Allowing talking in virtual reading rooms:
User-contributed content and online archive finding aids

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Abstract
Over the last few years the internet has become much more dynamic and participatory. Many major websites now involve users in the creation of content. This is significant for archives because it suggests ways that their own virtual reading rooms might develop. A likely site of participation is the online catalogue. This paper considers the effects of user-contributed content on archivists’ two key descriptive functions: facilitating access and documenting context. It finds that user participation in description can potentially improve access, by adding detail to online catalogues and by enabling peer-mediation, and enhance interpretation, by enriching context, by providing evidence of the continuing use of records, and by incorporating multiple perspectives into the catalogue. But it also identifies dangers in user-generated content, including its potential to exclude groups of users, to introduce biases and inaccuracies into descriptions, to affect archivists’ contextual descriptions, and to undermine trust in virtual reading rooms. The strengths of user-contributed content may be harnessed, and the weaknesses limited, by the design of systems for user participation. Ultimately, however, it is clear that archivists must retain a presence in virtual reading rooms.
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As more and more users leave reading rooms for websites, archives are increasingly becoming as much virtual destinations as they are physical ones. According to the latest CAARA survey (Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities, 2005), visits of in-person researchers to Australasian state and national archives have declined by more than 20% over the last decade; while, during the last five years alone, there has been nearly a seven-fold increase in unique visits to those archives’ websites. With increasing quantities of digitised and born-digital records being made available online, this trend will continue. Given this, it is important to consider how archives present themselves online. And in thinking about the shape of virtual reading rooms, a question that archivists must confront is whether to let their users participate in online description.

Over the last few years, user-contributed content has become a key feature of many websites. It can take several forms: users contributing unique text to websites and editing other users’ work (the user-created encyclopaedia, http://www.wikipedia.org, is an example of this), users uploading comments or reviews (such as at http://www.amazon.com), or users adding personal keywords or “tags” to photos and other items (for example, http://www.flickr.com). Dempsey (2006b) includes even the passive participation of users in shaping content (websites that monitor browsing histories, user locations, and other data to generate personalised services) when he characterises this phenomenon as the "co-created experience."

There are many potential applications of user-contributed content to online archive catalogues: users could add labels to records that are more meaningful to them than controlled subject terms; they might enhance item-level descriptions by adding a level of detail to administrative histories, biographies, and scope and content notes that is simply too time-consuming or domain-specific for archivists themselves to create; users could flag the research potential in particular items, communicate with fellow researchers, and pose questions to archivists; they could record the ways in which they have employed material in research; users might even attach their own transcriptions, translations or digital photos of items to catalogues. Such changes have the potential to provide institutions with a much better understanding of their virtual users, to promote a stronger sense of engagement between those users and archives, to foster
communities among the users themselves, and to provide new and rich detail about archival records and their use over time.

Libraries and museums have taken a lead in exploring the merits of user-contributed content. The Library of the University of Pennsylvania, for example, provides a site for its members where they can write their own keyword labels for books and view the collections of labels generated by their peers (figure 1.). A consortium of American museums and galleries (including the Guggenheim) is taking a similar approach in their design of a website, the Art Museum Social Tagging Project, which also allows users to “tag” images of works of art (figure 2.). Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum recently launched its OPAC2.0: a new online catalogue that displays user-contributed labels alongside the museum’s own controlled access terms, allowing searches across both.

Some archive websites are also trialling forms of user collaboration. The National Archives of Australia is beta testing a VRroom (virtual reading room): it is a website designed for school children and presents digitised records in a variety of innovative ways, including a tool for annotation (though, significantly, these annotations are only visible to the user making them). The School of Information at the University of Michigan has taken the concept further in its “Next Generation Finding Aid Project”. A group of faculty and students from this school is trialling user-contributed comments to an online catalogue at the Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections website (figure 3.). This website allows users to describe themselves and their interest in the collections; to comment on items within the catalogue, adding their own knowledge and questions; and it provides archivists with a way to communicate with users. Finally, the Dutch Nationaal Archief employs user-contributed comments in its catalogue of online digitised images. Comments already left on the site include personal responses to images, questions to other users, added detail about the subjects of particular images, and even suggested corrections to the Archief’s own contextual descriptions.

Archivists must explore these kinds of services if they are to keep pace with their evolving audience. Before jumping on the technology bandwagon, however, it is important to consider the potential impacts on traditional descriptive strategies. As Light and Hyry (2002) warn, “[a]notations raise many troubling questions because they
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would capture and incorporate different archival processes and areas of expertise into our basic descriptive tools” (p. 228). This paper seeks to examine these “troubling questions” by studying the likely effects of user-contributed content on the two main functions of archival description: facilitating access (helping users find archival records that will satisfy their research needs) and supporting meaning (providing sufficient contextual information – such author, date and place of creation – to allow users to correctly interpret records).

Access
One of the great difficulties of description is to speak to a variety of users – with a multitude of different subject and name-based reference questions – and bridge the gap between their queries and the mostly provenance-based arrangement of archival records. Finding aids ideally contain enough detail about the context and content of records to allow users to locate relevant source material independently. Archivists assist users by inserting subject, place and name keywords into catalogues and drafting standalone finding aids such as repository guides, subject leaflets, and indexes. Users, for their part, must trust that these descriptions are accurate and are sufficient for their research needs (Rosenberg, 2001).

This trust is both a source of power and a burden for archivists. Schellenberg (1988) states that description, “involves an element of self-abnegation for an archivist, in that it makes available to others his own knowledge about documents” (p. 108). But archivists, of course, make that knowledge available selectively: they choose what context to include, what content to highlight, and what additional access points to provide. In this sense, archivists are gatekeepers. Ketelaar (2002) writes of, “the knowledge-power of the finding aids, as representation of what the public may not see openly, but may expect to find behind the closed doors of the prison-like repository” (p. 234).

The role is a burden, too, because it is very difficult to sustain. Inserting multiple access points into catalogues, writing guides and providing indexes are time-consuming and expensive tasks; and dependent on the timely completion of several other functions (appraisal, processing and arrangement). As a consequence, archives
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around the world suffer tremendous cataloguing backlogs. The Logjam report (North West Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2004) discovered 29% of collections in the North West of England to be uncatalogued. Greene and Meissner (2005) found in their recent survey of American archivists that 88% of respondents view an “acceptable” backlog as being a quarter of total holdings. And even where indexes and detailed catalogues are available, the results can be frustratingly impermanent: new generations of researchers come with different questions and bring new terminology. Yakel (2003) notes that there is a “documented need to revisit previous collection descriptions” (p. 3).

Faced with this impossible situation, many archivists advocate a kind of descriptive triage: to aim at basic descriptions of all holdings; describing from the top down and from the general to the particular; and focusing descriptive energies on the context surrounding whole collections rather than the contents of particular folders. Duff and Haworth (1997) suggest that descriptions structured by provenance should be the minimum: enabling access only by matching queries to particular creators of records. In a similar vein, Nesmith (1992) advocates a “contextual approach”, which “is concerned in the first instance with acquiring knowledge of the context in which information is recorded rather than knowledge of the information contents of records” (p. 16).

The result for users is that they must either learn how to recast their questions as archival ones (as Nesmith (1992) puts it, “which creators of records created records which are most likely to contain information on the subject of interest?” (p. 17)) or they must depend on archivists to do this for them. Pugh (1982) suggests that, “[t]he archival system is predicated on interaction between the users and the archivist. Indeed, the archivist is necessary, even indispensable, for subject retrieval” (p. 36). For Sweeney (2002), archivists have become, “mediators between the users and the search tools, and ultimately, the records” (p. 174). Successful mediation requires that users already have detailed knowledge surrounding their topics (particularly names of people, places and organisations to serve as access points) and that archivists have a thorough grasp of their holdings; and it depends on fruitful communication between both parties. Mediation places a heavy burden on archivists: Jenkinson (1980) argues
that, since there an unlimited number of potential research topics, fulfilling the role fully would demand of archivists, “Omniscience” (p. 256). Furthermore, with greater job mobility, fewer subject specialists in major archives, a diversifying user population and many more novice researchers, it is growing ever more difficult.

In the virtual reading room, where communication between archivists and users is much more problematic, mediation becomes even harder. Sweeney (2002) writes, “as more and more archives mount their resources on the Web, and as computers alter user expectations, archives will have to change their ways of supporting users” (p. 261). Archivists can respond to this challenge either by assuming an even heavier descriptive burden and providing more richly detailed online catalogues (so that virtual users can find resources without direct help), and thereby hold on to their power, or they can release some of the burden and power of description to their users.

Hill (2004) advocates more detailed description for online catalogues:

In order to satisfy more of our online users it is clear that we need to be providing more information (more complete catalogues) and better-quality information (catalogues accompanied by subject indexes) which would allow easier access to our archives by topic. (p. 142)

Some archives have taken this route, especially for collections of digitised records which are often packaged as “learning objects” or placed in virtual exhibitions. The *Moving Here* website, for example, employed both archival researchers and historians to provide rich supporting documentation for its migration-themed digitised collection in order to help visitors understand the significance the records (Geser & Wood, 2004). The researchers added new, item-level detail to the finding aids (that the participating institutions could not otherwise have afforded) and the historians wrote four peer-reviewed “Migration Histories” as a general introduction. Deep description of this kind, however, is very expensive (and therefore out of reach for most online description); it involves a great deal of selectivity – archivists must choose which records will receive this treatment; and, by guiding users, not only in finding, but in interpreting records, it risks becoming heavy-handed and directive.
User-contributed content to online catalogues may be an alternative substitute for the archivist as mediator in the finding process: by adding subject, name, and other keywords, item-level context and content notes, links to allied material, etc., users might create more richly detailed finding aids than those that archivists are themselves able to produce; and by posting questions and comments, users could share knowledge with each other, guiding their fellow researchers to other material – within the archive, or to other institutions they have visited, or to published sources. But what are the full implications for accessibility? Would peer mediation support all users?

Opening spaces for the voices of users in finding aids will not, in itself, result in a representative sample of users choosing to participate. Factors such as gender, age, wealth and ethnicity may well influence who contributes content. Around eighty percent of contributors to Wikipedia, for example, are male (Schiff, 2006). Divisions may also develop between users with different research interests. Genealogists are the largest online archive user group (Hill, 2004). They are probably also the most social. Yakel (2004) reports that genealogists already learn most their source-seeking skills from each other (often through genealogical societies), they network, and they share research discoveries. Genealogists will therefore likely prove eager contributors to finding aids. Professional and academic researchers on the other hand, whose specialised knowledge could greatly enrich finding aids, may prove less willing to share with other users. Sexton, Turner, Yeo and Hockey (2004) conducted a focus group into an application for presenting archival material online and found that, while the personal and leisure users in their sample were enthusiastic about added features such as online glossaries and indexes, the professional and academic users were less interested and were suspicious of anything that potentially stood in the way of their own, unmediated interpretation of the material. Professional and academic users might well react in the same way to features inviting their participation in description. Tellingly, the University of California Libraries’ Bibliographic Services Task Force (2005) considers, but rejects, developing user-contributed content features such as tags and shared collections on the grounds that their “scholarly users” may not provide sufficient content (p. 54).
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If some groups do dominate, and the singular voice of the archivist is replaced, not by a plurality of narratives, but by the united voices of a few strong groups, then there are dangers that others may feel unwelcome in the virtual archive, that the finding process will be distorted (towards popular classes of records heavy with keywords and descriptive comment), and that the mediation of strong groups may bias users in their interpretation of records. Jenkinson (1965) contests that the archivist, “should be all things to all Archives” (p. 124). User-contributed descriptions will likely be many things to only some records. Wikipedia’s example is instructive: although it is open to all, Wikipedia is by no means representative; the entry on Coronation Street, for instance, is double the length of Tony Blair’s (Waldman, 2004). Mortimer (2002) suggests that the needs of historians have been relatively neglected by archivists over the past fifteen years with increasing numbers of recreational users soaking up resources. It would certainly be a shame if historians, or any other minority user group, felt themselves trespassers in virtual reading rooms, aliens in the domain of genealogists or hobbyists. Furthermore, user-contributed content may be positively dangerous if it distracts archives from their broader social missions. Moss and Currell (2004) warn (in relation to digitisation projects) that favouring needs of the “largest user communities... may fail to meet a truly socially inclusive agenda and reflect the diversity of holdings” (p. 127).

The challenge of ensuring that the needs of all online users – not only the most vocal – are met, suggests that archivists will need to retain a presence in virtual reading rooms, even where they are assisted by the users themselves. Archivists will also need to provide users with the tools to control their own level of involvement in virtual reading rooms. Archivists might, for instance, provide users with options about how they view the catalogue: giving them the ability to turn off user-contributed content altogether, for example, or to only view their own annotations (as in the National Archives of Australia’s VRroom), or to view only the content provided by a nominated group (a genealogical society, perhaps, or a history class). Nevertheless, user-contributed content does show great promise for improving accessibility: by inexpensively adding dynamic access points to catalogues it can assist in a task at which many archives are currently failing; and by harnessing peer-mediation it can relieve archivists of a heavy burden that must become even more difficult to sustain in virtual reading rooms.
Interpretation

Archival description presents essential context with records to ensure that they retain their meaning and evidence despite removal from the environments of their creation and use. Archivists have traditionally fulfilled this role by keeping records of the same provenance together (maintaining the link between records and creators); preserving the arrangements of their original use (maintaining the relationships between records); and communicating this context to users through hierarchical lists, biographical and administrative histories, and scope and content notes. For online description – of paper records accessed in an archive, and especially of digitised and born digital records available online – this contextualising function is particularly critical: Moss and Currall (2004) warn that “the potential for misunderstanding is enormous [online]” (p. 129), given the diversity of virtual users, their varying levels of archival expertise, and their multiple cultural perspectives. How will user-contributed content in online catalogues influence the interpretation of records?

By harnessing the specialised knowledge of many individual researchers to enrich context, user-contributed content may improve interpretations of some records. Users scrutinize individual items in much greater detail than is possible for modern archivists, with all their backlogs and contending responsibilities. En masse, users bring a breadth of subject knowledge, linguistic ability, and familiarity with records across institutions that no single archivist can replicate. One of the participant’s in Sweeney’s (2002) study of the source-seeking processes of users, a university professor, spoke to this, arguing that archivists ought to take advantage of the in-depth knowledge of expert researchers; of both their subject expertises and their intimate familiarity with individual documents.

A particular record format that might benefit especially from added context provided by users is the photograph. Photographs are often inadequately catalogued. This is because it is very difficult to identify the dates, people, places and events depicted in them (especially older ones) that the creators themselves did not see fit to record. Furthermore, because of their preservation needs and their display value, photographs are very often the first records selected for digitisation by archives. A recent American
survey found that photographs were the top digitisation priority for 65% of all archives surveyed (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2006). Without sufficient context, these digitised photographs are particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation. User-contributed content may mitigate this problem by drawing on outside expertise to identify some of these photographs and give them context. The Dutch Nationaal Archief employs user comments in this way, often to very good effect. For example, the subject of a photograph of two men drinking from a pipeline, for which the Archief only has a date and a place, has been identified by a visitor to the website as likely being of test drilling for mineral water. In their comment, the user gives a brief history of the mineral water industry of the Maastricht area and cites a relevant text (figure 4).

However, if user-contributed content has the potential to enhance context and to improve the interpretation of particular records, then it also risks polluting context and distorting interpretation. What accuracy can be expected of contextual information contributed by users? Is it likely to be biased? And might user-contributed content contaminate archivists’ own contextual descriptions?

User-contributed content will likely be of mixed quality, with inaccurate contributions sitting alongside correct ones. Ross, Donnelly and Dobreva (2004) point out that allowing equal space for everyone’s opinions, “may lead to a glut of misleading and incorrect information” (p. 177). And such inaccuracies may father other misconceptions and errors. A common problem affecting the accuracy of much content contributed by users is the tendency to rely on other internet sources when creating, or judging the credibility of, content. For this reason, Burbules describes the internet as a “self-sustaining reference system” (Byerly & Brodie, 2005). Even peer-edited Wikipedia is susceptible to this; Wales (2006), its founder, admits that editors often rely on the “Google test” to determine accuracy (the theory that, if it cannot be found on Google, then it does not exist).

A further problem with the accuracy of user-contributed content is the danger of bias. Wikipedia, again, provides an example here: though it may be very accurate overall, it is subject to deliberate inaccuracies, malicious editing, ideology and bias. Schiff (2006) enumerates a series of hotly-contested Wikipedia entries that are the sites of frequent
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abuse: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Macedonia, the Armenian genocide, George W. Bush, and many others. Wales (2006), recalling how a neo-Nazi group once attempted to delete a series of articles, confesses that this remains an intractable problem with his site. All unmediated user-contributed content systems are vulnerable to this threat. Shirky (2005), for example, points out that there is no defence against groups manipulating tagging systems to characterise an issue in a certain way (such as pro-life) and drown out other voices. Archives that permit user-contributed content risk having their online catalogues become sites of disputation and controversy.

At its best, user-contributed content may prove very useful: it may serve accessibility and improve the interpretation of under-described records; but, ultimately, it can never be as trustworthy as professionally-authored archival descriptions. On the internet, as Price (2005) puts it, “[s]tuff moves around, stuff vanishes, stuff can’t be trusted: it’s a questionable environment, at best, for serious scholarship.” Inaccurate or biased user-contributed content may be tolerable so long as other users can recognise it as such.

By clearly delineating user keywords and comments from official contextual description, archivists may alert visitors to the need to exercise greater discretion for that material. But, even with such safeguards, could user-contributed content still compromise the context provided by archivists? Such an outcome would be dangerous. Cox (2004) reminds us that, “[t]he keeping of records is fundamental to systems of trust” (p. 10). Records provide legal evidence, support government accountability and corporate governance, and strengthen community memory. Archivists have an obligation to secure trust in archives and if content contributed by anonymous users leads others astray then archives lose a measure of control over their trusted reputations as repositories of evidence.

There are several ways that user-contributed content might disrupt archival context. It might do so by directly challenging it. In some of the comments on the Dutch Nationaal Archief’s site, users question the validity of contextual details given by the Archief. One user counters the Archief’s description of an image of a female ice skater, for example, writing, “[t]his is not Lidija Skoblinova, but Irina Jegorova or Tatjana Siderova” (figure 5). Simply by adding new detail on top of archival context, users might subtly alter the meaning of archivists’ descriptions. In the mineral water example quoted earlier (figure

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4), the Dutch Nationaal Archief gives as context the fact that the photo is from Maastricht. The user’s comment builds on that detail by further specifying the site as a mineral water spring in Mastricht, thereby subtly changing the Archief’s own location. User-content might also disrupt archival context by colouring it with users’ potentially biased interpretations. A user-contributed label, for example, on the Powerhouse Museum’s website describes an image of a humble shoe-size measuring stick as an “instrument of torture”, giving the museum’s neutral description of the object a new and sinister meaning (figure 6). Hurley (1998) recommends that archivists practice “negative virtues” by not adding any extraneous information in description that may corrupt the evidential quality of records (p. 60). User comments and folksonomic labels might well be considered extraneous in this sense, as content contributed by users must inevitably impact on the contexts given by archives.

A further threat posed by user-contributed content to archival context is that it might cause much of that context to be bypassed altogether. Traditional archival description is founded on the principle of respect des fonds. Jenkinson (1980) gives voice to this:

... a single document out of a Group of Archives is no more to be taken as expressing in and by itself all it has to tell us than would a single bone separated from the skeleton of an extinct and unknown animal. (p. 239)

Often the most important context for interpreting records’ meanings is not found at the item level but in the arrangement of a body of records as a whole, in the relationships between records, and in the descriptions given at collection and series levels. For this reason, Procter and Cook (2000) argue that “it is never acceptable to provide lower level descriptions without appropriate higher level description to govern them” (p. 21).

By making items the focal points of description, user-contributed content may undermine the higher level context within which archives seek to position their material. Because users tend to be more interested in individual items (which may, for example, identify an ancestor, prove a legal claim, or clinch a historical argument) than in whole collections (which are aligned to creators’ interests rather than users’), user-contributed content will likely cluster at the item level. The Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections website provides an example of this: although users to this site are able to insert comments at any level in the catalogue, most comments are for individual items.
Higher level context, essential to meaning, might easily be overshadowed simply by the weight of item level description generated by user-contributed content.

Connections created by users between individual items may even threaten to disassemble archival collections. When users label items with the same tags, they link those items together, creating pseudo collections. The set of Powerhouse Museum objects, for example, that share the “shiny” tag may be considered the “shiny collection” (figure 7). Yakel proposes harnessing this idea by adding a function to the Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections website that would allow users to bookmark items of interest and share these as “virtual collections” with each other (Nesbit, 2006). But would such user-created collections devalue archivally arranged fonds? Speaking to a similar scenario (Wolgar’s proposition that online catalogues might automatically rearrange collections to suit the needs of individual users), Pepler (1990) warns:

However, if we accept this argument, we run the risk of allowing the records to be regarded simply as a number of random units which can be re-ordered in any convenient way without affecting the nature of the collection, a position which would clearly deny the principles of provenance. (p. 31)

At the heart of all of these dangers – that inaccurate and biased user-contributed content might pollute archival context and overshadow or replace archival arrangement – lies the central issue that, in their descriptions, archivists aspire towards impartiality by, as Jenkinson (1965) puts it, letting records speak for themselves by arranging and describing them according to their provenance; users, on the other hand, must be expected to describe (and virtually rearrange) records according to their own needs and their personal perspectives. Archivists, according to Duranti (2000), should aim to be impartial bridges between records creators and users: “the archivist must be neutral, objective, not driven by ideology or personal quests or missions” (pp. 11-12). Users cannot be held to such a standard and the content they contribute must therefore inevitably affect meaning, for both good and ill effect.

But could the same thing be said for the context provided by archivists? Post-modernists argue that archivists’ aspirations towards neutrality are futile. Harris (2002), for example, identifies archival contextualisation as just one of many “layers of
construction in text” (p. 84). With Duff (Harris & Duff, 2002) he writes, “[e]ach story we
tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the
records and re-creates them” (p. 272). Duff and Harris (2002) employ Hayden White’s
concept of metanarrative to argue that archivists’ neutral posture can actually be
harmful, by imposing an authoritative meaning and thereby silencing alternative
perspectives:

Arguably, metanarrative has dominated the realm of archival description for
nearly two centuries – in the form of such big stories such as the impartial
custodian, respect des fonds, the principle of provenance, original order, the
series, and records as evidence – expressed in the last few decades most
powerfully in a range of thinking and activity concerning descriptive standards.
(p. 276)

User content, though variable in quality, may ultimately aid interpretation by
supplementing the single, creator-oriented context offered by archives with multiple
contexts generated by the community. A point made by several observers of user-
contributed content systems is that they unseat the domineering voices of institutions.
Ross, Donnelly and Dobreva (2004) suggest, for example, that opening memory
institutions to user content breaks down their reputations as “ivory towers”, the
preserve of “experts and the elite” (p. 177). Geser and Wood (2004) describe user-
contributed content as “giving memory back to the people” and “bypassing to some
degree the privilege of interpretation traditionally held by curators and historians” (p.
26).

User-contributed content may therefore improve interpretation for some records by
bringing many eyes and many minds to bear on the tasks of drafting and vetting
contextual descriptions. But user-contributed content is also very troubling for
meaning, simply because users are likely to describe records from their own personal
perspectives where archivists seek to allow records themselves to express the contexts
of their creation. Clear boundaries are obviously vital. It will be very difficult, however,
to prevent any semantic impact on archival context. Once again, therefore, it is
important to give users control over how they view user-contributed content. Just as in
physical reading rooms, “chatter” may disturb some patrons who prefer to contemplate
records in silence; yet others may truly benefit from the chance to share meanings, to build group memories and to learn how different records have been interpreted over time. Dempsey (2006a) writes, “[n]eeds vary”: some users just want information, others want to engage in “conversations”, and others require access to authoritative records that they can rely on as evidence.

User participation in the creation of online archive finding aids is now firmly on the horizon. Archivists must consider what the consequences of user participation will be for users in virtual reading rooms, for archives as institutions, and for traditional archival methodology. Archival description is weakest when it seeks to completely control the processes of finding and interpreting records. By controlling all the points of access to records, by mediating for users, by presenting only the creator’s perspective, and by expecting trust and concealing the choices made in selecting, arranging and describing records, archivists open themselves to charges of selectivity and bias and they assume an impossibly heavy burden. User-contributed content may allow archivists to release some of their grip on description. Users could mediate for each other by contributing access points and by providing reference guidance to their peers. User-contributed content has the potential to enhance meaning, too, by adding new context to records, by preserving evidence of records’ continuing histories, and by incorporating multiple perspectives into description. Nevertheless a degree of control is necessary if the access needs of all users are to be served, if the meaning and evidence inherent in the context of records’ creation and use are to be conveyed, and if trust is to be established.
Figures

Figure 1. The Library of the University of Pennsylvania [http://tags.library.upenn.edu/]

Figure 2. The Art Museum Social Tagging Project [http://www.steve.museum]
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Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections

The Next Generation Finding Aid Project

This project was conceived by Associate Professor Elizabeth Yakel of the University of Michigan School of Information, who brought together a group of students to brainstorm new and creative methods of displaying archival content online. Individuals contributing to this project include:

- Dharna Almon
- Andrew Bemgert
- Maga Ghetu
- Rich Marquez
- Christie Peterson
- Polly Reynolds
- Seth Shaw
- James Sweeney

About us:

Yakel sees current online finding aids to be inadequate, merely reproducing paper finding aids without taking advantage of their electronic environment. The digital medium allows for quick searching, interlinking, participation and collaboration, and interfaces beyond text; techniques a paper finding aid cannot do. While many repositories and archives employ EAD (or encoded archival description) in their online finding aids, no one has yet to take full advantage of all of the properties that EAD has to offer. Thus, we sought to expand the capability of EAD, make the archival and research experience collaborative and participatory, and challenge the traditional finding aid structure.

About the Polar Bear project:

The Polar Bear collections at the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan proved to be an excellent experimental collection for us to frame our ideas. First, the Polar Bear collections have a rather devoted and interested audience. Researchers at the Bentley request these collections both for their historical as well as genealogical content. Therefore, we knew that online collaboration and participation would be possible and valuable. Second, the Bentley had just digitized all of the polar bear materials in their collection. Thus, providing us an excellent opportunity to not only experiment with finding aids, but also envision interfaces for

Figure 3. Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections website http://polarbears.si.umich.edu
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Figure 4. The Dutch Nationaal Archief

[Image]

http://beeldbank.nationaalarchief.nl/

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Figure 5. The Dutch Nationaal Archief

http://beeldbank.nationaalarchief.nl/
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Figure 6. The Powerhouse Museum Collection OPAC 2.0

http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=63459

Figure 7. The Powerhouse Museum Collection OPAC 2.0

References


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