

Inherent Biases and Complexities of the Use of Historical Digital Archives: Bibliometric Analysis in Digital Archives of Holocaust Victims

When scholars of information studies use digital archival materials for research, it is important to acknowledge that the archival materials and the archival representations (a.k.a., finding aid or other descriptive metadata) that result from the value-added processes of arrangement and description (Yakel, 2003, p. 2) frequently do not contain the exact and complete information for which we are searching. In particular, sources of historical events for which we are searching are often disproportionately scattered across several different repositories, are not always readily accessible, or are missing altogether. This may be because historical events are documented to different extents, and often not in proportion to what happened. In particular, digital archival datasets that are skewed towards majority groups or particular perspectives, or datasets that have not been made available digitally can affect the accuracy and reliability of online searches across libraries and archives. In some cases, the information they contain may not be in the form we anticipate or may be fragmented across many sources. These are known problems with searching for archival materials. Another confounding factor in locating archival materials and content that may be relevant to a user's query can be the finding aids and retrieval systems themselves. Therefore, the paper tries to look beyond archival materials and descriptions that are presented to users and understand possible challenges and drawbacks that can happen when materials are selected, manipulated, and interpreted by the time these materials reach to users by asking: What is accessible and known, and what may be less accessible and obscured in online archives? What processes and decisions were made during the arrangement and description by whom, and with what kind of audience in mind?

Skewed data regarding what datasets are available or easily accessible, what has already been published about an event can both, directly and indirectly, influence users' decisions about what topics to research and how. For instance, Johnson and Rittner (1996) assert that, in archives about the Holocaust, "the Jews occupy the centre, with the other victims extending outward in concentric rings" (p. 123). Indeed Non-Jewish victims have only recently been studied by scholars although there were myriad non-Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities including those who were disabled, homosexuals, gypsies, or Black victims. Thus, this pilot study aimed to verify research trends, marginalized groups of focus, and underlying dynamics in the studies of Holocaust victims. The study relies on bibliographic and bibliometric data including the number of publications in each area, the

characteristics of key terms, and written languages used in chronological order. The study demonstrates how scholars can better understand the historical archival materials of the Holocaust by taking into consideration the detailed context and limitations of the materials that affect their interpretation. Furthermore, the study shows how historical materials should be understood in a way that considers the historical context in which they were created, survived, and were made for historical archiving. In this way, researchers can become aware of the situated institutional, professional, or personal assumptions and biases built into these digital archival materials and descriptions presented by archives. Moreover, exposing the intricacies and potential challenges that can be involved during the processes of the creation, selection, collection, management, interpretation, and retrieval of online finding aids and associated archival content can be a good place to start to help researchers better understand the limitations of how archival content is retrieved and represented; and may also help them in developing more productive and critical research skills when using digital archives.

References

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- Yakel, E. (2003). Archival representation. *Archival Science*, 3(1), 1–25. doi:10.1007/BF02438926