Tibbo, H.R. (2003). Primarily history in America: How U.S. historians search for primary materials at the dawn of the digital age. *American Archivist*, 66(1), 9-50.

Summary of the Survey Study

In 2001, the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation (http://www.delmas.org/) funded an international comparative study – the Primarily History project – that examined the information-seeking behavior of historians in the United States and the United Kingdom. The project was headed by Helen Tibbo from the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Ian Anderson from the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute at the University of Glasgow. The survey report in *American Archivist* presents the data, collected as part of the Primarily History project, which examined how historians teaching US history in universities across the US located primary resources for their research, what types of materials historians are most likely to use, and how they are preparing the next generation of scholars to search for primary materials.

The population of 300 participants was surveyed on two occasions – in spring 2001 and again in spring 2002. The second survey expanded the population to include all the full-time, active faculty teaching history in selected universities – 400 historians from 30 universities. Analysis of the results showed that the most important source materials for historians are period newspapers as well as unpublished correspondence, and that they are very conservative in their searching behavior. On average they rely on time-proven methods of chasing footnotes, browsing bibliographies, and using catalogs in local (university) libraries. Most of them prefer outdated, but printed sources (National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections) over updated, but electronic versions of the same materials. Although almost all faculties use OPACs, they are quite shy in using union

catalogs or comprehensive online research resources provided by the archivist or librarian community. Many faculty members visit the web sites of various depositories, but mostly just to check on hours, parking, and driving directions.

The conclusion of the survey is that there is quite a mismatch between the searching habits of users and the resources offered by the librarian and archival community. In part, the problem is that the nature of historical research requires various techniques of searching for primary sources, on-line search being only one. Also, many of the resources are quite new and therefore knowledge about them and the ways to use them have not yet percolated through the historian community, and archivists need to engage in more vigorous promotion and education about the archival resources available.

Survey Study Critique

The size of the population surveyed in the Primarily History project implies a great amount of quantitative data – on both sides of the Atlantic approximately 300 participants filled in complex questionnaires and 25 or so answered questions in semi-structured interviews. However, finding detailed information on-line about the project, data collected, or comprehensive evaluation of results is quite difficult.

According to the information provided in the PPT presentation available on the HATII (Primarily History 2007) web site, the project was carried out during a 3-year period with the objectives to find out: (1) how historians locate primary sources, (2) what do they teach their students about locating sources, and (3) what do archivists do to promote and educate users about electronic finding aids. This should be performed through a complex questionnaire survey and a small number of semi-structured interviews. In the year 2001, questionnaires were sent to historians, in 2002 to archivists and, as the conclusion, the project should be organizing a symposium bringing together historians and archivists.

I could not find any information or proof that the project completed the archivists' part of the survey or organized the symposium. According to the list of conference papers listed

on Anderson's faculty site, he presented the paper dealing with a supply and demand to the UK archives in on-line environment, so I presume that survey on UK archivists was performed. It is unfortunate that researchers decided to keep data close to their chests and divulge it only in small dosages and at their convenience.

Overall, it is a very well done questionnaire survey, but Tibbo has difficulty presenting the data clearly and in a transparent way. In the article she is so concerned with explaining the minutiae of the methodology and sample selection that it is difficult to see the forest for the trees. After going through all percentages and nuances of the Carnegie list vs. NRC ranking list, it remained unclear if the survey of professors of US history in the US is performed as a part of the Primarily History survey, or was performed as a pilot study. Why was the survey performed twice, and why was it preformed only in the US? It is not clear if there was a parallel study of professors of UK history in the UK.

The data of the survey, discussed in this research, is extremely interesting and shows that it is not always "build it and they will come," especially not for archivists and their web sites. Historians need to cast very wide nets to find their materials, and from their point of view, the Internet is still too sparsely populated with the relevant information to be worth the trouble of searching it. The interesting information is that historians would persist in using outdated sources for the sake of familiarity with a printed form, over more accurate information in a digital form. However, the most surprising information, presented here as well as in ACRL article, about how present historians teach future generations to search for primary material (Tibbo 2003, ACRL), is that many historians are not familiar with basic archivist tools like finding aids, even in printed form. As they do not know how to use them at the first place, they do not teach their students to use them either. Making archival tools available on-line, therefore, does not make much difference. Tibbo's conclusions are that archivist should embark on an education campaign and let people know what is available – in repositories as well as on-line. She calls for more educational programs that would reach toward the students, faculty, administrators and teach them how to use archives to their best advantage.

However, based on the presented data and findings, I am inclined to question the original design of the tools of the archival profession, regardless of their implementation on the Internet. If your primarily users – historians – do not know how to use already existing tools, then there is more to it than just persistence in "the old ways." Maybe archivists should use the opportunity of modern technology to develop new tools that would be better tailored to the needs and desires of its potential users?

References

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