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Processing for Archivists and Users

How do archivists make decisions, and how do users interact with collections?

What impact does processing have on user experience?

Lack of information about a collection and its contents can impede a researcher’s use of a collection

Archivists are not impartial ‘custodians’ of history
The Nijinska Collection

- Originally a 300+ page finding aid with 21 series, duplicates between series
- Materials filed under wrong or unfindable titles
- Music Divisions most requested unprocessed collection
A post-MPLP world where different versions of minimal processing are applied, depending on the type of collection and the needs of the institution.

Discussions of processing rarely touches on the subjectivity of the archivists and how processing decisions are made.

Some archives have chosen to tailor their finding aids and descriptive material specifically for their user base.
Literature of User Studies

- Betts Coup tested the usability of three levels of archival description, detailed, aggregate, and minimal. Tested users reported an easier time with the aggregate and detailed descriptions.

- Researcher Elizabeth Yakel has suggested that archivists tend to overestimate how much users understand archival processing, which can lead to a disconnect between the two groups, as well as difficulties for users.
Further Research

A pilot study that follows the decisions made by the archivist during processing, to the reading room, tracking user experience, difficulties users have with a collection, what parts of a finding aid they use, and how helpful users found the provided content information. This would be best performed at a larger institution that sees frequent user traffic.
Archivists Questions

- How do you decide on the quantity of description for collection material (series, folder, item, etc)?
- What language/ terms are used in these descriptions?
- Does your institution track user questions and resolutions for collections?
- Does your institution assess user experience?
User Questions

► What descriptive material did you use in your search/research?

► How would you rate your understanding of the finding aid descriptions? (Likert scale)

► Did you have questions about the collection in your research? Did the institution have a mechanism to ask and resolve questions?
Goals

► Determine how accurately information produced by archivists is received by researchers

► Address gaps in user understanding of descriptive material

► Improve access and use of information for users
Thank You

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