

Are Targeted User-Centred Interfaces the Key to Facilitating the Conversion of the Traditional Non-User to a User of Archives?

Andrea Johnson (aj1@csmail.ucc.ie)

University College Cork

Archival digitisation brings limitless opportunities, the advantages of which are obvious; however in the race to exploit this new media fundamental user-centred design principles have been ignored.

Based on body of research undertaken recently in the UK (Sabin et al.), the Internet is now viewed as a key point of entry to archival services. This poster examines the issues surrounding traditional non-user groups and the challenges that the designer faces when designing an interface to facilitate their needs.

The poster session will afford the opportunity of presenting the first in a series of prototype user-centred designed interfaces that aim to actively support the traditional non-user thereby facilitating the conversion process to that of an archive user. It will also examine the need for a cohesive national digitisation strategy that sustains targeted, well designed interfaces.

Based on a MORI poll (2003) nine out of ten adults in the UK aged fifteen plus are classified as non-archive users. This figure indicates that there is vast scope to identify and target groups within the non-user classification with the aim to persuade them to use an archive service, whether that be locally, nationally or via the Internet.

The MORI poll found that one in four people stated that making information available on the Internet was especially important to them with over a third of respondents stating that they are most likely to use the Internet to research their family tree within the next two years.

These figures are promising and suggest that the intellectual barrier that exists on accessing archive material seems to be dissipating. This is supported by research undertaken by the LEADERS project who found that the majority of users in their survey, 60%, could be categorised as 'personal leisure' users as opposed to 22% categorised as 'professional or occupational' users (Sexton et al.).

In response to this shift within the traditional user profile a small body among the archival profession has begun to address the

need for a user-centred approach when developing new ways to support and develop archival access by online users. LEADERS is one such project that has examined different types of users and their requirements in order to develop a set of open-source tools that can be used by archivists to create online content (Sexton et al.).

Wendy Duff has called for the establishment of a global research network of archival user studies. Her work and that of her colleagues Joan Cherry, Catherine Johnson and Barbara Craig has focused on the information seeking activities of the user. She believes that a detailed understanding of the information seeking behaviour of different types of users is a pre-requisite to providing the archival services of the future (Duff).

This growing interest in end-users and how they seek and use information is a departure from the traditional archivist's rationale. Wendy Duff offers an explanation as to why end-users have traditionally been marginalised in the design process. "At the heart of archival theory is the record, not its secondary use nor the various types of researchers who visit archives seeking information" (Duff).

This marginalisation of the user manifests itself in the inadequate consideration given to them and their specific needs in many of the digitisation best practise guidelines; the focus being strongly on technical standards and material issues.

Therefore consideration must now be given to all types of users in order to encourage the next generation of archive users. The challenge that remote users bring is the inherent difficulty in their identification and classification of use, this information is vital when producing comprehensive user requirements. Without a detailed understanding of the user and their requirements, the fulfilment of the later is unlikely.

Amanda Hill acknowledges this in her research on the characteristics of users of online archival resources.

Users of our online services are just as important as users who enter our record offices and, if we are to form a clear picture of the overall use of our services, we need to ensure that there are processes in place to count those users

(Hill)

In order to engage key groups amongst the traditional non-users it is essential to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of what has gone before. With the advent of large scale digitisation projects it has become possible to undertake summative evaluations of the user's experience of archival digitisation.

My own research into a digitisation project highlighted the pressures of a publicly funded scheme and the ensuing problems of designing for the widest possible audience. As a consequence the user was insufficiently defined which resulted in a poor understanding of the user's requirements (Johnson).

The current process for bidding for funds for digitisation compounds this approach. In order to attract new archive users and offer previously 'unavailable' access of archival material to the individual, the user must be placed at the centre of the design process. One significant influence in this pursuit of converting the non-user has to be a cohesive digitisation strategy, with local projects uniting under an agreed national strategy. This could generate a co-ordinated system where the user could enter at any point and navigate according to their individual needs.

The need for a targeted approach is the focus of this poster presentation, the focus of my own research is targeted user interfaces supporting all levels of users. These prototype interfaces encompass all that user-centred design can convey and aid in actively supporting the user in sharing in the vast opportunities that archival digitisation affords.

A multi-method research strategy which reflects real life has been utilised to produce a variety of data that provides a rich picture of the current problem. A number of groups selected from the non-user classification have been identified as suitable subjects for prototype users.

Using both summative evaluations of existing digitisation projects and analytic analysis of prototypes, the design process is both iterative and ensures the empirical measurement of prototype usage.

With an early focus on user requirements and tasks, the prototype interfaces are to undergo a rigorous testing programme. Understanding the behaviour of users when seeking information coupled with the amount and type of information requires further investigation with consideration given to the presentation and the interpretation of archive resources.

The interfaces presented at the session will include many features that the evaluation of current projects have shown to be lacking or poorly designed. The features include a single directory to help potential users identify what information may be useful of interest to them, simple navigation tools, a comprehensive help system and appropriate information of the archive resources available to the user both locally, nationally and via the Internet.

All prototype interfaces conform to ISO Standards 9241 and 13407 and W3C guidelines.

This poster session marks the beginning of my research with the prototypes being the first in a series, each placing the user at the centre of the design process, which I believe is fundamental in securing new audiences for archive services via the Internet.

This targeted designed process hopes to overcome the restrictions that funding can often apply to these areas.

More research needs to be undertaken to examine at what point users stop using archival web resources and for what reason i.e. information overload, poor navigation etc.

Further research, in addition to what has already been produced by LEADERS (Sexton et al.), Duff and Hill is required into the types and categories of records users want to have digitised as most of the current projects have been driven by funding considerations.

"Review is vital" (MORI) therefore in an effort to ensure that archival digitisation delivers consequential accessibility, computer science has a key role in providing innovative solutions that actively sustain and promote the use by traditional non-user groups thereby encouraging new audiences to access archival material via this exciting media.

Bibliography

Duff, W. "Understanding the information-seeking behaviour of archival researchers in a digital age: paths, processes and preferences." *Proceedings of the DLM Forum 2002*. Luxembourg, 2002. Accessed 2005-02-17. <http://europa.eu.int/historical_archives/dlm_forum/doc/dlm-proceed2002.pdf>

Hill, A. "Serving the invisible researcher: meeting the needs of online users." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 25.2 (2004).

Johnson, A.C. *"The Mersey Gateway project: How was it for you?" A User Centred Evaluation of a Digitisation Project..* Dissertation, University of Lancaster, 2004, 1966.

MORI. *Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future. Annex D: Non-Archive Users Survey :Omnibus Study*. MLA Publications, 2003. Accessed 2004-11-03. <http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/atf_annex_d.pdf>

Sabin, R.W., and L. Samuels. *Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future. Annex E: Towards a better Understanding of Non-Users*. MLA Publications, 2003. Accessed 2004-11-03. <http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/atf_annex_e.pdf>

Sexton, A., C. Turner, G. Yeo, and S. Hockey. "Understanding Users: a prerequisite for developing new technologies." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 25.1 (2004).