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**Archives in the Life of the User:  
What Archives Can Learn from User-Centric Museums**

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**Abstract**

Library, archive, and museum convergence is still a topic of much contention in some academic circles. However, resistance is perhaps most entrenched in the archival discipline. This article attempts to briefly examine why that might be the case, and then asks the question: *What can archives learn from museums' relatively-new increased focus on being user-centric?*

The author uses the extraordinary scholarship of authors such as Paul F. Marty, W. Boyd Rayward, and numerous others in order to examine changes in libraries and, most specifically, museums, as well as the creation of the museum information professional role and the use of museum informatics. From this examination, the article suggests that archives and archivists could indeed benefit greatly from further exploration into, and adaptation of, the museum world's increasingly user-centric approach. It is furthermore suggested, following in the prior steps of libraries and museums, that the focus of archives should move from a "user in the life of the archive" to an "archive in the life of the user" mentality.

**Introduction**

In 1998, W. Boyd Rayward, an Australian librarian and scholar, wrote that, "The advent of electronic sources of information and their ever-increasing volume and variety will require a major redefinition and integration of the role of archives, museums and research libraries."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. Boyd Rayward, "Electronic information and the functional integration of libraries, museums, and archives" in E. Higgs (Ed.), *History and electronic artefacts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1998), 207.

Rayward continued, saying, "It is my view that the distinctions between all of these apparently different types of institutions eventually will make little sense..."<sup>2</sup> However, he also added the premonition that, "...we can anticipate continuing turf battles between the professional groups that manage them as we get to this point."<sup>3</sup> Rayward's vision of "turf battles" proved to be prophetic. On both sides of the argument concerning the converging of archives, museums, and libraries, clear lines were drawn in the sand on the battlefield, with numerous articles, special issues in journals,<sup>4</sup> workshops, and conferences on the topic.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, specifically within the archival profession and education programs, those lines are still being drawn today.

Archival public relations campaigns commonly use "preserving the past for the future"<sup>6</sup> or "preserving cultural heritage"<sup>7</sup> as reasoning for why archives are institutions crucial to society. However, while preservation is certainly one aspect of archives' function, the preservation of the "past" or "cultural heritage", e.g. artifacts, records, information, etc., falls under the purview of more than just archival repositories.<sup>8</sup> All cultural and memory institutions, i.e. archives, museums, libraries, etc., provide this service. Preservation is not exclusive to archives.

Preservation should always remain an important aspect of an archival repository, but archivists must ask themselves if *preservation* of archival records or *access* to those records is the most important role of an archive? If the answer is preservation, then archivists should perhaps adopt more of the role of conservators, with archives becoming more limited or even closed to the public, since a user accessing a record puts it at the greatest risk. However, if archives are to remain more than just a locked-vault repository in which society preserves its records - that is they wish to remain active and relevant in modern day society - an archive must be more than just a place of preservation.

The Australian archivist Peter J. Scott defines an archivist as both "a preserver and interpreter of records."<sup>9</sup> Scott's inclusion of archivists in the active role as interpreter, requires that archivists have someone to which they can interpret records: the user. Likewise, Barbara L. Craig, Professor Emerita at University of Toronto's iSchool, defines an archivist's duty as to "acquire, preserve and

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<sup>2</sup> Rayward, 207.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The special issues were in *Library Quarterly*, *Archival Science*, and *Museum Management and Curatorship* and were intended to encourage "more research examining how libraries, archives, and museums can collaborate and combine forces to better serve their users" (247). For further details, see Paul F. Marty, "An Introduction to Digital Convergence: Libraries, Archives, and Museums in the Information Age," *Archival Science* 8 (2008), 247–250.

<sup>5</sup> For more specific information, see Paul F. Marty. "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession in Cultural Heritage Organizations: Reconciling Internal and External Demands." *Library Trends* 62.3 (2014), 616.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Buckley, "The Truth is in the Red Files: An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture," *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008), 113.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Usherwood, Kerry Wilson, and Jared Bryson, "Perceptions of archives, libraries, and museums in modern Britain," *Library & Information Research* 29, No. 93 (Winter 2005), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Buckley, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29, No. 4 (October 1966), 500.

make available records of enduring value,"<sup>10</sup> a definition which she acknowledges is deceptively simple, but which does include the important act of making records accessible to users. Therefore, in addition to preservation, archivists must strive to better understand, care about, and adapt to the changing nature of how users access and use information, both in and outside of the archival context, in order to fulfill their role as interpreters and facilitators of user access.

This essay uses various aspects of the extraordinary scholarship on libraries, archives, and museums (LAM) convergence conducted most extensively by Paul F. Marty, but also builds on the studies and writings of W. Boyd Rayward and numerous others. It focuses most specifically on the relationship between museums and archives, in order to ask the question *What can archives learn from museums' relatively-new increased focus on being user-centric?*

The structure of this essay is divided into two main parts. First, I provide an overview of LAM convergence to date, and suggest possible reasons why archives are lagging behind libraries and museums in choosing to embrace it. Also in this section, an analysis of the modern user's interests and expectations shows that users do not have many of the interests over which informational professionals have obsessed for years. The continual shift to person-centered information behavior, and what this means for LAMs, and archives specifically, is also briefly discussed.

In the second part of the essay, I analyze two main actions which museums have taken to increase attention to their users. To begin with, an analysis of the creation of the changing role of museum information professionals is conducted. I also extrapolate from the museum context in order to show that a similar information professional role and mindset could prove to be equally beneficial for archives. Secondly, the study of museum informatics is explored, revealing just some of the varied and important user-based information that has come to light due to its creation, including the use of user profiles. From this analysis, I submit that archives needs a similar user-based form of archival informatics, and provide a few suggestions of what this might look like. Furthermore, this essay argues that archives, like libraries and museums<sup>11</sup> before them, should move from a "user in the life of the archive" to an "archive in the life of the user" mentality. For, as Marty explains, "It is not about what we do in libraries, archives, or museums that matters; it is the role these institutions play in our everyday lives that is so important."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara L. Craig, "What are the Clients? Who are the Products? The Future of Archival Public Services in Perspective," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), 135.

<sup>11</sup> Marty calls for an increase in the amount of research looking at the "museum in the life of the user." Paul F. Marty, "The Changing Nature of Information Work in Museums," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58, No. 1 (2007), 105.

<sup>12</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 619.

### Cooperation, Collaboration, and Convergence<sup>13</sup>

The issue of LAM convergence is not a new one. As Paul F. Marty, a professor at the School of Information at Florida State University and prolific author on LAM convergence, explains, "[C]ollecting institutions have wrestled with issues of institutional identity for centuries, and much of what is happening today with the increased availability of digital resources is simply returning us to a pre-existing world of more natural relationships and organizational schemes."<sup>14</sup> However, over the course of the past few decades, and despite some resistance, libraries have increasingly embraced the philosophical shift from focusing on the "user in the life of the library" to the "library in the life of the user."<sup>15</sup> In addition, museums have more recently started to adopt a similar stance. This, in turn, has prompted museums to change the way they interact with users, and the way users interact with them.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, despite the fact that archives, museums, and libraries all must adapt to the modern paradigm - which includes wide-spread technology, expectations of immediate and increased access, digital convergence,<sup>17</sup> disproving the public's assumption that "everything is available online," and steadily-increasing interdisciplinary focuses - there seems to be the most widespread resistance and entrenchment against LAM convergence in the archival context. Despite involvement in some prime examples of LAM collaboration, including the Flickr Commons project<sup>18</sup> and the creation of the Committee on Archives, Libraries, and Museums (CALM),<sup>19</sup> archives appear to be lagging behind the other two fields in interdisciplinary cooperation,<sup>20</sup> collaboration, and convergence. This prompts the question of why this is the case.

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Charlene Hsu Gross, "Keeping CALM - Cooperation, Collaboration, Convergence," *New Members Round Table* 39, No. 4 (May, 2010) available at [http://www.ala.org/nmrt/news/footnotes/may2010/keeping\\_CALM\\_gross](http://www.ala.org/nmrt/news/footnotes/may2010/keeping_CALM_gross) (accessed on 06/04/15).

<sup>14</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 614.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>17</sup> Marty says that "digital convergence" is "driven by the idea that the increased use of and reliance on digital resources has blurred traditional distinctions between information organizations" and will lead to further convergence of libraries, archives, and museums. Marty, "Intro to Digital Convergence," 247.

<sup>18</sup> The Flickr Commons project is an example of exceptional collaboration between "dozens of libraries, archives, and museums from around the world" who have all "contributed thousands of images from their collections to the Commons in an effort to increase awareness of and access to publically held images with 'no known copyright restrictions'" (620). However, although the images reached a huge number of people, the increase in traffic to their physical institutions that was expected did not happen for most of the museums. Although Flickr users are delighted to have access to these images, many seem to have little to no interest in finding out more about the institutions who contributed them. For more, see Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 620 and M. R. Kalfatovic, E., Spiess, K. Kapsalis, A. Van Camp, & M. Edson, "Smithsonian Team Flickr: A library, archives, and museums collaboration in web 2.0 space." *Archival Science* 8, No. 4 (2008), 267-277.

<sup>19</sup> "CALM is the joint committee of three national professional associations: American Library Association (ALA), Society of American Archivists (SAA), and American Association of Museums (AAM)." However, although a special committee between ALA and SAA in 1970, the AAM was not welcomed into the alliance until 2003. For more, see Gross, "Keeping CALM."

<sup>20</sup> "Finally, as the lines between libraries, archives, and museums increasingly becomes blurred, it is in their best interest to engage in a greater level of cooperation. All three are actively engaging in exhibiting and they could and should use this commonality as a stepping stone for greater cooperation in their common goal of preserving and presenting our shared cultural heritage." Aleksandr Gelfand, "If We Build It (and Promote It) They Will Come:

In part, this lag may be tied to the fact that many archivists still believe an uncompromising focus on the records, in contrast to focusing on the users or uses,<sup>21</sup> is imperative to maintaining the reliability and authority of an archive. Interestingly, a study in 2008 showed that libraries, archives, and museums are all still viewed by the public as trusted authorities,<sup>22</sup> despite libraries and museums' greater acceptance of user-based reforms than their archival counterparts. Likewise, in at least some archival schools of thought, reference services<sup>23</sup> continue to be considered a necessary nuisance, and not viewed as an important aspect of archival practice. However, if archives continue to try to maintain their distinct separation from libraries and museums, they risk becoming irrelevant and obsolete in the future. Although libraries, archives, and museums still struggle to share data across institutions of their own type,<sup>24</sup> they must also work to promote collaboration and cross-pollination between all cultural heritage institutions.

To be sure, the issue is no small matter. Much work still needs to be conducted in many areas in order to better understand the full breadth of this multi-faceted subject. Even among those who agree that increased cooperation, collaboration, and convergence of archives, libraries, and museums is necessary, there is much disagreement concerning whether this should be considered a positive change, as well as what the scope of said change should include. This is the case in both digital and physical contexts.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, what seems to be increasingly obvious is that the typical user is not nearly as concerned with the prospect of LAMs converging as are information professionals.

### Users' Interests and Expectations

Information professionals care deeply about both real and perceived distinctions between different kinds of collections and institutions, but most users do not.<sup>26</sup> The public seems to recognize and focus more on the similarities of archives, libraries, and museums and, either consciously or subconsciously, associates their roles as being in conjunction with each other, or in some cases, as being interchangeable. As further evidence of this, archives are often confused

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History of Analog and Digital Exhibits in Archival Repositories," *Journal of Archival Organization*, 11:1-2 (2013), 78.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Eastwood believes that Hilary Jenkinson's call for primary status to be given to the caring of records and secondary status to users has been widely misunderstood. This "misunderstanding" of Jenkinson has resulted in many archivists dismissing the importance of reference in archives. In contrast, Eastwood says that Jenkinson's intention was to assign "primary" as an indication of sequence, not of importance. Terry Eastwood, "Public Services Education for Archivists," *The Reference Librarian*, 26:56 (1997), 28-9.

<sup>22</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 620.

<sup>23</sup> Pugh says that "Reference services, broadly conceived, are the activities by which archivists bring users and records together to meet user needs." Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives & Manuscripts*, Chicago: Society of American Archivists (2005), 24.

<sup>24</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 622.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 616.

<sup>26</sup> Michelle Doucet, "Library and Archives Canada: A case study of a national library, archives and museum merger," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 8(1) (2007), 65; Rayward, 219; and Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 616.

with libraries and museums in popular culture depictions.<sup>27</sup> Today's user is also greatly reliant on online information, and is likely to desire, and even expect, that institutions can and will provide 24-hour access to a sizable amount of data no matter where it is housed or how it is organized.<sup>28</sup> In addition, wide-spread digitization projects have only increased this expectation, and have played more than a small role in further blurring the traditional distinctions between LAM institutions.<sup>29</sup>

Marty has shown that users of information resources either cannot or, and even more commonly, do not want to understand the differences between LAM institutions. However, he argues, there is no reason why users should have to understand these differences in order to find the resources they need.<sup>30</sup> Marty implores information professionals to "recognize that most of the assumptions that we [information professionals] take for granted about information organization and access in libraries, archives, and museums are simply not shared by our users..."<sup>31</sup> In short, many users want access to "stuff,"<sup>32</sup> not necessarily to know where that "stuff" came from.

With this knowledge, archivists must seriously ask themselves "Should the role of an archivist change if most users are uninterested in the differences between LAMs?"<sup>33</sup> Marty acknowledges that for many information professionals it is an important, but difficult, lesson to learn that users looking for information often do not share the same assumptions and expectations as those providing it.<sup>34</sup> However, he explains that this fact is not necessarily a dismissal by the public of LAMs or their differences, but instead a reflection on how users look at information. As Donald O. Case, a professor and prolific author on information behavior and information policy, revealed in his book *Looking for information: A survey of research on information seeking, needs and behavior* (2012), information behavior is shifting from system-centered to being person-centered.<sup>35</sup>

The shift to person-centered behavior is readily apparent in the "user-centered development of websites, online catalogs, interactive exhibits, and digital collections."<sup>36</sup> As such, Marty argues, it is no longer sufficient or acceptable for information professionals to design user interfaces with information organized to reflect the way that providers use that information. Instead, user interface needs to reflect "our improved understanding of the ever-changing information needs of our users."<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, even archivists who accept reference as a key archival role still

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<sup>27</sup> Buckley, 98-100.

<sup>28</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 104 and 97.

<sup>29</sup> Thanks to new capabilities, many historical barriers which separated and limited the information those organizations could provide in the past no longer exist. *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 618.

<sup>31</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 617.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 621-2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 617.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

often take the position that archivists need to focus most on educating the public how archivists structure and use archives,<sup>38</sup> instead of focusing on how users want and expect to use or interact with the information available.

To be sure, accepting this shift in information behavior does involve reexamining complex and difficult ideas concerning the "changing nature of information access, provision, and authority in the digital age." With greater acceptance of this philosophy,<sup>39</sup> libraries and museums have had to relinquish a sizable amount of control concerning how their users make use of their resources, even if users choose to take them out of their original context or create new meanings through different juxtapositions or connections.<sup>40</sup>

The idea of allowing users to remove or manipulate the context of their records for their own use is undoubtedly scary for some archivists. Provenance is assigned primary significance by most archivists,<sup>41</sup> and some archivists cite context/provenance as the fundamental element that separates archives from other cultural or memory institutions in the first place.<sup>42</sup> But if archivists acknowledge that access of records is a crucial function of archives, that most users of archives are not interested in the differences between LAMs or how they are structured internally, and that information behavior is shifting increasingly to being person-centered, archivists must adapt to these changes in informational culture and do a better job of serving their users. In order to provide a better understanding of what a user-centric archives might include, an analysis of how and why museums have accomplished their expanding focus on users should prove exceedingly helpful.

### **Museums' Shift to Users: The Role of Museum Information Professionals (MIP)**

In the mid-1990s, museum researchers and practitioners began discussing the possibility of a need for a new role in museums. The role that emerged was that of the "information manager,"

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<sup>38</sup> For more on User Education, see Pugh, 26-7; Barbara L. Craig, "Old Myths in New Clothes: Expectations of Archives Users," *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), 118-126; and Craig, "What are the Clients?," 135-41. However, although the above literature covers some aspects of user education, as Yakel notes, "a broader delineation of the scope and content of the archival user education curriculum is not occurring in the literature. Additionally, there has been no empirical work evaluating the outcomes of different types of archival user education classes or curricula" (61), and much scholarship is still needed. Yakel also suggests that archivists "rethink the one-size-fits-all approach to archival user education" (63). Elizabeth Yakel, "Listening to Users," *Archival Issues* 26(2) (2002), 53-68.

<sup>39</sup> Some authors have referred to this as disintermediation. It could involve information professionals removing themselves from the role of "authoritative intermediary" and instead being tasked with "embedding all of their knowledge and expertise in the very information systems that allow users to bypass the information professional in the first place" Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 620.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 619-20.

<sup>41</sup> Steven L. Hensen, "The First Shall Be First: *APPM* and Its Impacts on American Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 67.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Douglas, "Innovative practices: reference and outreach in the digital environment" (Lecture, ARST 540 - Archival Public Services, University of British Columbia, March 16, 2015) and Barbara L. Craig, "What are the Clients?," 138.

who was to be "charged with caring for the museum's information."<sup>43</sup> Eventually, this role evolved into a number of museum professionals who are often given numerous titles in their respective information technology (IT) departments,<sup>44</sup> but who are sometimes referred to collectively as museum information professionals (MIP).<sup>45</sup>

Although MIPs are still greatly understudied,<sup>46</sup> Marty conducted a series of 21 interviews with MIPs in 2007, in which he outlined their continuously-changing role. Marty says that MIPs are "a new kind of information professional," and that they must be "individuals with the capability of providing authoritative sources of information without bashing people over the head with their own notions of authority."<sup>47</sup> In addition, Marty says, an MIP must be "comfortable with the idea that as long as people are finding the resources they need, and that those resources are of high quality, then it does not matter whether anyone knows where those resources came from..."<sup>48</sup> This value of information over a source's origin could prove equally as useful to the type of informational professionals needed in tomorrow's archive setting.

Since their implementation, museums have come to accept the MIPs' role as being important, despite their actions not necessarily always furthering the institutional goals explicitly. It is now recognized that by helping museums better cater to their users, MIPs are still helping serve the museum's goals and mandate, albeit sometimes not explicitly. If archives create a similar position as what MIPs occupy in museums, what might be called "archival information professionals" or AIPs, then archives must too accept that their role would not always explicitly serve the high-end goals of their parent institution. If implemented, archives would have to remember that the role of providing a better understanding of archives' users and the changing nature of their uses is helpful in helping an archive perform one of its main functions: allowing users to access holdings.

Museums and archives are both relying more and more heavily on various forms of information technologies to meet user needs. As the number of online visitors to a museum website is now exponentially greater than that of in-person visitors, the number of issues MIPs deal with has grown as well.<sup>49</sup> MIPs are now in charge of areas such as digitization policies, metadata standards, digital rights management, and many others.<sup>50</sup>

An MIP must also be capable of recognizing the values and understanding the cost of implementing new technologies for the museum. Acknowledgement of the importance of

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<sup>43</sup> J. Hermann, "Shortcuts to Oz: Strategies and tactics for getting museums to the Emerald City," in K. Jones-Garmil (Ed.), *The wired museum: Emerging technology and changing paradigms*, (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997), 75 quoted in Marty, "Changing Nature," 98.

<sup>44</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 103. At the very least, MIPs surely work much more closely, and in the same technological sphere, as IT experts.

<sup>45</sup> Operating under titles including "Information Manager," "Information Technology Specialist," and "Chief Information Officer," MIPs bring myriad of important skills to today's museum. Marty, "Changing Nature," 97.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 621-2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 102.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 104-5.



keeping existing technologies up-to-date and functional, and being able to understand and troubleshoot most problems when they occur in-house are also essential skills. However, MIPs must be equally as skilled at knowing when to outsource or contract work on a case-to-case basis<sup>51</sup> and with cost and risk benefit analyses always in mind. In terms of soft skills, MIPs should be competent to assist others in the museum in considering the needs of museum users, and understand how those needs differ from user to user, both in the museum and online.<sup>52</sup> As for the theoretical role of AIPs, a minor substitute of the word "museum" for "archive" and all of the above information is just as applicable.

As all of these combined functions show, the MIP must have a firm grounding and expansive knowledge in both information technology and museums. They must be knowledgeable about their museums' day-to-day functions, both inside and outside their department, as well as its larger institutional goals.<sup>53</sup> This is no small task, as the needs of both users and other museum professionals are in constant flux. Thus, MIPs need to be continuously aware of the museum's current and future needs.<sup>54</sup> However, the combination of museum and information knowledge is what sets MIPs apart from just IT experts working inside a museum.

If AIPs are to prove useful to archives, they must be to archives and information technology as MIPs are to IT knowledge and museums. Likewise, the expectations and needs of archives and their users are also experiencing great change, and this shows no signs of stabilizing anytime soon. Archival informational professionals would need to always keep in mind the "big picture"<sup>55</sup> of the archives' mandate as well as its current and future goals and needs. MIPs, and AIPs too, need to provide for and accommodate the needs of their institution's staff, but also facilitate access and provide a smooth interface for users who, in all likelihood, have no desire to understand what is happening in the internal information structure.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately libraries, archives, and museums also have to accept that the easier they make it for users to access their resources, the harder they make it for those same users to understand and value how much work actually is involved in making those resources available."<sup>57</sup>

Marty says that for MIPs to succeed, they need to advocate, establish, and administer information principles that may influence museum professionals, users, and even the entire museum. Thus, they may find themselves in the uncomfortable place of "redefining the museums

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 100-1.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>53</sup> "The research participants stressed the need to consider the true mission and goal of the museum when faced with new technologies and changing capabilities. They stressed the potentially dangerous possibility of becoming focused on technology for technology's sake and distracted from the museum's overall mission." Ibid., 101.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> "Specific skills and technologies quickly become obsolete, but the ability to look at the big picture will always be important. The true value of MIPs lies not in their ability to solve individual technology problems, it lies in their ability to comprehend the future of information work in museums." Ibid., 105.

<sup>56</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 621.

<sup>57</sup> "The challenge facing cultural heritage information professionals today is to make their contributions clear, to be their own advocates for their own contributions to the betterment of humanity, while simultaneously making more resources available to an audience that wants increasingly unlimited access to everything, with as few barriers as possible, and all of it for free." Ibid., 622.

and their place in it simultaneously.<sup>58</sup> If archives create similar roles of information professionals in archives, i.e. people who possess knowledge of both how an archive is structured internally and how users of archives expect and want to have access to the records, they might also find themselves in a similarly-uncomfortable position. However, despite some potential awkwardness, this role could prove transformational to archives, in much the same way it has transformed the museum.

Museums are rapidly changing. This is true in both museum staff's roles and structure, but also in their overall mission. Many museums are, as one MIP interviewed put it, "changing from being repositories of collections that have a wow factor to more educational institutions." The creation of the MIP position is just one step in a multi-step process that museums have undertaken in their ongoing evolution from being "repositories of collections" to the more nuanced and user-based role of educational institutions;<sup>59</sup> or to that of the even more amorphous, "repositories of knowledge."<sup>60</sup> Marty explains that, "If museums are to remain relevant for modern visitors, museum professionals must adapt to meet the changing needs and expectations of their users."<sup>61</sup> It is important to remember that the same warning of remaining relevant is just as applicable to archives.

Marty says MIPs must remember that, "The core competency of a museum is not the management of complex technology, it's the creative use of it."<sup>62</sup> Might not a similar "creative use" of technology be just as positive and potentially groundbreaking in archives? To be sure, archives must better understand what it is their users expect, want, and need before an AIP-like position could be put to its full potential. One way they could do this is to embrace user-based informatics studies of archives.

### **Museums' Shift to Users: The Role of Museum Informatics and User Profiles**

At the same time the new role of the MIP was evolving, a growing importance regarding the study of museum informatics was happening as well.<sup>63</sup> Museum informatics is a sub-discipline of social informatics,<sup>64</sup> which explores the interactions between people, information, and technology within a museum context.<sup>65</sup> Some of the many areas that museum informatics has been able to provide insight into include more cooperative problem solving, history-enriched digital records,

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<sup>58</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 104.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>64</sup> Paul F. Marty, "Museum Informatics and Collaborative Technologies: The Emerging Socio-technological Dimension of Information Science in Museum Environments," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50 (1999), 1083.

<sup>65</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 97.

computer-supported cooperative learning, and increasing the collaboration between museum staff and scholars and other professionals.<sup>66</sup>

In 2007, Marty provided a helpful overview of a number of studies that have used museum informatics to better understand users. These topics of research include:

- Different metadata schemas and how they help/hinder users seeking collections data.
- Changing expectations for online museums' outreach to many different audiences.
- Different methods of targeting user needs through personalization and pervasive computing technologies inside and outside the museum.
- How helping museum visitors conceptualize information resources transformed the way museum professionals build relationships with their users.
- The importance of creating accessible and usable information resources for online museum projects.
- Different methods for determining if museum websites meet the needs of their users, including a discussion of the dangers of not evaluating museum websites for usability.
- Statistics and transaction log analysis for museum professionals evaluating user satisfaction with museum websites.
- The importance of understanding information needs for users at all stages of a museum visit, including access over the internet before and after physical museum visits.<sup>67</sup>

This list is by no means exhaustive. However, it does provide a small glimpse into the type of information and analyses that museum informatics have been able to bring to museum researchers and practitioners.

Although it must be admitted that there are definitely some areas of informatics that apply exclusively to museums, archival institutions could certainly benefit from their own form of similar user-based studies in archival informatics. Building off the earlier museum informatics topics listed, with only minor changes, user-based archival informatics could include studies that examine:

- Different metadata schemas and how they help or hinder users of archives.
- Changing expectations for archives' online presence, and the engagement of outreach services to many different audiences.
- Different methods for targeting individual user's needs inside and outside the archive.
- How the ability to help archives users conceptualize information resources might transform the way archivists build relationships with their users.
- The importance of creating accessible and usable information resources for online archival resources and projects.

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<sup>66</sup> Marty, "Museum informatics," 1085.

<sup>67</sup> For more specifics on these studies, see Marty, "Changing Nature," 98.

- Different methods for determining whether archival websites are meeting the needs of their users.
- Statistics and transaction log analysis for archivists interested in evaluating user satisfaction with archives' websites.
- The importance of understanding the information needs of users at all stages of a visit to an archive, including internet access before and after physical archive visits.

The above list of possible areas for user-based archival informatics also is not meant to be complete. However, it does show how using the earlier studies of museum informatics may provide archivists and archival researchers a wealth of helpful ideas regarding what areas in which to conduct research regarding their users.

In addition to the aforementioned studies that utilized museum informatics, user profiling in museums has also unearthed insightful data. The creation of user profiles can provide even more options for the "primary problem" that users of a database system must confront: knowing how to perform an efficient search.<sup>68</sup> In too many cases, users must have prior knowledge of a database itself, how it has been structured, and what terms it will recognize, in order to search it efficiently.<sup>69</sup> An MIP's job often involves trying to figure out the most effective way to organize and prepare information on both the back-end, i.e. the behind-the-scenes structures of information, and the front-end, i.e. the user/visitor's experience.<sup>70</sup> It is also important for them to remember that the solution on one end can be vastly different than the other.<sup>71</sup> What creating user profiles allows MIPs to do, put simply, is to allow for the fact that "different users will have different needs" and cater to a variety of differing users and needs.<sup>72</sup>

Although archivists have acknowledged that intellectual and physical arrangement can be, and often are, different,<sup>73</sup> in most archival software interfaces there seems to be a continued resistance, or lack of interest in pursuing a customizable view option, or designing interfaces for different users, such as user profiles, based on the users' expressed interest. The ability to better serve different users' needs is important in museums,<sup>74</sup> but it is just as important in archives.

As multiple user studies have shown, an archives' internal structure of information - i.e. creator-based aggregations of fonds, series, sub-series, etc. - is considered overly-difficult or confusing and, in truth, is largely irrelevant to most users and their subject-based concerns. But understanding an institution's internal information structure should not need to be considered a

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<sup>68</sup> Marty, "Museum Informatics," 1087.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 100.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Marty, "Museum Informatics," 1087.

<sup>73</sup> For more, see Luciana Duranti, "Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 50.

<sup>74</sup> "Different users will need different access to either all or some of the museum's data. Just as in a real museum, visitors to the virtual museum's electronic data repository will wish to encounter the available data differently; some will want to browse the system freely while others will want the equivalent of a personal guided tour." Marty, "Museum Informatics," 1088.

prerequisite for a user to use an archive. However, this more complex and structural information should still be accessible should the user need access to this information.<sup>75</sup>

One possible way for both users and information professionals to have access to the information they want and need, may be to "hide" the traditional archival structure in a similar way that websites hide HTML code. The top layer could be designed in order to better accommodate users' subject-based queries, while those who have reason or inclination to see the underlying information could access a second layer that provides a full account of fonds, series, file, et al. Ideally the switch between the two interfaces should be as seamless as possible. This interface could presumably be executed in much the same way that Marty describes The Spurlock Museum's database capabilities which can show the same database of virtual artifacts in various fashions to different students according to their educational needs,<sup>76</sup> or using database structures utilized by some current records programs.

With the information that museum informatics has provided, museums are now better able to understand how users are utilizing the resources that they have already provided to their users, which museums services and areas could be improved, what users would like to see in terms of museums resources in the future, and much more. If archives truly wish to understand their users more fully in order to be able to better accommodate different user expectations and varied uses of archives, archival informatics that focus on users in a similar way that museum informatics has been used, provides an intriguing way in which to accomplish this end goal.

## Conclusion

To be sure, the study of what archives can learn from museums needs considerable further focus and analysis. For example, archives use of exhibitions, both digitally and in-person, and how they could be designed to better cater to users is an area which would benefit greatly from further study. In addition, how archives could use a museum-or-library-type-loan arrangement with other cultural institutions for exhibiting purposes could also prove worthy of warranting further examination. Almost certainly, archives might be able to learn from many other disciplines and fields of study, both inside and outside of the LAM convergence model.

It must also be said that there have been some important steps to a greater increase in interdisciplinarity and LAM convergence that have already been suggested and put forth for future consideration. For instance, Information Standards Specialist Katherine Timms has championed the idea of a digital integrated access system for museum, archives, and libraries alike.<sup>77</sup> She identifies the major barrier as each profession currently using different description

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<sup>75</sup> This is the case in much the same way that Marty says museums should still provide the ability for a user to have access to information regarding the origin of a resource, "as would, for instance, researchers in the humanities and social sciences." Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 621-2.

<sup>76</sup> Marty, "Museum Informatics," 1089.

<sup>77</sup> Katherine Timms, "New Partnerships for Old Sibling Rivals: The Development of Integrated Access Systems for the Holdings of Archives, Libraries, and Museums," *Archivaria* 68 (Fall, 2009), 67-95.

standards and systems. However, some possible ideas around this "parallel descriptive standards" barrier, including the creation of "data content standards by material type, and not by community affiliation" throughout LAMs, have been suggested by others.<sup>78</sup>

To be certain, meeting the needs of the current and future users of archives, museums, and libraries will require information professionals who can "transcend the traditional boundaries between libraries, archives, and museums in the information age."<sup>79</sup> They will likely have the difficult task of maintaining some of the key structural elements that have traditionally provided distinctions between LAMs on the back-end interface and structural level, while simultaneously evolving the front-end into one that defaults to a more accessible, customizable, and streamlined interface. The creation of more specialized information professionals, with knowledge in both information technology and information management but also of their specific institution, such as the example provided by MIPs, would help make this transition and evolution progress more smoothly.

New ways to study users of LAMs, and especially archives, such as the kind afforded by user-based informatics, would provide archivists and archival researchers more information which they could use to figure out how to best provide access, as well as giving the user the option of finding out other relevant information, should they choose. However, information professionals must also acknowledge that many users will not find this information useful or applicable to their needs or interests. For, as Marty has said, "In all areas, [these information professionals] will need to walk a delicate line between the conflicting motivations and expectations of the information provider on the inside and the information consumer on the outside."<sup>80</sup>

One of the interviews that Marty conducted shows how some information professionals in museums are beginning to focus on the similarities of all information organizations. One particular MIP states that he has in recent years seen "an encouraging trend towards the sort of convergence of information science and library science to impact all cultural heritage endeavors that range from archives to natural history museums."<sup>81</sup> He cites this as a "very positive thing" believing that "everybody can learn from each other."<sup>82</sup> The MIP continues with a comment reminiscent of W. Boyd Rayward's earlier words on LAM convergence, stating: "I think that the skills needed are basically the same across those arenas, and that all of our information is going to end up in one big pot one of these days."<sup>83</sup>

Elizabeth Yakel's comments also echo the idea that information is information no matter where it originates, and reminds us that, "We are, all of us, working for the betterment of humanity, and in the long run, the differences in how we preserve, organize, and make available our

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<sup>78</sup> Mary W. Elings and Günter Waibel, "Metadata for All: Descriptive Standards and Metadata Sharing Across Libraries, Archives, and Museums," *First Monday* 12.3 (2007), n.p. (Last accessed April 9, 2015) at <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1628/1543>.

<sup>79</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 624.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Marty, "Changing Nature," 104.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

information resources simply do not matter."<sup>84</sup> In even more grandiose terms, Marty says that libraries, archives, and museums are more than just institutions that preserve and provide access to our cultural heritage, they "collect, preserve, and disseminate the very information resources" which are "the sum total of what it means to be human."<sup>85</sup>

It is undeniable that archives, along with museums and libraries, are repositories of knowledge, but they are useless without users. As information behavior becomes more person-centric, archives need to move from a "user in the life of the archive" to an "archive in the life of the user" mentality. Or not. For, indeed, whether or not archives choose to adapt to the changing nature of how users interact with information, and to LAMs convergence, change will continue to happen. The only question that remains is whether archival researchers and practitioners alike will swallow their fears, embrace change as they turn into it, and ride the new wave, or whether they will continue to fight the inevitable changes until they are swept away with the unstoppable tides of time.

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<sup>84</sup> Marty, "Digital Convergence and the Information Profession," 625.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

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