

Some Issues of Access: Sharing community memory in small community archives

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Introduction

Small community archives often fly under the radar when archival issues are discussed. This article briefly examines some aspects relating to access and community archives, particularly regarding two areas: how concepts and conditions of access are affected by the working environment, and what the archives and heritage information professions can do to support the better management of access in the future.

This article is based on research I completed in 2015 as the inaugural recipient of the Ian McLean Wards Trust Scholarship. It looked at the role, impact and development of community archives in New Zealand, and identified gaps and opposing viewpoints as they related to three areas: the perceived role of community archives today, current issues impacting what community archives can and cannot do, and factors forecasted to affect the development of community archives over the next ten years.¹

Background

Research findings were gained from two distinct stages of research. One stage used the Delphi Method, a structured re-stating of a range of anonymous expert views about a topic² in order to develop a consensus of opinion.³ This involved the careful selection of fifteen archives and heritage information experts with considerable knowledge or experience in archives or information heritage. Through three online surveys, each expert was asked to give their opinions on a series of statements describing aspects of community archives in New Zealand, and predict factors that would impact community archives over the next ten years. These findings will be covered in a separate article.

The other stage involved the analysis of findings gained from semi-structured interviews with five individuals (interviewees), each of whom had sole day-to-day responsibility for a small community archive. Five different types of small community archive were represented: a local history archive, a church archive, an interest group archive, an iwi

archive and a school archive. The intention was to provide as much diversity as possible in this selection, so three archives were situated in the North Island and two in the South, and three were situated in urban environments and two were rural. Three also operated 'in-house' from within a broader corporate structure, while two were independently created by the community the collection served. None had any direct government funding. Collections varied in size from around 20 to about 1200 linear metres. All of the interviewees worked part-time; two were volunteers, two were paid archivists, and one carried out occasional archival duties as part of a paid administration position.

Interview questions related to the collection, day to day work, concerns about the archival holdings, and aspects about the collection that interviewees would like to change. Most of the discussion in this article is based on the findings from these interviews.

Characteristics of Small Community Archives

These five collections reflected some of the common characteristics currently associated with many small community archives in New Zealand. They:

- were controlled by a self-defined community;
- demonstrated some form of active community participation with the collection (for example, through community volunteers, or through community ownership of the building in which the collection was held);
- required users to come to a physical place to access the holdings in the collection (i.e., they did not have digitised or digital collections);
- held a wide range of items ranging from archival records to reference material and artefacts and;
- operated either as an in-house repository, or as a collecting institution.

These collections also demonstrated a range of other characteristics that help to paint a more detailed picture of the common working context for many small community archives. These collections:

- saw themselves playing a key role in preserving the memory of their community;
- had a broad collection mandate that included a range of material kept as community memory;
- demonstrated varied archival practices ranging from excellent to non-existent;
- relied on one or two key individuals who maintained the collection;
- operated in an environment where the user community and governing

- body did not always understand the collection's role and purpose;
- had a culture of pragmatic staff decision-making;
- had less than adequate resourcing that affected archival practice to varying degrees;
- did not have much professional support from, and few collaborative initiatives with, other heritage institutions and professional associations;
- did not have staff with archival qualifications, and often operated in an environment where staff, volunteers, colleagues, or governing bodies lacked awareness of archival principles and practices.

As a result, these characteristics provide some useful context from which to understand issues of access within small community archives, and how they may need to be addressed.

How Small Community Archives View and Apply Access

Managing access on a day-to-day basis was of key concern for interviewees because they considered that if the community was not able to access the collection, they would no longer use it. A key reason for this was due to their perception that concepts of access played a key part in the overall role of the community archive, which was demonstrated in three fundamental ways: to preserve evidence of the history of the community, to enable and encourage the community to access its memory, and to support other community functions in areas such as administration support.

All interviewees spent much of their time working on processes and initiatives that enabled and encouraged community access, because they considered that an underused collection compromised its continuing existence, and also reduced the community's ability to access something that was essentially theirs to begin with. For interviewees, access was about ensuring openness to the collection to the community - the collection belonged to the community and existed for that community. Collection items were often viewed as being held 'in trust' for the community, and therefore still essentially owned (for want of a better word) by that community rather than by the repository itself. For each interviewee, their collection was considered unique, regardless of the number of items in the collection that were not by definition purely 'archival'. This was because the collections were seen as providing memories and stories of the community in ways and forms that could not be obtained from other 'non-community' sources and collections.

Access processes and initiatives focused on providing a range of

fundamental, simple and physical ways to give community users access to items in the collection. This was done mainly through shelving, boxing, listing and (if possible) retrospective accessioning. For interviewees, achieving good standards in these areas was paramount, because it meant that more material could be accessed by the archivist, and therefore the community, a lot more easily. It was also very pragmatic, because it was common for all collections to have a large number of items that were still inaccessible to users. For example, only two of the five collections had finding aids (and these were not extensive), and four of the five interviewees still relied primarily on their own head knowledge when it came to locating material. Two of the five also admitted to not knowing much about the holdings at all, due to inadequate levels of listing and boxing taking place prior to their arrival.

There was also little evidence of any real development in the area of digitisation or online finding aids, or plans to improve this in the future. Three interviewees discussed the value of putting finding aids online, but admitted that lack of resourcing kept planning at a very basic level. Only two collections had online finding aids, but these were far from complete. One collection used *The Community Archive* website (www.thecommunityarchive.org.nz), although nothing had been added for a while because the interviewee could not get assistance from Archives New Zealand to carry out the process. Two interviewees from larger collections were each planning a small digitisation project in the future, although these were still dependant on getting resourcing. Digital preservation planning was not carried out at all, with concerns, if they existed, centering solely on the physical storage of items such as video cassettes and CD-ROMs.

These and other findings demonstrated a situation where the access practices by necessity were often basic and ad-hoc. It also meant that as interviewees focused on achieving suitable levels of community access to their holdings, other related aspects (such as custody, copyright, and specific restriction controls) were not addressed to any significant degree in the face of more pressing demands. Only one interviewee had developed formal guidelines for collection users on the use of restricted items. The other four made informal on-the-spot restriction-decisions on the rare occasion the situation demanded it.

Although interviewees demonstrated awareness of the need to restrict material in some situations, this was usually done to protect items in the collection from loss (that is, stopping a community user from taking an item home and not returning it) rather than to restrict

content. There were however occasional exceptions. The school archives had sensitive information such as personnel files stored in a room that was only accessible to the archivist and the Principal.

No matter how much (or how little) access is currently being addressed in community archives, access issues around electronic material still need to be considered more. This is because future donations will become more electronic in format, there will be greater demand from geographically disconnected communities for electronically accessible records, and the community itself will be increasingly documented in a range of electronic media. As a result, small community archives will not only need to start learning how to put community-related information online, but also to start discussing how it should be managed once it is. They need to know about aspects such as what information to share, what form it will be in, whether the addition of content and/or metadata through crowd-sourcing will be allowed, and how concepts of copyright and ownership (if relevant) are applied.

The current situation is also exacerbated by the growing elephant in the room: questions relating to the ongoing management of digital and digitised material. At the moment many possible solutions fall in the large gap that exists under the theoretical (or pricey) 'ideal solution'. Even when affordable solutions can be found that fit the requirements of a small community archives, the lack of any form of cohesive and collaborative support system for community archives makes them difficult for archivists to identify and apply.

Obstructions to Access-related Solutions

While there is evidence that some community archivists are aware of the various issues that can impact access, my research has identified three key obstructions that hinder the development of possible future solutions.

The first is lack of resourcing. While this seems to be a ubiquitous issue for most archival repositories, it is important that the depth and breadth of its effects are not overlooked or downplayed when it comes to community archives. To some extent, all community archives covered by the interviews had some form of storage, preservation, description and/or appraisal issue (or issues) that could be directly attributed to low numbers of paid staff hours or inadequate levels of operational and targeted project funding.

The second is lack of training. None of the interviewees had any specific archival qualification, nor did they have access to any forms of

in-depth archival training. Two required training in fundamental archives management principles and processes, while another two discussed how some of the other small community archives they knew of that were run by people who had no archival training and who were not aware that they even needed it.

The third is the lack of collaborative support and advocacy. A key reason for this is the low-levels of current support from the wider archives and heritage information communities. This situation has been exacerbated by the erosion of the support previously provided by the larger archival institutions, as well as the lack of training opportunities outside the main centres. This has resulted in a situation where interviewees saw (or found) little impetus to change methods or seek advice, or even to be made aware of what they could potentially achieve.

Addressing the Issues of Access

There is no one easy answer when it comes to addressing issues of access within small community archives. The potential for a state from which feasible solutions can be developed does exist, but this depends on how willing the wider archives and information heritage communities are to understand the often unique roles, issues and concerns of community archives from the community archives' own perspective. A unified understanding of these aspects (even if disagreement exists in the detail) will help to avoid the temptation to leap in with generalised big-bucket solutions that may not always fit a low budget, community-focused environment.

A situation raised during an interview with the iwi archives provides a good example of why accepting and working with community archives on their own terms is important. A woman had come into an iwi archives with pebbles she had collected near marae she had stayed at on a hikoi. She offered them to the collection, and they were accepted by the interviewee, but one of the other staff had concerns about what they represented spiritually, and put them in a cupboard. The following paragraph outlines in the interviewee's words what happened next:

A couple of weeks later I saw [the donor] in town and I said to her ... 'You need to come into work and pick up your tāonga'... Because for me, she gave something to us and they just cast it aside and put it into a dark room ... that wasn't good enough, you, know? ... She said 'I appreciate you telling me girl.' She said 'I never gave my tāonga to them to put away in the cupboard.' I said 'exactly.' I said 'I know that, which is why I am telling you. Come and get your tāonga.' So she did. She turned up

here one day ... and then she went over to [Manager] and she goes '... my tāonga was in the cupboard up there. I didn't like it being in there. I'm gonna take my tāonga home.' And [Manager] said 'Kai te pai ... You do that.'

This one example provides in microcosm a few of the diverse and occasionally 'non-traditional' archival perspectives that surround community archives, as well as the memories, values, ethics, beliefs, cultures and sensitivities that give them flavour. As a result it demonstrates how a more in-depth understanding of community archives on the part of the wider archives and information heritage communities can help with the professions' own questions about access. This is particularly in terms of 'out of the box' thinking that impacts on archival roles, ownership, documentation, privacy, use, and storage.

Next Steps

The research made seven recommendations that, among other things, can be used to address access-related issues as they relate to three particular areas. Firstly, to help overcome the three key obstructions (lack of resourcing, lack of training and lack of support / advocacy) so that community archives can ensure base-line levels of access can be met. Secondly, to aid staff education and training regarding access, its issues and possible solutions, so that current processes are more effective and consistent, and future needs are identified and managed. Thirdly, to generate wider industry awareness about access issues in community archives so that collections can receive greater levels of advocacy and support.

These recommendations are summarised below in order of recommended priority, and are provided here to engender debate and suggestions for the way forward.

Recommendation 1: Develop a broadly applicable definition of the term 'community archives' for New Zealand archivists. This will help the wider profession discuss community archives (and therefore notions of access) from within a commonly understood framework.

Recommendation 2: Develop a formal statement about the role and purpose of community archives that is recognised by all professional associations that cover heritage information management. This will (among other things) help to clarify understanding of access and access issues in community archives.

Recommendation 3: Establish a Community Archives Advocate Group to champion community archives and their ongoing development. A vocal and unaffiliated advocate will not only help to raise the profile of community archives, but also the profile of associated issues such as access.

Recommendation 4: Develop voluntary base-line standards of practice for community archivists, which the community archivists themselves contribute to. These will aid consistency of practice when it comes to managing areas such as access.

Recommendation 5: Develop a Community Archives Toolkit for community archivists that will enable the sharing of current resources, articles, guides and other 'how to' documents. This will provide opportunities for community archives to better understand a range of aspects including concepts of access, and potential solutions.

Recommendation 6: Provide an online communication space for individuals involved with community archives that is not conditional on location. This will help to introduce good communities of practice that will benefit the management of areas such as access.

Recommendation 7: Champion a qualification for those working with community archives to reduce the qualification gap between community archivists and archivists in other institutions. Even if a qualification is not viewed as achievable (or even desired), it will provide a vision of 'the possible' that can broaden perspectives on what can and can't be done by community archivists.

All these recommendations are designed to help generate a wider understanding of community archives, and out of this, aid the development of access-related solutions that fit the working context of many community archives.

Conclusion

Many small community archives work within an environment that can be less than beneficial to either collections or staff, and which may operate well outside mainstream practices. While the provision of access is seen as a vital part of the community archives' role, this is usually carried out at a fundamental level, and does not consistently address other access-related issues such as copyright and the provision of access to digitised and born-digital material. Key obstructions such as lack of resourcing, lack of training and lack of collaborative support need to be addressed before the more specific access-related issues can be solved. A

major step to removing these obstructions will involve greater levels of advocacy and support from the wider archives and heritage information industries, along with a resultant willingness to understand key issues from the perspective of the community archives.

Endnotes

1. Welland, Sarah. "The role, impact and development of community archives in New Zealand: A research paper". (research paper, 2015). <https://repository.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/handle/11072/1752> or https://www.academia.edu/13398356/The_role_impact_and_development_of_community_archives_in_New_Zealand_A_research_paper.
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