

Archiving as an Information Science. Evidence from a Survey Carried out on a Sample of Greek Students

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Abstract: *New technology has always been and certainly is today a key factor in the evolution of information. The emergence of archival science as an autonomous discipline and its integration into the wider field of information science is in many ways a result of recent technological developments. In this paper we present in summary a part of a survey carried out on a sample of Greek students (including students of library and archival science) that aimed to map and clarify perceptions of the archive among the students as well as their understanding on the nature of archival science.*

Keywords: *Archives, Records, Archival science, Information science.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Archival science has relatively recently evolved into an autonomous academic field utilizing new technology and as part of the broader discipline of information science (Couture, 1996; Giannakopoulos, 2008). The most significant problems it is expected to solve is the rapidly increasing mass of evidence produced by the administration authorities and the growing demand for free access of the public to archival information. Technological developments have offered not only new tools for managing records, but also new means of producing them. The fact that a large amount of archival material is currently being produced in electronic form demonstrates that the transition from hard copies to more fragile electronic substrata has already been achieved. The management (and especially the preservation) of electronic archives constitutes an object of study, research and discussion worldwide (Heldstrom, 1993; Moore, 2008).

Nevertheless, the most important change directly linked to information management concerns the broadening of archival science towards the direction of records management. The archivist is now directly associated with management, as he/she monitors the course of records from their creation to their safe keeping in perpetuity. This development is not solely associated with the equation between today's records and tomorrow's historical archives, but chiefly with the fact that their rational management is related, to an astonishing degree, to the orderly administration of an organization. The "global approach to archival science", i.e. the acknowledgement of the archivists' leading role in the management of both (active) records and

(historical) archives (Atherton, 1985), reinforces the informative character of archival science and creates a broader scientific and professional field (Ketelar, 2000).

II. EVIDENCE FROM A SURVEY

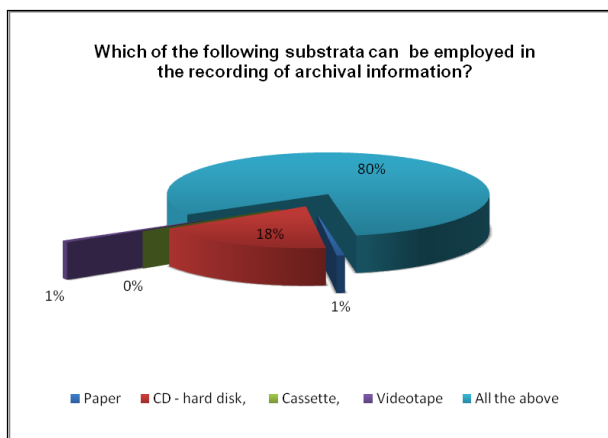
In fact, there were two separate groups that took part in this research. The first group (A) included 244 individuals, all of them Higher Educational Institutions (universities and TEI) students from almost all academic fields, i.e. technological, financial, scientific, social and humanitarian. The second group (B) contained 130 students from the three information schools of Greece (departments of Librarianship and Information Systems of the Technological Educational Institutions of Athens and Salonica and the department of Archival and Library Sciences of the Ionian University). What follows presents in comparison data from both surveys.

1. The first question was meant to investigate the respondents' level of familiarity with the meanings of the term "archive" (total amount of a legal or physical entity's evidence, archival service, building accommodating an archival service).

The choices contained no wrong answer, while only one of them was totally correct (all the above). The latter was chosen by an impressive percentage of 53% of the respondents in group A. The information schools students' point of view proved narrower, as only 37% picked the totally correct answer. Their majority (61%) chose the "easiest" answer: "an archive is the total amount of a legal or physical entity's documents".

2. The question was analogous to the first one (no wrong answer) and was associated with the substrata employed in the recording of archival information.

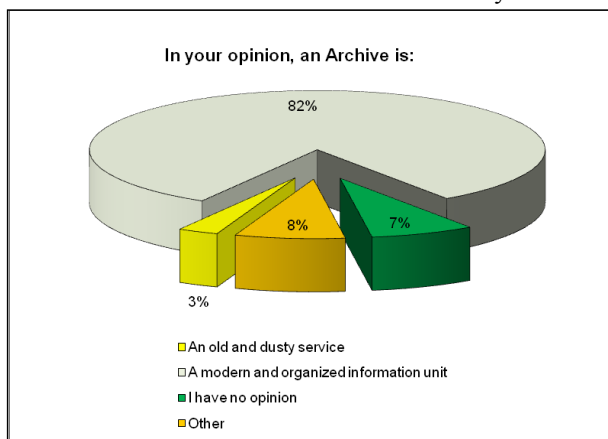
About 80% of the respondents replied that all suggested substrata can be used for storing archival information, thus appearing to comprehend that an archive is defined by its content, rather than its form. Of great interest is the fact that 18% of the respondents answered that archival information may be stored in CDs and hard discs; this, however, appears quite normal, as young people today are highly familiar with contemporary information storage substrata.



3. The third question aimed at finding out whether the theoretical knowledge in regards to the archive's definition that the students appear to have, may have a practical application. Therefore, we provided the respondents with five groups of material and asked them to choose which two could belong to an archive.

32% chose the "newspaper collection", thus making an expected mistake by expressing a rather common belief. The choice of the material group entitled "academic conferences' proceedings", which was made by 27% of the respondents, was also mistaken and suggests that the distinction between published (secondary) and archival material is a difficult one. The same mistakes, although by lower percentages (18% and 20% respectively), were also made by the information schools' students.

The correct choice of the material group entitled "historical documents associated with the 1821 Revolt" was made by 31% and 40% of the respondents in group A and B respectively. This should be probably attributed to the widely-established (although mistaken) belief that an archive is about old documents or evidence associated with significant historical events. It is the very same belief that led most of the respondents to erroneously rule out the material group entitled "your grandfather's correspondence". Although this material is fully consistent with the archive's definition, only 3% of the respondents (similar percentage in both groups) ended up choosing it; obviously, even the students in the relevant academic field were not "attracted" by it.



4. The question aimed at the investigation of whether an archive is known as a service (information unit) for the citizens' accommodation.

82% thought that an archive constitutes a "modern and organized information unit", whereas 5% replied that an archive is indeed an information unit, although not necessarily a modern and organised one. The answers of group B provided a quite analogous percentage (81% and 3%), which shows that the vast majority of students effectively comprehends the nature of the archival services' aim.

5. The question showed that the most widely-known archival service is the General State Archives.

23% of the respondents, who claimed to know an archival service (18 individuals in total), mentioned that this service was the General State Archives. The National Intelligence Service came second (15 individuals). This is a fully rational answer that shows that students believe that an archival service manages information. It should be noted, however, that the National Intelligence Service constitutes a producer of archival material, rather than an archival service. Possibly, this very same logic led a small number of students to include the National Statistical Service, the Register Office and the Town Planning Office. "The newspapers" and "the libraries" were mentioned by 13 and 8 students respectively. Lastly, 4 respondents mentioned the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive. One would indeed expect a higher position for this institution, which is widely-known in academic circles and boasts a dynamic promotion policy.

6. The question demonstrated the great significance that the national archival service is thought to possess.

96% of the respondents described the role of the General State Archives as "very important" or "important", regardless of their level of awareness regarding this role's essential meaning.

7. The question complemented the previous one and demonstrated that the vast majority of the respondents (91%) believed that the General State Archives address any member of the general public in need of archival information.

The corresponding percentage in group B was 87%. It is noteworthy that 6% gave the obviously mistaken answer, i.e. that the national archival service addresses... "students of specialized schools".

8. 48% of the students believe that an archivists has more chances to find a job at the General State Archives; by adding 19% and 27% of the respondents who chose "the government" and "a library" (in this case the percentages of group A and B were similar) respectively, one is led to the conclusion that 94% of the respondents think that archivists' professional future lies in the public sector. Thus, only 2% believe that private businesses could hire an archivist.

Information schools' students provided analogous answers. 53% of them consider the General State Archives as the most possible employer. Nevertheless, 11% think that private enterprises may employ an

archivist. This demonstrates that students are well-aware of the employment opportunities that they will hopefully be offered in the field of records management. 9. 52% of the students replied correctly that Librarianship and Archival Studies share some common elements (however, the following question indicated that 33% of them could not specify those elements properly). The answers establish the common informative basis shared by these disciplines, as well as their differences. 28% of the respondents claim that Librarianship and Archival Studies “coincide to a degree of 50%”; this answer may be viewed as analogous to the previous one, thus raising the percentage of students correctly accepting the common informative basis of both sectors to 80%. 18% maintained that they coincide as academic fields and 2% replied that they are totally unrelated.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions validate Greek society’s view of archives. Most of the answers entail the notion of accumulated (even irregularly in many cases) information or merely evidence. Two more parameters should be taken into consideration here: the connection with historical persons and events. Apparently, archives are viewed as temples of knowledge and information, inaccessible (and therefore important) to the average citizen.

Only few of the respondent (just 32%) know the General State Archives, while even fewer appear to be familiar with other archival services of particular interest is the fact that, according to this research, these archival services are less known than the National Intelligence Service, the National Statistical Service, the Register Office, the Town Planning Office, the “newspapers” and the “libraries”. We believe that these answers, by all means disappointing at first glance, are noteworthy, as they associate the meaning of archives with that of “intensive information repositories”.

Some of the answers regarding the electronic substrata and the information storage media seem to point towards this direction as well. Apparently, a large section of the respondents are familiar with the term “archive” may be also translated as “computer file”, through its various applications in computer science. Under this light, the term “archive” appears as an intricate sum of information (not exclusively of documents any more).

Even though no consistent definition of the archive seems to be in place among the sample of students on which this survey drew, there is a clear understanding of the archive as a source of information emerging from the questionnaires as a shared undisputed fact.

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