

Use of Finding Aids and the London Free Press (LFP) Collection: A Preliminary Examination

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Abstract:

This study investigates how users search for information about archival holdings. The investigators examined a set of institutional data from a large Canadian academic archive to determine how users interact with finding aids which are available via a public website. Creation of finding aids is a longstanding part of archival practice and in fact finding aids have traditionally been perceived as the primary tool used to access archival holdings. However, technology has provided opportunities for creating and providing access to descriptive data. Some examples include online public catalogues along with keyword searching of databases and websites. While there has been literature which focuses on user centered design in archives there needs to be more discussion about how finding aids intersect with user behaviour. This research project, which builds on previous research in this area, explores the idea that the traditional tool of finding aids may not be valued by archives' user communities and in fact may be an obstacle that inhibits the creation of user centred discovery tools. Findings of this research project revealed that while some users do interact with online finding aids the majority of users do not search finding aids or online databases. Users traditionally begin their research by emailing the archives directly to ask for assistance. This means that there must be mediation by archives staff and perpetuates a culture of dependency on archives staff. This dependent relationship does not put the user at the centre of the discovery process but rather puts the user on the periphery of the process. This project also explores the need for further research into user behaviour and user experience to ensure that traditional archival practices are centred around user's needs.

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