

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.

and why I think it's a concept that deserves broader attention from the profession as a framework for discussing shifts in practice and values.

My initial thoughts on Archives 2.0 were influenced by the Library 2.0 phenomenon.² Note that although I used Library 2.0 as an inspiration for my conception of Archives 2.0, I associate a broader group of changes with Archives 2.0 than the library world does with Library 2.0. Like other uses of "2.0," Library 2.0 harkens back to the system used by software developers to signify new versions of software—that is, by assigning a new whole number (rather than using, say, 1.8 or 1.9), the developers signal that a software release has significant changes and differences. Therefore, terms like Web 2.0, Library 2.0, and Archives 2.0 refer to new "versions" of a concept.

I had the opportunity to restate and condense my vision of this new "version" in my introductory remarks for the session "The Real Archives 2.0: Studies of Use, Views, and Potential for Web 2.0" at the SAA Annual Meeting in 2009.³ In that session, I argued that Archives 2.0 is a useful concept for characterizing the systemic and interrelated changes already well underway in the archival world. Many people use "Archives 2.0" to refer to the implementation of Web 2.0 tools in archives, such as launching wikis and blogs, contributing digitized content to social media sites such as Flickr and YouTube, and communicating with users through Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks. Certainly taking advantage of Web 2.0 opportunities is one aspect of the changes underway in the profession, but it is by no means the only driver—or result—of these changes. I have two purposes in presenting a case for a broader meaning for Archives 2.0: first, to establish a common usage for the term, and second, to begin a conversation about the broader range of changes underway in the profession, which include, but are not limited to, the use of Web 2.0 and social media tools.

Defining Archives 2.0

At the 2009 SAA Annual Meeting, I needed a brief definition of Archives 2.0 and so developed a short list of what Archives 2.0 is not. Included in that list is that Archives 2.0 is not "something in the future." It's also not "a passing fad," "just Archives + Web 2.0," or "just for 'tech people.'"⁴

² Michael Casey is credited with coining the term "Library 2.0" on his *LibraryCrunch* blog in 2005. For a good introduction to the topic, see Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk, "Service for the Next-Generation Library," *Library Journal*.com, 1 September 2006, <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6365200.html>, accessed 26 October 2010.

³ Kate Theimer, "Archives 2.0: An Introduction," presented at "The Real Archives 2.0: Studies of Use, Views and Potential for Web 2.0," 13 August, 2009, Austin, Texas, <http://www.slideshare.net/ktheimer/archives-20-an-introduction>, accessed 26 October 2010.

⁴ Theimer, "Archives 2.0: An Introduction," slide 2.

Archives 2.0 is an approach to archival practice that promotes openness and flexibility. It argues that archivists must be user centered and embrace opportunities to use technology to share collections, interact with users, and improve internal efficiency. Archives 2.0 thinking incorporates measurement and assessment as essential tools and bases procedures on established professional standards and practice. It requires that archivists be active in their communities rather than passive, engaged with the interpretation of their collections rather than neutral custodians, and serve as effective advocates for their archival program and their profession. Archives 2.0 is not “something in the future,” but a description of what the majority of archivists believe today. Clearly, no one would argue that everyone in the profession espouses these views, but we’ve reached a pivotal point when these views are more widely held than not. Part of the value in establishing Archives 2.0 as a means of describing archival work today is that it confirms that the profession has reached a new stage of maturity in the United States.

Archives 2.0 Compared to Archives 1.0

Perhaps the most effective way of illustrating what Archives 2.0 means for the profession is by contrasting it with “Archives 1.0,” as I will do below. However, I do so with the caveat that I use these generalizations to highlight the changes that have occurred in the past and are emerging in the present. I argue that the generalizations and stereotypes presented here as characterizations of Archives 1.0 were formerly more true than not for most archives and that this affects how members of the public—as well as some archivists—see the profession. This representation of Archives 1.0 is not intended to imply that all archives and archivists operated in this way in the past.

Just as new versions of software contain and build on incremental improvements made over many years in previous releases, Archives 2.0 is not a revolutionary development that has sprung up in one or two years. Many of the contrasts that I highlight have been under discussion in the profession for decades. The purpose of presenting them here, assembled together as part of a transition from Archives 1.0 to Archives 2.0, is to argue that, cumulatively, they now represent majority rather than minority views and that the individual issues are part of a larger wave of change that should be considered as a whole.

Here, then, are a series of contrasts between the qualities of the present and future of the profession that I’m calling Archives 2.0 and general characteristics of Archives 1.0 that represent a rapidly fading past.

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.

so-called collaborative archives.⁸ Faded or fading are gatekeeper archivists, who keep archives closed to control all aspects of access to collections, deciding how they are viewed, how they are described, and, to some extent, what use can be made of them.

Attracting New Users, Not Relying on Users to Find Them

In the past, many archives were confident that their predefined audience of professional historians, genealogists, and “hobbyist” researchers would find their way to the archives. That philosophy may be summed up as, “if we describe it, they will come.” The more appropriate philosophy today is, “go where your users are” by making digital collections available in online spaces archivists don’t control, including Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook.

Shared Standards, Not Localized Practice

Archivists initially developed specialized local practices for organizing and describing their collections, reflecting the view that archival collections were so diverse and unique that it would be impossible to employ the kind of standardized cataloging practices used by librarians. Most archivists now understand that while their collections are unique, the properties, characteristics, and needs of these collections are not. As a result, archivists are increasingly adopting the structure that standards such as EAD and DACS provide.⁹

Metrics and Measurement, Not “Unmeasurable” Results

In the past, many archivists considered their work unmeasurable, or they did not see the need to keep systematic statistics to measure their productivity. In today’s world, the question is not *whether* to measure, but how and what to measure to produce meaningful results.¹⁰

⁸ Isto Huvila, “Participatory Archive: Towards Centralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualization of Records Management,” *Archival Science* 8, no. 15 (2008): 15–35.

⁹ *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004).

¹⁰ See, for example, the inclusion of sections on measurement in the SAA Archival Fundamentals Series volume: Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 258–68, as well as the Archival Metrics Project sponsored by the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and the University of Toronto, <http://www.archivalmetrics.org>, accessed on 26 October 2010.

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.

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.