COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF HISTORIC PRESERVATIONISTS

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Abstract: This paper reports the communication patterns and information needs of preservationists or cultural resource managers, a more recently used designation. It suggests strategies appropriate to the Information Age for meeting those requirements.

1. Introduction

Specialized information needs, including those of historic preservationists, have created demands for innovative information systems. Dissemination of both knowledge and technological advancements in specialized subject areas, such as cultural resource management, requires high performance systems which capture data in all forms, categorize and organize electronic information in a variety of formats, and simplify the utilization of networked databases. Communication technologies combined with computing capabilities have created high-speed networks capable of delivering electronic images and machine-readable data to individual workstations throughout the international community (Arms, 1990). It is time for preservationists to claim these technologies as their own.

Legislation (Reclamation Projects Authorization and Adjustment Act of 1992) establishing the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training at Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana, emphasized the need for information development and dissemination. The National Center is to coordinate research, disperse information, and provide training in preservation technologies. Watson Library personnel, in planning for the Center, immediately focused on a research project to identify communication patterns and information needs of historic preservationists.

The research was based on McCook’s (1992) observation, “Understanding the needs of the user for information and activating this understanding characterize the conceptual framework of the library and information profession,” and actuated by McClure’s (1992) urging of librarians to “…propose and define roles and responsibilities for networked services—services in the electronic age; …and to support research efforts that assist us to better understand how best to meet information needs.”
2. Review of Literature

A large body of pertinent literature is devoted to assessments of information needs, gathering behaviors, and uses by specific professions. The most comprehensive behavioral research was done by Garvey (1979) at the John Hopkins Center for Research in Scientific Communication. Garvey, a psychologist, stated:

...the librarian will have to become expert in the communication structure of science and in behavior of scientists within this structure. Inherent in this approach is the matter of librarians taking on the task of conducting such science "investigations" of the communication behavior of the constituency which they wish to serve.

Raitt (1988) studied the information needs of scientists and engineers. Siess (1982) investigated the information needs of engineers engaged in research and development. Collection and use of information by American historians was addressed by Case (1991). Crawford (1971) reported on informal communication among scientists in sleep research, and Bichteler and Ward (1989) investigated information-seeking behavior of geoscientists. Although the literature identified some broad, encompassing factors impacting the historic preservation field and its information needs (Chittenden, 1991), no study was found that dealt directly with information-seeking behavior patterns of historic preservationists.

Any consideration of information services in the electronic age necessarily involves rapidly advancing technologies. "Virtual library" is a term frequently employed in library literature as the 21st century approaches. Saunders (1993) defines the term:

A virtual library is a system by which a user may connect transparently to remote libraries and databases using the local library's online catalog or a university or network computer as a gateway...assuming, of course, that the necessary information—whether bibliographic, journal citations, or full text—is stored in a computer somewhere in digital format.

Numerous authors have addressed the necessity of relating the technology of the "virtual library" to the needs of the user. Representative are Hewin's (1990) observation of the user-centered nature of new ways of handling information and Penniman's (1991) advocacy of the user's viewpoint: facilitating access to information, assuring preservation of recorded information, organizing information to enable retrieval, providing equal opportunity for access to information, and promoting the use of information. Increasing numbers of libraries are adopting the new concept of a "library" and implementing sophisticated technology on behalf of users (Arms, 1990; Casorso, 1992, 1991; Chantiny, 1992; Condrey, Phillips, & Presti, 1993; Fleischhauer & Rowe, 1992; and McLaughlin, 1993;

But will the new electronic library fit the communication patterns and meet the information needs of historic preservationists? To begin answering that question one must examine theories of communication. Shale and Garrison (1990) quoted from Schramm: “Communication is now seen as a transaction in which both parties are active.” Verduin and Clark (1991) indicated, “To be effective, communication should flow multidirectionally (to all people concerned) and should be two-way in nature.” Rogers (1986) spoke to the interactivity of computer networks stressing that new technologies “...are forcing basic changes in communication models,” and citing the desertion of the earlier model of communication, which assumed information as a concrete entity that could be moved around, for a newer one: “...a cyclical, two-way process over time,” a theory that acknowledges context and the interrelationship of the communicators.

Rogers (1986) recognized “communications networks as consisting of interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned flows of information.” Convergence and time were essential elements in the model: communication research becomes an “analysis of a series of cycles of information exchange over time.”

3. Description of the Study

The researchers developed a four-page questionnaire consisting of thirty-two items, using the model prepared for the American Psychological Association by Griffith and Miller (1969). The instrument was sent to five persons for validation, and suggested revisions were made to the instrument. The 1993 Membership Directory of the Association for Preservation Technology International was used to identify leaders in the field representing 19 professional areas. Respondents were asked to name additional persons in the field who could provide information relative to the study, and instruments were sent to them as well. Significantly, only 21 of those named by the respondents were not included in the original sample. Respondents totaled 180 and represented seven countries, 34 states of the United States, and Washington, DC. To ensure that responses represented the selected sample, telephone interviews were conducted with ten non-respondents using a random sampling technique.

3.1 Demographic data

Seventy-three percent of the respondents were male, 38% were between the ages of 30-39, 66% between the ages of 40-59, and 21% were over the age of 60. Highest level of academic degree held included: bachelor’s degree, 21%; master’s degree, 59%; and doctorate, 10%. When asked to identify bachelor’s and master’s levels major fields, respondents listed 61 and 53 areas, respectively. Architecture, history, engineering, and art/art history were the undergraduate
disciplines most frequently cited. Graduate study was most prevalent in the fields of historic preservation and architecture. Some respondents (n=19) did not possess academic degrees. Ninety-one percent of the respondents indicated that current work assignments relate to the area of specialization.

3.2 Sources of information.
Eighty-nine percent of the respondents stated that they read journals on a regular basis, with 11% reading more than six journals per month. Other forms of communication used to obtain/share information in the field included:

- Telephoning others: 92%
- Using libraries/information centers: 83%
- Writing memos/letters to others: 82%
- Talking with colleagues in the same agency: 78%
- Utilizing document delivery services: 63%
- Visiting other agencies/institutions: 61%
- Exchanging manuscripts: 43%
- Exchanging reprints: 16%

In addition, conferences, newsletters, and electronic data services were listed as forms of communication utilized.

3.3 Uses of Information
Responses indicated that information is used most often for projects (83%) or reports (80%). Other uses included: speeches (60%), publications (50%), workshops (38%), and grant writing (20%).

3.4 Resources for Locating Information
Respondents were asked to rank resources as to usefulness in locating information, with a rank of one (1.0) being most useful. The types ranked as most useful were personal books (3.3) and personal files (3.4), research (4.5) and trade journals (4.9), office files (5.7), conferences (6.6), and trade papers (6.8). Electronic resources were among those listed as least useful: online databases (10.7) and CD-ROM indexes (12.5). Journals identified as major resources included: APT Journal, Historic Preservation (NTHP), Old House Journal, Traditional Building, Society of Architectural History Journal, Architecture, Progressive Architecture, Journal of ICOMOS, Cultural Resources Manager Bulletin, Technology and Conservation, AIC publications, and Association for Industrial Archaeology Bulletin.

3.5 Experiences in Seeking Information
The majority of respondents (52%) indicated that they are self-reliant in seeking information, 21% depend on colleagues, 15% use assistants/students, and only 12% rely on librarians or information professionals. Personal effectiveness in
locating information was rated as excellent/skilled by 42%, satisfactory by 54%, and unsatisfactory by 3%. Frustrations in the use of information included:

- Time involved in searching: 66%
- Inadequate indexing: 50%
- Lack of physical access to resources: 44%
- Lack of familiarity with electronic databases: 40%
- Lack of electronic network access: 36%
- Time delays in obtaining materials: 35%
- Lack of relevant databases: 26%
- Cost: 23%
- Lack of quality information: 23%

Other dissatisfactions included lack of abstracts (14%), changing terminology (13%), imprecise vocabulary (11%), and foreign language formats (12%).

### 3.6 Electronic Resources

Seventy percent of the respondents indicated that their institutions/agencies do not provide access to online electronic databases; however, 60% stated that they would like access to this service. The number of respondents and type of databases used included: bibliographic (n=71), subject specific (n=66), project oriented (n=55), and full-text (n=16). Other less used databases were statistical and demographic. Fifty-eight respondents reported that their agencies/institutions have developed internal databases. These basically reflect in-house activities, consisting of bibliographies of documents, compliance reports, business contracts, federal orders, or specialized databases such as the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings and the U.S. National Parks Service HABS/HAER Database. Only 33% indicated that their effectiveness in using electronic databases was satisfactory.

Electronic services with which respondents are familiar included: e-mail (35%), Internet (24%), electronic bulletin boards (19%), and CompuServ (16%). Others less frequently cited were DIALOG, LEXIS, NEXIS, NSFNET, RLG/RLIN, and AATA. Few respondents (2%) indicated that they use electronic databases on a regular basis (i.e., two times per month). Reasons for nonuse included:

- Lack of equipment: 37%
- Lack of skills/confidence: 37%
- Project did not require online searching: 30%
- Project did not fund online searching: 25%
- Lack of time: 24%
- Lack of administrative support: 17%
- Additional time required: 10%
- Negative feelings about use of computers: 5%
4. Recommendations

An analysis of the data provided by respondents to the survey indicates that the historical preservationist/cultural resource manager operates in a specialized arena, has a need for technical information, desires resources that will provide distant access to information, wants information about and training in the use of new technologies and electronic resources. The cultural resource manager is dedicated to preserving the past for the future. To accomplish this mission it is increasingly critical to employ the "tools of the future."

Specific recommendations for implementing and/or improving information services to this group include:

1) Increase both private and public access to online information;
2) Enable connections between databases developed by individual agencies;
3) Encourage development of standardized terminology and/or natural language searching techniques;
4) Provide current contents type information for appropriate publications;
5) Increase information literacy;
6) Expand and actively market document delivery services;
7) Cultivate appreciation for the expertise of the information specialist;
8) Initiate cohort groups to foster usage of Internet, electronic bulletin boards, and e-mail;
9) Develop contractual information services focusing on the unique needs of various entities within the field;
10) Establish clearinghouses to solicit, index, abstract, and disseminate the vast interdisciplinary information critical to the field.

5. Conclusion

Preservationists are a particularly interesting group to study because of their disparate preparation and varied experience. An analysis of their communication habits and information-seeking patterns leads to the overarching conclusion that the virtual library, with its interactive nature, can serve them well. For it to do so, however, will require resolving an existing dichotomy of the field: ensuring the accuracy and comprehension of information vs understanding how information is structured and organized. Preservationists must accept, as Gilmore (1989) argued, that "intellectual and physical control of resources go hand in hand."

Recognition of communication concerns, both in knowledge and technology, provided the impetus for establishing and identifying the major goals of the National Center. The new information technologies can assist in developing solutions to these concerns. Information specialists have a major role to play in de-
signing services and resources to improve technological research and information transfer for this diverse, multi-disciplinary clientele. This study of preservationists' communication patterns should facilitate that role.

References


