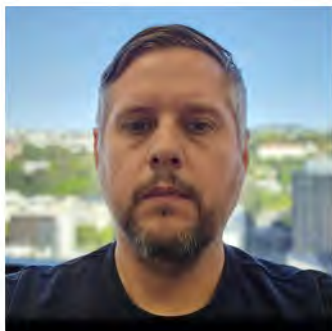


Investigating the portrayal of archives in the New Zealand press, 2013–2023

Peer-reviewed article



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ABSTRACT

There is little analysis of press articles that report on archives, especially those from New Zealand, and archives are underrepresented in news media analysis in comparison to libraries and museums. The research outlined in this article describes the themes and topics present in written news articles, and the general sentiment of press coverage of archives. Research was undertaken in the form of a qualitative content analysis of press articles published by major New Zealand news organisations over a ten-year period. It found that portrayal of archives by the New Zealand press is generally positive, any negative sentiment tending to align with constructive critique rather than cynicism or promotion

of stereotypes. Themes including digitisation, funding concerns, and access to collections are commonly presented by the press, which in turn may influence the perception of archives by the public.

INTRODUCTION

The written press is still a popular and influential source of news and information for the general public.¹ In completing my *Master of Information Studies*, I undertook a research project investigating the portrayal of archives in the New Zealand press, and the impression and image of archives that is presented to the readers of news articles. I analysed the themes present in press coverage of archives and measured the sentiment of this coverage. The purpose of the research was to better understand how news articles can affect the perception of archives, and how this might influence engagement with archival institutions and their collections. This article summarises the background, methodology, and findings of the full research report.²

Archives are poorly understood and often ignored by the public when compared with other knowledge institutions such as museums and libraries.³ It is therefore important for archives

to inform the public and other stakeholders of their purpose and activities, as this can lead to improved engagement with archival collections, and potentially better outcomes for archives in terms of donations, public support, and funding.⁴

Newspapers and online news articles are still considered an important and credible source of information for most people in New Zealand.⁵ The written press is still regularly engaged with, and mainstream news media commands a much higher level of trust among New Zealanders than social media.⁶ Due to this trust and broad reach, the press is highly influential on the knowledge absorbed by its readers and correspondingly the readers' attitudes to a particular subject. Considering there is already an identified lack of understanding of archives and archival institutions,⁷ it is important that the press is portraying archives and their activities truthfully and accurately. Throughout this article, I have used the term *press* to describe the news industry and the written articles they publish, rather than the more inclusive term *news media*, which incorporates text, video, audio, and other media formats and their creators.⁸

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several studies analysing portrayal of the information professions in various

types of media, both fictional and non-fictional. A 2006 study focused on the information professions, and how they were portrayed by the Australian press.⁹ The objective was to compare the representation of information professionals with common stereotypes, via a content analysis of two newspapers – one national and one regional. The study found that media portrayals were more positive and more diverse than hypothesised, not leaning on stereotypes as much as anticipated. It noted that archivists were portrayed more favourably than librarians, which was consistent with previous research, however there was not much investigation as to why this was the case, and the small number of articles about archivists in the study made it difficult to read much into this finding.

There are few, if any, recent studies specifically investigating archives or archivists in an analysis of press portrayal, but there are studies that discuss archives – or archivists – in other forms of media. A 2015 study focused on the portrayal of archivists specifically, investigating how they were portrayed in feature films.¹⁰ The study considered the idea that the public was generally uninformed about the archival profession, and that films commonly reinforced stereotypes to the public, in a similar way to news media and other sources. Films featuring archivists were

identified and analysed based on a checklist of stereotypes and themes from existing literature. One key finding was the common representation of archivists as gatekeepers of information and their use as a plot point in films when access to information needed to be restricted in some way. This concept of archival “power” was expanded on by Greene (2009), noting that although archivists wield considerable power by nature of their roles and responsibilities, they often do themselves no favours in terms of promoting their profession, arguing that archivists have a responsibility to communicate who they are and what their role is to the communities they are part of.¹¹

A common theme in the literature is the concept of an image problem in the information professions. A mixed-methods study of the portrayal of the information professions in a major Slovenian newspaper discussed whether this image problem was reflected in the press, and whether the portrayal shifted over time when considering changes in the political environment and in the education of information professionals over a period. An attempt was made to connect the perceptions to the factors that influenced them. Other studies continued the theme of concern about negative stereotypes of the information professions being promoted in the media, and noted a lack of understanding from the

public of what staff in information roles actually do.¹³

It is important to understand why the press is an influential source of information for the public. In the context of the rise of social media as a news source, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, a 2022 study investigated the trust that the New Zealand public has in the news media, compared with levels of trust overseas.¹⁴ The study compared a survey of New Zealanders taken in 2020 with a 2019 survey by Reuters across 38 other countries.¹⁵ The resulting insight was that New Zealanders had a relatively high level of trust in the media when compared with people from other countries – affecting how the public could be influenced by media articles, including those relevant to archives.

There are no recent peer-reviewed articles specifically analysing the media portrayal of archives – and none in the New Zealand context at all. There are however three older North American articles that discuss the subject. The first article analysed 300 newspaper articles from a three-year period in the mid-1980’s.¹⁶ In parallel with the broader studies of the information professions mentioned earlier this focused on stereotypes and image,¹⁷ but the tone of the findings was more negative, mentioning “cynical” media coverage and the “oppressive” stereotype of the

archival environment. It was noted that news media and the public had a lack of trust in government institutions – including archives – which manifested itself in contempt even though they were largely unfamiliar with archival institutions. The second study again discussed stereotypes and cynical media coverage of archives, but also noted the tension between this coverage and the role of archives as an important source of historical and cultural context for the press.¹⁸ Finally, a review of articles in the New York Times over an eight-month period in the early 1990’s described archives as an “authority” called upon for information, mirroring the concept of archives as a source of truth and context that the press relied on.¹⁹

A Master of Library and Information Studies research report focusing on public libraries was the only literature I could locate describing portrayal of information professions – not archives specifically – in New Zealand.²⁰ This again presented a more negative portrayal, however, it did not delve deeply into the reasons. The study did describe the dependency of individuals on media information sources and discussed the importance of institutions cultivating their public profile.²¹

Archives have an important role to play in their community, reflecting and describing the community and its people, and storing their collective memory.

Battley (2019) gives context to this role and discusses the importance of community access to, and involvement with archives.²² This is based on the concept that once items are placed into an archive, they are removed from their original context in the community, and effort must be made to minimise this disruption. Relating this to the Records Continuum model, archivists must consider the impact of *place* on how people experience records, throughout the life of the record.²³ This level of community access and engagement requires open dialogue and communication between the archive and its community, with the press potentially providing a reliable and practical means for this to occur.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of my research was to investigate and analyse how archives are represented in the press in New Zealand, identifying the themes, topics, and coverage of archives and archival institutions, and the overall sentiment of press coverage. This could increase understanding of the portrayal of archives, and potentially inform the strategies of archival institutions when engaging with their communities via the press. The research was guided by the following research questions:

Q1. How have archives been portrayed in the New Zealand

press over the studied period [January 1, 2013, to January 31, 2023]?

- a). What is the sentiment (positive or negative) of press portrayal of archives?
- b). What are the recurring themes in the press portrayal of archives?

Q2. Which recurring themes in the coverage of archives in the New Zealand press could influence the perception of archival institutions by the public?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I used a qualitative research strategy for my project. As the intent of the research was to analyse the subjects, themes, and sentiment of press articles, a qualitative analysis allowed me to achieve this more effectively than a quantitative study,²⁴ letting me focus on the underlying meaning of the articles and work in a flexible and iterative manner. The use of qualitative analysis to investigate press portrayal of various subjects is common in the existing literature, and qualitative content analysis is an accepted and effective strategy for description of textual data.²⁵

The research methodology was a qualitative content analysis of a selection of written news articles, chosen to be representative of media communications around archives. Qualitative content analysis allows the identification of themes, patterns, and biases in the articles, by comparing them with

a defined list of characteristics.²⁶ Content analysis is a method frequently used for analysis of media coverage in the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (GLAM) sector, with a few – mostly older – articles analysing archives or archivists via content analysis of newspapers,²⁷ or other media.²⁸

The analysis included press articles published from January 1, 2013, to January 31, 2023, inclusive – allowing the collection of enough meaningful data. I chose to focus on recent articles due to the swift changes in the media landscape in recent times, including the rise of social media as a primary news source for many people, and the rising topicality of misinformation around contentious topics.²⁹ There was also very little recent analysis of archives-related press articles in the literature, particularly in New Zealand.

I included in my analysis articles published in the three major national and regional press sources in New Zealand over the specified period – *Stuff*, *New Zealand Herald*, and *Otago Daily Times*. These three sources cover the majority of New Zealand's population,³⁰ and include a mixture of national, regional, and local news articles. Each press source publishes its articles online and can be searched with common search engines.

To capture a complete picture

of the portrayal of *archives*, it was important to define what archives are, and which related areas and subjects were to be included. Archives can be collections of permanent records held in a repository; the organisation that manages the archival collections; or the buildings or repositories that house the records.³¹ I included articles relevant to all three definitions in my research, covering national and regional public archives, collecting archives, community archives, and the archives of corporations and families. I included digital, physical, and hybrid repositories. In addition, I also included articles focusing on *archivists* – the people and the profession.

Searching for articles was completed via a *Google* search, then a search of *Newztext Plus*, an index of New Zealand newspapers and publications. Using two different indexes ensured I was capturing as many relevant articles as possible. I searched for simple keywords, starting with *archive*, *archives*, and *archivist*. This approach to content gathering has been used in recent studies of the press, such as those focusing on populist online content and political unrest,³² and media bias.³³ I found that other similar terms – *archival*, *Archives New Zealand*, even *records management*, did not return any additional relevant articles.

Searching was undertaken in a private browser window with no accounts signed in, to minimise the

risk of my own digital footprint influencing the search results. Potentially relevant articles were selected based on headline and description from the search results. I skim read each potential article and discarded any that:

- Were unrelated to archives in the context of my research, or only had a fleeting mention of archives in an otherwise unrelated article. This included articles using phrases like “trawling through the archives” in a general sense;
- Were unrelated to New Zealand;
- Were not in English – I had no resource for translation, and most non-English articles had a translated or equivalent article available;
- Contained primarily video, audio, or multimedia content that could not practically be extracted to a text file;
- Were exact textual duplicates of articles already included in the collection;
- Had no obvious publication date.

For each identified article I recorded metadata, including the headline, author (if known), publisher, and publication dates, among other data. I stored each article as a plain text file and stripped out any elements that were not required for my analysis – promotional material, image captions, and related article links. This left just the headline, byline or author (when specified), publication date, and body text.

I included paywalled articles in my analysis. Repeating all the above searches using *NewzText Plus* returned a good number of articles that were not returned by the *Google* search, however it also missed a number of articles that *Google* included. I am confident that between these two searches, almost all relevant articles (n=241) from the period were detected. This thorough approach to searching and data collection resulted in an accurate and reliable data set, which was consistently arranged, and appropriately formatted for analysis.³⁴

I used *NVivo* – qualitative content analysis software – to match sections of the text in each article against a coding scheme, categorising the various themes and topics present in the articles. I used an inductive approach to coding – creating and assigning categories and sub-categories based on the articles being analysed and allowing the categories to emerge – rather than a deductive approach using pre-existing coding categories or frameworks. This strategy of emergent coding grounds the coding framework in the article data, reflecting the themes present.³⁵ In a more practical sense, there was not a recent coding framework available that would closely fit my data. As inductive coding is a fluid process, the coding framework was modified and updated as coding progressed through the articles.³⁶ I undertook two coding passes of all

articles, with a phase of reflection and adjustment after the first phase of coding.

All actions undertaken on the data were logged, to increase transparency and reproducibility of results.³⁷ Some articles covered multiple themes, while others were more focused on a single theme. I separated out any articles that – in my opinion – did not meet the threshold for inclusion in my analysis. Reasons included having only a brief mention of archives in an otherwise irrelevant article, or being more concerned with library materials or current public records. Once all non-relevant articles were excluded there were 177 articles included in the analysis.

In addition to identifying themes, I also coded the general sentiment – or tone – of each article on a scale (*very positive/moderately positive/moderately negative/very negative*), based on my impression when reading the article. Finally, I coded the types of archival institution discussed in each article, from a list of *Collecting Archive, Community or Regional Archive, Corporate or Organisation Archive, National Archive, and Personal Archive*.

This research approach did have some limitations. Firstly, qualitative content analysis can identify and describe the themes and sentiments present in the data but is unlikely to identify what causes these themes and sentiments to occur.³⁸ There is also a possibility of relevant articles

existing that are not indexed by search engines or media databases, affecting the completeness of the data set – I believe the risk of this was minimal. I also noticed a recency bias in my collected articles – there were more articles available via search from recent years when compared with the earlier years of my search period. I am unsure what caused this – perhaps more articles were published recently due to most press publishing now being available online, meaning less consideration of space on newspaper pages.

As I was the sole person responsible for the collection, coding, and analysis of data, there was the potential for unconscious bias in the categorisation of articles and their associated themes. I attempted to mitigate this as far as possible by having a robust and well supported search strategy, consistent and specific conditions for article inclusion, and including detailed process documentation. I did not have the resources to use multiple people for coding or triangulate my results with other data.³⁹

RESULTS AND FINDINGS OF ANALYSIS

My final coding framework consisted of four primary codes – or pillars – each with several subcodes covering the full range of media portrayal:

- *Collection Management*
- *Community Relations*

- *Organisation Functions and Resources*

- *User Experience and Access*

These pillars summarise the types of activities undertaken by archival institutions, and the ways they communicate about these activities with the public and other entities. In addition to these archival pillars, there were two further relevant top-level codes, each covering an overriding characteristic of the articles, but not necessarily describing the article content directly – *Institution Type*; and *Article Sentiment*.

COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

Management of collections was a theme present in over 60% of the articles (n=111). This included sub-themes consistent with the core functions of archival management, especially the acquisition, storage, and maintenance of physical and digital collections.⁴⁰ *Acquisition and Accession, Digitisation, and Preservation* (both *Physical* and *Digital*) were popular topics. *Arrangement and Description* was a theme only mentioned in a single article – this perhaps reflects its nature as an internal process, compared with external-facing services which could intersect more with public interest. See *Fig. 1. on next page*.

Articles concerning *Acquisition and Accession* were primarily concerned with donations of items from various sources, and discussion about the circumstances

Code	Number of Articles*
Collection Management	111
Acquisition and Accession	33
Arrangement and Description	1
Digitisation	45
Handling Iwi Collections	6
Preservation	46
<i>Digital Preservation</i>	19
Public Recordkeeping	11
Security	15
<i>Data and/or Privacy Breach</i>	12

Figure 1. Collection Management code results (*some articles feature multiple codes).

of these acquisitions. These articles tended to be celebratory in nature, with archives' promoting and sharing details of their latest acquisitions. They often intersected with *Outreach* themes, usually *Requests for Content*, or promotion of events where some details of the internal workings of archives were discussed.

Digitisation was discussed or mentioned in a quarter (n=45) of all articles analysed and was a major topical theme with considerable interest from the media. Articles regarding digitisation intersected with many other coded themes, across different types of archival institutions. The most common of these intersections were with *Online Access* (by collection users), *Outreach*, and *Digital Preservation*.

Articles on *Preservation* (n=46) included 19 articles discussing or mentioning digital preservation, meaning the majority of preservation articles were concerned with actions on physical collections. Archives still hold vast physical collections and the

number of press articles covering physical preservation appear to reflect that. Most of the digital preservation articles were published from 2019 onwards, suggesting that this is a growing area of interest. Security of collections also appears to be a growing concern, with only a single article mentioning it prior to 2019, and then 14 articles since, reflecting recent high-profile data breaches and security incidents affecting archival institutions. Whether this is the beginning of a long-term escalation of security concerns is yet to be seen.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Many articles (n=85) discussed how archives interact with their surrounding community, whether the public, other institutions, or particular groups. Sub-themes include *Outreach* (n=46), *Using Collections for Research* (n=26), and *Collaboration Between Institutions* (n=20). Archival institutions regularly used press articles for outreach to the community –

Code	Number of Articles*
Community Relations	85
Collaboration between Institutions	20
Gaps in Archival Knowledge	10
Māori	9
Outreach	46
<i>Display and Use of Collections</i>	24
<i>Public Events</i>	18
<i>Request for Content</i>	12
Using Collections for Research	26

Figure 2.

Community Relations code results (*some articles feature multiple codes).

including promotion of events and exhibitions, and requesting content for their collections. *Using Collections for Research* was a relatively common theme in articles, often as part of a larger article where a researcher called on the services of an archive, and commonly included their feedback on the user experience. *See Fig. 2.*

Finally, *Collaboration* articles mostly focused on a small number of critical projects, especially those involving public funding and large public institutions. Several articles discussed collaboration between these larger institutions and regional libraries or museums. There was little discussion in the press of collaboration between smaller institutions, outside of those which shared the same premises or parent organisation.

ORGANISATION FUNCTIONS AND RESOURCES

The theme of *Organisation Functions and Resources* (n=95) described functions of institutions that did not involve the direct management of archival material.

The largest sub-theme was *Buildings and Physical Repositories* (n=43), closely followed by – and often associated with – *Financial* (n=35). Articles mentioning *Personnel* (n=23) – both paid staff and volunteers – were also common.

Articles around buildings and physical repositories were another example of press interest, potentially due to the use of public funding and a desire for public institutions to use this funding efficiently. There was also a promotional element to these articles, advertising the intention to build, upgrade, or modify their physical spaces, and celebrating when work was completed. On a less positive note, there were also articles bemoaning the poor condition of physical repositories, sometimes repeatedly over several years. *Financial* topics were a regular concern for the press, conversely, funding was celebrated by archives when approved or received, whether from public funds or private donations. *See Fig. 3. on next page.*

Figure 3.

Organisation Functions and Resources code results (*some articles feature multiple codes).

Code	Number of Articles*
Organisation Functions and Resources	95
Buildings and Physical Repositories	43
Financial	35
History of Archives	9
Personnel	34
<i>Volunteers</i>	11
Political Relations	10
Vendor Relations	8

Code	Number of Articles*
User Experience	54
Frustration	9
Online Access	20
Physical Access	17
Restrictions	15
Searching and Finding Aids	10

Figure 4.

User Experience code results (*some articles feature multiple codes).

Personnel articles focused in most cases on the achievements and hard work of both paid staff and volunteers, as well as their experiences in the world of archives. Some articles profiled archivists and other repository staff, either introducing them to the community, or recognising a long career.

USER EXPERIENCE

The theme of *User Experience* – whether positive or negative – was present in around 30% of articles (n=54). These articles could be important for archival institutions, as access to collections is a driving principle of archives, with all other archival management functions arguably contributing to the goal of making archival materials available for use.⁴¹ They expressed

how users interacted with the archive, and how satisfied they were with their interactions. There were similar levels of coverage of *Online Access* (n=20), and *Physical Access* (n=17), with both being important. Some articles talked of users experiencing *Restrictions* on access (n=15) whether deliberate – as in restricted collection items, or not – such as technical problems with systems. While access issues could be a source of frustration, there was also positivity around the relatively open access to collections in New Zealand, especially digital collections. See Fig. 4.

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

All articles were coded to a sentiment, based on the overall tone of the article. Overall sentiment of articles was 75.14%

Sentiment	Number of articles	Percentage with sentiment (%)
Very Positive	60	33.90
Mostly Positive	73	41.24
Positive (Total)	133	75.14
Very Negative	11	6.21
Moderately Negative	33	18.65
Negative (Total)	44	24.86

Sentiment	Number of articles	Percentage with sentiment (%)
Very Positive	60	33.90
Mostly Positive	73	41.24
Positive (Total)	133	75.14
Very Negative	11	6.21
Moderately Negative	33	18.65
Negative (Total)	44	24.86

positive and 24.86% negative, suggesting that the press was generally publishing articles that positively portrayed archives, but around one in four articles were negative in tone. When the sentiment data for each article was compared with the type of archival institution discussed in the article, or the themes explored by each article, the picture was a little more complex. See Fig. 5.

Articles discussing *Regional or Community Archives*, *Collecting Archives* and *Corporate or Organisation Archives* were primarily positive, with negative articles mostly restricted to national-level institutions, and to a lesser extent regional (public) archives. This does reflect the types of articles published about

different archive types, with public institutions receiving more scrutiny of their operations. Although national-level archives were portrayed a lot less positively, there were still more positive articles than negative ones overall. See Fig. 6.

Themes that were portrayed particularly positively included *Collection Management* themes like *Acquisition*, *Digitisation* and *Preservation*. *Community Relations* (*Outreach*, *Events*, *Use of Collections*, etc.) also scored as highly positive. Articles about the *User Experience* of online collections were also highly correlated with positive sentiment.

The main article themes with a strong correlation to negative sentiment, or primarily negative

Figure 5.

Sentiment coding summary.

Figure 6.

Archive Type vs. Sentiment.

in tone, were topics of *Public Recordkeeping* and *Security* – including *Data or Privacy Breaches*, as well as *Frustrations* with the experience of using the collections, both generally and in the context of access restrictions – justified or not. Often negative sentiment was related to large and complex projects, or notable events such as data breaches or system outages.

INTERSECTION OF THEMES

Identifying and analysing the intersections and commonalities between themes can lead to further insights and a substantial picture of the data being analysed.⁴² It was beyond the scope of this project to consider every possible connection between every identified theme or sub-theme, but there were times where connections and commonalities between themes stood out.

As one of the most common themes in the analysis, digitisation intersected with various other themes within the articles. Online access to archival materials often went hand-in-hand with digitisation projects, with archives promoting the benefits of digitisation in allowing availability of more collection items to a wider range of users, especially those who were unable to access the collections physically. In some cases, there appeared to be a genuine joy in this increased level of access both from archivists and users. Similarly, outreach and

digitisation were often connected, with archives displaying digitised collections, holding seminars and events around the topic of digitisation, and providing advice for members of the public who may have been looking to digitise their own personal collections.

Digitisation was also mentioned as a preservation technique, protecting fragile or valuable materials – both paper-based and born-digital – from further degradation and physical space constraints. There was a sense of urgency and coverage of several large-scale digitisation projects. There was little discussion of the drawbacks or challenges of digitisation at scale. The actual personnel – both paid staff and volunteers – that work with archives were not mentioned in the context of digitisation at all. Digitisation projects were being undertaken across all types of archival institutions, although collecting archives were the most common to feature in articles on digitisation. The National Library's *Papers Past* online collection was the most common example of large-scale digitisation featured in the press.

There was little crossover between the few articles that mention Iwi collections – generally held by national or regional archives on behalf of Iwi, and articles discussing the relationship with the Māori community. Almost all articles mentioning

Māori were detailing Iwi involvement in the *Tāhuhu* project to replace the Archives New Zealand building. There seems to be a recent awareness of the importance of working alongside Iwi, at least at the level of national projects.

DISCUSSION

Articles relating to archives were regularly published by the press in New Zealand over the studied period, although the frequency of articles appears to be increasing over time. Some of the themes identified in the analysis have the potential to affect how the public perceives archives, so awareness of these themes and how they are portrayed could be useful for archival institutions when planning engagement with the public, or interacting with the press, whether in favourable or unfavourable circumstances.

Earlier literature presented a portrayal of archives that relied on outdated stereotypes, and covered archives in a cynical way,⁴³ suggesting a distrust of archivists and archival institutions by the news media which was largely based on a lack of understanding of archives and general frustration with governmental authority. In contrast, the sentiment of press articles in New Zealand appears to be on balance, more positive in nature with negative sentiment often restricted to frustrations around collection

access, concerns over public funding, and high-profile security incidents where public data is at risk. Any literature on press portrayal of archives is quite old, so the change in perception could be due to increased understanding of archives by the press, or other factors specific to the press – such as a change in approach, funding, or readership demographics. Geographical and cultural factors might also be at play – with little literature on the New Zealand context available, New Zealand could have always been different to countries like the United States of America or United Kingdom.

The media presented a very positive image of regional and community archives, with local press championing and promoting their local archival institutions, celebrating new additions to the collections, and supporting the staff and volunteers who kept the archives running.

National Institutions were still the subject of more positive articles than negative, but the balance was much closer to neutral. National archives and large collecting institutions absorb a lot more public funding, and are involved in larger and more ambitious projects, so attract more scrutiny from the press. Even negative articles rarely attacked institutions or attempted to spread misinformation, instead reporting on public and political concerns with funding, governance, and user access to collections. These articles were balanced to

an extent with positivity around collection management and community outreach, portraying a curiosity around new or interesting collection items, and the embracing of technology to manage collections in the future and provide new forms of access.

Outdated stereotypes and a lack of understanding appear to no longer be contributing factors to the portrayal of archives by the press, and consequently the perception of these institutions by the public in New Zealand. Instead, the sentiment expressed by the press appears to be relatively fair and supportive of archives while still being willing to identify and report on issues and failings when necessary.

The most common themes identified included digitisation of collections, acquisition of collection items, information and concerns around buildings and physical repositories, public and private finance, access to collections, and outreach to – and interaction with – the wider community. The presence of these themes in conjunction with the sentiment of the articles can shed some light on how the media sees archives.

The prevalence of digitisation in articles appeared to parallel the changing nature of media in general, with institutions of all types and sizes rushing to digitise collection items. There were objectives of preservation in the face of technical obsolescence,

alleviating physical space constraints, and provision of faster and broader access to collections for a demanding and connected public. The portrayal of digitisation was almost unanimously positive, which could influence the perception that digitisation is a *win-win*, glossing over the considerable resource costs – both financially and in terms of staff or volunteers – and the complexity of maintaining and preserving digital collections in the long term, including data storage, maintaining integrity of files, and managing obsolete formats and platforms. These considerations are well documented and understood within digital preservation circles,⁴⁴ but may not be familiar to collection users and the public.

Articles discussing acquisition of collection items were relatively common, and almost all positive – the few relevant articles with negative sentiment bemoaned the lack of space for further collection storage. These articles often read like advertisements for archives, with details of the latest acquisitions giving a peek into the collection. Some were likely pushed to the media as press releases or other communications. It seems likely there is a positive influence on the perception of archival institutions from the publication of acquisition-themed articles.

The media have an ongoing concern around the allocation and use of public funds for archive

projects, especially regarding physical repository buildings and other major construction projects. As one of the primary ideals of the press – at least in theory – is to hold the public service to account,⁴⁵ it is understandable that there is such a focus on these large projects, and regular scrutiny of cost overruns, delays, or less than optimal use of public resources. Researchers, professional associations, and other members of the community also used press articles to call out the poor condition of certain physical repositories, and pushed for resolution, in one case in multiple articles over several years. Having said this, there were still more positive articles than negative regarding buildings and physical repositories. Archives celebrated milestones in the construction and refurbishment of new facilities, provided progress updates, and occasionally gave the public a peek into their repository operations. These types of articles may help to allay fears from the public, reassuring them that money is being well spent, and progress is being made.

Outside of major projects, finances were often mentioned in the context of grants or donations, either being requested or received by an institution. Many archives may struggle to maintain both public and private funding, so could use the press for advocacy and promotional purposes to increase awareness of

financial needs. It is important to advertise what is being achieved to stakeholders, in the interests of maintaining or increasing existing funding levels.⁴⁶

User Experience had the lowest percentage (58.9%) of positive articles of the four main pillars identified by my analysis. This reflected user frustrations with finding aids and reading rooms, and other barriers to collection access, some of which were explained by legitimate use restrictions on collections, temporary actions due to security breaches, and in once case acts of vandalism against collection items. Interestingly, articles discussing online access were positive overall, even when considering frustrations with finding aids and systems. As noted for digitisation, there seems to be plenty of positive interest from the press and the public around the increased access to collections that new technologies and processes are enabling. The increased availability of collections online provides new ways for users to interact with collections and allows more serendipitous discovery of collection items and knowledge. Improved access, whether via institutional finding aids, digital repositories, or shared discovery platforms, appears to be driving engagement with archival institutions, over and above the traditional outreach programs that many institutions undertake.

Outreach in a more traditional sense is already commonly

undertaken by archival institutions via the press, at both national and local levels, and is important to help archives develop and maintain the relationship with their community.

Outreach articles were almost all positive, advertising and promoting the organisations, their collections, and events they were running. It appeared that many archives were already aware of the potential uses of news articles for self-promotion, and were engaging with the press at least on some level.

While not directly evident in the content of articles themselves, an observation that arose from the analysis was the crossover between archives and other cultural institutions, especially libraries and museums. Often housed in the same building, arranged as part of the same parent organisation, or even sharing the same staff, it could be a source of confusion when determining the nature of an institution. Examples of this included city libraries which also housed a local archive collecting public records and historical documents. Community archives could be almost museum-like and somewhat flexible in their collecting approach, including objects and ephemera in addition to documents and records. Digital collections and aggregation services seemed to blur this distinction even further.

One of the prevailing themes in literature on the portrayal

of archives in the press and other media is that there is a poor understanding of the role of archives – and archivists – in society, with a generally uninformed and unengaged public.⁴⁷ It seems that press articles in New Zealand are providing some information in this area, with regular publication of articles covering the various ways that archives are interacting with their communities, and discussion around topics that have a direct effect on society – use of public funding, acquisition of collection items that reflect the community, and preservation topics. Areas where there still appears to be a lack of information presented include the inner workings of archives, especially the process of arrangement and description – in many cases archives seem to be presented as a *black box* that takes in items and eventually shares them again. Additionally, there is little discussion in the press of the unique protocols involved with Māori collections, or those for handling sensitive and restricted information.

In addition to this, the wealth of cultural heritage and knowledge that is held by archives does give them – and the staff that manage the collections – considerable power, making decisions on what is preserved or not preserved, as well as managing access. It is argued that not only do archives have to respect and maintain the context of the collective memory

they hold on behalf of society,⁴⁸ they also have a responsibility to have open communication with their community, both steps that can help to alleviate this power imbalance. They must strive as far as possible to maintain their collections in the context of the community that created them – not just via archival description with metadata and documentation, but by keeping an open dialogue with the public.⁵⁰ It is impossible to know from my analysis if there is an open dialogue – in both directions – between archives and their community, but there does appear to be a high level of engagement with the press. Positive and informative content is pushed out from archives to the public, informing them at least superficially of some of the actions being undertaken by archives. Counter to this, there is also a degree of accountability on behalf of the public, with investigative articles exposing failures, cost overruns and other items of public interest, in a generally fair and justified manner. The written press remains an important way to maintain this dialogue, even while considering the changes in the media landscape, and wider disruption in communications technology in recent years.

The inaccurate stereotypes and image problems of archives and the wider GLAM sector that were frequently analysed and discussed in the past,⁵¹ and which seemed to already be fading somewhat in

later literature,⁵² were not generally represented in my analysis – the concept of surly gatekeepers of information⁵³ does not register at all in any of the analysed articles, instead there seems to be respect for archivists and archival institutions, and plenty of hype around new technologies such as digitisation and accessible online repositories. Negativity and frustration are more aligned with difficulties in accessing and using collections due to technical problems and inflexible processes, rather than any kind of issue with the staff themselves. The cynical and untrusting media environment described by Craig,⁵⁴ is not one that seems to exist in New Zealand currently, and nothing in my analysis suggests any attempt by the press to mislead the public about the nature or activities of archives, or to perpetuate stereotypes of any kind. Instead, they portray archives as imperfect but valuable guardians of cultural heritage, with an eye on the management and preservation of collections into the future, but not always the resources to achieve this aim.

Positive and engaging press coverage of archives could lead to higher levels of community engagement, and in turn access to greater resources in future, whereas negative coverage could turn things towards an untrusting, uninterested public. Ideally the former would be maintained.

Accurately confirming whether

the portrayal of archives is truthful or reflects the reality of archival institutions was outside the scope of this research project but could be worth further investigation. It would require data collection from within the archives themselves for comparison, either by content analysis of policies and practices, or via surveys, interviews, or other investigative methods. The findings could be compared against actual readership data from news media sources, identifying how real-life readers are being exposed to the themes discussed, and what influence this may have.



CONCLUSION

Archives have been portrayed in recent years by the New Zealand press in a generally positive and engaging way, with press coverage balancing promotion with critique, and no sign of deliberate misinformation or cynicism present. Dated stereotypes have largely disappeared, and topical subjects like digitisation, public funding, and collaborative projects are presented in press articles, hopefully engaging and capturing the interest of the public, in turn driving increased knowledge of archival activities. The relationship between archives and the press can have mutual benefits, but like any relationship, requires a degree of nurturing and maintenance to be productive and successful going forward.

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How to document and treasure an ephemeral art

By Keith McEwing

This article summarises an online ARANZ talk made by Keith on the 11 April 2024 where he discussed the archives of dance and the National Dance Archive of New Zealand Ngā Kaitiaki Taonga Kanikani o Aotearoa (NDA).



INTRODUCTION

Dance, like all performing arts, is ephemeral. And by ephemeral, I mean that once a dance reaches its conclusion it is gone. This is unlike fine arts, which often ends as a finished artwork such as a drawing, painting or sculpture. In performance, be it music, drama or dance, completion and conclusion are one and the same, with nothing but memories and representational elements remaining. Because of this, *intangible heritage* is another expression used in association with dance and the performing arts. This expression acknowledges that it is the act itself that is our heritage and not just the tangible recordings and mementos of it.

So how can one document and treasure an ephemeral art such as dance? Alternative questions may be what is recorded and how representational is it of how we dance? I have a fanciful notion of 100 years from now an archive of TikTok and other social media reels being discovered, and I wonder, what will people in 2124 make of it?!

To answer these types of questions, I should encourage us to think more broadly than what we might first think of when we talk about performing arts. While we often tend to think of dance only as a form of performance best described as *theatre dance*, the realms of music, drama and dance stretch much further than what we encounter in the theatre. Dance, along with music and drama, is not just for performance, and performance is not just for entertainment. And while dance generally may always be a pleasure to watch, there are other purposes for dance, such as cultural, political or social statement (think for example of the haka), social activity (for example, dances, hops, dance parties etc.), dance as competition, and dance as therapy.

Archives such as the National Dance Archive of New Zealand (NDA) continue to consider how to archive dance and the unique challenges that we face. In this article I introduce some