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Serving the Public First: Archives 2.0

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Serving the Public First: Archives 2.0

Abstract

The hallmarks of contemporary archival philosophy, known casually as “Archives 2.0,” have everything to do with making archives open, attractive resources for researchers of all persuasions. These rotate around a few main assertions. First, that archivists should endeavor to make their repositories as attractive as possible to users—this means offering friendly, all-inclusive access, being responsive to user desires, being tech-savvy, and leaving some discovery and processing of collections to the researcher. Secondly, modern archiving stresses accessibility—having a standardized way of organizing collections that will be easily understood by visiting researchers, utilizing language familiar to average people for finding aides, and having the funding necessary to provide visitors the aid, attention, and resources they need.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Civil War, history, philosophy, archives, Special Collections

Disciplines

History | Military History | Philosophy | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Serving the Public First: Archives 2.0

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

By [Matt LaRoche](#) '17

The hallmarks of contemporary archival philosophy, known casually as “Archives 2.0,” have everything to do with making archives open, attractive resources for researchers of all persuasions. These rotate around a few main assertions. First, that archivists should endeavor to make their repositories as attractive as possible to users—this means offering friendly, all-inclusive access, being responsive to user desires, being tech-savvy, and leaving some discovery and processing of collections to the researcher. Secondly, modern archiving stresses accessibility—having a standardized way of organizing collections that will be easily understood by visiting researchers, utilizing language familiar to average people for finding aides, and having the funding necessary to provide visitors the aid, attention, and resources they need.



Matt LaRoche pins a text panel in the USCT exhibit he's been curating this summer. Photo courtesy Amy Lucadamo.

This philosophy differs immensely from the earlier “Archives 1.0” model, in which archivists intentionally limited access to the few deemed worthy of access to their materials, shunned technology, and customized collections to the point that they became utterly inaccessible to the visiting researcher. I see the new model prevailing over the old in my workplace daily. *Special Collections* has rededicated itself in recent years to striking a balance between the analog and the digital by making some of its artifacts available online while reserving a portion in-house. In doing so, they have assured that they both meet user demands for tech-accessibility and invite new users to explore the collections in person. Speccoll has also had great success in fostering funding and donor relationships with outside sources, giving them the wherewithal to serve successfully as a research hub and teaching resource. This is the direct result of Speccoll’s most defining characteristic—outgoing and pleasant staff members who, on average, spend as much time assisting the public with one-on-one research aid or introducing entire classes to the collections, as they do behind a desk.

My experiences in this reformed version of Special Collections have completely redefined my understanding of archival mission and practice. Initially, I believed that archives were intrinsically insular—only the properly trained people could hope to see the artifacts outside of an exhibit. I thought the emphasis was on preserving artifacts first, and aiding researchers second. Now I recognize that archival thinking has shifted incredibly. Archives are now encouraged to serve the public first, and fawn over their (admittedly *amazing*) artifacts second. Rather than have each collection perfectly processed, archivists understand that the public must decide how best to structure the resource. The reason is simple—they are the ones who will use it.

Sources:

Kate Theimer, “What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?,” *American Archivist*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 58-68

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