

*"If the information community is to meet the challenge of the 'information society' successfully, it is essential that it focus on helping end users do information work more efficiently...The criterion of success for [a new generation of user studies] will not be how well they describe user behavior, but rather how much impact they have on the reformulation of information policies."*

Colin Mick, 1980

## Preface

This is the story of a failed user study--failed according to the criteria spelled out by Colin Mick in the epigraph at the front of this volume. The document you are holding includes the penultimate draft of a report on the findings of a unified series of user studies that I designed and carried out at the National Archives and Records Administration from January 1990 to July 1991. The report was never completed, never approved, and never released publicly by the National Archives. Furthermore, the recommendations and suggestions included in the report were neither accepted nor implemented. Following wide-spread review by the staff of the National Archives, I re-wrote the document to report separately on the individual studies without making recommendations about agency policies and practices. These revised reports were never formally released by the National Archives and are only available upon request. Few visible changes in policies or procedures for serving patrons can be attributed directly to this research project.

So why am I making this report available now, after a delay of nearly three years? I have two goals in mind. First, interest remains high in the process of undertaking user studies in archival repositories. The methodology of the studies and the data reported in the appendices should be of use to archivists, librarians, curators of special collections, and others who wish to understand the purposes and behaviors of people who seek historical information in the nation's archival repositories. Over the years, there have been many persuasive recommendations on the questions that should be asked of users but very few published studies that report on the answers. This document, in part, addresses the need for field-tested questionnaires that will allow archivists to gather information systematically from their research clientele.

A second goal of publication is to widen the discussion of the reference and access procedures of the National Archives that had begun, *sub rosa*, when the report was circulated internally for comment. Large and significant issues that bear upon access to the public's trove of historical documentation housed in the National Archives should concern people who value the personal freedoms that are embodied in public archives. Among the more important issues that need to be explored are the nature of archival reference practices, the professional identity of practicing archivists, the priority that archival agencies place on making their records available, and the capabilities, skill requirements, and training needs of the personnel who serve the public. Discussion of these and many more relevant professional issues could benefit from a deeper understanding of the ways in which researchers approach the primary materials that they hope will address their historical questions.

With the completion of the new research facility, Archives II, on the campus of the University of Maryland, the National Archives is at a crucial cross-roads in its history. It stands to reason that the dramatic improvement in the public service potential represented by the new building will raise the service expectations of both the public and the staff who serve them. Information obtained directly from patrons is an important component in a fresh assessment of assumptions that have governed

archival reference service for at least a half a century. The report reproduced here was intended to contribute to that reassessment, without purporting to direct its outcome.

A warning is in order for the reader unfamiliar with the recent administrative history of the National Archives. The report that comprises Chapters Three and Four of this document was written for veteran staff of the agency. As an internal document, one that I expected would eventually be released to the public in revised and expanded form, the draft report was intended both to criticize and encourage staff who were already well aware of the thrust of the recommendations and who were equally aware of the fifty-year evolution of the agency from a records warehouse to the most significant archival research institution in the country. As such, the report does not provide the background on the history of the agency's public services that would be expected of a study designed, from the start, for general consumption.

The two chapters that precede the report have been written since I left the employ of the National Archives. They are intended to place the report in context and to elaborate upon the assumptions underlying the research design. In chapter One I describe the origins of the research project and outline my personal odyssey through the research rooms of the Washington, D.C., complex in search of clues to what motivates people to seek solutions to their historical questions by calling, writing, or visiting the National Archives. In describing the process in some detail, I make recommendations that may be of use to others who wish to undertake internal administrative research projects.

Chapter Two is a review of the key ideas and research techniques that underlie the study. I discuss the major influences on the research design, describe the series of studies that together comprise the overall project, and summarize the implementation and analytical processes that led to the summary of recommendations in the draft report. This chapter will be of use to archivists, librarians, and others who wish to pursue leads to a plethora of stimulating ideas on research use.

Chapter Three is the unedited text of the draft report submitted to the management of the National Archives in July 1991. The bibliography that accompanied the text has been updated and appended to this report. Chapter Four contains the appendices that accompanied the draft report along with some of the analysis included in a revised version of the report.

Since beginning this project more than four years ago, I have received encouragement, advice, and support from many people within and beyond the National Archives. While the study was underway, I received the most significant assistance from Don Wilson, Lynn Lady Bellardo, Avra Michelson, and Ann Gordon. Trudy Huskamp Peterson and Michael McReynolds opened many doors; Michael Kurtz didn't close them. Following the completion of the study, Richard Cox was most consistent in his support for publication of the results. I hasten to add that all of the opinions and recommendations in this report are my own. In so doing, I am reminded of the disclaimer that is typically appended to motion pictures. The trailer warns the viewer that any resemblance of characters in the film to real persons, living or dead, is merely coincidental. Regardless of how we choose to distinguish between illusion and reality in the service of access to the nation's archive, this report should be useful guide to the heritage of user studies.

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