduate-level archival education, more opportunities for ongoing professional development, and a growing understanding on the part of employers about the need to hire qualified archival staff.²² It is logical that this rise in professionalism would result in archivists who are more aware of standards, best practices, and emerging trends, as well as more confident about challenging their traditional role and modes of interaction.

Despite the fears expressed by some that in a rush to embrace technological change archivists will abandon their archival traditions, I see nothing in the philosophy of Archives 2.0 that rejects or even challenges the accepted tenets of archival principles. What Archives 2.0 does challenge is how those principles and values are carried out in practice. And surely, continuous evolution is an excellent indicator of a healthy professional practice.

Why Does Archives 2.0 Matter?

Why does it matter that we attach the term “Archives 2.0” to what is essentially a description of the archival profession today? I can think of at least two reasons. First, defining a concept stimulates conversation by giving people something to which they can react. It is easier to debate the merits of a concept when it has been named and defined. I am sure there are many valid criticisms and suggestions for additions or changes to the ideas I’ve offered. I hope that the archival community views a discussion of the concept of Archives 2.0 as a starting point for conversations about the general direction of professional practice, much as the concept of Library 2.0 did for libraries.²³ That conversation has not always been harmonious, but I think many would agree the discussion and debate has resulted in a richer understanding about the library profession today.

Similarly, by understanding that technology is only one of many factors affecting changes in the profession today, archivists can have richer conversations about how to navigate most effectively through these currents of social and technical change. Conversations of this kind are already taking place in England,

²² See the results and analysis of the A*CENSUS at the SAA website, <http://www.archivists.org/a-census>, accessed 26 October 2010.

²³ Regarding the discussion of Library 2.0, see, for example, John Blyberg, “Library 2.0 Debased,” *Blyberg.net* (17 January 2008), <http://www.blyberg.net/2008/01/17/library-20-debased/>, and Meredith Farkas, “The Essence of Library 2.0?,” *Information Wants to Be Free* (24 January 2008), <http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2008/01/24/the-essence-of-library-20>, both accessed 26 October 2010.

for example at the recent conference, “Archives 2.0: Shifting Dialogues Between Users and Archivists,” at the University of Manchester.²⁴ Establishing a definition of the key areas of change associated with Archives 2.0 may provide a starting point for identifying these new areas of exploration and research.

Second, by proposing that the archival profession has entered a new phase of its development, archivists can begin to coalesce around a shared set of values. Perhaps some may consider it a minor distinction, but I see value in no longer saying that archivists *should be* flexible, open, transparent, collaborative, and so on, and instead affirming that they, in fact, *are* those things. This is not to say that every archivist in every situation shows more “2.0” than “1.0” characteristics, but rather that this is how the majority of archivists think of themselves and present themselves to the world. For those who espouse the values of Archives 2.0, it is encouraging to note that the “Core Values of Archivists” document recently approved by the Society of American Archivists²⁵ includes some similar values, such as ensuring open access and supporting advocacy.

Archives 2.0 as a concept will be superseded by better and more powerful constructs for thinking about archival practice, just as the tools of Web 2.0 will be replaced by more sophisticated ones. But, as with technology, every advance in archival thinking builds on the ideas that came before. Defining Archives 2.0 is important because it provides a framework for defining the ideas and attitudes shaping archival practice today and on which archivists can continue to build.

The spirit of flexibility and the willingness to experiment and collaborate—the hallmarks of Archives 2.0—will serve the archival profession well as it addresses continued reductions in resources and funding. Larger audiences of users who engage in open dialogue about what archivists do and the power of their collections will strengthen the effectiveness of advocacy, both internal and external. This is not a time to cling to outmoded or unnecessary practices—or to hide amid the boxes in the stacks. While it may sound overly dramatic, the future of the profession may depend on archivists’ ability to evolve and successfully meet the challenges presented by the economy, new technology, and future users.

²⁴ See, in particular, the paper presented by Joy Palmer, one of the organizers of the conference, “Archives 2.0: If We Build It, Will They Come?,” *Ariadne* 60 (July 2009), <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue60/palmer>, accessed 26 October 2010. For more about the Archives 2.0 conference, see the conference website, http://www.restore.ac.uk/archiving_qualitative_data/projects/archive_series/Conference.shtml, accessed 18 February 2011.

²⁵ See <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/core-values-of-archivists>, accessed 8 June 2011.