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Methodological Considerations

The user study conducted at the National Archives during 1990 and 1991 was grounded in a decade or more of compelling arguments in the published literature of the archival profession and the equally compelling lessons of decades of user studies conducted in libraries in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. This chapter consists of two sections that together provide the context within which the study was designed, implemented, and reported. The first section of the chapter draws out the key themes of the "classic" readings on studying the use of archives and counterposes these themes to important conclusions of library use studies and the critics who have reviewed them. The chapter's second section describes the design and implementation of the overall study and the methodologies of the individual research projects.

Research Influences

Since the mid-1970s, archivists have described why a more systematic approach to understanding users and use is needed. Elsie Freeman, Mary Jo Pugh, Bruce Dearstyne, Paul Conway, Lawrence Dowler, and Richard Cox especially have been in the forefront urging the archival profession to give as much administrative weight to the users of archival materials as to the materials themselves. They argue that recognizing and responding to the information needs of users is central to the wider use of historical information in contemporary problem solving, central to the proper documentation of society, and central to the viability of a profession buffeted by rapid technological change. "Use of archival records is the ultimate purpose of identification and administration," declared the final report of the Society of American Archivists' Task Force on Goals and Priorities in 1986. By the late 1980s, archivists had begun to consider high quality research on users an essential means toward this goal.[1]

1 *Planning for the Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986).

Elsie Freeman, in her now-classic article on the administration of archives from the user's point of view, sounded the clearest call for undertaking systematic user studies. She put forward a simple proposition for turning administrative, descriptive, reference, and training practices upside down. "The identity and research habits of our users--who they are, how they think, how they learn, how they assemble information, to what uses they put it--must become as familiar a part of our thinking as the rules of order and practice that now govern the acquisition, processing, description, and servicing of records."[2] After pointing out four false assumptions about archival reference work--that archivists are oriented toward users because they like reference work, that they know who uses archival material, that archivists understand the research process, and that they provide practical, even sufficient, help in doing it--she outlined in some detail the parameters of systematic user studies. Freeman was not the first and has not been the last person to urge the archival profession to undertake research on the characteristics of users and archival research. In 1980, Mary Jo Pugh presented a catalog of possible research questions that if answered would shed light on the ways in which researchers approach the historical record.[3] Her focus was principally on understanding how historians and other scholars use subject headings and personal or corporate names to gain access to archival collections through traditional finding aids and card catalogs. She drew her inspiration, in part, from a handful of studies undertaken in the 1970s, of which the most significant were those by Richard Lytle.[4]

Lytle's small experimental study contrasted the efficacy of access by provenance (linking subject queries with information on function and structure) with access by content analysis (linking subject queries to index terms). Lytle's study did not consider researcher characteristics to be relevant variables. Pugh began to suggest that issues such as previous experience, type of information need, and research topic may be important. "The relationship between the type of research project and the modes of access also needs to be studied," wrote Pugh at a time when new fields of historical inquiry and new waves of historically curious individuals were finding their way to archives and historical societies nationwide.

The decade of the 1980s might be called the era of the research agenda. If Pugh's list of possible research topics kicked off the period, Richard Cox established the most wide-ranging framework for the archival profession in 1992. Cox reviewed much of the relevant recent writings on archival reference and organized the underlying research questions into a four-part framework: research about use in archival repositories; research about the accuracy and effectiveness of archival refer-

2 Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 117.

3 Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33-44.

4 Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 64-75; Lytle "Intellectual Access to Archives: II. Report of an Experiment Comparing Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 191-207.

ence; the impact of technology on research in archives; and research about interaction between researcher and reference archivist. In each area he contrasted the progress made on clarifying issues with research findings in the field of librarianship--typically finding archival progress slow or inconsequential. Cox singled out the interaction between archivists and researchers as especially worthy of attention. "Most archivists writing about reference have described their notion of the importance of the archivist as an intermediary between the researcher and archival records, but the nature of this relationship has never been carefully analyzed."[5]

Lawrence Dowler, in an important mid-decade review article, places the interaction of archivists and patrons at the heart of the archival service function. The very nature of that interaction is what is distinctive about the archival point of view. After urging caution in dismissing cavalierly the notion of the archivist as expert intermediary, Dowler suggests that "archivists must find a way to capture systematically the knowledge of the reference archivist and enter this information into finding aids and knowledge-based systems for providing access to records."[6]

These agenda-setting articles have made clear that archivists are more sure of why user studies should be undertaken than how to design useful users studies, especially who and what should be studied, when and where user studies should be conducted, and how to gather information systematically. Paul Conway's framework for user studies is the only effort to link the basic objectives of a user study program with a practical way of gathering and recording valid, reliable information from users.[7] His article describing the framework, however, was largely an exercise in practical theory, since few studies have actually been carried and fewer still have been published. Even more significant than the relative paucity of serious research on users and use is the failure of the existing research findings to have much impact on the prevailing notions of reference service, in spite of the fact that user studies have sometimes raised serious questions about the appropriateness of the status quo.[8]

Over the years, the National Archives itself has undertaken studies of reference use for a variety of purposes. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, and then again in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the

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5 Richard J. Cox, "Researching Archival Reference as an Information Function: Observation on Needs and Opportunities," *RQ* 31 (Spring 1992): 394.

6 Lawrence Dowler, "Availability and Use of Records: A Research Agenda," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter/Spring 1988): 82.

7 Paul Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393- 407.

8 Among the published user surveys are: Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Study," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 35-56; Ann D. Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage: The Report of the Historical Documents Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Historical Publication and Records Commission, 1992); Karen Dawley Paul, *The Documentation of Congress: Report of the Congressional Archivists Roundtable Task Force on Congressional Documentation*, S. Pub. 102-20 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992); and Robert P. Spindler and Richard Pearce-Moses, "Does AMC Mean 'Archives Made Confusing'? Patron Understanding of USMARC AMC Catalog Records," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 330-41. Among the better unpublished studies are by Best, Hanlon, and Helsey (see bibliography). Studies undertaken at the New York State Archives and Records Administration and the Delaware State Archives remain unpublished and unreported.

agency sought to understand the reasons for the failure to complete finding aids programs, to make reference service more efficient, and to identify trends in research topics. At each turn, the agency relied on indirect measures of patron needs instead of engaging researchers directly. Even though each successive study of reference service had specific administrative purposes as its principal motivating factor, the surviving evidence of top administration thinking points away from the use of evaluative research for purposes of departing from the path upon which the agency embarked early in its history. That path defined the archivist as gatekeeper for the scholarly historian. Roy Nichols, in a 1940 speech aptly titled "Alice in Wonderland," noted that the true reference function of the agency was to "build up a staff to study the various classes of material with a view to acting as research assistants as well as consultants when scholars come to the archives."[9]

Archivists at the National Archives and around the country have not been alone in their concern that user studies be useful analytical tools. A thirty-year tradition of library research on national, regional, state, and local levels and in public, university, and special libraries has produced a backlog of over one thousand studies. Their topics run the gamut from in-house use of library materials and circulation patterns, to characteristics of users and non-users, to the assessment of programs and services. In general they have tended to describe programs in particular libraries rather than take a multi- institutional approach. When they have focused on users in broader terms, library user studies often have described behavior of individuals rather than of groups.[10] Finally, library user studies have not shown very well how information gathered in the study process can be applied to designing and assessing programs for users beyond the clientele being studied. Individually, library user studies are not very useful for archivists.

By considering them as a group, however, several perceptive critics of library user studies in the United States and the United Kingdom have identified patterns of findings.[11] Some of the concepts underlying these patterns may be useful for archivists because, removed from their particular library setting and stripped of their specific library procedures, user studies have identified some of the components of the process of information transfer. This fundamental form of communication is the point of departure for building user-oriented services in both libraries and archives. In an archives, information transfer occurs in many different ways, but most typically when a researcher with a specific information need interacts with archivists and finding aid systems and in the process acquires historical information of use in meeting some of the need.[12]

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9 Roy F. Nichols, "Alice in Wonderland," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 149-58.

10 Maurice B. Line, *Library Surveys: An Introduction to the Use, Planning Procedure and Presentation of Surveys*, 2nd ed. (London: Clive Bingley, 1982).

11 John M. Brittain, *Information and Its Users* (Bath, U.K.: Bath University Press, 1970); Geoffrey Ford, *User Studies: An Introductory Guide and Select Bibliography* (Sheffield, U.K.: Centre for Research on User Studies, 1977).

12 Robert S. Taylor, *Value-Added Processes in Information Systems* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1986).

R.H. Orr and Colin Mick are both interested in modeling the relationship between a person who has an information need and the service supposedly designed to fulfill it. Implicit in Orr's model of library service effectiveness based upon assessments of quality and value, is a simple concept that places the librarian as intermediary between the user and the information that will satisfy his or her needs. Orr's model does not provide a mechanism for defining either information need or satisfaction with the results. The major contribution of Orr's model is its generalizable description of the reference process that allows the information professional to identify points in the process where quantitative measures are appropriate and points where qualitative judgments are required.[13]

Mick recognized the need for evaluations of user information needs that would assist information professionals in modifying systems (automated and traditional) to account for behavioral patterns and other determinants of need. His research shows that satisfaction with a specific information task is directly related to the more general context in which the problem arises. Specific information need is only one part of a larger environment governed by individual and group situations, attitudes, and norms.[14] The importance of group affiliation, or lack thereof, is an extremely important concept in the development of the National Archives user study. Since Mick reported his model in 1980, other researchers have refined and carried his themes further.

By proposing generalizable models of the information-seeking process, both Orr and Mick recognize and attempt to overcome some of the liabilities inherent in most user studies and evaluation programs. The difficulty of comparing studies and applying the results to new situations results in part because so many evaluation programs use as their point of departure the goals and objectives of the reference service rather than the goals and motivations of the user. Charles McClure makes the further point that too many evaluation studies have no impact on an organization or on access systems because mid-level managers distrust statistical approaches as inaccurate measures of quality. Managers perceive quality as a fuzzy concept, one laden with value judgments and uncertainty. Statistical measures, if not carefully handled, impart a false sense of security and may hide individual variation under a cloud of aggregate conclusions.[15] Herbert White zeros in on the problem in lamenting the "countless studies which are nothing more than user responses to their Pavlovian stimuli."[16] Users either tell us what we want to hear or do not know enough to complain.

13 R.H. Orr, "Measuring the Goodness of Library Services: A General Framework for Considering Quantitative Measures," *Journal of Documentation* 29 (1973): 315-32.

14 Colin K. Mick, Georg N. Lindsey and Daniel Callahan, "Toward Usable User Studies," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 31 (September 1980): 347-56.

15 Doris J. Schlicter, and J. Michael Pemberton, "The Emperor's New Clothes? Problems of the User Survey as a Planning Tool in Academic Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 53 (May 1982): 257-265.

16 Herbert S. White, "The Use and Misuse of Library User Studies," *Library Journal* (December 1985): 70.

The concept of satisfaction with information seeking and the services designed to assist the process is extraordinarily controversial. In 1980, George D'Elia documented the potential value of satisfaction as a measure of library performance.[17] In an important sequence of studies of retrieval from online library catalogs, user satisfaction with search results was THE dependent variable around which the entire project was designed.[18] Criticism of the studies and to the use of satisfaction as a variable makes three important insights. First, expressions of satisfaction with services and/or technology are not normally distributed along the traditional bell-shaped curve from unsatisfied to satisfied, but tend to cluster at the satisfied end of the scale. Second, the level of expectations, which may or may not be realistic, is intimately linked to levels of satisfaction; high expectations for success may result in a low level of satisfaction.[19] Third, it is misleading to mix results of a search, on the one hand, with satisfaction with service on the other.[20] In an important review of the literature on user satisfaction, Rachel Applegate urges the separate measurement of the performance of the information system or service and the emotional satisfaction of the user, both of which contribute to personal behavior. In plain terms, any given user may be unhappy with the system yet satisfied with the results, or happy with the system yet unsatisfied with the results, or some combination of the two.[21]

A study reported by Hilchey and Hurych backs up these criticisms of user satisfaction measures, but only begins to suggest how more meaningful results can be obtained.[22] Chris Argyris places the blame for much self-fulfilling research conclusions on a social science methodology that values precision (quantitative specification) over accuracy (effective behavior). His very perceptive comments on the process of research, learning, and social change suggest that research should seek to develop normative theories--models that force a confrontation with the way things are--and that such models should be "consonant with the nature and structure of the kinds of theories people actually use."[23]

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17 Ronald Powell, "The Utilization of User Studies in the Development of Performance Measures," (unpublished paper prepared at the University of Michigan, School of Information and Library Studies, 1986), 64.

18 Christine L. Borgman, "Why Are Online Catalogs Hard to Use? Lessons Learned From Information-Retrieval Studies," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 37 (November 1986): 387-400.

19 Kathryn B. Wilson and Joanne Eustis, "The Impact of User Frustration on Humanities Research," *College & Research Libraries* 42 (July 1981): 361-65.

20 Beth Sandore, "Online Searching: What Measure Satisfaction?" *Library and Information Science Research 12 (January-March 1990): 33-54.*

21 Rachel Applegate, "Models of User Satisfaction: Understanding False Positives," *RQ* 32 (Summer 1993): 523-539.

22 Susan E. Hilchey and Jitka M. Hurych, "User Satisfaction or User Acceptance? Statistical Evaluation of an Online Reference Service," *RQ* 24 (Summer 1985): 452-59.

23 Chris Argyris, "Research as Action: Usable Knowledge for Understanding and Changing the Status Quo," in *The Theory and Practice of Organizational Psychology*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Toby D. Wall (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 197-211.

The theory of need and how that need is fulfilled in an information-seeking environment has been a subject of intense study, bringing together research findings from disciplines as diverse as cognitive psychology, operations research, sociology, and information science. Twenty years ago, Maurice Line attempted to form a synthesis by offering a set of definitions that distinguished between "need," "want," and "demand," but instead touched off a debate that has not ceased. "Strictly, a need is a necessity, something a person cannot do without. But who is to say what is 'necessary', for himself or others? The statement 'he needs information' is akin to 'he needs a bath'-- information, like washing, is usually helpful but rarely absolutely essential."[24] Quite recently, Lynn Westbrook synthesized existing theories from a practitioner's standpoint and found a lack of consensus on an operational definition of user needs.[25]

T.D. Wilson reviewed the state of the art in 1981 and concluded that the concept of motivation was at the heart of information seeking behavior, and that "needs arise out of the roles an individual fills in social life." The most important of these roles, Wilson proposed, is the "work role," the set of activities, responsibilities, etc. of an individual, usually in some organizational setting.[26] Don Swanson further expanded on this concept by postulating a trial-and-error theory centered on "problem-oriented access to information." He emphasized the necessity of understanding the logic of the underlying problem situation, and only in this light the behavior of library users.[27] Brenda Dervin takes this personalized approach one step beyond in suggesting that information is not a commodity but rather a construct of the user. "Information seeking may therefore be better described as sense-making--the new sense that people make when they are attempting to progress through situations that arise in their lives."[28]

Donald Case studied the information-seeking behaviors of a small group of historians in search of clues on how they transform their knowledge into new, original works. He to came to the firm conclusion that a "problem-oriented model" of library use was the only viable way to approach both the organization of and access to library materials. Setting aside the futility of the historian's hope (documented by Case) for the reclassification of primary sources according to categories of time, space, and topic, Case found that even when historians are very specific about the nature of their personal historical methodology, they pursue comprehensive, in-depth understanding over narrow searches for documentary evidence.[29]

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24 Maurice B. Line, "Draft Definitions: Information and Library Needs, Wants, Demands and Uses," *ASLIB Proceedings* 26 (1974): 87.

25 Lynn Westbrook, "User Needs: A Synthesis and Analysis of Current Theories for the Practitioner," *RQ* 32 (Summer 1993): 541- 49.

26 T.D. Wilson, "On User Studies and Information Needs," *Journal of Documentation* 37 (March 1981): 9.

27 Don R. Swanson, "Libraries and the Growth of Knowledge," *Library Quarterly* 49 (1979): 9-10.

28 Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney, "Neutral Questioning: A New Approach to the Reference Interview," *RQ* 25 (Summer 1986): 506.

29 Donald Owen Case, "The Collection and Use of Information by Some American Historians: A Study of Motives and Methods," *Library Quarterly* 61 (January 1991): 71.

In an important article synthesizing a group of innovative studies on the information seeking process, Carol Kuhlthau documents six general stages, or steps, from information need to information use. In her model, Kuhlthau hypothesizes that people first recognize the need for information, then identify a general topic, investigate information on the general topic, formulate focus on the topic, gather information pertaining to the new focus, and finally complete the search. When she tested her model, however, she found that half of the users in her study "did not show evidence of reaching a focused perspective of their topic at any time during the search process."[30] The findings of this exploratory research suggest that even in the midst of a linear search for historical information, patrons approach the record from either a broadly or narrowly focused point of view.

Archivists, too, have speculated on the nature of archival need and how that need translates into research activity. William Joyce makes the important point that all research in archives is historical research, regardless of discipline. "Even if they are not formally trained in the discipline of history, social scientists, public policy makers, and others approach their topics with a retrospective or sequential understanding.... Archivists cannot avoid dealing with the historical method and its implications for archival repositories and archival researchers."[31]

Joyce chooses to distinguish the users of archives as either "academic" or "applied." By this he means open-ended inquiry, broadly defined, versus unambiguous, narrowly defined information need. Elsie Freeman reports that Trudy Peterson makes a similar distinction between "researchers of the interpretation" and "researchers of the fact."[32] Freeman dismisses the distinction, noting that "both interpretive and factual researchers who are trained historians are likely to approach information differently from those who are not historians." In making this claim, she is suggesting strongly that occupational status may be an important factor in determining information needs. And yet the findings of Colin Mick, described above, argue that group identification (or lack of it) is a stronger force than occupation, per se.

The research hypotheses and findings, as well as the rhetorical arguments presented in these studies together present a logical argument that leads to the central research question of the study. The logic goes as follows:

* information need drives purpose;
* purpose is a combination of scope of problem and group affiliation;
* purpose drives information-seeking behavior;
* patron behavior (activities) drives their service needs;
* information need, therefore, drives service need.

30 Carol Collier Kuhlthau, "Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User's Perspective," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42 (October 1991): 369.

31 William L. Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 131-32.

32 Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder," 113.

The principal question that the National Archives user study sought to investigate was whether it would be possible to characterize reliably the information needs of the agency's research clientele in terms that could inform the structure and implementation of National Archives reference and access policies. If it turned out that the clientele of the agency could be understood in operational terms, then the results of the user study could be used to design (or re-design, as the case may be) the reference procedures of the new facility, Archives II, on which construction was just beginning in 1989. The primary challenge in posing the research question in this way was that the legitimacy of the study depended only in part on the quality of the data and the accompanying statistical analysis. Ultimately, the success of the study would also have to depend upon the acceptability of the findings to those administrators who would be called upon to use the study.

Research Design and Implementation

The design and implementation of the study followed a traditional planning model articulated for library user studies by Meredith Butler and Bonnie Gratch.[33] They outline a seven-stage process that begins with problem definition, and proceeds through goal identification, definition of scope, literature review, program development, program evaluation, redefinition of problem, and identification of new research areas. This is a traditional social science approach to research that Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh-Cesar have codified and Maurice Line described for library surveys.[34] After a hiatus during which survey research has fallen into disfavor in libraries (perhaps from overuse), the technique is again being presented as an appropriate approach for evaluation studies of information services.[35]

Study Population

The target population of the study was patrons who contacted the agency for purposes of research during calendar year 1990. Not included in the study were the following groups of patrons:

* **Tourists**: Visitors to the National Archives building for purposes of viewing the Charters of Freedom or the temporary exhibitions in the Circular Gallery. It might have been argued that this group represents an important part of the agency's **potential** research clientele, and was therefore worth factoring into the project. Indeed, while the user study was being developed, a separate marketing survey was carried out by an independent research firm. Among the more intriguing findings of the study, which was never published by the agency, was that the vast majority of the people who entered the building on Constitution Avenue to see the Declaration of Independence had absolutely no idea what other historical information was in the building,

33 Meredith Butler and Bonnie Gratch, "Planning a User Study--The Process Defined," *College & Research Libraries* 43 (July 1982): 320-30.

34 Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh-Cesar, *Survey Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1981).

35 Helen M. Gothberg, "The Library Survey: A Research Methodology Rediscovered," *College & Research Libraries* 51 (November 1990): 553-59.

what the real purposes of the agency were, or what archivists did to preserve and make available historical records of the federal government.

* **Beyond the Beltway**: Researchers who used the resources of the nationwide network of presidential libraries, archives field branches, and records centers. Presidential libraries users had been investigated by previous or ongoing studies.[36] Since the focus of the study was possible ways to develop patron services at Archives II, the field branches, with their regionally focused clientele, and the records centers, designed to serve the ongoing records storage needs of federal agencies throughout the country, were ruled out of scope.

* **Agency Staff**: Federal agency employees who contacted the custodial staff of the National Archives without going through the established reference procedures of the agency for the general public. For example, it is possible, and evidently somewhat common, for a Department of Defense staffer to place an information request directly with the archivist responsible for arranging, describing, and providing reference service on Army records. Only one of the many components of the National Archives user study had even the remotest chance of capturing this aspect of the agency's clientele--the least successful component at that. With hindsight, it is clear that the inadvertent exclusion from the study of federal agency researchers skewed the study toward the information seeking patterns of the public.

The overall population sampled in the study consisted of the general public--very broadly defined--who represent the vast majority of the users of the National Archives. These are the people who wrote, called, or visited the agency's facilities in the Washington, D.C., area. Many would have characterized themselves as scholars, most would not. The study was carried out over a year-long period, so as to gather information from patrons who visit during peak periods, such as late summer, as well as during lean periods, such as mid- winter.

Sampling Concept

In an ideal study designed within the framework described above, an appropriate sample of the agency's overall user community for the entire calendar year would have been chosen randomly from a complete list of patrons. Moreover, this random sample would have been chosen as the individuals walked in the door; the research work of this group would have been tracked over time; and all individuals would have been interviewed in depth to investigate their motivations, information needs, and service preference. The success or failure of this sample in finding the information they sought would have been tested and the factors affecting the outcome would have been duly noted. Supplemental information would have been gathered from the archivists and support staff who served them over the course of their days or months of work in Washington. All of this behavioral and perceptual information would have been analyzed against the background of an analysis of the characteristics of the agency's clientele, past and present.

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36 Robert W. Tissing, "The Orientation Interview in Archival Research," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 173-78; Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries;" Hanlon, "Communication Between the Researcher."

There are a number of reasons that the sampling strategy for the study departed from the ideal

* The National Archives maintains no master list of patrons. Researchers who use original records must obtain a research card by completing a simple application. Those who use the microfilmed resources of the agency--at least 50 percent of the total population--are not required to obtain research cards.
* The information gathered from people who do obtain research cards is insufficient to construct a valid stratified sample, which would be necessary for all but the simplest analysis of traits. The essence of stratification is the classification of the population into sub-populations, or strata, based upon some supplementary information, and then the selection of separate samples from each of the strata. During analysis, the sub-samples are combined and inferences drawn about the entire population.
* Federal regulations on the confidentiality of patron registration information make the supplying of any information other than basic identification optional. Information such as names and addresses can only be used for survey research after passing through a maze of red tape established as part of the government's Paperwork Reduction Act.
* A crucial component of the research design was on-the-spot interviews with patrons, rather than follow-up interviews days, months, or even years after their visits to the National Archives. This design feature eliminated the possibility of mail or telephone surveys; and any remaining expectation of follow-up surveys during the course of the study was demolished by the stringent terms of the Paperwork Reduction Act. Established statistical theory governing the selection of a simple random sample suggests that, when the overall population of study exceeds 30,000, a sample size of 800 is sufficient for making reliable inferences.[37] The true challenge was in selecting such a sample from an unknown population whose demographic characteristics varied as the study progressed. Attribute sampling, a simple technique used by accountants to estimate the occurrence of a characteristic in a population, is not appropriate when the expected occurrence of the trait exceeds 10 percent.[38]

In order to accommodate the complex administrative structure of the National Archives and the expected heterogeneous composition of the user population, while working within the realistic cost constraints of the project, a modified cluster sampling strategy was chosen.[39] In this scheme, the seven research environments in which patron interviews were desired (Consultants Office, Microfilm, Central, Suitland, Cartographic, Still Picture, Motion Picture) were considered to be separate clusters. Within each cluster, one or more "typical" weeks were selected for intense investigation. In most cases, a single week was judged sufficient; three weeks were spent in the Central Research Room. During the "research week," patrons were either selected at random for interviews (if the population size of the room warranted this strategy) or all patrons at the site were interviewed. Overall, the proportion of patrons selected from each cluster for inclusion in the study was roughly proportional to the distribution of researchers in the units reported by the agency's

37 Ninety-five percent confidence level; error range of plus or minus 3 percent; expected population percentage of 25. Graham Kalton, *Introduction to Survey Sampling* (Beverley Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983), 82.

38 Jack E. Kiger and Kenneth Wise, "Attribute Sampling: A Library Management Tool," *College & Research Libraries* 54 (November 1993): 537-549.

39 Kalton, Introduction to Survey Sampling, 28.

annual report over the past five years (since it became an independent federal agency). A total of 800 patrons was selected over the course of the study using this cluster sampling methodology.

One of the principal assumptions of the strategy was that the week or weeks chosen for study were "typical." There is no statistically valid mechanism for testing the appropriateness of the selection process, since the amount and quality of information about the patrons in any particular research environment is insufficient. A replication of the study using alternative sampling strategies would address this issue.

Qualitative Research Approaches

The design of the user study provided for the gathering and integration of both quantitative and qualitative information. The following information supported and reinforced the interpretation of patron interview data:

* **Archival Research**: The administrative archives of the National Archives, both official and unaccessioned records, provided essential background information on previous efforts to understand patron activity and reference services. The National Archives Library contains an extraordinary vertical file of administrative reports, pamphlets, informal guidelines, and other "grey literature" dating from the formation of the organization; much of this information is unavailable elsewhere. Additionally, extensive documentation on user and reference studies carried out in the 1970s was made available to the project director, as were files of patron registration forms, paging slips, and reproduction service orders for the years immediately preceding the study.

* **In-depth Interviews with Staff**: The project director undertook dozens of formal interviews with reference archivists, mid-level managers, and senior administrators. These in-depth interviews set the context for existing practices and policies. More importantly, the interviews provided a rich description of how archivists view their professional responsibilities, the frustrations, challenges, and rewards of daily involvement with patrons, and the ways in which reference service has changed over the years.

* **In-depth Interviews with Patrons**: In the course of conducting 800 brief interviews with patrons for purposes of gathering quantifiable information, twenty-five experienced researchers volunteered to be interviewed in more detail about their experiences at the National Archives. This group of patrons represented a range of research interests and professional backgrounds. Many expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with the "deterioration" of reference service over a decade or more. Others were equally determined that the National Archives user study acknowledge the high quality of assistance provided in spite of reduced resources. One common thread running through all of the interviews was the essential value of the holdings of the National Archives.

* **Observation of Patrons**: Throughout the year-long period dedicated to direct interviews with patrons and staff, many hours were spent observing the information-seeking behavior of researchers in each research room of the National Archives. The project director sat in on orientation interviews with consulting archivists, observed detailed records consultations between patrons and reference archivists in the Civil Archives and Military Archives branches, and followed the progress of novice researchers as they became more familiar with the research

facilities. The opportunity to observe and take notes over a long period of time is a luxury afforded few archivists in any institution. The information obtained in this fashion, when combined with information from interviews with patrons and staff, played an extremely important part in the formulation of the study's recommendations.

A number of principles governed the interviewing of patrons in the various research rooms. The principles were derived from two sources. The first source is the considerable literature on direct interview techniques, most of which have been developed by market research firms, such as the Gallop and Roper companies, or by social science research groups, such as the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The second source of interview principles was the practical limitations of the National Archives setting, which dictated that patrons be inconvenienced by the study as little as possible.

* **Confidentiality**: All of the patrons interviewed were guaranteed anonymity and the responses of any particular patron were kept confidential. In practice this principle proved easy to implement and a necessary feature of the study. Although most patrons would have willingly provided information for attribution, the promise of anonymity significantly improved the response rate. Of the 800 interviews undertaken, only five were incomplete. This is remarkable by any survey's standards.
* **Interruption**: Each patron chosen for the study was interviewed in the midst of the activity they came to the building to undertake. All of the questions pertained to the research project being undertaken at the time of the interview, and few questions required memory recall beyond six months in the past. This technique nearly eliminated the common survey errors that occur when patrons are asked to describe previous research projects or to recall events or activities in the distant past.
* **Simplicity**: Nearly all of the questions asked of patrons required either a simple yes/no or a choice from a list of options. If such an option list contained more than four items, a flash card containing the possible responses was presented to the patron. This technique increased compliance, limited patron frustration, and improved the validity of each interview.
* **Behavior**: By focusing on ongoing research activity, the interviews did not solicit information on perceptions of the National Archives or attitudes toward services rendered by the agency's staff. A handful of patrons in each research room were evidently dismayed by the factual approach of the study. They used the interview's final question to tell stories of their experiences, to compliment specific staff, or to criticize the services or finding aids.
* **Consistency**: All of the interviews were conducted with the aid of a written questionnaire that was shown to each patron in advance. As far as possible, the questions were posed to the patrons exactly as written; every effort was made not to "lead" them toward particular responses with verbal embellishments or body language.
* **Flexibility**: If a simple question elicited a complex response, the interviews followed the leads provided by patrons, as far as practical. In some cases, these "side-trips" provided valuable information on the inter-connections that researchers make among research rooms.

Consultants Office Study

The first interviews with patrons were carried out in the Consultants Office, located in Room 207 at the East end of the second floor in the National Archives Building. The room serves as the initial point of contact for on-site researchers who wish to use original copies of National Archives holdings. As structured at the time of the study, the primary functions of the office's staff were to:

* issue research cards to new researchers or renew expired cards;
* refer researchers to the most obvious reference unit for in-depth consulting;
* answer general questions on the National Archives and its holdings, especially those concerning genealogical research;
* assist researchers in requesting service on Navy deck logs;
* answer telephone inquires from the general public and refer callers to other units;
* compile a database of information on researchers drawn from researcher applications.

As time permits, the branch chief encourages the professional staff to prepare reference reports and secondary finding aids (guides to doing research in specific record groups or on specific topics). In addition, staff archivists annotate finding aids, as appropriate, to provide more detailed information on holdings.

At the time of the study, the Consultants Office was staffed with one technician who was primarily responsible for issuing research cards and answering incoming telephone calls. Two archivists were assigned permanently to the office, one position was filled by a trainee archivist, and one position was vacant. A genealogy specialist and assistant branch chief are available during peak periods.

Consulting archivists have available a selection of finding aids and published volumes describing the agency's resources. Most notably missing is a complete collection of finding aids for microfilm publications. The Consultants Office does not stock many of the standard publications necessary to refer patrons to resources outside the National Archives. In addition there is minimal information available in the office on newly accessioned records.

As the first study involving patron interviews, this phase of the project was important for defining the scope of the research and testing the wording of specific interview questions that were later posed to patrons in each research facility. Appendix 1 contains information on the findings of the study and copies of the survey instrument.

During the week of January 29, 1990, the registration process of each researcher who completed an application for research or consulted with an archivist was observed by the project director, with the assistance of two archivist-trainees assigned to the office for the week. The observation questionnaire was designed to capture the patron's specific question as originally posed to the front desk attendant and to make note of additional information elicited from the patron in the course of the registration/consultation process. The project director estimated the amount of time spent on

PROJECT: Initial Consultation and Referral

DATES: January 29 - February 2, 1990

METHOD: Observe the researcher registration and consultation process in the National Archives Consultants Office and briefly interview all patrons who apply for a research card. Information from researcher applications is merged with observation/interview data to construct a portrait of new researchers and their research questions.

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS: 213

RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary goal of the project was to construct of portrait of a cross-section of new researchers who visit the National Archives Building. In gathering data from existing forms and through observation of the registration process, the project sought to answer the following questions:

* What are the broad characteristics of the people who visit the National Archives Building, including the number of individuals and research teams, their regional distribution, their primary purposes for visiting, including genealogical research, and their prior experience with archival research?
* What do researchers say they want, including how specifically their topical requests are stated, and how they say they found out about the agency's holdings?
* What services are provided through the Consultants Office for new researchers?
* What do researchers expect to accomplish in the building?

the process, and noted where each researcher or research team was referred and whether patrons expected to get started right away. Toward the end of the registration process, the investigator asked five questions of each person: 1) how they found out about the holdings; 2) if they called or wrote in advance of the visit; 3) if this was their first visit to the building; 4) if they had ever used archival materials before; and 5) if they expected to use any special equipment during their research trip. Finally it was noted if the researcher was engaged in genealogical research. Following the completion of the observation, a copy of the researcher's application form was attached to the questionnaire.

The project director compiled all of the information from the questionnaire into a database for analysis. The research application yielded the following information: research card number, zip code, and probable purpose of the visit. Since purpose of visit was not requested directly from researchers, this information was estimated by combining responses to questions on institutional

affiliation, topic of research, and expected product. The name of each person issued a research card was checked against reference branch and reading room sign-in logs for the two week period following the study period.

Research Room Interviews

The heart of the study was a series of discrete projects that involved interviewing patrons in each of the research rooms in the National Archives facilities in Washington, including the Consultants Office in the main building.

Microfilm Research Room

The first of these interview studies took place in the Microfilm Research Room, located on the fourth floor of the National Archives building. The room is a centralized reference area for patrons wishing to consult holdings reproduced in microformats, especially 16mm and 35mm microfilm. The room is equipped with 92 microfilm readers, two microfiche readers, and four mechanized microfilm reader/printers capable of reproducing microfilm and microfiche images with the use of venda-cards purchased in the room. A fifth reader/printer, located in the adjacent stack area, may be reserved for bulk self-service copying of film and fiche.

The staff of the Microfilm Research Room is supervised by an archivist who doubles as supervisor of the Central Reading Room. Two archives technicians with considerable experience in the room have lead responsibility for advising and orienting patrons new to the room, supported by a group of less experienced archives technicians who rotate among both the Microfilm and Central Reading Rooms. A Genealogical Specialist staffs a small desk in the rear of the room during the day.

The Microfilm Research Room is the only open-stack area in the building and is intended to function largely as a self-service operation. Brochures on genealogical research and using census and military records are available upon request. Finding aids for the census records are positioned on small tables along the main aisle; binders in the adjacent storage area contain pamphlets describing each microfilm collection available. Two small rooms containing published genealogical research aids are right off the research room. Patrons retrieve reels themselves directly from storage cabinets located in the room and adjacent storage area; many signs advise them to refile reels as they complete their work. Self-service reader/printers are available in the front of the room, as are forms that mimic the layout of census records on film.

The Microfilm Research Room is sometimes thought of by staff and patrons as only for genealogical research, which is somehow less- than-serious research. This impression starts at the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance where guards tend to refer patrons directly to the room when they are able to determine that their topic of interest is genealogy or family history. An orientation film for patrons who are unfamiliar with conducting genealogical research is screened in a theater-like setting near the entrance to the reading room. The most readily available microfilmed holdings in the room, census records and indexes to military service and pension files, are heavily used by genealogists.

PROJECT: Using the Microfilm Research Room

DATES: March 12 - 17, 1990

SUMMARY: Interview a random sample of researchers who use the Microfilm Research Room during one typical week, including evenings and Saturday. Interview findings are supported by observations of staff/patron interactions and interviews with staff.

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS: 292

RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary goal of the project was to construct a statistically accurate portrait of a cross section of people who visit the Microfilm Research Room during a typical week. In gathering data from personal face-to-face interviews with researchers actively engaged in research and from observations by the project director, the project sought to answer the following questions:

* What are the broad characteristics of the people who make use of the Microfilm Reading Room, including their primary purposes for visiting and their preparation and prior experience with the National Archives?
* Which microfilmed records appear to be used frequently and what are the intentions of researchers to use other National Archives holdings?
* What services are needed by patrons, including access tools, personal consultations, and photocopying? Overall, the project investigated the extent to which the Microfilm Research Room functions as a open-stack, self-service operation within the National Archives. The interviews did not seek to elicit complaints or criticism directly, although all comments volunteered were noted on the questionnaire.

Finding aids for holdings rarely used by genealogists are not obviously located and no map or location guide for the holdings is available for general distribution.

All researchers who signed into the Microfilm Research Room during the week of March 12, 1990, including those who visited in the evenings and on Saturday, were eligible for the study. A standard mathematical formula determined that an appropriate sample size of approximately 300 randomly selected patrons should be interviewed, or just under half of the total number of discreet individuals who could be expected to visit during the study week. In order to help guarantee random selection, patrons were chosen for an interview by selecting numbers from a deck of cards containing the unique number of each microfilm reader in the room. Three passes through the deck were made each day; once in the morning, once at noon-time, and once again in the mid to late afternoon. If a selected reader was not occupied during a particular pass through the room, no substitutions were

made. During peak periods of use, the project director and up to two assistants conducted interviews simultaneously.

A researcher or team of researchers was eligible to be interviewed only one time during the week. The interview technique involved interrupting the researcher while he/she was consulting a reel of microfilm mounted on a machine. This process excluded from the study curious visitors to the room, tour groups, and other people not actually using the holdings. The interviewer explained the purpose of the study to each selected researcher and sought permission to conduct a brief interview. Each interview took about ten minutes, unless researchers provided additional commentary. Only three of 295 people approached declined to be interviewed; two pleaded lack of time while one felt the research was a confidential matter.

The project director compiled all of the information from the questionnaires into a database for analysis. Researcher's comments were recorded verbatim for qualitative analysis, while numerical codes were assigned to all other responses, such as research topic, purpose of visit, and expected outcome. Data was compiled and analysis was carried out with the assistance of SPSS/PC+, a statistical software package designed for the personal computer.

Central Research Rooms

The second major interview project focused on patrons who use paper-based records. The Central Research Rooms in the National Archives building and the Research Room at the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Maryland, provide service on textual records and printed archives. The combined seating capacity of the rooms is 74. During Fiscal Year 1990 (October 1990 to September 1991), the rooms recorded a total of 40,458 daily visits, or an approximate average of 135 per day, which represents a 1.3 percent increase over the total for Fiscal Year 1989.

The research rooms are staffed by archives technicians who have minimal records expertise. In the Central Research Room a supervising archivist oversees scheduling, manages the Microfilm Research Room, and handles routine information requests from researchers, especially those concerning genealogical records. At Suitland, the supervising archivist is also a records specialist. No records specialists are assigned to the Central Research Room on a regular basis. The adjacent National Archives Library is administered separately and staffed by technicians, archivists, and professional librarians.

An identical set of reproduction services is offered to researchers in the Central Research Room and at Suitland, although the procedures for administering them vary. Since 1986 researchers have been permitted to make self-service reproductions in the research rooms. Procedures require that researchers submit materials to be photocopied to research room staff for inspection. In Suitland researchers may schedule 30 minute blocks on machines located in the research rooms, while bulk copying in the Central Research Room takes place in an adjacent room. In mid-1989, the Central Research Room was re- wired to accommodate increased demand for laptop computers. Self-

service photocopying of bound or fragile documents is prohibited, although researchers may request that reproductions be made by National Archives staff.

PROJECT: Using Textual Records in the National Archives

DATES: July 2-20, 1990; September 4-7, 1990

SUMMARY: Interview/Observation. Interview a random sample of researchers who use the Central Research Room over a three week period and interview as many researchers as practical who use the Suitland Research Room during a one week period. Interview findings are supported by observations of staff/patron interactions, interviews with staff, and tracking of reference service request slips.

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS: Central - 189; Suitland - 30

RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary goal of the project was to construct an accurate portrait of a cross section of people who use textual records in the Central Research Room in the main National Archives Building and the research facilities of the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Maryland. In gathering data from personal face-to-face interviews with researchers actively engaged in research and from observations by the project director, the study sought to answer the following questions:

* What are the broad characteristics of the people who make use of the textual holdings of the National Archives, including their primary purposes for visiting and their preparation and prior experience with the National Archives?
* What records and services are used by patrons, including personal consultations and reproductions?
* How do researchers appraise their familiarity with computer technology, including experience in online searching and retrieving records from archival databases.

PROJECT: Special Archives Research Rooms

ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS:

Motion Picture, Sound and Video Branch

Still Picture Branch

Cartographic and Architectural Branch

DATES: April 23-27, 1990

April 30-May 4, 1990

May 7-11, 1990

SUMMARY: Interview researchers who use the reference rooms in each branch during one typical week. Interview findings are supported by observations of staff/patron interactions and interviews with staff.

NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS:

Motion Picture-30;

Still Picture-28;

Cartographic-18

RESEARCH DESIGN

The primary goal of the project was to construct a portrait of a cross section of the people who use records in the three special archives research rooms during typical weeks of 1990. In gathering data from personal face-to-face interviews with researchers actively engaged in research and from observations by the project director, the project sought to answer the following questions:

* What are the broad characteristics of the people who make use of the research rooms, including their primary purposes for visiting, their preparation, and their prior experience with the National Archives?
* What are the primary barriers to access confronted by researchers of special archives?
* What services are needed by patrons, including access tools, personal consultations, and reproduction capabilities?

Researchers must request records in the appropriate reference branch by completing a reference service request. Retrieved records are delivered to the research room where researchers are required to sign the reference service slip acknowledging receipt. The pink copy of records in active use is filed at the research desk; the green copy is kept with the records; the original copy is filed in the reference branch. The reference service request form is used almost exclusively for inventory control and to compile use statistics. Use records are rarely evaluated for other purposes even though they provide an array of information about the records consulted.

Finding aids for each record group are available in the research room, conspicuously located in bright blue binders. The finding aids are not necessarily the most complete version available in the reference branches. Special lists or annotated inventories compiled by records specialists are only available in the reference branches. Additionally, agency-produced finding aids filed with the archival record may not be as readily accessible as National Archives-produced inventories. The card catalog for library materials is located in the Central Research Room and is also available online at an OCLC terminal located in the library. Physical access to the National Archives Library is only available to patrons with a research card because the main entrance is off the research room.

A researcher or team of researchers was eligible to be interviewed only one time during the study period. The interview technique involved interrupting researchers while they were consulting records. This process excluded from the study curious visitors to the rooms, tour groups, and other people not actually using the holdings, including those consulting finding aids only. The interviewer explained the purpose of the study to each researcher and sought permission to conduct a brief interview. Each interview took about ten minutes, unless researchers provided additional commentary. None of the 219 people approached in either room declined to be interviewed.

The project director compiled all of the information from the questionnaires into a database for analysis. Researcher's comments were recorded verbatim for qualitative analysis, while numerical codes were assigned to all other responses, such as research topic, purpose of visit, and expected outcome. Data was compiled and analysis was carried out with the assistance of SPSS/PC+, a statistical software package designed for the personal computer.

Special Archives Research Rooms

The third cluster of direct patron interviews were focused on patrons using records in specialized reference rooms throughout the National Archives complex that are managed centrally. The Special Archives Division, although administered as a single unit within the Office of the National Archives, is three separate operations, each with distinctive holdings housed in separate facilities with staff and procedures largely unique to each branch. The Cartographic and Architectural Branch is located in spacious, recently refurbished facilities at the Pickett Street Annex in Alexandria, Virginia. The reference facilities of the Still Picture Branch and the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Branch are housed in the National Archives building on the 18th and ground floors respectively.

Overall, the project investigated the common features of researchers and their use of holdings and services. The interviews did not seek to elicit complaints directly, although all comments volunteered were noted on the questionnaires.

A researcher or team of researchers was eligible to be interviewed only one time during the week. The interview technique involved interrupting the researcher while he/she was consulting the holdings. This process excluded from the study curious visitors to the room, tourists, and people who may only have used findings aids during the study week. The interviewer explained the purpose of the study to each selected researcher and sought permission to conduct a brief interview. Each interview took about 10 minutes, unless researchers provided additional commentary. Only two of the 78 people approached declined to be interviewed; both pleaded lack of time to respond.

Immediately following each interview, the project director compiled all of the information from each questionnaire into a database for analysis using a Zenith laptop computer running SPSS/PC+ data entry software. Researchers comments and responses to open-ended questions were recorded verbatim in the database for later assignment of code values or qualitative analysis. Code values for all closed-ended questions were included on the questionnaire.

Telephone Call Study

A completely separate study was designed to look at telephone calls received from the general public to the Consultants Office in the main National Archives building. The National Archives has no central switchboard to route incoming calls or handle routine questions. The Consultants Office telephone number is listed in the telephone blue pages as "General Information," and "Reference Services Branch." The number is given out by long distance telephone operators, and is included in a pre-recorded message about genealogical research. Appendix 5 contains specific information on the findings of this project and a copy of the log form.

At the time of the study, the Consultants Office was staffed by one archives technician who had primary responsibility for taking incoming calls, and by two archivists who provided backup. The Reference Services Branch chief and her secretary also answered incoming calls. National Archives regulations (Chapter 7, paragraph 4d) permit staff to make referrals within and outside the agency. Staff are advised to "refer persons seeking information best found in library materials to the Library or other appropriate libraries" and to "give bibliographic suggestions when this can be done without special research."

Type of Inquiry

* **Inquiries about the institution**, including requests for brochures, building hours, information on the exhibition hall, requests for agency publications, and information on policies and procedures.
* **Switchboard calls** for a specific person, branch, or office.

PROJECT: Telephone Inquiry Log

DATES: January 22-26, 1990

METHOD: Categorize every incoming telephone call to the National Archives Consultants Office (Room 207) by type of call and action taken using a specially designed log form.

NUMBER CALLS LOGGED: 662 incoming calls

RESEARCH DESIGN

The project sought to describe the variety of incoming calls to the Consultants Office and how telephone service is handled by staff. Additionally, the project was intended to yield information on how callers found the telephone number and the proportion of callers who identified themselves as engaged in genealogical research. Staff who answered phones in the Consultant Office recorded information about every incoming call for a one-week study period on a specially designed log form.

* **Inquiries about records**, including inquiries about single items or files, record groups or collections, or broad subjects; inquiries about non-accessioned federal agency records; and inquiries about non-federal records.
* **Other** inquires that do not fall into other categories.

Action Taken

* **Answered**, from memory, ready reference sources, or mailed brochures or forms.
* **Referred**, to agency staff, federal agency personnel, or other organizations.
* **Could not reply.**

Every person who answered the phone in the Consultants Office participated in the study.

* Log each incoming call for a five-day period, 8:45 am to 5:00 pm, January 22-26, 1990.
* Place check marks on a special form for each specific inquiry included in the call.
* Note topic of inquiry, as appropriate.
* Indicate if call seems to pertain to genealogical or family research.
* Ask callers how they got the telephone number.

PROJECT: Reference Correspondence Analysis

ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS:

Architectural and Cartographic Branch

Motion Picture, Video and Sound Recordings Branch

Still Picture Branch

Civil Reference Branch

Military Reference Branch

Captured German Records Staff

Center for Electronic Records

Legislative Reference Branch

DATES: October 1-5, 1990

METHOD: Direct Measurement. Each incoming reference letter was assessed to determine, if possible, the purpose of the letter and the specificity of the request, using a coding form developed for the project.

NUMBER OF LETTERS ANALYZED: 367

Reference Letter Study

Toward the end of the study period, an effort was made to incorporate correspondence from the general public into the overall analysis. Appendix 6 contains specific information on the findings of this project.

The National Archives logs nearly 300,000 pieces of correspondence per year pertaining to the agency's reference service activities. Three categories of reference inquiries are received by the branches responsible for responding to patrons: unique reference letters stating one or more questions with more or less specificity; requests for reproductions; and thank-you letters, complaints, and miscellaneous correspondence of an administrative nature that do not necessarily warrant a response. Additionally some reference branches log requests for information received by telephone that require a written response. The overall purpose of this component of the user study was to

explore the extent to which it is possible to use unique reference letters to construct a basic portrait of the people who contact the agency for information about its holdings and services and the range of specificity used in asking the questions. This project was the primary component of the overall study that investigated the perspectives of people who contact the agency but may never visit in person. The project was most concerned with determining who is writing on what topics, what type of information they want, and how specifically their requests are stated. The project was not intended to evaluate the processes and procedures followed by the National Archives in responding to requests received by mail.

During the study period of one week, all units responsible for responding to requests for information about the agency's records and services were asked to photocopy all incoming correspondence, reproduction service orders, standard request forms, and any other written forms of communication.

The following are the instructions provided to reference units to assist them in gathering information for the project:

Photocopy ALL incoming requests for information before a reply of any kind is prepared.

Copy all requests, regardless of form (eg. letter, memo, forms).

Copy referrals received from other agency units.

Copy only the incoming request. Attachment included by the requestor need not be copied unless they are essential for understanding the request.

For congressionals, copy the cover letter from the Hill along with the constituent request.

Do not include requests for information received via telephone.

Try and complete the photocopying process as soon as possible after the day's mail is received and sorted.

The success of this project largely depends on obtaining a complete cross section of incoming requests from every unit. Please be as thorough as possible.

At the end of the study period, all materials received from participating reference units were sorted, first by unit and thereunder by type of correspondence. For purposes of this project, only reference requests in the form of letters were analyzed using a coding form designed for the project. Each letter was read twice during analysis, first to determine the purpose of the letter and the nature of the request and then to identify the specific components of the research question. The results of this coding process were compiled manually on accounting sheets designed for the project.

PROJECT:	Reference Interviews
ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS:	
	Civil Reference Branch
	Military Reference Branch
DATES:	June 4-15, 1990
METHOD:	Observation/Direct Measurement
NUMBER OF OBSERVATIONS:	
	Civil-18
	Military-12

The design of this project was influenced by previous research by David Bearman that investigated the characteristics of the initial question posed to archivists in writing, in person, and over the telephone by about 1,600 researchers in 17 archives on a single day.[40] Less than half the queries evaluated by Bearman were substantive questions about repository holdings. In 56 percent of these the researcher sought specifically identifiable items, even when the actual existence of the item was not known. Only nine percent of all queries analyzed specified a broad topical subject. In addition to these findings, the report on the project listed a total of 18 access points, or question elements, specified by researchers in their queries. The most common elements found in the study were type of document, personal name, and title of document.

Observing Patron-Archivist Interaction

A final project was intended to gather observational data on the nature of the interaction between patrons and reference archivists in two of the principal branches of the National Archives. Appendix 7 contains the study instrument used in this project.

The original purpose of the project was to observe the interaction between researchers and consulting archivists, on a one-on-one basis, in the two branches that handle most of the in- depth consulting on textual records. In addition to assessing the character of communication among the parties, data was to be gathered on the specific ways in which researchers asked questions, the degree to which archivists probed for additional information, and the made use of finding aids by archivists and researchers.

This project did not succeed as originally intended. Although the design may have been sound and the data gathering instruments reliable, the volume of researcher traffic through the reference

40 David Bearman, "User Presentation Language in Archives," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 3 (Winter 1989-90): 3-7.

branches during the study period prohibited the systematic measurement of research questions. In some cases as many as six substantive consultations with researchers took place simultaneously when only one person was available to gather data. In other cases, the project director was stationed in one location while most consultation activity took place elsewhere.

Over the course of two weeks in the two reference branches, a total of thirty reference interviews were observed and information on the question negotiation process was noted on the observation questionnaire. Although this was an insufficient number of observations for systematic quantitative analysis, this observation of researcher interaction with records specialists contributed valuable qualitative information to the overall study.

Discussion

The findings of the National Archives user study, even in their present status as draft proposals, have major implications for archivists, librarians, and other information specialists throughout the country if one simple premise is accepted. The premise is this: for the most part, the people who call, write, and visit the National Archives are the same people, literally, who contact other archival repositories in the United States. There is no special "breed" of researcher that crosses the threshold on Pennsylvania Avenue or College Park. The history professor looking at Works Progress Administration records in Washington may just wander into a university archives in Illinois, or write the rare book and manuscript library at Yale, or call the state archives in California. The parents who packed the kids in the car in Omaha and drove to Washington to do genealogical research just might drive the car the other direction to Salt Lake City, or turn up at the county records office in Massachusetts, or write the historical society in grandma's home town of Minneapolis. By learning about the users of the National Archives, we learn something about researchers in general.

The potential value of this research to archivists beyond the National Archives derives partly from the data and partly from the possibility of extending the conclusions to smaller institutional settings. As for direct interpretation from the data, several major generalizations are apparent.

First, people visit archives because they have concrete information needs. These needs are relatively easy to identify and can be met if archivists develop flexible service systems.

Second, archivists must tap more effectively the formal and informal networks by which people communicate with their professional and personal groups. An archives that projects a "come and get us" attitude will not generate the volume and kind of use that is necessary to justify archival programs to top administrators.

Third, the users of archives are computer-ready, yet archivists must be prepared to work actively with users to develop interfaces, search strategies, and all the other aspects of effective retrieval in a machine environment.

Fourth, researchers who visit archives are, in general, intellectually prepared to pursue the tasks they have defined for themselves, yet they will continue to need meaningful orientation and direct assistance on the PROCESS of archival research.

Fifth, archivists' responsibility to understand users and use does not stop at the door of the archives. The impact of the use of records and services on people must be better understood. User studies are a viable mechanism for understanding the impact of archives on everyday lives.

More generally, a well-crafted user study can be a useful management tool for archivists, but we all do not have to do one. Although we all need to understand how our reference and access systems function from our patrons' perspectives, archivists should not bother gathering extensive information about their users unless they have a very specific purpose in mind and have the administrative support necessary to make adequate use of the findings. All archivists who have responsibility for public service should continually gather and make use of basic descriptive information about users--the who, what, when, where, and why questions. Questions that concern process--the "how" questions--are more complex, and at the same more generalizable. It seems far more feasible that these more targeted studies be carefully planned and conducted so that their findings are of use beyond the institutions that carry them out.[41]

41 Conway, "Facts and Frameworks."