Critical Review – Historical Reseaerch

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INFOST 799

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March 13, 2022

For the Critical Review – Historical Research assignment, I looked at the article titled “Archival Automation in the United Kingdom and the Relationship between Standardization and Computerization” by Jenny Bunn. Like the title states, this article looks at automation in archives, the project of systemization and archivists ceasing to engage with development of principles of new information technology, their structure and representation in the “machines.”[[1]](#footnote-1) For this it is important to remember that I am not just looking at the study itself but, the organization, background, results and overall clarity of the article. As I was reading through this study, I had to keep referring back to the introduction to see what the actual focus of the study was. Moving through the study, there were many things that I was questioning and a few things I actually appreciated.

The first thing I always look at when it comes to any research study is the literature review. For this article, I was less than impressed with the literature review. From what I can tell, the author was vague and said that interest in this topic was “sporadic” but “engagement with computers has been long-standing.”[[2]](#footnote-2) She continues to only list two references to studies or literature about this topic. I think the author should have either identified more (if they existed) or stated that they were the only two she could find. The author has a paragraph a couple pages later that mentioned literature again, but there are no specifics. Due to the lack of other literature about the topic mentioned in the study, I get the feeling that the author only looked for ones that supported her hypothesis or ideas about the topic.

From what I could find, the hypothesis for this study was “this article seeks to look into the prehistory of this phenomenon; increasing our understanding of the relationship between computerization, standardization, and systematization will also increase the potential for successful outcomes to the community’s ongoing engagement with computers.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The author does lay out what the paper will look at and the organization of the paper in the second page. This was helpful because, she emphasizes that it is the UK perspective that the paper is going to look at and also helpful to see what the order of the paper should be. As I continued reading through the article, I realized that the author was splitting it up in decades starting with the mid-1960s. From what I can tell, the author does not give a reason for starting at the date she does but, I do appreciate that she had headings for these sections because it was easy to follow the paper.

The author did historical research on this topic by investigating sources and influences and historical documents (indexes in this case). According to our textbook the basic steps of historical research are: identify a problem of historical significance, collect background information, formulate a hypothesis, gather evidence or data, organize and analyze the pertinent data and interpret the findings or draw a conclusion.[[4]](#footnote-4) Based on these guidelines, the author of this study did in fact carry out a historical research study but, there is room for improvements. Mentioned already was the lack of literature reviews or background information. Next, looking at her gathering evidence/data stage she does a good job writing about the various information she found but, it would have been beneficial to have a table or graph to reference. When reading through her evidence/date it was difficult to keep track of all the dates and information mentioned. She also mentioned quite a few committees, councils and so on throughout this section which made the information more difficult to grasp in my opinion. To combat this difficulty, the author could have added an index with all the councils, committees, etc. for the reader to reference. This would have been especially helpful for those who are not from the UK or with little knowledge of the archive field in that country.

It seems that there was a skewed collection of date from the two decades the author looked at. Just looking at the length of the two decades sections, the first decade (mid-60s-mid 70s) has almost double the amount of information. There is no mention as to why this might be but, it does bring into question the thoroughness of the research into the second decade section the author looked at. Something else I wonder is why the author did not look at anything newer than the mid-1980s. This article was written in 2019, so why did she not also look at the decade of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s? The author does mention that “investigating the currents of the next ten years, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, is necessary, however, before such a characterization can be entirely upheld.”[[5]](#footnote-5) If this is the case why did the author not look at this next decade to further show her findings? I would bet that there are significances from that decade that would have impacted archives through computerization and archivist’s engagement with these “machines.”

I do like that the author included a table of the institutions she looked at but, I was confused as to why it was inserted where it was and also, the lack of detail with the table. I do not like that she did not include the information from the mid-60s to mid-70s time frame for this table. It makes the table seem incomplete. This table could have been more useful if the author had inserted more information in the table and also referenced it throughout the article. The conclusion of the article summarizes the information she found but, does not have any tables or graphs to help emphasis these findings. She mentions that “standardization and computerization may have initially emerged as separate threads, but the threads started to coalesce in the mid-1970s and soon became intertwined in a project of systemization that involved and evolved from the balancing of two competing pressures of forces.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This is a good conclusion but, I cannot tell of this proves or disproves her hypothesis. The study was interesting and did show a rudimentary example of historical research. There are many ways this article can be improved simply by clarification, expansion and a few more graphics. I am sure the author did her best to express her process and findings of her study, so I do appreciate this example of a historical research project.

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