

Radical Departures

Strangely enough, I didn't get the feeling that I was reading radical departures concerning archival theory. Instead, I thought I was reading something dealing with 'about time somebody used some common sense around here'. As I read I made notes that found themselves answered later on in the discourse and I felt rather pleasant about the prospects of 'loving' the backlog-if it ever went away, what would archivists then do? The particular articles that stood out for me were the Greene/Meissner article, the Hyry article, and the Hedstrom article. I can't put my finger on how the older material relates to the newer material, but I will start with my interest in the Hedstrom article.

Margaret Hedstrom, "Descriptive Practices for Electronic Records: Deciding what is essential and imaging what is possible", *Archivaria* Vol 36 (Autumn 1993)-pg 59

"Electronic records present archivists with the potential for much richer description. In the electronic era, the descriptive paradigm will shift from the current practice of augmenting scarce descriptive information to one of selecting from an abundance of metadata, which could form a complete audit trail of all actions taken to create, update, and modify a record, and of all its uses."

I found this statement made me think of photographic metadata. In current practice a digital camera records the technical information used in photographic exposure (f-stop, shutter speed, ISO, white balance, flash status, etc...); it also records other information like time and date the image was taken and camera model. Furthermore, users may input more descriptive information such as name of photographer, copyrights, location image was taken, and more. This amount of descriptive information from an image is extremely helpful when comparing technical data of these images to the hordes of images found in many archives that are dateless. In the world of documents this type of information is also available, but requires more front end user description. I know that Microsoft metadata records the date of a document and file size, but it can also provide descriptive information to word docs. I have rarely used this feature and unfortunately I have rarely added additional information to my photo files. So I agree that "the potential for much richer description" is already present, but getting users to take advantage of this potential is a present challenge.

"Given both technical and resource limitations, archivists must determine what we want systems to document and how much descriptive data is enough. (24) Management of metadata and capture of the contextual data about electronic records also require more advanced descriptive practices and more elaborate archival control systems. As descriptive practices shift from creating descriptive information to capturing description along with records, archivists may discover that managing the metadata is a much greater challenge than managing the records themselves."

This part of the article made me think of two things. The first thing pertained to a brief overview I received of Archivist's Tool Kit. It was pointed out that it allowed for the user to determine data fields particular for the archival institution. In regards to the reading this addition makes using a standard a bit tougher since there may not be a way to share the additional data fields or place the additional data fields within existing data structures. The second thing deals with the paradigm shift from creator to capturer in regards to information description and in the management of the metadata. In hearing the

adventures of the VSU archives, I see this taking place as routes are explored to capture and store various types of information for better management of the collections and increased user access. Learning to use new technologies and upgrading collection information to digital standards has created new requirements of archival staff that may or may not have made their life easier. This shift towards increased use of metadata is also seen in the courses proposed for the archival track of the MLIS program; database design is in effect metadata management for efficient information capture and dissemination.

“Rather than attempting to create and impose external standards for data content on the creators of records, archivists will benefit from indentifying data content standards used by records creators and exploiting them in archival descriptive systems.”

My interest in this part of the article relies in part on my earlier comment on photographic meta data and my lack of adding any addition information to the record. “Identifying data content standards used by records creators” plays into the issue of provenance placed within modern record creation. If records are created using particular metadata fields, then this must be important to the way the records were used. The lack of information in the fields is also part of the creation of the record and should be considered. That said this part does conflict somewhat with what Yale has been doing with the implementation of ‘more product, less process’ in regards to university record keeping and requirements of record creators to organize records according to set standards prior to depositing in the archives.

“Archivist attention will shift from creating descriptive information to capturing metadata and managing it to promote access, use, and understanding of archival...PAGE 60...records. The arena for descriptive standards development will also change from developing internal standards and guidelines that are endorsed by the archival profession, to participation in the standards development process of others.”

This last part of the Hedstrom article restated my thoughts as I read and made me rethink what the future role of archivist might contain. It seems that archivists will have to wear a feathered hat made up of large feathers comprising computer savy, marketing/outreach, and education; with smaller feathers representing the older archival theories and practices. In relation to the other articles, it seems that this change in hats may also signal a larger change in accountability and production (processing). Production quotas are being tabulated and calculated as presented in the Prom article whereas particular production issues are presented in the realm of the Greene/Meissner article. The bulk of my comments and questions came up while reading the Greene/Meissner article.

I really liked what was being said in the Greene/Meissner article and I can see why it has had such a great appeal or shock to the archival community. It makes sense. I have already written a lot, so I am going to present the questions and some answers that came to me as I read:

What is the researcher’s responsibility in actually doing research? How much of this responsibility had been placed on the archivist and the finding aid? This question was answered with a quote from St. John’s Athenaeum: “Remember that researchers are coming to do research, so you don’t have to do it

for them in advance..." (pg 8, Greene/Meissner) and later answered very well by Hyry's account of Yale's progress with the 'more for less' ideas: "We consciously put a heavier burden of discovery on the researcher, who must now plow through more material to find desired documents. This concern is outweighed by the desire to expose the greatest number of collections to our users." (pg 8, Hyry)

What is 'quality of the collection' for users of the collection? This question was answered with: "Our users, tellingly, seem much less concerned about these housekeeping issues than we do. Only ten percent of users in our small survey indicated that they were at all concerned with level of dirt and tidiness of collections." (pg. 4-5 G/M) But it did not address the issue of quality as well as I had hoped, issues of dirt in the folders does not get to the point of what researchers are expecting to find in a 'quality' collection. Are they expecting to be hand-led to the information or do they enjoy the act of discovery in and of itself? More research may be needed to help determine just what is really needed in a finding aid or catalog description. The next closest answer came with the statement from the MIT processing manual: "'Quality' processing does not necessarily mean extensive arrangement and description" (pg 17 G/M).

Which archive is doing it 'right' or has the lowest amount of backlog? What are they doing (production wise)? This answer was not found in the Greene/Meissner article, but the Hyry article about Yale did help explain how it might be achieved. There was mention in G/M of 'creative solutions' to the processing issue but no examples; and at the end of the Hyry article he made mention of new processing techniques for photograph collections but failed to mention what they were. (pg 9 Hyry)

How much (description) is enough or too much? This question was answered 40 years ago by Bordin and Warner: "a cursory inventory is made, a card or two of general description is placed in the manuscript catalog and from there on the researcher is on his own." (pg 17 G/M)

What are the creative solutions to the backlog? The best answers I could find for this question related to thinking outside the box in an effort to change thinking towards archives' backlogs: "It is time, however, to redefine what passes for 'standard' processing, and to make backlogs more embarrassing to the profession than failure to remove paper clips." (pg 20 G/M) And "The most important guideline is to always prefer the acceptable minimum—within and across collections—and make each new situation argue for any additional investment of time and effort." (pg 25 G/M) The later answer caused humorous visions to dance in my head concerning the argument. I saw folders standing on trial explaining to the staff why they should be described in more detail. With embarrassing the profession, some sort of published weekly photo blog on the worst archival backlogs from the researchers stand point might do the trick once trickle down plays in.

That is about all I am going to say. I still have ideas of what a 'shovel' logo might look like and I would be interested in discussing more about the "forest through the trees" I keep hearing about. The following is my favorite quote of the week:

"Insanity is when you do things the way you've always done them, but expect a different result." (pg 30 G/M)

PS-I disagree with Debra about the Prom article. (No offense here) I didn't like reading it primarily because I found the statistical tables to be graphically lacking in information presentation and clarity (this includes the table that was divided by a foot note). The overabundance of numbers provided in the tables and repeated in the text made for a very time consuming read that reminded me of a particular article on co-citation analysis; both of which may have been summed up nicely in an abstract.

Denise A. Wallace