

The Conceptualization of Archival Materials Held in Museums

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Abstract

Archives, libraries and museums preserve collections containing diverse material. In managing these collections different standards are used, each developed inside their own professional community. While searching for material preserved in different institutions users shouldn't stumble over inability to cope with different descriptive standards and access points defined by these standards. As this research suggests, the path to any kind of interoperability starts with people who implement standards. This exploratory study investigates curators' understandings of archival and documentary materials held in their museums (i.e. rather than in archives) by analyzing and describing their attitude towards records that surround them in their daily professional practice.

Keywords: Archive, Museum, Metadata, Description, Record

1 Introduction

The matter of description in the end becomes the matter of access. The matter of appraisal and acquisition also comes down to questions of access by the

In: F. Pehar/C. Schlägl/C. Wolff (Eds.). Re:inventing Information Science in the Networked Society. Proceedings of the 14th International Symposium on Information Science (ISI 2015), Zadar, Croatia, 19th–21st May 2015. Glückstadt: Verlag Werner Hülsbusch, pp. 506–513.

end user. The processes that take place in different institutions are foremost determined by people who are doing their daily work. Contemporary business processes produce a lot of documentation in different forms and on various media. These processes are managed by people. In order to understand both the processes and the resulting documentation, therefore, we should direct our attention to people. This research seeks to explore what happens with archival material that was organically created through business or other human processes and thus was defined by its context of creation (i.e., it is a record), when it ends up in a museum collection that was artificially assembled. The researcher argues that a key point in the conceptualization of archival material in museums is embedded in the curatorial perspective. That there is a collision between archival and museum points of view is evidenced by data on the numbers and nature of registered archival records in Croatian museums. In 2013 a statistical report from *The Register of Museums, Galleries and Collections in the Republic of Croatia* reported that there were 281 museums with 2175 museum collections and 879 documentary holdings in Croatia. Only 5 museums stated that they have collections of archival material (8 archival collections in total), and 68 museums stated that have an institutional archive. The data were gathered by the Museum Documentation Centre (MDC), a central advisory institution. Each Croatian museum sent its own data to MDC regarding its collection, types of material that is collected etc. *The General Guide for Archival Fonds and Collections in the Republic of Croatia* also provides basic data on archival holdings in the custody of both archival and non-archival Croatian institutions. Data for this guide were collected and analyzed by an archivist from the Public Archive Service. This *General Guide* reports 54 museums holding a total of 625 archival collections.

2 Archival environment in non-archive institution: theoretical perspective

Theoretical assumptions and the methodological approach of this research is derived from the field of archival and recordkeeping research (McKemmish & Gilliland 2013) and are framed within the interpretivist tradition with postmodern influences. Hugh Taylor suggested that “the relationship be-

tween museums and archives deserves to be examined more fully in an age that is fast becoming dependent on the image, icon, and virtual reality” (Taylor 1995: 9). Paul Marty noticed that although there are a number of research studies that analyze the nature of users’ needs in museums, there are just a few that have focused on the nature and behaviour of museum information professionals (Marty 2007: 98). While some research studies focus on the specific role of a museum archive e.g., the museum archivist (McKellar 1993: 348) and the necessity of employing archivists in museums (Punzalan 2001), others focus on the figure of the curator. Ting analyses curatorial interpretation of collections (Ting 2012). The professional profile of curator is examined to learn about the curatorial community in Santa Catarina, Brazil (Graipel & da Cunha 2009) or to examine curatorial identity in audience participatory designed exhibitions (Tatsi 2011). Others question the possibilities of professional crossover (Beasley 2007) or examine “cross-community” challenges (Baca & O’Keefe 2009). Regarding the abovementioned, this research will focus on curatorial descriptive practices relating to records contained in museum collections and produced by creators and museum documentation units. Museum documentation is produced by curators and other museum professionals. Upon acquisition by a museum, an object first undergoes a process of identification. Every act of identification is some sort of categorization. It is followed by classification. Both acts are products of the human world and have a highly subjective nature as Mai has noted “Any classification is classification from a particular point of view, for a particular purpose” (Mai 2010: 634). Even in this first process, subjectivity becomes an important factor. By placing the object within a specific collection, a decision has been made about descriptive practice. All descriptive processes are defined subjectively since there can be no representation without interpretation (Duff & Harris 2002: 10), and the individual view of the professional will always be just one of many possible. Although the digital age and informatization of archives and museums has blurred traditional distinctions, distinctions still remain between professionals. These include different educational backgrounds, especially in museums where curators are employed mainly because of their specialty knowledge on different subjects, according to the type of museum. But the main difference lies in the point of view and perspective regarding their relation to the materials themselves and the transfer of information about the materials to users. Robert Martin noticed that museum professionals derive their identity from their academic discipline and professional practice (Martin 2007: 85). Elings and Waibel highlight that

“applying particular data content standards by material type, and not by community affiliation, could lead to greater data interoperability within the cultural heritage community” (Elings & Waibel 2007). Landis presents a different point of view, asserting that “nothing about cultural heritage materials themselves indicates that they should be controlled using one framework or another. One cannot pick up a cultural heritage object, for example, and say it is inherently archival. This is a repository based decision, impacted by a host of factors and various collections within a given cultural heritage institution might be controlled differently” (Landis 2007: 98). I would argue that employing archival or museological control over collected materials also depends on the knowledge or best practice applied by the manager of assembled materials. But if we choose to control the same type of materials in different modes, then data and metadata on dispersed archival material in various museum holdings would remain disconnected and archival units left without their original contextuality. To reestablish original context, it is not necessary to physically reunite dispersed materials. New technologies enable us to do so virtually, on a platform of mutually agreed upon descriptive standards. The central hypothesis is that arrangement and description of archival and other documentary material found in museum settings depends on the curatorial framework determining what constitutes archival material, and what a museum object and museum documentation.

The main goal of this study is to develop a better understanding of how records of any kind are managed, described and accessed in a museum. Its main objectives are to identify, analyze and describe curatorial actions regarding different types of records. This study will attempt to answer several questions: How do museum curators approach archival materials and records within their institution? How do records and other archival materials become treated as museum objects? What happens to archival material in the museum setting? How is archival material represented in museum exhibitions? Do museum professionals see any possible convergence points in description and access of archival material in museum collections, and if so, what might those be?

3 Material, methodology and research plan

Content analysis of documentation generated by museum curators is necessary because it will summarize and broadly define major trends in the recordkeeping landscape in the museum curator's domain. It will include analysis and description of museums' catalogue records, different fonds of museum documentations and curatorial research notes. For the purpose of the research, these types of records will be divided into two groups. The first group will include materials that are treated as museum objects, as original artefacts that are part of museum collections. The second group will include documentation produced by curators such as catalogue entries. In 2011 a pilot study was conducted on the same topic among the curatorial communities of regions geographically and culturally close to Croatia: Slovenia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Štefanac 2013). This study used a semi-structured questionnaire that was distributed via e-mail. However this method and technique proved to be unsuitable for answering the above mentioned questions with any depth. Instead, it became apparent that achieving such understanding demands repetitive contact in person. This research, therefore, can also be considered to be addressing questions about what kind of methods and techniques are the most suitable and effective to use in elucidating the nature of the information environment in museum settings. In order to gain insight into all this level of museum work this research will include curators who manage collections of different types of materials that in other kind of repositories might typically be considered as archival such as photographs, blueprints, official and personal letters, cartographic material, maps and ephemera. The common denominator is that these materials are in fact evidence of personal or bureaucratic activities. This research will include curators who work on museum exhibition and all preceding processes such as research on an item's historical background, origin, usage, display and producing descriptive record and catalogue record of exhibition. In-depth interviews will be conducted which will allow curators' opinions and perspectives to emerge. The sample is purposive. All of the museums' collections and their curators are listed on official websites so one can easily observe what kind of materials are in a particular collection and who is the curator responsible for that collection. Each subject will participate in a series of open-ended interview sessions. Five sessions in total with each curator are anticipated, each lasting approximately one hour. The anticipated time range of

research is 9 months in total. Finally, the method of auto-ethnography is going to be employed because of the researcher's educational and professional background. Since I have formal education in museology and archivistics, and have been employed as an archivist in a museum I will inevitably bring my subjectivity and particular perspective to bear. Further, auto-ethnography will be used to externalize my inner dialogue (Duncan 2004: 3) so this set of emergent data would represent one more perspective on curating records in museums. Auto-ethnography as a method, not as a form of presentation, will be conducted in the same period as the interview process with curators, and I will try to answer to all questions put to curators, from my own perspective. In recent years auto-ethnography was employed in several original research, such as doctoral thesis by Lomas (2013) that explored the engagement of records management through a computer mediated communication focused co-operative inquiry and Hryhorczuk (2013) that dealt with so called dark tourism heritage.

4 Expected scientific contribution

Along the continuum of material – curator – computer based retrieval system – user, it is the figure of the curator as manager, describer and mediator that stands out. With deeper understanding of the reasons why curators choose to describe an object or document in a particular way, e.g., which descriptive standard they employ, we could perhaps better understand areas of possible conflicts and modes of convergences between different heritage communities, and between their institutions and practices, e.g., archives and museums. The data set which would emerge at the end of this research would be unique and could serve as starting point for similar explorations but from different perspectives, i.e., different professional communities.

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