48 years of personal archives: a historical user study in the Jewish national and university library's archives department / Rachel Misrati

Abstract:

This paper is a historical user study that focuses on the use personal archives in the Manuscripts and achieves department of the Jewish national and university library over a period of almost 50 years. The primary value of personal archives (as with all archives) today is seen to be its accessibility to users and its function in satisfying the information needs and information seeking behavior of researchers. The best way to measure this value to date is through user studies, which discern information needs and how the archives can best provide a solution to them all personal archives are unique: the JNUL houses archives of national importance and, because of Israel's special status in the Jewish world, of international importance too. As the literature shows, archives user studies are few but those that are being conducted and have been accomplished, concentrate on contemporary users. However, today's users are not working in a vacuum. In most archives ands archive departments; past use has influenced the way that the institution functions and the way its politics have been shaped.

The main overall research question of this historical survey was what information can be learned from the order slips and registration forms that have been filled in by users. The question was then divided up into more specific questions: whether there was a distinctive user profile for patrons of the department; which archives were the focus of users' information seeking behavior and if there were archives that were used more frequently than others; what could be learned from the relationship between research trends and the use of material in different periods and whether these new research trends affected the type of researcher or archival material used. The final question was concerned with how to apply the results to future policies of the department.

The research was carried out in the Manuscripts and Archives department of the Jewish National and University Library based on the order slips, registration forms and internal department notebooks that recorded use the archives. The study looked at the data provided by these sources every five years, beginning from the year 1959, when the department was officially recognized and user records began, to the year 2007, when the department was spilt into two: the Department of Archives remained and the Manuscript Department joined the Institute of Microfilmed Manuscripts. The year 198 was chosen instead of 1970 because of its proximity to the publication of the Israel State Archives list of personal archives and 2001 was chosen instead of 2000 because it way half between 1995 and 2007.

Because the user study was a historical one, an understanding of the history of the department, its establishment, collection policies and methods of working was an essential element in establishing the background and context

of the research. To this end interviews were carried out with directors of the department and important tacit knowledge was recorded.

The study was implemented in various stages. First, a list of personal archives in the department was made. Secondly, for each year in question, the data pertaining to personal archive use was separated from non-personal archive use and manuscript use. Thirdly a group of 47 'frequently used' archives was compiled from archives that had been used for a minimum of five times in any of the years in the study. A distinction was made between the number of times an archive was used and the number of users who used it. Finally, user data was collected from order slips from the 47 archives in the relevant years. Records from the department notebooks were also checked from the same years and registration forms were used as another source of data if information from the order slips and notebooks was not complete. Data recorded for building the user profile included the date, the user's name, his or her country of origins and their stated purpose for using the archive.

The results of the survey provided clear answers to some of the research questions though others were not answered in a particularly conclusive manner. From the data that was available it was possible to discern quite a clear user profile for patrons of the department. While over two-thirds of patrons were Israeli, the other third were foreign and almost a quarter of the frequently used archives had more foreign than Israeli users. The largest foreign group of users was Germans. Analysis of the statement of purpose meant that the users could be divided into 9 main groups. From these results it was apparent that there was a strong academic bent to the user profile.

The results also showed which archives was the focus of the users' information – seeking behavior and which archives were used more frequently than others. Patterns of archive use were discernable as users sought to satisfy their information needs and the influence of research trends as users and their use of the archival material were prominent in some cases, such as women's studies and Yiddish, and almost unnoticeable in orders, such as interest in non-canonical literary manuscripts.

The results of the survey are important for the future in various ways. Knowing who your users are and what material they use can be used to predict future use to a certain extent and this could be applied to decisions concerning acquisition accessibility through prioritizing in arrangement and digitization. The primary function of archival material as a source for research means that results relating to new research trends ad their effect on archive use can help the department evaluate the need to follow the change in these trends ad in interest in archives by different sections of the population to ensure that services is optimum and efficient.

The gaps in data, caused by an absence of questions on the order slips or registration forms or by unfocused questions, should lead to a redesigning of the slips forms in a way that gives the user the opportunity to provide all the providing the necessary information about himself to help the department

reassess its priorities in providing the best and most desirable service to its users.

The contribution of this research is on two planes, the historical and the applied. On the one hand it aims to fill in a part of the history of the Jewish National and University Library and the Hebrew University from an archival perspective, as this is the first such research that had been carried out on this department. From a theoretical perspective, it will provide a model for other archives or archives departments to carry out historical studies of user practices in their institutions.

This research will provide the basis for a second stage, which will not be covered here, where data is collected from contemporary users. Conclusions from the historical research both in methodology and data will contribute to building the research tools of the second stage, so that fuller picture of users in the department can be drawn up.

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