Chapter IV
A Case Study of Use–Centered Descriptions: Archival Descriptions of What Can Be Done with a Collection

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author argues the case that there is a mismatch between current metadata standards for the description of archival holdings and what many users actually want to know about a collection. Standard archival descriptions objectively describe what is in a collection, whereas users wish to know what they can do with a collection. It is argued that matching users’ research questions to library resources that could help answer those questions is a crucial social role played by librarians, archivists, and other front-line staff. However placing descriptions of what is in a collection online for users to search directly risks disintermediating the users from library staff. ‘Use-centered descriptions’ are proposed as a way of systematically describing what can be done with a collection, and are, in effect, an encoding of library staff’s knowledge about what can be done with a collection. It is therefore argued that use-centered descriptions repair some of disintermediation gaps caused by putting collection descriptions online. A theoretical motivation for use-centered descriptions is presented by showing how Heaney’s (1999) analytic model of collections, which underlies the Research Support Libraries Program (RSLP) collection description standard, only addresses finding and identifying resources. We augment this model to address selecting resources from a range of possibilities and show how use-centered descriptions stem from this augmentation. A case study is presented demonstrating the experience of developing a set of use-centered descriptions for the University of London as part of a project to encourage wider access to their archival holdings. The project had necessarily limited aims, and therefore conclusions are drawn about the viability of use-centered descriptions in wider domains.
INTRODUCTION

The author looks at archival holdings, the way that they are described online, and the social role that archivists play in matching users’ research questions with archival resources. The central theme of the chapter is fairly simple: that there is a role for metadata descriptions of archival holdings which describe what can be done with an archival collection, as well as the more traditional schemas for metadata which set out to describe what is in a collection. We discuss how making descriptions of what can be done with a collection available online has the effect of surrogating some of the social roles that archivists play for their users.

In recent years there have been several well-funded efforts to place metadata descriptions of archival, library and museum holdings online, such that users can have direct access to them. The effect of doing so has been to raise the profile and accessibility of many collections that have been hidden away in libraries and record offices, and have only really been accessible to professional researchers and experts.

Substantial amounts of governmental records have been put online (e.g., the UK National Archives, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/; the U.S. National Archives, http://aad.archives.gov/; and the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records, National Archives of Japan, http://www.jacar.go.jp/), and there have been projects to develop centralized databases of archival holdings (e.g., the UK Access to Archives project, http://www.a2a.org.uk/), as well as projects by educational establishments to electronically catalogue and publish their holdings (e.g., AIM25, http://www.aim25.ac.uk/, is a searchable database of archival holdings of London universities). They constitute a plethora of sites, which must host data about millions of collections.

In a few cases collection custodians have produced item-level descriptions of their collections (where individual items in the collections are described), but in most cases the expense of doing so is prohibitive and so collection-level descriptions (where general descriptions of the contents of a collection are made) have been produced and published. These collection-level descriptions are highly standardized, objective descriptions of a collection using rigorous, controlled vocabularies. Typically a collection-level description contains a general description of the contents of a collection, some biographical notes about the collector, and some custodial details, such as access conditions and housing details.

In this chapter we question the value of publishing such descriptions online without archivists and other experts offering intermediation between such descriptions and users. From an information seeking perspective, we need to question how well these descriptions allow users to identify archival collections that contain materials that will help address their research questions. The relationship between a research question and archival resources is often not clear and is sometimes downright abstruse.

As an example consider the following research question and a description of an archival holding, and see if you can judge how the archive would be useful in addressing the research question. The research question is: “How has the climate altered in Africa in the past two centuries?” The archive is a collection of materials related to Christian missionary groups, including detailed records of society meetings, correspondence, and so on, held by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (Porter, 1999). At first look one would think that the archive would certainly be useful to theologians and social historians, but it is difficult to see how it would be useful to climatologists. However the link exists: in their correspondence the missionaries would often write home and describe the local weather conditions, in enough detail that a modern researcher has been able to build up a detailed climate map.

We argue that the role for traditional archival collection-level descriptions is not directly to
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