

Getting personal: shifting from traditional to digital services without losing our human (inter)face

A lot has changed since archivists started exploring the Internet, published catalogues online and (after some hesitation) collections as well. Powered by Web 2.0, meanwhile rapid changes occurred in the way archivists and users interact with each other online. These exciting developments challenged the former attitudes of colleagues world wide. As archivists, we were stepping outside our comfort zones, or letting the general public step inside ours. Currently we find ourselves at the next turning point: entering a stage in which our websites no longer merely offer convenient ways for researchers to prepare for their research at home, before they head for reading rooms. No, websites have become number one platforms for the actual research itself, with less need for location visits.

This trend is supported by the outcome of Dutch surveys amongst users of archives: in 2003, still 79% of the respondents had visited a reading room within the six months before the survey, in 2013 that percentage had declined dramatically to 49%, of whom 26% visited only once. However, the number of visitors to websites of archives had at the same time increased from 47% in 2003 to 82% a decade later. The way users visit archives and do research (in reading rooms or online) has turned around between 2003 and 2013. Another interesting outcome of the survey: of all respondents who said to be in need of support outside opening hours of archives, 36% mentioned live chat (68% mentioned e-mail) as a preferred way of receiving support. Yet currently only few Dutch archives provide such a «personal» online support service.

With that said, we reached a point where we lost eye on the majority of users of archives, simply because these users have gradually been moving away from visiting reading rooms, going online. And we have not moved with them, other than with database records and scan images.

However, traditional reading rooms offer more than what we currently offer through virtual «reading rooms» online. In fact, besides access to original resources, the added value of «physical» reading rooms for its visitors has always been in meeting other researchers, sharing information with each other, and most of all face-to-face contact with archivists for personal guidance through a maze of access tools and archives. The Dutch survey report of 2013 states that visitors of reading rooms value above all the expertise of the available staff, followed by staff 's friendliness and the quality of their answers. All three aspects are missing in virtual reading rooms. So in all efforts of digitizing everything, archivists are overlooking the one thing valued most by our users: themselves.

The best services of archives have always been personal attention and support of users. In today's world rapidly being digitized, society has started to recognize the value of personal contact. In the Netherlands, for example, shops and banks, where doing business on- line is today's standard, are advertising their live (video) chat services even on television. They use personal attention for their digital customers as their unique selling point. Since personal attention can not be automated, as archivists, we need to find ways of providing personal support through virtual research environments. In other words: how can archives bring back the archivist behind an online reference desk?

Currently BHIC provides two of such services: chat and forum. Chat has been provided from 2010 onwards, service is from 7–10 PM on weekdays in correspondence to the time frame during which our website is attracting most traffic. In 2015 until mid September, a total of 1500 chats has been answered: A perfect way for users of having personal assistance only a mouse click away, while doing research in the virtual reading room. Amongst users, chat is one of the highest valued services provided by BHIC. It is amazing what a picture of a smiling archivist in the corner of the screen does to a website visitor.

Yet even more exciting is providing service on forums. Not the most advanced tool one can imagine, however, many of the most active online communities use forums as their platform. By choosing its management strategy wisely, BHIC has «grown» a very active community on their forum, with close to 1000 messages each month in many topics. It is now a site where users from all over the world meet online, share information, answer each other's questions, and help newcomers with getting their research started. Archivists act as moderators, monitor if questions get answers, keep in touch with active members, and jump on discussion threads where they can add value, for example because of their specific knowledge of collections or search strategies.

The community feels «at home» in the forum, much like researchers feel at home in our reading rooms. Its personal nature, human-to-human interaction, has made the forum one of the biggest traffic attractions of BHIC website. Where chat is a digital alternative for the traditional reference desk, forums add mutual research assistance... and a virtual coffee table too!

Of course, services like chat and forum have their share of influence on the work of reference archivists at BHIC. This is due not only to shift hours and communication skills, but most notable in the role archivists «play» online. Instead of being a natural authority in answering reference questions, for example in a forum, an archivist is now just one of the many other community members. Your answer may not be the first or last, and may certainly not be the best for this question. Amongst users are many experts who may help «our» client better than we can.

Although seemingly simple, forums provide powerful many-to-many reference tools, in which archivists and researchers collaborate. BHIC archivists nowadays make use of the forum in a way they could not have imagined before, having become comfortable in forwarding reference questions to the forum community, where its users are able to answer more questions, a lot faster. Their trust in the community, and loss of control over some of their work processes, left archivists with the benefit of spare time, now available for reference requests which require their specific knowledge and skills. Most of all, each question gets the best, and fastest, personal attention possible, provided by either an archivist or another member of the online community.

However, as a profession, archivists have explored only a few of the many ways of enriching virtual reading rooms with their personal «presence». In the Netherlands, an education and research project started, in which students, teachers and archivists explore virtual research environments from different angles. One of the set themes being the human/professional and its role within this environment, its possible forms, and added value. But while exploring, learning more each day, for now my best advice to colleagues anywhere would be: Let's get personal online!

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Christian van der Ven, MA, is known in the Netherlands as «the digital archivist», for his blog about archives and innovation, for founding the Dutch Archives 2.0 network community, and for co-initiating the «23 Things for Archivists» web course in which archivists explored Web 2.0 and social media. At the Brabant Historical Information Centre (BHIC), he is involved in developing BHIC's online strategy, leading teams in exploring new ways of digital services.