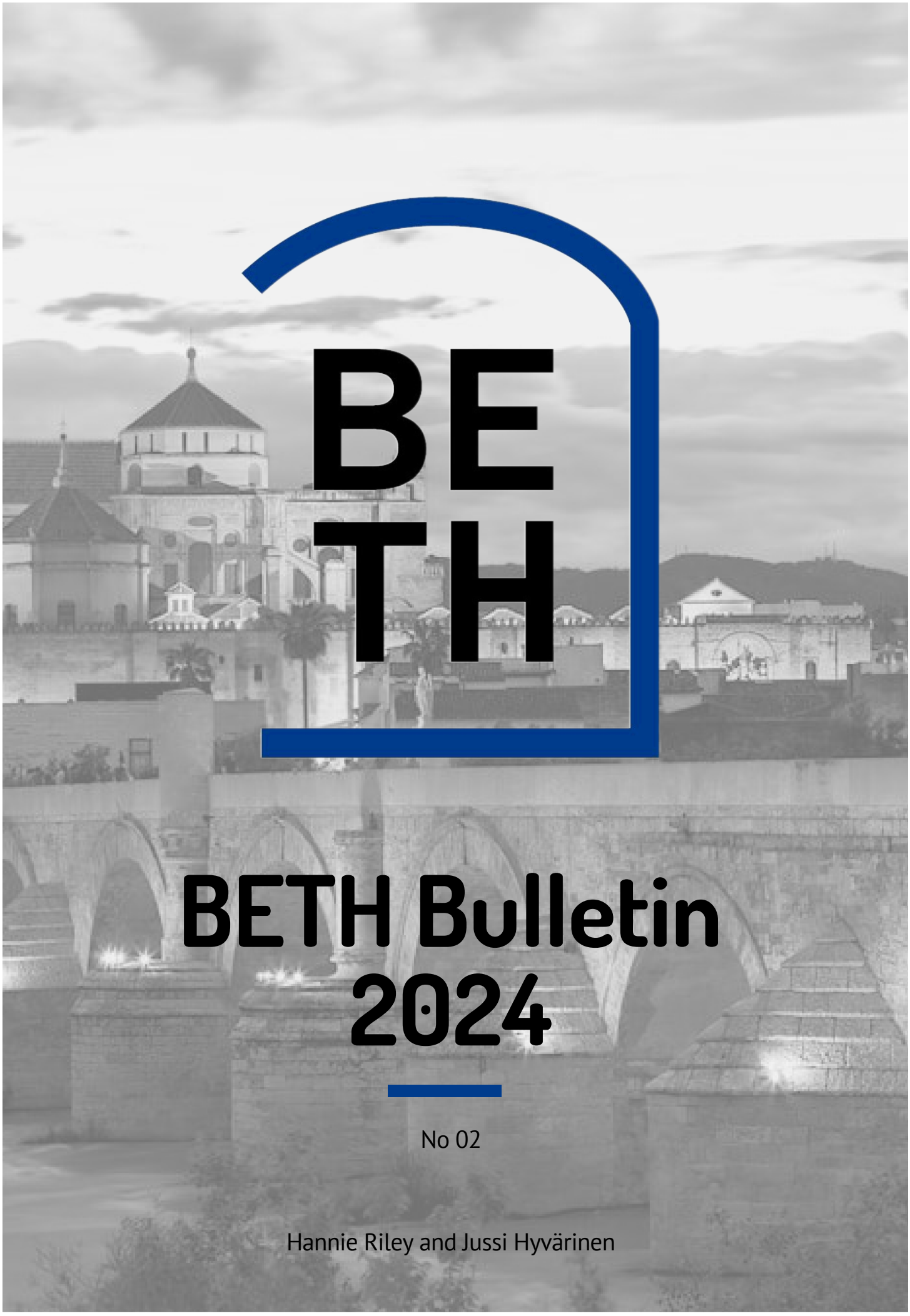

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Evaluating Access as Social Interaction

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Memory institutions rely on the communal use of their services to properly serve their purpose as repositories of information. If the very people who use and support these institutions cannot access library or archival services, they hold no value at all. Access, then, is an essential component of any study on the field, as any processes or services rendered by archives and libraries cannot be obtained without first establishing consistent access to them. This is emphasised all the more by changes in technology, particularly developments brought by the digital age, which have exponentially increased both the possible routes by which users can access information and the complications brought by increases in scale. When considering the importance of establishing connections between users and the records and items held within memory institutions, any evaluation and assessment should focus on defining what access is in the context of archives and libraries and how best to implement access in an increasingly changing field.

Defining Access

In establishing the meaning of access in the information management field, a research paradigm that properly aligns with realities in practice is needed. Considering the variety of memory institutions active in society and the various roles and user groups each are connected to, a research framework requires a flexible and relational enough approach to experiences on the ground. To this end, in arguing for

a focus on access in archival evaluation, an interpretivist research paradigm, as defined by Alison Jane Pickard, best encompasses the needs of assessing accessibility, particularly in regards to ontological and epistemological stances (Pickard, 2013, 11-13).

What is Access?

The International Council on Archives (ICA) defines access as 'the right, opportunity, or means of finding, using, or approaching documents and/or information' (n.d.). These processes and means take various forms depending on the type of information and the type of use intended by the user. Access to a text in a library would require a means to physically transport the user to the building and the skills necessary to find it within the library's system. To use the information found within the text, however, would require navigating copyright law and obtaining intellectual permission to properly use the material, a different aspect of accessibility in regards to obtaining information (Baumann 1986, 351).

Access, then, is a multifaceted process that holds physical, legal, and intellectual aspects (Baumann 1986, 351; Hamburger 2011). This is emphasized all the more in regards to information held digitally, where new developments in online organisation and retrieval capabilities provide both opportunities for new methods of access as well as increased risk in regard to intellectual property and privacy concerns, and where the distinctions between physical and legal access can be blurred (Shiri 2015, 178). However, the core basis of access, whether physical, legal, or intellectual, and whether in physical archives or online repositories, is in connecting interested users with information held in memory institutions, and it is in light of these connections that the ontological stance of access in context is fully explored.

Traditionally, archivists have tended to view access to records as being based on their provenance with a greater focus on tracing the history of the item rather than the needs of the user (Dooley 1992, 345). This approach to access can be advantageous

when determining who created the record and organising it within the archival hierarchy, and could provide secondary access for the public through the intervention of the archivist as an intermediary between the user and the documents (Beattie 1997, 87). Indeed, David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle argue that in terms of internal best practice, provenance-based retrieval systems increase access to the items held within archives for the archivist and the institution by streamlining the retrieval process (Bearman and Lytle 1986). Access in this sense is the systems and processes in place in an institution which professional archivists and librarians employ in their practice, and, at least in theory, can be taken as a universal standard used across a broad range of memory institutions. Access for the public is found primarily through the trained lens of the archivist.

This approach, however useful it is within those in the field, has come under review when considering its relevance to the wider public, particularly for those outside of the institution. Janice E. Ruth argues that archivists need to critically examine their traditional reliance on provenance-based processes and be open to alternative retrieval and access systems (Ruth 1988). In particular, reformulating access with a wider user base in mind than only professionals in the field is a necessary step in aligning memory institutions with modern day realities, where greater access to information is available to a larger scale of users and where service expectations made of public institutions are greater than ever before. In light of these changes, Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland urges archives and libraries to view access to its materials as a means of social interaction (Gilliland-Swetland 2000). By doing so, she argues that these institutions can better offer connective interfaces if their efforts are coordinated with other disciplines, thereby producing more points of access to a wider base of users. This, in turn, reorients the focus of archival access from provenance to the subject level in the record's hierarchy, theoretically providing greater flexibility in practical usage (Beattie 1997, 87).

Access as a means of social connection reflects the wider reimagining of the purpose of memory institutions in the eyes of their users, moving away from storage of past materials to the present day retrieval of needed information, as argued by Angelika Menne-Haritz (2001, 59). As part of this process, access itself becomes more available to the general public, with the need for the archivist as an

intermediary less essential than before (see Bureau of Canadian Archivists Subject Indexing Working Group 1992). Rather than formulating access as a system of retrieval, access is instead defined as an interaction between social elements, including relationships between user and user, user and material, and user and institution. This approach defines access as the connective links between user and information, taking into account the various pathways and avenues users have to their archives and libraries.

This diffusion of focus regarding the initial point of impact of access, however, naturally leads to various forms the process takes in practice. These forms depend on the specific contexts they exist within. A student seeking to borrow a book from a library has different needs and different aims from government officials seeking confidential data from an official repository. Access takes very different guises between these two examples, and it is here that a relativist ontological stance proves necessary in properly identifying what access means across the varied needs and motivations of both users and institutions, a challenge in the realm of cultural heritage experts (Doerr 2009, 477).

The reality of access for a researcher seeking an archival item entails membership of the archive, physical access to the building, and the skill set required to handle and approach the item. Yet this reality does not translate well to a general user seeking an online resource of digital photographs, where concerns over connectivity and online security determine how access is provided in that context. As a result, when investigating how access is defined and implemented, these definitions must be taken on a case-by-case basis, as the realities of each are dependent on their context. Relying on subject access rather than the traditional focus on provenance is an important step in accounting for these different realities, as access by subject provides more flexibility and agency on the part of the user in regards to how and when they obtain the material, and provide greater insight into the motivations of their use (Dooley 1992, 346).

Subjectivist Epistemology

If the realities of access are dependent on context, it is worth determining what users and institutions make up those realities. In a subjectivist epistemology, the interaction between subject and user is the essential point where knowledge is gained and, in regards to access, determining who is doing the interaction and for what purpose is important in understanding the term (Pickard 2013, 12).

Richard H. Lytle describes an archival system as made up of four groups: the material items and records held within the system; the users who make demands on the materials; the finding aids and retrieval systems used to obtain the materials; and those responsible for servicing the materials (1980, 65). The particulars of the makeup of these groups can change depending on the venue, such as the difference between online and physical repositories, but they represent most of the main actors and functions that exist in information management practice. When assessing what access is in any given context, identifying who fits into these roles will be crucial. Once the various components are identified, more specific markers of each context can be delineated depending on their respective needs and influences (Lytle 1980, 65).

Each interaction will involve different actors and different information. Even interactions taking place within the same institution will have different users or different records in play, even more so when taking into account the differences between vastly disparate memory institutions, such as the dissimilar purposes of a public library compared to an online database. Thus, it is important to keep in mind when evaluating access that access will appear differently case by case, and that instead of seeking broad strategies that attempt to tie together the various expressions of accessibility, a focused review that emphasises the interactions held within these institutions would hold more value (Gilliland-Swetland 2000).

Key Challenges

Any evaluation of access in modern memory institutions must be taken with an understanding of the challenges these institutions face in its implementation. As these institutions transition from operating with a storage based purpose toward an interactive,

creative-based one, the conflict between traditional standards of preservation and greater access has increased in both quantity and importance (Menne-Haritz 2001, 59). Correspondingly, memory institutions' accessibility strategies must consider issues of privacy protection, of scale, and of a variety of structural restrictions.

Access and Privacy

An important consequence of greater accessibility in memory institutions is the prominent role archives and libraries play in guaranteeing rights to free speech, information, and freedom of expression (Shepherd and Ennion 2007). Indeed, this role as stewards of public knowledge has increased public awareness and use of archival and library resources, as access to its records performs an important service in accountability and in ensuring social and historical justice (Jimerson 2009; Cox and Wallace 2002). However, access to information, particularly that of a sensitive nature, comes into conflict with personal privacy and data protection. This tension poses important questions for archives and libraries in implementing their accessibility policies and requires care on their part in addressing it.

At the core of this issue is that while public records and information held in memory institutions, many of which hold sensitive and personal data, serve a plethora of public goods, providing access to them carries the constant risk of misuse and exposure which carries the potential for major consequences for people's lives and rights (Čtvrtník 2023). At both the institutional and governmental levels, policies and practices have been put in place to address this tension. Redaction practices regarding personally identifiable data, publication schemes, and, in the United Kingdom, the institution of the Information Commissioner's Office, have all been put into practice in an attempt to provide access to publicly available information while staying in line with privacy legislation.

There will, however, always be grey areas where tension still exists, and memory institutions must always be aware of the complex interplay between access and privacy (Sillitoe 1998, 6). With online data banks and information programming in common use, combined with legislation requiring both openness and protection of personal data, the particulars of when and how access to archival records is granted are simultaneously

rendered harder to define and more important than ever (Robbin 1986, 168, 170-171, 175). Any evaluation of access in memory institutions must take into account the competing responsibilities they face regarding this conflict, and judge any policy or practice in light of it.

Scale

Compounding issues in safeguarding privacy are the increase in scale archives and libraries are now working within. Both in terms of the amount of data being handled and the number of users interested in accessing them, archival resources are being stretched by greater demand (Kapsalis 2016, 2). Those resources, however, have often been unable to meet this demand, due both to the speed in which modern data is produced and by budget cuts and a lack of funding for the institutions charged with handling them (Evans 2007, 388). This has led to a backlog and resulted in less access instead of more. Meanwhile, a user public that has developed a greater interest in archival and library services while also bringing increased requirements of service on demand has put new pressure on these institutions. A growing expectation for every page in every document to be ready-made and available among the public, along with an assumption that these are easily and quickly available, provides a major challenge for resource-strapped memory institutions tasked with connecting these users with the items they wish to access (Evans 2007, 388).

Advances in the Information Age have played a major part in this process. Digital technologies and innovations have increased the amount of data in use, the routes of access, and the public's demand for both. Digital material is produced at a faster rate than its analogue counterparts and gaining access to them is quicker and, in many cases, easier for the user (Kapsalis 2016, 2). For memory institutions which must also ensure their records are safeguarded and in line with privacy requirements, the increased scale of practice provides challenges in terms of keeping pace, all the while having to learn proficiency in new realms of digital technology (Evans 2007, 388). Web-based access to digital records does indeed make access easier for the general public, but also applies pressure on their holding institutions to lower their barriers, barriers that exist to ensure best practice (Isaac and others 2008, 187).

It is imperative to understand the scale being dealt with. This entails determining how much data is being held, how much of it is being made available, and how many requests for access are received. In acquiring data from these evaluations, deciding whether to measure results based on the whole or within a certain cross-section of the data will provide clarity on how to navigate problems of scale.

Structural Restrictions

In evaluating access in light of memory institutions, a clear and obvious challenge in evaluation would be any restrictions faced by users in obtaining the records and items held in archives and libraries. A report led by Caroline Wavell identifies several barriers to use and access (Wavell and others 2002, 58-59). These include institutional barriers, such as restrictive opening hours and charging policies, environmental barriers, such as difficult physical access to buildings, social barriers, such as the lack of skill required, and barriers of perception and awareness, which involve the belief among some in the community that archives and libraries are not welcoming of them (Butcher 2022). Cost becomes a barrier to access when users cannot afford membership fees to these institutions, or find paywalls are in place online. Policies that directly deny access to any group or the public at large will have clear implications in evaluating how their access systems are enacted, and provide clear boundaries in terms of evaluation (Butcher 2022).

However, beyond official barriers are social factors that serve to prevent prospective users from gaining full access to archival items. While an archive or a library can make its records freely accessible by official policy, if those who wish to access their items lack the required skillset to properly engage with them, they are still barred from properly attaining said records. Such a user would need to know what exists within the archive and understand where to find it among a multiplicity of catalogues, and, once found, would need to engage with a system of proper retrieval and handling. This can be confusing and frustrating for users, particularly for those who lack experience or who have disabilities that hinder their ability to grasp these systems (Pelan 2018). In many cases these users are unable to handle this process on their own, and, despite attempts by the field to move away from provenance based retrieval systems, they still find themselves dependent on the archivist for full access (Bureau of Canadian Archivists Subject Indexing Working Group 1992, 34).

Further, as memory institutions seek to engage with a broader user base, they must confront demographic realities regarding how they are perceived. Randall C. Jimerson states that archives have traditionally been run by those in power, and that archivists now have a 'moral professional responsibility' to ensure their selection policies include records of the marginalized (Jimerson 2009). Yet many institutions still lag behind when it comes to representation of minority groups. A survey of public library services in Newcastle and Somerset led by Rebecca Linley and Bob Usherwood in 1998 found that younger people, women, and ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in the archive user population (Linley and Usherwood 1998, 89). A similar study by Patrick Roach and Marlen Morrison on twelve English public library authorities noted that public libraries across England were failing to meet the needs of ethnic minority populations and that few services had established measurable objectives and service standards regarding equality and ethnic diversity (Roach and Morrison 1998, 76).

Findings such as these feed the perception that archives and libraries are privileged spaces whose records do not represent their communities and where they would be out of place (Wavell and others 2002, 59). These perceptions have led many in these communities to refrain from connecting with these institutions on the basis that they believe the items held there were not meant for their use. This mirrors circumstances elsewhere, as memory institutions across numerous countries wrestle with power imbalances and legacies of historical injustice (See Anderson 2005; McKemmish, Chandler, and Faulkhead 2019). If a perception of elite exclusivity persists, there is, then, a powerful social influence denying entire portions of society access, even when this is independent from official policy and practice, and evaluation efforts must account for societal factors that may not be obvious at first glance.

Access in the Field

Memory institutions have formed connections with their community of users through means of instituting new organisation systems, increasing their access points, and by embracing a collaborative approach to accessibility. These strategies and initiatives aim to bring users and records closer together, creating the social links necessary for greater access in light of the demands and expectations of modern society.

Simplifying the requirements of access can remove barriers for those who lack the time or ability to engage with official archival retrieval systems. In the digital realm, aggregating information from a wide array of institutions can similarly create better access. John Pelan writes on the Scottish Council on Archive's plans to create a singular portal for accessing Scotland's archive collections, which would include records from universities, local authorities, and businesses (2018). Ian Johnston and Jane Stevenson have similarly worked within Salford University Library to ensure that all the various catalogues they held were available through a single search function by working alongside the Archives Hub (Johnston and Stevenson 2015, 44). Such a reorganization addresses challenges regarding skill sets.

Similarly, focusing on the finding aids and retrieval systems available to the user further renders access easier. Ali Shiri identifies Knowledge Organisation Systems (KOS) as a model for the effective and efficient organisation and retrieval of information (Shiri 2015, 178). KOS refers to a range of strategies for organising information based on discovery, and offers users a structure to facilitate item-level search functions. In light of the variety of information sources and formats in use, the need to create easily useable search systems becomes increasingly necessary (Shiri and Molberg 2005; Hodge 2000). Doing so, however, eases the burden of knowledge needed for access and facilitates increased use.

While institutions aggregate their information into singular interfaces, they have conversely increased the access points by which users can reach the said interface. Johnston and Stevenson note that, particularly in the online realm, a single route to access an institution's content is no longer practical or desirable (Johnston and Stevenson 2015, 44). In practice, archives have ensured their collections are available through major archival services, such as Archives Hub, or embedded links on the main website of their parent institutions. Such an approach increases the institution's reach, and thus, connects to a greater number of users.

Further, directly addressing challenges regarding perception, memory institutions have reoriented themselves within their communities and embraced a collaborative approach to building access. Wendy M. Duff and Jessica Haskell argue that memory institutions that embrace user-centric models of access integrate better to modern

realities of social media and instant access while also providing greater means of connections to under-represented groups (Duff and Haskell 2015). A 2001 Ipsos MORI survey attempted to go beyond the issue of how many people visit museums to understand 'who visits' and the purposes for their engagement (MORI 2001). It was this survey that revealed the shortcomings of memory institutions in regards to minority engagement, and emphasized the importance of forging new relationships with underrepresented groups.

Since then, work in the field has included research highlighting a designated community officer's role in developing a mutually supportive relationship with the wider community (Grut and Press 2015). Others have developed tools that improve hands-on access for local community organisations to archival catalogues (Ledauphin, Josi, and Siegrist 2020). Targeted approaches that take into account minority experiences strengthen ties between both, and the greater trust that results in increased access to archival records. Underlying this approach is the view of memory institutions as a common and public good rather than the protected property of an institution (Evans 2007, 394; Freeman 1984).

For example, Kristine N. Kelly, in her work on open access among art museums, found that in her study of eleven American museums, lowering restrictions and expanding access to a larger user base made negligible impact on their expenditures, and that 'the real and perceived gains far outweigh the real and perceived losses for every museum that has made a transition to an open access approach' (Kelly 2013, 24). Focusing on building social connections with their community, then, provides greater access by building trust and changing perceptions with a diverse base of users while maintaining their organisational processes.

Methodology

User Needs

Any evaluation of access must first consider whether the user has access to transportation

to an archive or library, or, in the digital realm, has a device with a connection to the internet.

Once proximity to the institution is established, a user needs the proper skill set to engage with the institution's retrieval system (Beattie 1997, 87). This can take the form of the archivists themselves who retrieve the item or an online system that connects the item and user. Determining the level of field knowledge the user has and the resulting level of assistance they need is important to consider.

Finally, cost must be considered. Institutions which require membership fees run the risk of excluding those with low income or no income at all. Even for institutions free to access, the cost must be considered when transport needs and educational resources incur expenditures that must be considered in any evaluation effort.

Data Collection

To properly conduct evaluation into access, both quantitative and qualitative data is necessary, so a mixed method approach would be most appropriate. To understand how access is implemented in practice requires data on the number of users of a particular institution and the number of requests made. There would also be a need for a review of both items held within the institution in question and the systems they employ. These statistics would reveal quantitative data on the volume and scale of relevance to evaluation (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, 127).

However, to properly understand the particulars of how access is both perceived and implemented, a qualitative approach is needed: to move beyond 'how many' to understanding 'who visits' (MORI 2001). When collecting data in this regard, the researcher must be careful to include in the data set those originating from diverse economic and demographic backgrounds to understand community access fully (Lilley and Moore 2013, 41). Combined with qualitative statistics, insight gained from these responses would provide valuable information on how and to what extent memory institutions are engaging with their community.

With regards to access, users will each have their own motivations and reasons

behind their interactions with memory institutions and any data must keep their context in mind. This entails understanding the demographic backgrounds of these users and the level of know-how and skill of each. Every case will be different and must be analyzed as individual cases before any overarching conclusions can be made.

Methods

With empathetic interaction in mind, participant observation, focus groups, and surveys offer promise in providing the qualitative data needed for evaluation. Participant observation will provide important insight into understanding the particulars of access as it inserts the researcher directly into the context being studied (Patton 2002, 268). Though consent and privacy considerations must be taken into account, seeking to understand the context where access takes place best provides the data needed for interpretivist research.

These methods can be complimented by data extraction targeting membership and usage rates of targeted memory institutions. The aim would be to gain the quantitative data necessary to investigate the meanings and motivations in context of said results. Combined, conclusions regarding the interactions and connections formed between user, archive, and record can be gained.

Conclusion

Access in light of memory institutions is the means by which users interact with the records held within them. The social connections formed by this process influence the perceptions, use, and policies of both institution and user and reorients the focus of how access is conceptualised. Evaluation efforts must investigate beyond retrieval systems and visitor numbers, and into the policies, decisions, and engagement efforts of these institutions regarding community engagement and outreach. They best do this by employing methodologies that properly examine the contexts where these interactions take place. Memory institutions would be best served by focusing their evaluation efforts on how they implement access, as it is through granting access to a pluralistic user base that archives and libraries can best navigate a fast changing world.

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