

A Digital Odyssey: Lessons from the 2023 *American Archivist* Readership Survey

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The Society of American Archivists has published *American Archivist*, with the intention of supporting its readers as the leading publication in the archives field, since 1938. The Journal was solely available in a physical format until a companion digital version was introduced in 2010. Then, due to increasing production expenses and decreasing distribution, it transitioned to a digital-only format in 2021. Because of this significant change, the *American Archivist* Editorial Board administered a readership survey to seek readers' input about how they interact with the digital format, their impressions of it, and how their reading experience can be improved.

As an addition to an *American Archivist* readership survey conducted in 2011 (<https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.74.2.1p5h34j67450524v>), the Editorial Board surveyed approximately 5,300 SAA members in February and March 2023 to understand their opinions about the Journal and their reading habits. The 14-question survey consisted of single-choice, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions related to a variety of topics. Approximately 4 percent of those surveyed responded to the call, compared to the 9 percent of readers who responded to the 2011 survey. The survey was generated on Google Forms, which allowed the concluding data to be presented in pie charts and bar graphs. In addition, the data was downloaded to Excel to create a spreadsheet of the responses.

A Divide in Readership

The 212 respondents roughly mirrored the demographics reported in the 2021 A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report, with the majority currently working in academic institutions or government agencies (<https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.317224>). In analyzing the results, the Editorial Board highlighted three key findings: readership is divided on format issues, reviews are not widely read, and readers have wide interests. This is all reflected in the fact that readers generally read only certain articles and in the survey's comments section.

First, the survey revealed that readers of *American Archivist* are divided on issues concerning format and functionality rather than content. As this survey is the first following the transition to an all-digital format, the Editorial Board was interested to discover how members were interacting with the Journal in the electronic format. Many respondents shared that the format afforded them convenient features such as quick discoverability, immediate access to content across various platforms and devices, access to older issues, downloadable PDFs, and the ease of shareability with non-SAA members. Many readers also mentioned that the website is easy to use, offers quick access to the table of contents, and allows them more equitable accessibility options, such as screen reader compatibility. While many benefits of the current state of *American Archivist* were identified, some respondents noted that they preferred the print edition and would like the option of ordering physical back issues. Printing PDF versions of the articles is one way to resolve this problem, but many still wish for a physical copy to have at home or for travel purposes.

The Many Interactive Pieces of the Digital Puzzle

When asked what topics they would like to see addressed in future issues, many respondents had similar ideas of digital records, digital preservation, digital processing tools, web archiving, and born-digital media. These results encourage us to think about how we can incorporate more interactive web elements into the Journal. A digital format is also advantageous in allowing us to create new content, such as the Reviews Portal (<https://reviews.americanarchivist.org>) which reviews websites, digital collections, or technologies that have an impact on the archives profession. New series, such as Intergenerational Conversations, which juxtaposes new voices and classic pieces, make the most of the Reviews Portal's dynamic format. While the Portal offers space for members to engage with a variety of materials, the survey revealed that reviews in general are not widely read, and that a small number of readers engage often with the Reviews Portal. About 40 percent of readers responded that "they do not read the reviews in the Journal or in the Reviews Portal," and more than half of respondents answered that "they either skim the reviews content or read a couple of reviews that pique their interests."

The Intergenerational Conversations series (<https://reviews.americanarchivist.org/intergenerational-conversations>) hopefully will expand reader engagement with the Portal. The Editorial Board is considering how we might improve marketing and communications for reviews. Portal reviews about archives and pop culture are some of the most viewed content, so we are considering eliciting more reviews on this topic. Given the overall survey response rate of only 4 percent, we need to think about how we can reach out to the overall membership of SAA to improve communication between the organization and the Journal's readers.

As an organization that serves members from all areas of the profession at all different career stages, it is no surprise that our readers have varied interests. *American Archivist* appears to be very relevant to the work of about 15 percent of our respondents, who read all or nearly all the articles. Close to a third either do not read the Journal at all or only look at the table of contents. A few respondents noted that they stopped reading the Journal completely when it became digital-only. When we asked what readers want to see more of in the Journal, responses ranged from articles about equity, liberation, and reparative justice to research by students and early-career archivists, and from practical guidance to "philosophical or scientific speculation."

Takeaways to Create a Better Journal

Given the diversity of interests, how can *American Archivist* publish articles that bring in new readers and matter more to current readers? One initiative that appears to be well-appreciated is "Special Sections," collections of articles that focus on under-discussed or current topics in archives. The Design Records Special Section brought to the fore major issues concerning the appraisal, processing, management, and preservation and activation of architectural, landscape, fashion, and other design records.

The Editorial Board is also currently assessing the option of a continuous publishing model, which permits publishing time-sensitive research as it is written and releasing reviewed material as quickly as possible for readers and researchers. When asked about this model, survey respondents did not demonstrate strong feelings. Almost half of respondents (49.1 percent) reported that they do not prefer either model.

Based on the survey, as well as informal conversations, it is clear that one challenge the digital-only format faces is the fact that members often do not learn about new issues when they are first published. This is perfectly understandable, as most of us do not have time to read every email we receive. To address this issue, the Editorial Board will discuss how we can help our members become more excited about the Journal's excellent articles.

The Editorial Board wants to make the Journal as relevant and engaging to you as possible. We welcome your ideas about how we can improve! Email your thoughts to Editor Amy Cooper Cary at AmericanArchivist@archivists.org--and go check out the new Spring/Summer 2023 issue at <https://meridian.allenpress.com/american-archivist>.