Chapter XII

Librarians as Info Architects: New Roles for Archivists and Reference Librarians in the Digital Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Many Internet users believe that archival collections should and will be digitized and placed on the World Wide Web for all to use. This belief derives from several unrealistic ideas about what the Web can do, what archival collections are, and that technology, including processing, storage and display, is free. Attempts have been made by small and large libraries to meet expectations only to find that staff requirements, as well as financial and technological issues, present too many difficulties to overcome (Nelson, 1996). Archivists are now reevaluating the Web and the benefits it offers to their repositories.

In view of these issues, we are suggesting an alternative of digitizing representative samples of holdings and providing a teaching guide for primary source interpretation for student use. The Library of Congress is currently developing primary source resources with teaching units on the Web. Unlike most repositories, the Library of Congress has a tremendous amount of collection material to draw upon as well as the financial support and staff that can be devoted to
such large-scale projects (http://www.lc.org). For most archives we advocate a similar product but on a much smaller scale that still provides the same advantages to users.

This chapter will outline a Web resource design that focuses on displaying primary resources for new and potential users. The design we suggest fits archive collections with a limited budget and a small staff. The resource comprises documents or artifacts that are digitized for Web display. They are organized into a file that is separately linked from the Web page. These items are chosen from collections within the holdings and are associated historically or by general topic. The goal is to choose items that support and aid a teaching curriculum and direct users to larger pertinent high demand subject documents while offering a representative sample of the holdings.

THE NATURE AND PATRON USE OF MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Manuscript repositories and archives are responsible for collecting the records and manuscripts of a variety of organizations, families and individuals. These historical records are viewed as having continuing historical value (Ellis, 1993). Archives are often associated with a larger parent organization, such as corporations, or they may be associated with special collection departments within larger library organizations. Some manuscript repositories may also be separate entities or departments based on their collecting focus and size of their holdings.

Many diverse users utilize archives. The main constituents are historians and scholars who seek information about the past. This information is often found in primary source documents such as photographs, letters, diaries, records, journals and artifacts. Historians conduct research using these documents to formulate questions, to determine time and context, to estimate credibility and to construct historical narratives or arguments (National Standards for United States History, 1994). Historians generally view history as a process of movement and causality, not something that is discovered only in a textbook. They uncover facts and interpret them by giving them meaning and a relationship with the past (Leinhardt, Stainton and Virji, 1994).
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