

Title: Summaries of Finding Aids: What Makes a User Click?

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Topic:

In recent years, archival institutions all over the world have started making their finding aids available online. This has significantly improved archival access, giving a wider audience the possibility to prepare their visit from home, and allowing them to make a well-motivated choice to visit a particular archival institution. However, archives may have thousands of fonds with corresponding finding aids, and locating a fonds of interest requires a non-trivial search engine. Within such a search engine, each fonds will be represented by a short summary based on the archival description, and the first selection moment is for a user to decide whether or not to consult the corresponding finding aid. Our aim is to understand what information triggers this selection decision by a user.

Content:

We specifically address questions like: What type of information is provided as a summary? How does this correspond to the elements of description of the International Standard for Archival Descriptions (ISAD)? What fields are most important for the decision to view the full finding aid? And which fields trigger the decision *not* to view it? What is the importance of the static summary of the whole finding aid, relative to the importance of a query-based summary with excerpts from the finding aid matching the query? Can we improve the summary by adding more information from the finding aid? We conducted a user study with 18 subjects, the majority of them being familiar with archival systems and terminology, and two sets of finding aids from the OAC. The summaries consisted of five static fields of the finding aid (collection title, contributing institution, collection date, items online, and summary) and three query-based snippets. All subjects did two simulated tasks. They judged whether or not they would consult the finding aid based on the provided summary, and highlighted the parts of the summary that triggered their decision (both in case of a positive decision to view the finding aid and in case of a negative decision not to view it). Finally, alternative summaries with either more contextual information, or more information on the archival material, or both, were judged.

Insights:

The main outcome is that a selection decision is based primarily on contextual information: the title and abstract of the whole fonds – both in case of a positive decision to view the finding aid, as well as for a negative decision to skip it. In both cases the abstract (usually a whole paragraph) is more important than the title (usually a short sentence). For positive selection decisions the query-based snippets are equally important as the title, for negative decision they seemed to matter less. The preference for contextual information is in sharp contrast with current search engine practices, where users strongly prefer query-specific summaries over static summaries of web pages. Here the relatively sparse descriptions at the record or file level, and the relatively sparse relevance may play a role. In addition, there was far more information in the static fields, than in the three short snippets. Indeed, there was generally more interest in expanding the query-based summary, with more detail on individual files or records, and their grouping within the archival structure.

Keywords: Summaries of finding aids; Archival Access, EAD retrieval.