

Grazia Tatò¹

LET US CHALLENGE THE FUTURE TODAY

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Purpose of this paper is demonstrating how in recent decades, the use of archives has totally changed both in type, quantity, and manner.

Method: It was verified how the study rooms have gradually become just one of the ways by which scholars have approached the documentation.

Results: This change has also involved the archivists' way of working in the communication phase of the inventory: standards, networks, sites are born, both the research tools and the documents themselves have been increasingly digitized. The demand from users who are no longer just traditional scholars is more and more pressing.

Conclusions: Finally, the need to find new ways of communication imposed by the pandemic and by the limitations on the movement of users and the opening of archives was not irrelevant. New scenarios are thus being prepared that will certainly affect both the future work of archivists and the ways of studying the archives. To us all, the task of taking up this challenge.

Key words: archives, web, standard, users, communication

SFIDIAMO OGGI IL FUTURO

SINTESI

Scopo: Lo scopo di questo testo è quello di mostrare come in questi ultimi decenni l'utenza degli archivi sia cambiata in modo radicale sia nella tipologia che nella quantità che nei modi.

Metodo: si è verificato come le sale di studio siano via via diventate solo uno dei modi nei quali gli studiosi si sono andati avvicinando alla documentazione.

Risultati: Questo mutamento ha coinvolto anche il modo di lavorare degli archivisti nella fase di comunicazione della inventariazione: nascono gli standard, le reti, i siti, sono stati sempre più digitalizzati sia gli strumenti di ricerca che i documenti stessi.

In questa direzione si è fatta sempre più pressante la richiesta dell'utenza che non è più solo composta da studiosi tradizionali.

Conclusioni: Non ininfluente è stata la necessità di trovare nuovi modi di comunicazione imposti dalla pandemia e dalle limitazioni al movimento degli utenti e all'apertura degli archivi. Si stanno così preparando scenari nuovi che incideranno sicuramente sia sul lavoro futuro degli archivisti che sui modi di studiare gli archivi. A tutti noi il compito di raccogliere questa sfida.

Key words: archivi, web, standard, utenza, comunicazione

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SPREMENIMO PRIHODNOST ZDAJ

POVZETEK

Namen: Namen članka je predstavitev kako se je uporaba arhivskega gradiva spremenila po vrsti, kvantiteti in načinu v zadnjih desetletjih.

Metoda: Preverili smo, kako so študijske sobe postopoma postale le eden od načinov pristopa raziskovalcev k gradivu..

Rezultati: Ta sprememba je vključevala tudi način dela arhivistov v komunikacijski fazi: vzpostavljeni so standardi, omrežja, spletna mesta, prav tako so raziskovalna orodja in sami dokumenti vse bolj digitalizirani. Povpraševanja uporabnikov, ki niso več le tradicionalni učenci, so vse bolj pereča.

Zaključek: Potreba po iskanju novih načinov komuniciranja, ki jih nalaga pandemija z omejitvami gibanja uporabnikov in odpiranja arhivov, ni bila nepomembna. Pripravljajo se novi scenariji, ki bodo zagotovo vplivali tako na prihodnje delo arhivistov kot na načine preučevanja arhivskega gradiva. Naloga vseh nas je, da sprejmemo ta izziv.

1. PURPOSE

Once upon a time there was the study room ... there were swamped and titled users, there were archivists who dispensed competent advice, there were inventories and paper research keys ... there were, but are they still there? And if so, how did they change? In recent decades, the use of archives has changed dramatically both in terms of typology, quantity, and methods.

2. METHOD

Let us briefly examine these points.

Type, quantity, and methods.

In the past, the study rooms were frequented mainly by university professors, students engaged in the drafting of degree theses, some users who dedicated themselves to genealogical research, and some rare alternative characters in search of "strange" and fruitful things of sometimes disturbed fantasies. Users were in any case identified and identifiable, it was possible to talk to them, to deepen the motivations and purposes of the research. Today? Users are certainly much more varied and respond to different objectives, they are probably less prepared to face archival research, they are sometimes moved by curiosity and wandering around websites.

They will not find on-line an archivist ready to help, and they will find themselves alone in front of a screen.

The paths and indications that the archivists will be able to offer in this way, will be generic, not personalized as in the study room, and will often remain difficult to understand despite the commitment of those who worked to prepare the sites.

3. RESULTS

If inventory and rearrangement continue to respond to consolidated scientific criteria, those of communication have changed considerably.

The latter has increasingly become the key word around which the contemporary archivist must try his hand.

Standards, networks and sites, as well as the inevitable pressure of digitization have changed the rules of the game.

The archival description is traditionally conceived as an activity for archivists only, through which it is possible to develop useful representations for research and access to the documentation.

To carry out this activity they adopt a specific disciplinary technique: the description of the documentation and its sedimentation contexts is in fact modeled on the basis of a formal language of representation, that not only rests on the locally present archival tradition, but increasingly appeals to an articulated series of standards internationally set.

It could thus be argued that the result of this descriptive activity is the elaboration of highly codified archival information, with important consequences: the complexity of the aggregate information and the methodologies for their presentation lead to the production of research tools that need, in order to be fully understood and used, the mediation of the archivists, who thus undertake their decoding in favor of the users, a work that requires the archives to reveal themselves gradually, through successive phases, all however managed by the archivists who not only produce the tools access, but also guide their use by users.

However, the idea of extended archival mediation have recently to deal with the exponential development of web services, giving rise to a problematic encounter.

The traditional resources for accessing archives are in some ways inadequate for online management, especially in the concept of information as a dynamic phenomenon and in non-hierarchical ways. Furthermore, the scenario is made even more complex by the presence of web agents, since users do not always directly access archival information resources, but use automatic intermediation services offered by the network, such as search engines.

Archives on the web must once again be a sort of two-faced Janus: on one hand for the use of traditional users who are as free as possible from the mediation of archivists, on the other hand they must work properly for machine users using information retrieval algorithms.

All this involves difficulties in terms of language, hierarchical structure, search functions and ways of presenting information.

4. CONCLUSIONS

If the description of the documentation and its sedimentation and conservation contexts increasingly appeal to a series of international standards, the complexity of the information requires the mediation of archivists to decode it and to allow full understanding by the users.

On this already complex scenario, the pandemic has broken down, imposing the need to find new ways of remote communication due to the limitations on the movement of users, and the opening of Archives.

It was a strong push which, however, must not lead us to hasty and approximate solutions, but must engage the archival community to take up the challenge with seriousness and scientific rigor, in order not to offer a multiplicity of generic and "random" answers, letting oneself be carried away by the *modus mare magnum* of the web, or on the other hand from cryptic paths for professionals only, but striving to find the right scientific language, rigorous but understandable and aimed at what the user requests.

Hard? For sure, and quite a lot!

But archivists are not holding back and will face the challenge by creating mediation tools for archives that meet the needs of all users, even those with little or no experience, without betraying and debasing archival work.

It is a matter of moving from diversified points of view and from distinct disciplinary and cultural approaches, with the aim of promoting archival values in a substantially distracted society, bringing out the public, social, civic, and civil role, and of a democratic guarantee of archives.

Finally, the rapidly accelerating dematerialization does not allow us to consider archives only as a historical question. In all this, the archival science must necessarily have a central and decisive role, also making up for its delays.

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No typology.