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Reading Room Encounters in the Archival Context

The Example of the Swiss Federal Archives (SFA)

Abstract: In democratic constitutional states, public archives have the duty to enable access to historical information of state action in order to help secure the traceability of politics and the accountability of authorities. However, this is not an obvious statement and it has not always and everywhere been true. This paper traces the history of the access services of the Swiss Federal Archives (SFA) since 1848. Drawing on the concept of street-level bureaucracy, it focuses on face-to-face interactions between users and archivists in the reading room. In this vein, it provides an organisational history from bottom-up. It argues that the opening of access and increasing numbers of users intensified the bureaucratization of access procedures. Within this context, particular attention is paid to the digitization of the access interface and its bearing on (reading room) encounters of users and archivists.

Key Words: archives, administrative history, bureaucratization, information history, digitization

Introduction

My first reading room encounter in a public archive took place in the Swiss Federal Archives (SFA) in the late 1980s. I was a history student and looking for primary sources for an article in a forthcoming anthology. The person on the other side of the counter was Mr Wälti, a tall, grey-haired gentleman. In my memory, he always wore a white shirt. Mr Wälti was the master of finding aids, the key to any archival

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research. In order to get these aids, I had to stand in front of the counter and wait until Mr Wälti noticed my presence. Eventually, he would come up to me and I could express my request. Then, Mr Wälti would bring me some catalogue folders from the back office. With a few explanatory remarks about how to use these folders Mr Wälti would release me to the reading room for further research.

A few years later, I was doing research in the Archivo General de Centro América in Guatemala City – quite a different setting. Here, no finding aids at all were available for my period of investigation. So, the most important person for me was Don Goyo, a burly man of Sumpango, a village in the Guatemalan highlands. He was both stack attendant and consultant. Since the stacking part was more important, he always wore a blue coat. In order to get to the documents, I had to explain to Don Goyo which material I wished to study and he then brought me the paper bundles. Due to the lack of finding aids, a well targeted selection was impossible, and Don Goyo had to deliver an immense amount of paper bundles. Of course, I soon learned that it was essential to be on good terms with Don Goyo, as he was constantly overloaded with work and had to set priorities among the orders of the many reading room clients.

Later still, nearly twenty years ago now, I changed sides. Then member of the Swiss Federal Archives' staff, I was the bureaucrat on the other side of the counter. I was one of the masters of the universe of finding aids. At first sight, my reading room encounters as a consultant were very similar to those first encounters of my study time. However, I noticed immediately that this impression of permanence was deceptive. In the meantime, consultant services had been considerably enlarged and the division of work among different service functions deepened. In 1999, a new modern archives law had come into force. It put the archiving process on a more solid basis and liberalized access. In the broader context of New Public Management, the previous administrative practice was put into question. Resource-oriented routine was to be replaced by output-oriented management. Moreover, digital information technologies and the Internet became ever more important, making established routines obsolete and requiring constant adaptations of working processes.

Now, on the other side of the counter, I saw the many issues and constraints of the archivists' work I could not be aware of as a user. First of all I had to study the legal basis relevant for all issues regarding access, archival law, ordinance, juridical comments, data protection law, internal papers that regulate details of the concrete implementation of the legal basis. Before long, I also participated in finding solutions for issues of implementation not yet fully clear or that had proved inconsistent or cumbersome in practice. Moreover, I had to know the access processes and responsibilities as well as the whole administrative organization and hierarchy of the institution. In addition to formal rules, I began to decipher the cultural subtleties of cooperation in the archival work. Soon, I also got involved in other fields of activity

apart from access services. I became a member of the appraisal group, collaborated in projects and was entrusted conceptual work of various kind. All this meant that reading room encounters with users were just one aspect of a multilayered working package. Against this personal backdrop, which, I think, may quite well illustrate the diversity of archive reading room encounters, the following sections will trace the history of SFA's access services seen from the practice of face-to-face interactions between users and archivists in the reading room. In order to tell this story, I will draw on primary sources of the SFA's own archives and published material. For the most recent period, I will benefit from my own experience as a street-level bureaucrat and give a personal account on what it means to provide access to archival material under conditions of digitization.

Information has always been a central power resource.¹ This is particularly true for government and state information. Access to this information is a matter of dispute, and contradicting interests are involved. Public archives are central players in this dispute, even though the information they provide is historical.² With the French Revolution, the character of public archives as an exclusive information base for the king and the government began to change. From then on, the central public archives evolved into national institutions and archival documents were, at least in principle, available to all citizens. But their main function as a power resource on behalf of state domination remained.³ Archives served as the information base for a more and more academically disciplined historiography, which was to produce a national narrative. Public archives became part of the legitimizing apparatus of the bourgeois, liberal and democratic nation state. The SFA also stood in this tradition. Former SFA director, Christoph Graf, notes that the SFA operated as an instrument of a backward-looking, mythologizing and legitimizing historiography well into the

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- 1 Peter Fleer, Conclusion: Digitization and the Continuities of Change in Administrative Information Processing, in: *Administration & Society* 50/9 (2018), 1335–1359, doi: 10.1177/0095399718791540; Ida Nijenhuis/Marijke van Faassen/Ronald Sluijter /Joris Gijsenbergh/Wim de Jong (eds.), *Information and Power in History. Towards a Global Approach*, New York 2020; Jeremy Black, *The Power of Knowledge: How Information and Technology Made the Modern World*, New Haven/London 2015; Edward Higgs, *The Information State in England: The Central Collection of Information on Citizens Since 1500*, Basingstoke 2004; Edward Higgs, *Further Thoughts on the Information State in England ... since 1500*, in: Kees Boersma et al. (eds), *Histories of State Surveillance in Europe and Beyond*. London/New York, 17–31; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, London 1998, 2–3.
 - 2 Public archives are often considered the “memories of the state” or “national memories” in order to underline their importance. This metaphor is, however, misleading. See for example Peter Melichar, *Tote und lebendige Archive. Ein Begriff, seine Verwendung und Funktionen*, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 18/2 (2007) 129–144, 139–141.
 - 3 For a multi-perspective view on the subject of power and archives see for example: Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton 2009; Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers, The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, Durham/London 2014.

post-war period.⁴ It was only in the 1970s that the SFA began to develop into a laboratory of an emancipated historical social science.

These administrative and political functions of modern archives, which serve both an informed state and an informed public, are essential for democratic constitutional states. They are materializing themselves every working day in many reading rooms all over the world in face-to-face encounters between users and archivists. Using the example of the SFA, this article studies the bureaucratic practices concerning the access to archival information and the reading room as an interface of the administrative machine where citizens and state get into direct contact.⁵ In this vein, it provides a history of a state institution from the bottom-up. The leading questions are how this access interface has evolved over time and how it has been interconnected with social, political, legal and organizational changes.

In order to tackle these issues, I will start with a concise presentation of the concept of street-level bureaucracy, which is guiding this article. The second section considers the problem of archival sources and the scarcity of first-hand historical information on the daily face-to-face encounters in the reading room. With this comes a summary discussion of autoethnography, which will provide a methodical background of my personal account about the archivist's work. The third section provides a brief history of the Swiss federal state and its archives from 1848. With these methodological and contextual considerations in mind I will then give a detailed account of the evolution of the access services and, in particular, of reading room encounters between users and archivists. The fifth section analyses the digital transformation of archival access and the changing role of humans within this socio-technical configuration. I will conclude with a summary of the history of the reading room under the premises of bureaucratization and digitization and a few tentative remarks on the future of the archival access process.

The concept of street-level bureaucracy

Reading room encounters in public archives can be conceived within the concept of street-level bureaucracy most prominently developed by Michael Lipsky.⁶ In con-

4 Christoph Graf, "Arsenal der Staatsgewalt" oder "Laboratorium der Geschichte"? Das Schweizerische Bundesarchiv und die Geschichtsschreibung, in: *Studien und Quellen* 27 (2001), 65–82, 71.

5 See on the metaphor of administration as machine Peter Collin/Klaus-Gert Lutterbeck (eds), *Eine intelligente Maschine? Handlungsorientierungen moderner Verwaltung (19./20.Jh.)*. Baden-Baden 2009; Jon Agar, *The Government Machine. A Revolutionary History of the Computer*, Cambridge, MA 2003, 39–69.

6 Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, New York 1980.

trast to rather top-down oriented approaches in political sciences, the concept aims at studying the state from the bottom-up, that is to start with an analysis of the mechanisms at work in the concrete encounters between state agents and citizens on the very street-level and then conceptualize the political and administrative structure of the state from this perspective. What does public bureaucracy mean beyond the Weberian ideal type of legal-rational bureaucratic domination, when we allow for bureaucrats that are not simply officials entirely subject to rules, but social actors with considerable degrees of discretion?

Most studies on street-level bureaucracy deal with questions of public management and policy implementation. Typically, they combine diverse methodical approaches from political sciences, sociology, anthropology and psychology.⁷

Lipsky defines street-level bureaucrats as “[p]ublic service workers who interact directly with citizens [...], and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work.” Accordingly, he calls “[p]ublic service agencies that employ a significant number of street-level bureaucrats in proportion to their work force street-level bureaucracies”.⁸ Many studies in this field refer to police officers, teachers and social workers as prominent examples; lawyers and doctors are recurrently mentioned too.⁹ Lipsky mentions librarians, a type of bureaucrat akin to archivists.¹⁰

The literature on street-level bureaucracy provides a wide range of aspects of the frontline of direct state-citizen contact. From the citizen/client perspective, these human interactions are often experienced as uneasy situations characterized by unfavourable power imbalances and dependency. Bureaucrats, on the other hand, often experience their working context as determined by ambiguities, contradicting expectations, demand-supply dilemmas, resource scarcity and overbearing case-loads. A central issue of studies on street-level bureaucracies is the coping strategies of frontline workers to manage the bundle of these predicaments. They problematize the ad-hoc character of these strategies and see them based on culturally determined individual norm settings rather than determined by the rules of the organization. In a management perspective aiming at reforming public services to the better, they ana-

7 Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*, Cambridge, MA 2017; Jean Marc Weller, *Fabriquer des actes d'État, une ethnographie du travail bureaucratique*, Paris, 2018.

8 Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 1980, 3.

9 Steven W. Maynard-Moody/Michael C. Musheno, *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*, Ann Arbor 2003; Vincent Dubois, *The Bureaucrat and the Poor*, Farnham/Burlington 2010; Daniel Katz/Barbara A. Gutek/Robert L. Kahn/Eugenia Barton, *Bureaucratic Encounters. A Pilot Study in the Evaluation of Government Services*, Michigan 1974; Special Issue “Old and New: Street-Level Bureaucracy”, in: *Administration & Society* 50/8 (2018), 1071–1201; Yeheskel Hasenfeld/Jane A. Rafferty/Mayer N. Zald, *The Welfare State, Citizenship and Bureaucratic Encounters*, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (1987), 387–415.

10 Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 1980, 5.

lyse the causes for and the repercussions of these strategies. The fundamental ambiguity of street-level workers' discretion is a key element in these considerations. On the one hand, discretion is an indispensable ingredient of frontline work, which is to be swiftly responsive to the individual needs of concrete human beings in concrete situations. Therefore, it cannot be easily restricted without causing severe negative side effects. On the other, it is prone to a series of problematic practices, which undermine the general administrative standards of fairness and equality in a constitutional democracy, such as biases of many kinds, stereotyping, oversimplifications etc.

Scott T. Moore criticizes Lipsky's model for its management perspective tending to seek the motives for such coping strategies in culturally informed personal utility considerations of street-level bureaucrats.¹¹ He blames this perspective as a reductionist "bureaucratic discourse" and argues that it provides a truncated analysis of the decision processes of street-level bureaucrats. Alternatively, he suggests a "political discourse" which also considers factors bearing on street-level decisions, which are part of concrete organizational and working contexts. In particular, Moore calls for these contexts to be carefully differentiated. With this, he claims, it is possible to grasp the context dependent "variety of techniques, rules, and knowledge" which inform street-level bureaucrats' decisions.¹² It seems to me that these considerations are particularly relevant in the archival context, since the objectives involved in reading room encounters are less directly connected to cultural identities and social status than in the more typical contexts for studies on street-level bureaucracy, such as encounters during police patrols, in classrooms or in social work.

The problem of sources

Considering bureaucratic encounters historically poses the problem of lacking sources for the researcher. Life reading room encounters are usually, if at all, only poorly documented. Quite obviously, we do not have minutes of these encounters, let alone film or video sequences. Moreover, archives focus on legal competences and traceability of state policies and tend to archive material documenting bureaucratic working details rather restrictively. Due to this systematic scarcity of primary information, we have to rely on other, more indirect sources such as laws, regula-

11 Scott T. Moore, *The Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy: A Positive Critique*, in: *Administration & Society* 19/1 (1987), 74–94.

12 Moore, *Theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 1987, 83, doi: 10.1177/009539978701900104. See also: Didde Cramer Jensen, *Does Core Task Matter for Decision-Making? A Comparative Case Study on Whether Differences in Job Characteristics Affect Discretionary Street-Level Decision-Making*, in: *Administration & Society* 50/8 (2018), 1125–1147, doi: 10.1177/0095399715609383.

tions, house rules, concepts, strategic papers, plans of bureaus and reading rooms. From them, we may be able to infer what the concrete bureaucratic encounters must have been like.¹³

Reading room encounters are embedded in a particular setting, which is strongly influenced by incidents that occurred elsewhere and perhaps long before. For example, the decisions taken on the planning of the venue, the laws and regulations issued at a particular point of time, the business strategy guiding the archival approach towards access or the available office technology. Considering with Bruno Latour the artefacts of inscriptions of these incidents as “immutable mobiles”, which, more or less directly, frame reading room encounters, it is legitimate to use them as sources to reconstruct the history of reading room encounters.¹⁴

An option to deal with the scarcity of direct documentation of reading room encounters would be to do oral history with users and archivists. As an archival insider, I will opt for a different approach and leave the methodically correct oral history study to potentially interested outsiders. I will rather complement the classical analysis of written sources with an informed account of my own experience as an archivist. In order to avoid the interpretative pitfalls of insider narratives, I will pay attention to the methodical considerations framed by the discourse about the use of autoethnographic accounts within the social sciences.¹⁵

Autoethnography is a methodological concept and form of writing known in anthropology since the 1960s. It gained momentum as a qualitative research method in social sciences in the 1990s. This came together with a shift of perspective that

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- 13 Other sources that provide insights into details of the daily working life of bureaucrats are sometimes found in files that document deviances from the norm or misdemeanours of civil servants, such as disciplinary files or complaints by users or personal records. See for the latter: Therese Garstenauer, *The Conduct of Life of Austrian Civilian Government Employees in the First Republic*, in: Franz Adlgasser/Fredrik Lindström (eds.), *The Habsburg Civil Service and Beyond*, Vienna 2019, 213–233, 225–231.
 - 14 Bruno Latour, *Visualisation and cognition: Drawing things together*, in: Henrika Kuklick (ed.), *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, Greenwich 1992, 1–40; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005; Anders Blok/Torben Elgaard Jensen, Bruno Latour: *Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, New York, NY 2011, 121–122.
 - 15 The following paragraphs are based on: Tony E. Adams/Carolyn Ellis/Stacy Homan Jones, *Autoethnography*, in: Jörg Matthes (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, Published Online 2017, 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011> (2020-03-10); Geoffrey Walford, *What is worthwhile auto-ethnography? Research in the age of the selfie*, in: *Ethnography and Education* 38 (2020), 1–13, doi: 10.1080/17457823.2020.1716263; Vicki Lawal/Connie Bitso, *Autoethnography in Information Science Research*, in: *Handbook of Research on Connecting Research Methods for Information Science Research*, Hershey, PA 2020, 114–138, doi: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1471-9.ch007; Amon Rapp, *Autoethnography in Human-Computer Interaction: Theory and Practice*. *New Directions*, in: *Third Wave Human-Computer Interaction: Volume 2 – Methodologies* (2018), 25–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73374-6_3 (2020-07-30); Sally Denshire, *On auto-ethnography*, in: *Current Sociology* 62/6 (2014), 831–850.

challenged traditional positivist approaches and was informed by postmodernist ideas which problematized cultural accounts as highly artificial constructs. Autoethnography became an important method for authors who wanted to do evocative research tackling issues of identity politics. Typically, they raise a normative claim of giving a voice to otherwise silenced minorities and working towards social transformation. Evocative autoethnography wants to speak up against dominant narratives. This also includes the requirement to make visible the authors and their way of working. This last aspect is also present in another branch of autoethnography, which follows an analytical approach and is more in line with the standard methodology of social sciences. Analytical autoethnography is directed towards the analysis of particular groups in ways that allow for the utilization of researchers' personal experiences as primary information sources.

However, as autoethnography is a relatively recent research approach, such differentiations are not clear-cut and subject to ongoing debate. There is no generally accepted definition of autoethnography as a research method. Despite its increasing popularity, autoethnography is still a deeply contested issue within the social sciences. Some critics flatly deny its scientific nature and characterize it as "subjective, self-indulgent, narcissistic, and akin to navel-gazing".¹⁶ Substantial caveats are also discussed within the field of autoethnographic research, such as the lack of evaluative criteria and external verification. Excessive focus on the self, overemphasis on narration or exclusive reliance on personal memory are, among others, identified as possible pitfalls. In order to avoid them, a series of measures are suggested. In our context the most important of them seems to be, in a nutshell, an attitude of analytical reflexivity on the researcher's role in the situation under investigation, an attention to detailed description, the visibility of the researcher's own experiences, the dialogue with peers and a commitment to theoretical analysis.

For this paper, the autoethnographic approach seems to be promising, as it allows to "articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience", and can highlight aspects of everyday experience that cannot, or only with difficulty, be captured by other research methods.¹⁷ According to Amon Rapp, autoethnography is a "quick" method "for studying technology in real context of use".¹⁸ Moreover, autoethnography proved a valuable method for studying professional practice,¹⁹ which corresponds well to the street-level bureaucracy approach. In the context of library and information science research, Vicki Lawal and Connie Bitso suggest "a redirection towards inves-

16 Lawal/Bitso, *Autoethnography*, 2020, 122. See for a fundamental and scathing critique e.g. Walford, *What is worthwhile auto-ethnography*, 2020.

17 Adams/Ellis/Homan Jones, *Autoethnography*, 2017, 3f.

18 Rapp, *Autoethnography*, 2018, 32.

19 Denshire, *On auto-ethnography*, 2014, 832.

tigating the activities of librarians as actors in the sphere of information services provision” using autoethnography. Including archives, they continue that “within the context of an increasingly digital information environment, autoethnographic approaches are suitable for investigating emerging digital systems used in library and information services”.²⁰

In this paper, as I “already know the ‘field’ of study due to past [and present] experiences and expertise”, I make use of the autoethnographic approach in a pragmatic way, in the sense of a “quicker access to ‘ethnographic data’”.²¹ This means that I cannot provide a fully-fledged autoethnographic study. I will only be able to offer a selective inside description of the mechanisms of archival access services. It goes without saying that making use of insider knowledge does not include the claim to articulate more truthful or more accurate knowledge as compared to studies done by outsiders.

The Swiss federal state and its archives

With the founding of the federal state in 1848, the administrative structures of the Confederation of States of the period of the “Tagsatzung”, which had re-established the sovereignty of the cantons, were replaced by new federal state institutions. While, on the whole, this was a revolutionary break, the history of the archives was one of marked continuity. The archives services of the Confederation were smoothly transferred into the fledgling Federal Archives. They were integrated into the Federal Chancellery, the State Office of the Government, and consisted of the federal archivist. It soon became clear that he could not attend to all duties alone and the unit slowly grew in the following years. In 1853, the federal archivist was assisted by three clerks. At the end of the nineteenth century, we count two archivists assisted by two clerks. Still in 1975, there were no more than five archivists out of a total of 14 employees.²² Today, the SFA comprises about 58 full-time positions. Its staff has diverse professional backgrounds. Among others, they are business administrators, information and computer scientists, historians and lawyers.

Public archives fulfil a dual role in the information infrastructure of a state. On the one hand, they act as a service provider for the government and the administ-

20 Lawal/Bitso, *Autoethnography*, 2020, 125–126.

21 Rapp, *Autoethnography*, 2018, 33.

22 Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (CH BAR) [Swiss Federal Archives (SFA)] E3120B#1996/434#39*, ref. 021.21, Druckvorlage, 1977–1985, therein: Bedürfnisabklärung, March 1978, 13. See also: Leonard Haas, *Die Reform des Bundesarchivs*, in: *Festschrift Bundesrat H.P. Tschudi zum 60. Geburtstag am 22. Oktober 1973. Dargeboten von Mitarbeitern und Freunden*, Bern 1973, 95–112, 104.

ration and, on the other, as a mediator granting the public access to state information.²³ In the course of the adoption of the record management approach from the 1970s, archivists like to describe the duties of archives in terms of the life cycle of documents.²⁴ According to current standards on the Swiss federal level, it starts even before the particular documents are produced within the administrative bodies with the definition of a classification system according to which the documents, or rather the files, would be arranged. At this stage, the SFA supervise the administrative bodies in its jurisdiction (usually federal offices) so that their classification systems comply the required standards. Most importantly, together, the offices and the SFA conduct the appraisal of the classification system, determining the positions of the classification system whose files will be considered worthy for archiving. When an office later decides to archive the files that it no longer uses in its daily business, the SFA supports and supervises the process of preparing and delivering the files. When the delivery is correctly integrated into the archival fonds, the SFA is responsible for its long-term conservation and for guaranteeing access for reuse by the delivering office and, according to the legal regulations, for research purposes of the public. In short, access is the last step in the life cycle of documents following their production and the archiving for permanent custody.²⁵

Of course this is only a very schematic description of the functions of an archive, roughly covering the period since the 1990s. Over time, the SFA's functions underwent many changes, and not all functions were of equal importance at all times. During the first decades of its existence, the functions of describing, arranging and conserving the material of the periods preceding the federal state prevailed. Access functions were marginal. This backward-looking approach corresponded with the need of the new state for historical legitimization. In the twentieth century, the continuous adoption and archiving of the "production" of the federal administration and the use of archives became increasingly important. From the mid-century onwards, public access became a prominent and strategically relevant factor. All this changed the initial backward-looking approach, and the SFA's focus shifted towards the present and the future. The archives' role as mediator or as a kind of information broker, between state authorities and the public became more important. The chal-

23 Vereinigung Schweizer Archivare/Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (eds.), *Archive. Luxus oder Notwendigkeit? Eine Informationsschrift über Stellung und Aufgaben der Archive in der Schweiz*, Bern 1979, 7; Andreas Kellerhals-Mäder, *Diener zweier Herren. Unlösbarer Konflikt zwischen Sicherung und Vermittlung*, in: *Festschrift 200 Jahre Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv*, Bern 1998, 36–39.

24 Vereinigung Schweizer Archivare, *Archive*, 1979, 7f.

25 Simone Chiquet/Andreas Kellerhals/Guido Koller/Hans von Rütte, *Zugang öffnen Die Vermittlung im Schweizerischen Bundesarchiv*, in: *Studien und Quellen* 28 (2002), 351–376, 352, retrieved from: <https://www.amsdruckschriften.bar.admin.ch/viewOrigDoc/80000312.pdf?ID=80000312> (2020-03-10).

lenge to balance the legitimate interests of the administration as producers of the archival material and those of the public as researchers and citizens of a constitutional and democratic state became more complex. The most critical factor in meeting this challenge is the trustworthiness of archives, both towards the delivering offices and the public. Today, the SFA are a service provider for the federal authorities enabling the administration to account for its activities and work efficiently. At the same time, they serve as an information centre for society, making state action transparent to the public and open to critical reflection.

Reading room encounters and the bureaucratization of access services

The changing understanding of the meaning and tasks of archives was directly reflected in access services. During the first decades of their existence, access services were targeted towards federal and cantonal authorities. The public was not meant to consult the archives. The first legal regulations for the Federal Archives of 7 April 1852 only stipulated that scholars could apply to the head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs for an authorization to use the archives for historical purposes. The consultation of the documents had to take place in the office of the archivist.²⁶ Due to the high hurdles, scholarly consultations were rare exceptions and the archivist's office was sufficient to cover the needs that accrued from the use of the archives. An actual reading room was not needed.

The users authorized to conduct historical studies were well known to the archives.²⁷ They were high-ranking officials or university professors with a quasi-official mandate. The "reading room" encounters taking place in the archivist's office might have looked something like this: the archivist as a civil servant was called upon to assist users as far as it was in his area of responsibility. We may assume that the archivist, beyond his professional duty, also had a personal motivation to collaborate with these distinguished users. Moreover, we may assume that these encounters, although they took place in a bureaucratic environment, had a rather informal character and were framed less by strict bureaucratic rules than by the cultural norms of the time guiding the behaviour of two individuals with different roles and hierarchical status, but of a similar social background.

26 Amtliche Sammlung (AS), 3 (1853), 129–135.

27 The following considerations are based on Walter Meyrat, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bern 1972; SFA, E3120A#1969/80#53*, ref. 2.01.a-0053, Reglement und Plan für das eidgenössische Archiv nebst dazu gehörender Instruktion. Vom 14. September 1864. (2 Exemplare), 1864–1864; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#39*, ref. 021.21, Druckvorlage, 1977–1985, therein: Bedürfnisabklärung, March 1978.

Within the power play of this setting, the user could benefit from the formal advantages of his professional rank and the quasi-official mandate granted by the department. The archivist's sources of power, on the other hand, were his monopoly position and his unique expert knowledge of the archives. However, the protagonists would not have explicitly played out these sources of power. All in all, as they shared the archivist's office for long working days, the bureaucratic aspect was just an implicit framing condition of their encounter, which was rather characterized by personal exchange and collaboration.

This situation changed in 1899. The need for additional space had become ever more urgent, as the archive's holdings were constantly growing and the working situation in the archives had become increasingly unbearable. As the National Library was in a similar situation, the federal government had decided to erect a new building to host the two institutions.²⁸ It is true that the National Library occupied the biggest part of the building. Nevertheless, the new premises meant a decisive step forward for the SFA. Now, they got an actual reading room for its users. Compared to that of the National Library, it was small. With 32 sq m, it was exactly the same size as the director's office. The archivist's office, which was located next to the reading room, was only a little smaller, at 29 sq m.²⁹ Still, from now on the reading room was the paradigmatic location, where encounters between archivists and clients took place.

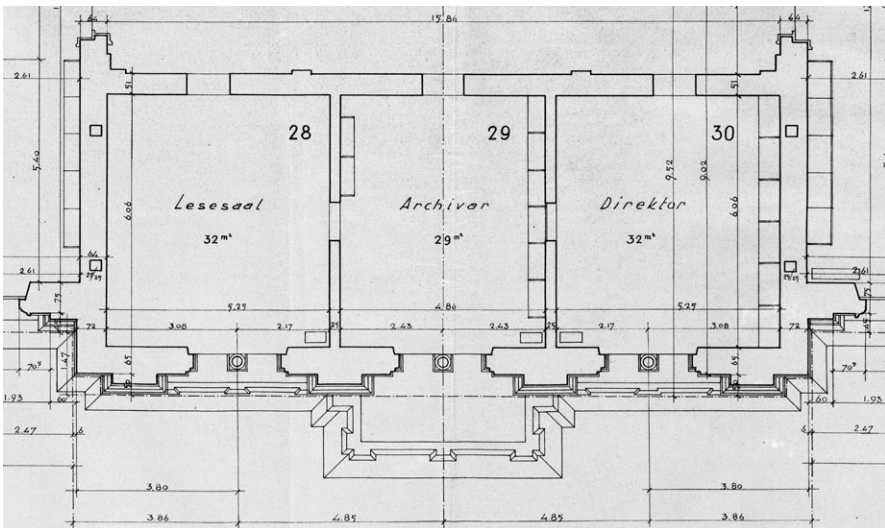


Figure 1: Swiss Federal Archives – Reading Room and Offices 1899, 1st Floor

Source: SFA, E3120A#1996/114#2*, ref. I.1, Bundesarchiv, Landesbibliothek, Pläne, 1895–1959.

28 Martin Fröhlich, *Das Schweizerische Bundesarchiv in Bern*, Bern 1999.

29 SFA, E3120A#1996/114#2*, ref. I.1, Bundesarchiv, Landesbibliothek, Pläne, 1895–1959; SFA, E3120A#1996/114#3*, ref. I.1, *Neubau eines Archivgebäudes, Korrespondenz, 1887–1910*.

The establishment of a proper reading room indicates that the SFA was preparing to welcome external users on a regular basis. However, the access to archival documents remained restricted. General access regulations had not changed and the general closure period of fifty years, stipulated in the regulation of 1864, remained in place.³⁰ The fact that the reading room was located on the second floor is also indicative of the reserved approach towards public use of the archives, particularly compared to the much larger reading rooms of the National Library that welcomed the public on the ground floor.

With the reading room in operation, users were now locally separated from the archivists. The former had no longer access to the archivist's office. This architectural setting fostered the professionalization and bureaucratization of their encounters, no longer as direct and personal as before. The user had to go looking for the archivist for advice or to place a new order. On the other hand, the archivist's monitoring of users was not guaranteed simply by the natural presence of both protagonists in the same office, but became a deliberate bureaucratic act. In the beginning there did not seem to be an actual counter figuring as the socio-technical interface for the interactions between users and archivist. So, the spatial separation between the zones for users and staff was not manifest in a clear-cut way.

But what actually constitutes a reading room encounter in an archive? Its only reason is the researcher's need for specific information exclusively available in the archives. Like other public services, the access to information is also organized in a stepwise bureaucratic procedure. Let me briefly summarize its generic elements.

Usually, the information a researcher is looking for is an inscription on a document that is part of a file. So, the user needs the right to access the file in order to be able to order it. Before this can be established, they must find the relevant file.³¹ For this, they must look for its descriptive information (its meta data), in particular its signature, in the respective finding aid, which they need to identify first, of course.

In the decades after the opening of the reading room the interest in the archival holdings grew slowly but steadily and the clientele expanded. In 1944, a new regulation concerning the use of archival holdings explicitly addressed the public as a user group.³² Nevertheless, its effect on reading room encounters was very limited. The fifty-year closure period was still in place, and the situation in the reading room remained unchanged. For the researchers, it was probably more important that the archives had abandoned the principle of pertinence from the 1930s onwards and that the archive holdings were no longer compiled according to thematic criteria. The

30 Amtliche Sammlung (AS), 8 (1866), 143–148.

31 Singular 'they' is used as gender neutral pronoun throughout this text.

32 Amtliche Sammlung (AS), 60 (1944), 327–329.

changeover to the provenance principle meant that from now on archive holdings conformed to the original structure of the federal authorities and their registries. This had the advantage of preserving the pre-archival context of the files. However, archive research became more difficult because the researcher could no longer orient themselves directly according to the subject matter, but had to know which administrative authorities had been responsible for dealing with the issues they were interested in. So, even if the researcher had formal access to premises, finding aids and files, they could easily get lost without the guiding hand of the archivist.

Nevertheless, growing scientific interest in the archival material and the gradually growing number of users were pushing towards an opening. At the same time, the SFA seemed to distance themselves from users. An internal direction of 15 February 1955 stated:

“Unknown petitioners (scholars, lawyers, press people, students) who request information at the grille or on the telephone are always invited to submit their questions in writing. Further oral information can be obtained from the federal archivist.”³³

This quotation suggests that the user base had become more diverse. However, the interaction between users, addressed as “petitioners”, and archivists was now bureaucratically “channelled” by a “grille” and the insistence on the written form.³⁴ Through the lens of the street-level bureaucracy approach, this restrictive practice can be interpreted as an attempt to cope with the growing demand for archival services. Obviously, the SFA tried to ration access. Neither its staff nor the premises were prepared for the mass processing of growing requests for historical information.³⁵

However, the demand-side pressure continued, and it became increasingly evident that the rationing strategy was doomed to fail. As a result, the SFA shifted to a more open approach and began to seek ways of adjusting access facilities to meet the increasing demand. But the wish to enlarge the reading room had to wait. It would have been logical to locate an enlarged reading room on the ground floor in the former premises of the National Library, which had already moved to its current location in 1931. At that time, these premises had not been handed over to the SFA, but were given as offices to the Division of War Technology (Kriegstechnische Abteilung). It was only in 1964, after it had moved to a new location, that the SFA could occupy the ground floor and establish a modern reading room. It had an area

33 SFA, E3120A#1969/80#60*, ref. 2.01.a-0060, Verwaltungsinterne Weisung betr. Aktenvorlage, Auskunftserteilung und Archivbesichtigung vom 15. Februar 1955, 1955–1955.

34 The “grille” can be considered a strict form of the “chancellery bar” (Kanzlei-Schranke), see: Cornelia Vismann, *Medientechnik und Recht*, Frankfurt a. M. 2000.

35 Haas, *Die Reform*, 1973, 96.

of 63 ^{sqm} (more than double than the former reading room on the first floor) and offered 12 workplaces.³⁶ An important aspect in the planning of the new reading room had been the optimization of the archival workflow. On the one hand, delivery and return of files had to be organized as efficiently as possible. On the other, surveillance of users had to be easily ensured. The Directorate of Federal Buildings (Direktion der eidgenössischen Bauten) underlined the advantage of the new premises on the ground floor: “This ensures to monitor visitors during working hours in the cheapest way possible and yet quite expedient”.³⁷



Figure 2: Swiss Federal Archives – Reading Room, 1966
Source: SFA, E3120C#2002/11#90*, ref. 51.1, *Bund*, 1966–1980, therein: *Der Bund*, 18.02.1966, Bern kreuz und quer. See also: Haas, *Die Reform*, 1973, 96 (with kind permission of *Der Bund*).

The new reading room symbolized the SFA’s new user-friendly approach. In an interesting article about the SFA, published in the newspaper *Der Bund* on 18 February 1966, the caption of a photograph of the reading room read:

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- 36 Christoph Graf, Die bauliche Erweiterung und Erneuerung des Schweizerischen Bundesarchivs in Bern, in: *Archivum. International Review on Archives XXXI* [Modern Buildings of National Archives] (1986), 109–121, 119. See for the following also SFA, E3120A#1969/80#7*, ref. 1.01-0006, Abtretung von Räumen des Archivgebäudes. Korrespondenz mit der Kriegstechnischen Abteilung, 1947–1962; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#39*, Druckvorlage, 1977–1985, therein: Bedürfnisabklärung, March 1978.
- 37 SFA, E3240A#1972/129#86*, ref. 2-05, Archivstrasse, 1934–1966, therein: Direktion der eidgenössischen Bauten, Umbauarbeiten und Renovation des Bundesarchivs, Beilage 1.

“Visitors are always welcome at the Federal Archives. In the tastefully renovated reading room on the ground floor, historians from all over Switzerland meet to study original documents. [...]. Only administrative documents that are not yet 50 years old are withheld from the public.”

The same article emphasized the importance of the holdings in the SFA for the modern Swiss historiography:

“[T]he fact that an administrative archive contains highly significant treasures [...] has recently been made clear by several much-discussed publications on the history of Switzerland during the Second World War. Almost suddenly the Federal Archives moved into the centre of interest, and the little-known, quiet building [...] seems to be guarding [...] not dusty files but state secrets of great importance.”³⁸

The prohibitive “grille” of the 1950s had definitely given way to a welcoming reading room with a regular counter that served as a bureaucratic interface between users and staff. From now on, we can address reading room encounters as an over-the-counter business. The encounters became more bureaucratic and standardized, in order to cope with the growing demand for consultation and many orders of files. The workload of the reading room personnel must have been heavy. An internal report for the year 1965 exclaimed rather unbureaucratically, “Mr Wälti was literally inundated”.³⁹ The interactions between bureaucrats (archivists and logistics staff) and the average client tended to be impersonal and purely professional.⁴⁰ At times, the relationship between archivist and user could take on a personal character. This was not the rule and mainly concerned “regular customers” and distinguished researchers who could benefit from preferential personal treatment.⁴¹ But it would

38 SFA, E3120C#2002/11#90*, ref. 51.1, Bund, 1966–1980, therein: Der Bund, 18.02.1966, Bern kreuz und quer. See also: Haas, *Die Reform*, 1973, 96.

39 Mr Wälti was the longtime head of the reading room. SFA, E3120B#1996/434#9*, ref. 14, Geschäftsbericht 1965, 1965, therein: Rapport interne, 14.01.1966. [Author’s remark: English translations of all German and French quotations are mine.]

40 A SFA brochure of 1997 discussed this development under the illustrative heading “From family business to the service centre”, see: Rita Schwarzer/Peter Métraux, *Dokumentengruft mit Sprengsätzen*. Eine Publikation des Schweizerisches Bundesarchivs, Bern 1997, 4–5.

41 Not surprisingly, I could not find direct evidence in the sources for this, but giving some credit to the accounts of elder archivists and researchers (usually professors emeritus) about their reading room experiences, it is fair to assume that archivists deviated here and then from the ideal-type conception and granted certain users special service, such as, for example, providing extra guidance to retrieve particular documents or abridging the ordering procedure. Indirect traces of special services might be found in the correspondence between researchers and archivists in user files registered under the series SFA, E3120B#451, *Korrespondenten nach Laufnummern, 1915–1984* and SFA, E3120C#451, *Einzelne Benützer (LfNr) / Standort der Akten: B 51, 1942–2013*. This evaluation, however, would have been beyond the scope of this article.

be wrong to assume that differential treatment was rooted in individual socio-cultural biases of the archivists. Rather, it was mainly due to individual research interests and knowledge of archivists or was congruent with SFA's policy to foster important research projects.

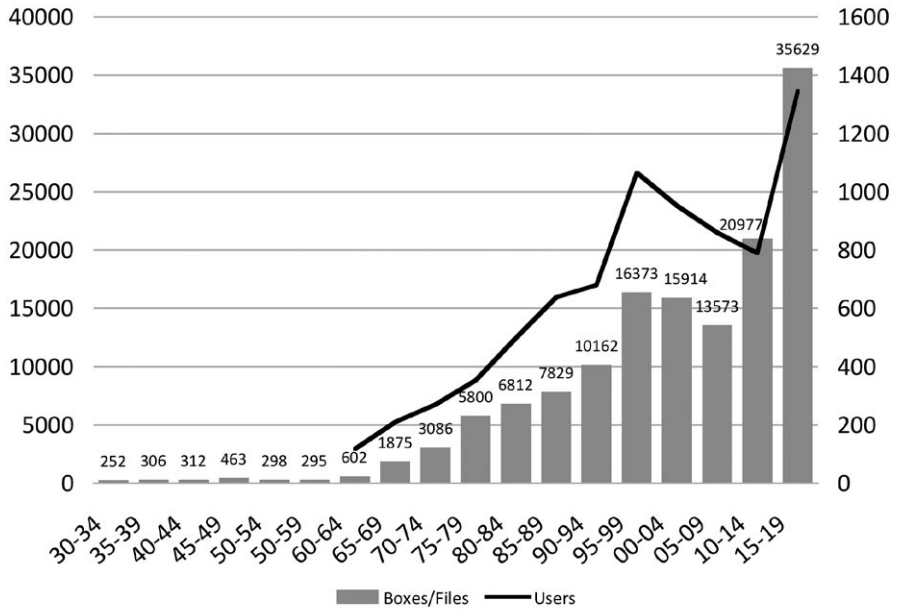


Figure 3: Yearly Reading Room Frequencies (5-year average), 1933–2019⁴²

Note: Calculations by the author based on data from various sources. Historical figures are not available for every year and not all of them are coherent over time. Calculating the average by quinquennium allows to dodge these issues in part and construct a reasonably coherent picture. The best data available is for total archive units consulted since 1966.

42 See SFA, E3120B#1985/31#223*, ref. 450, Besucherkontrolle, 1933–1966; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#10*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1966, 1966; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#11*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1967, 1967; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#12*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1968, 1968–1969; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#13*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1969, 1969–1970; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#14*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1970, 1970–1971; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#15*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht und Arbeitsprogramm 1971, 1971; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#16*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht und Arbeitsprogramm 1972, 1972–1973; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#17*, ref. 014, Arbeitsprogramm und Geschäftsbericht 1973, 1973–1974; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#18*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1974, 1974–1975; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#19*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht und Arbeitsprogramm 1975, 1975–1976; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#20*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht und Arbeitsprogramm 1976, 1976–1977; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#21*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1976/77 und Arbeitsprogramm 1978, 1976–1978; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#22*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1978, 1978; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#23*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1979, 1979; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#24*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1980, 1980; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#25*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1981, 1981–1982; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#26*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1982, 1982; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#27*,

In that period, legal provisions regulating the access to archival files were liberalized. The regulation for the Federal Archives of 15 July 1966 softened the general fifty-year closure period insofar as that from now on it was possible to grant exceptional access to more recent files for academic purposes.⁴³ In 1973, the regulation was revised and the closure period was reduced to 35 years in accordance with international standards.⁴⁴ The regulation of 1966 and its revisions liberalized access, but the research privilege remained in effect. This covered differential treatment of clients in the reading room and gave room to discretion to archivists. They had to decide what treatment to give to whom in every single case. From that period until about the mid-2000s, the senior archivist had considerable room for manoeuvre with regard to the assistance of researchers. Researchers could request an appointment in order to discuss their topic and research strategy in detail. I remember that he spent hours with his clients in the reading room and the back office area searching through piles of finding aids and archival files. This practice went far beyond the usual reading room services. But it was reserved for relatively few special cases and researchers. Instances of preferential treatment became increasingly limited over the course of further developments characterized by the standardizing and bureaucratizing of access services, as well as the eventual easing of the access to finding aids. It seemed that, above all, students benefited from this liberalization. In 1968, the director of the SFA said proudly in a newspaper interview: “We are a kind of dissertation producers”.⁴⁵ In fact, out of 242 people who visited the reading room in 1967, 84 were students. In the same year, users consulted a total of 2197 files. Compared to the situation of 1955, where the total of consulted files was less than 200, this was a tremendous increase. They were attended to by several employees. We do not know exactly, but in 1978 the SFA indicated that two and a half full-time positions plus scientific collaborators were deployed for usage domain.⁴⁶ Thus, there was division of labour bet-

ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1983, 1983; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#29*, ref. 014, Jahresbericht und Geschäftsbericht 1985, 1984–1985; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#28*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1984, 1984–1985; SFA, E3120B#1996/434#30*, ref. 014, Geschäftsbericht 1986, 1986; Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Tätigkeitsbericht 2002, Bern 2003; Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Tätigkeitsbericht 2004, Bern 2005; Websites of the SFA 2012–2020.

43 Reglement für das Bundesarchiv (Vom 15. Juli 1966), in: Amtliche Sammlung (AS), 29 (1966), 916–920, retrieved from <https://www.amtsdruckschriften.bar.admin.ch/viewOrigDoc/30000996.pdf?ID=30000996> (2020-03-15); SFA, E3120C#2003/226#40*, ref. 011.71, Reglement von 1966, 1962–1966.

44 Reglement für das Bundesarchiv Änderung vom 24. Oktober 1973, in Amtliche Sammlung (AS), 43 (1973), 1591, retrieved from <https://www.amtsdruckschriften.bar.admin.ch/viewOrigDoc/30001394.pdf?ID=30001394> (2020-03-15).

45 SFA, E3120B#1996/434#360*, ref. 091.1, Wir Brückenbauer, 1979–1980, therein: Wir Brückenbauer, 28. Februar 1968.

46 SFA, E3120B#1996/434#39*, ref. 021.21, Druckvorlage, 1977–1985, therein: Bedürfnisabklärung, March 1978.

ween at least a stack attendant, administrative staff observing the reading rooms and an archivist for research assistance. Reading room encounters remained formalized and the professional attitude of the staff became more pronounced.

This was a constant trend propelled by the continuing increase of user frequency, as shown in figure 3. The figure demonstrates a marked increase of reading room use from the second half of the 1960s up to the late 1990s. It shows a sharp increase in the 1990s as a result of intensive archive research in connection with the Holocaust assets controversy and the Swiss refugee policy during the Second World War. After this extraordinary situation, the figures fell again, but settled at a higher level than before the Holocaust controversy. The introduction of the online catalogue in 2010 resulted in a constant increase of reading room use. However, the dramatic increase shown by the figure is misleading. It is partly due to a change of the object of measurement. Before 2010, archive units represented archival boxes that usually contained several files. With the introduction of the online catalogue in 2010, it was possible to count individual files so that an archive unit from now on equalled a file.

In the 1970s, the need for space became more urgent. Above all, this concerned the space needed to store the rapidly growing archive holdings, but also the reading room, which had become too small in view of the number of users. In 1980, nearly 500 users received a total of 6358 archive boxes which usually contained several files.⁴⁷ It was finally decided to build a new underground repository and refurbish the access area. As early as 1985, the new access premises were inaugurated.⁴⁸ They comprised two reading rooms and two staff back-office areas separated from the reading rooms by a glass partition, so that the staff could easily observe users. The new reading rooms provided about 35 workstations. The big “reading room one” had 24 tables suitable for the study of classic paper documents. The most important technical device of these workplaces was swivel reading lamps (see figure 4). The workstations in the small “reading room two” were equipped with different audio and video devices and a microfilm reader for using various “new media” documents, which had found their way into the archives.

The architecture of the new reading room setting established a clear separation of the staff’s sectors from those publicly accessible.⁴⁹ The entrance area and the reading rooms were open to users. It is interesting to take a closer look at the entrance

47 The annual report of 1980 does not indicate the number of users. I have grossed this up by using the total of the user-days given in the reports of 1978 (380 users totaling 2200 user-days) and 1980 (2847 user-days).

48 Fröhlich, *Das Schweizerische Bundesarchiv*, 1999.

49 SFA, E3120B#2014/258#6*, ref. 021.31, Fotos Ostfassade und Lesesaal Bundesarchiv, 1980 (ca.)–1980 (ca.); SFA, E3120B#1996/434#101*, ref. 021.83, Einweihung des Neu- und Umbaus, November 1985, 1983–1986, SFA, E3120C#2003/226#382*, ref. 111.42-02, Baupläne Grundrisse, 1980–1980; SFA, E3120C#2003/226#372*, ref. 111.41-03, Baupläne Erdgeschoss, 1980–1980.



Figure 4: Swiss Federal Archives – Reading Room, 1985
Source: Photo collection SFA.

area, which was flanked by two back offices, each equipped with a counter opening onto the entrance area. Figure 5 is a plan sketch of the entrance area. It clearly shows the idea of the interface between archivists and users.

We see the back office for the administrative staff on the left side, where users had to register at arrival. If they wanted to enter the reading rooms, the staff had to open the central glass door manually. If users needed archival advice, they had to go to the opposite counter, behind which the back office of the advisory service was located. In case a user remained unnoticed by the staff, they could ring a bell and an archivist would come and take care of their concerns.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The following description of access premises and procedures are based on my own working experience as an archivist in these premises and accounts of elder archivists. They are complemented by information from internal papers from the SFA registry, in particular papers under the serial number 62 Nachfrageorientierte Vermittlung.

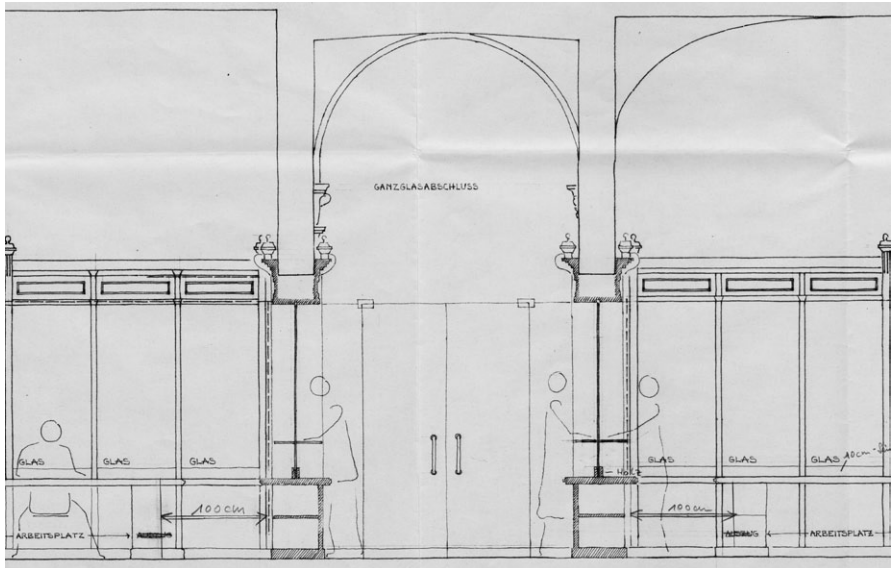


Figure 5: Plan sketch of entrance area of the reading rooms with counters, seen from the reading room, 1980

Source: SFA, E3120C#2003/226#372*, ref. 111.41-03, Baupläne Erdgeschoss, 1980.

In the rear part of the administrative back office, there was the logistics infrastructure for handling archival boxes and files and the lift leading to the archival treasures in the repository. The key to these treasures, the finding aids, were kept in the rear part of the advisory service. Most finding aids were filed in heavy green ring binders. Users did not have direct access to the area of finding aids and had to ask the archivist for the right ring binder. After having received the requested finding aids and identified the files of interest, the user could fill in order forms and put them through a slot in the glass partition separating the reading rooms from the back office. Each order was carried out according to a predefined process that involved several staff members with clearly defined tasks and responsibilities.

For the period between approximately 1985 and 2005, a usage process could be described schematically as follows. In order to access archival information a typical user, who visited the archives for the first time, had to pass a series of control points. Firstly, they had to have access to the archive's reading rooms according to the opening hours. Then, secondly, they had to sign in at the administrative counter. Thirdly, they needed advice where to start with their research. To this end, they had to explain their research issue to an archivist. The archivist recommended the fonds they considered relevant, fetched the appropriate finding aids in the back office and handed them over to the user, giving them further advice about how to search these catalogues. The user could start their search for interesting files

and order them. At the fourth control point, an archivist checked the order forms for correctness, particularly whether access could be granted. If positive, the archivist passed the order forms over to the stack attendant, who fetched the files from the repository and handed them over to the user. The user could consult the files at their desk. While working in the reading rooms, the user was constantly monitored by the clerk who overlooked the reading room. This fifth control point was primarily intended to ensure the correct handling of documents and prevent theft, damage or misplacement of files.

At this point, it is interesting to take a closer look at the documentary technologies, which in some way helped shape the analogue consultation procedure. Indeed, computers began to be used in the 1980s, but on the whole, their impact on the consultation procedure remained marginal. Their use was basically limited to three areas. The internal data-base could be of some help for the archivist in advising users and, in the late 1990s, users began to use laptops in the reading room. The third area of use concerned the registration of orders, which were entered manually by archivists in a simple database. However, the main tools in the process flow were still pen and paper. The rest was left to oral communication. Typewriters were not used by the staff for managing the consultation procedure and clients were not allowed to use them in the reading room for reasons of noise. So they had to transcribe the information found in the files by hand. It was possible to order photocopies of documents, but they were expensive. The procedure was complicated and the number of copies per client was limited. Copies could be picked up in the reading room after about ten days or they were posted to the clients' homes. It was not until around 2000 that it became common for users to take photos of documents with their mobile phones.

There were steps in the consultation procedure that were based on oral communication and those requiring forms. Steps connected to advisory services belonged to the first category. The main technical device here was the ring binder that contained the finding aids, at times complemented by a pad of paper and a pen. Additionally, special card indices were available for certain researches. However, the consultation process in this phase was driven by informal oral communication between researcher and archivist. Only when it came to ordering files for consultation or copies of documents, did steps in the process become more formalized. The user had to fill in one form per order, consisting of two sheets, the original and a carbon copy. The form required the user to provide the date and certain details that clearly identified the desired archive unit and the user. Subsequently, the form required the archivist's approval. In the next step it provided the stack attendant with a field in which they could enter the location of the archive box. Now the form was complete and the box could be retrieved from the repository and handed over to the user. The

carbon copy remained in the repository as a place marker. The original went to the client together with the box. After the box had been returned, the carbon copy was temporarily stored in the back office area for later control purposes by the administrative staff.

The order form forced users and staff to adhere to a predefined procedure and to provide specific information. Its boxes provided the bureaucratic blueprint which organized the order process. However, the control of the process remained exclusively in the hands of the staff. They decided whether the information filled in by users were sufficient and correct, so that the process could go on. It was up to their discretion to complete missing data or turn a blind eye to form errors. The form also allowed for an easy handling of the many subtle differences in the data from finding aids. In short, the order form was a bureaucratic tool that helped formalize a part of the consultation procedure on the organizational level, but whose simplicity gave leeway for unbureaucratic application at the technical level.

The customer-oriented approach confronted the SFA with a difficult challenge. It had to cater to an increasing number of users and master a massive amount of orders and files, while, at the same time, strictly preventing unauthorized access to information subject to legal closure periods. The architectural arrangement of clearly separated zones for users and staff, and the deployment of formalized bureaucratic procedures were measures that facilitated the efficient management of these conflicting requirements with limited resources. Overall, the relationship between archivists and users became less personal. However, archivists continued to make use of their street-level discretion in order to compensate the conflicting requirements of the reading room interface. Effectiveness and efficiency made them adjust their advice and time budget according to the concrete situations and users' needs. For example, users with research projects, which would keep them working in the reading room for an extended period of time received a thorough introduction of how to do research in the SFA. Such an investment did not make sense for users who were only looking for a particular file or document and who would visit the SFA just once. In these cases the archivists would decide to retrieve the needed document or file for them.

A recurring situation, which illustrates the subtle scope for action of the archivists, arose when a user appeared shortly before closing time with a request whose swift solution was not obvious. As archivists, we quickly had to decide how to proceed. In my personal experience, the decision-making process can perhaps be best described as working through an informal decision-tree, or rather a decision-network:

While listening to their request, I begin to evaluate whether I have the extra time to help the user, whether I should try to analyse their issue in more detail by ask-

ing further questions, or whether I should simply tell the user that it was impossible to solve the problem at the very moment and suggest another option, such as referring them to the next day. The decision depends on an undefined number of intertwined and highly situational criteria that I check iteratively. How complex is the issue really? How much time will it take to help the user? Is there a quick fix at hand? Can the problem be broken down into parts? What is the situation of the user? Is the user a local resident? Do they come back the next day anyway? Do they come from far away, perhaps from abroad? What about my past experiences with the user? What is my general workload at present? Do I have urgent issues to attend to? Is there a meeting right ahead? How important is it? Would it be justified to be late in this case? This list is of course not exhaustive and can be extended almost indefinitely. At the same time, all nodes of this decision tree must be continually rebalanced against each other.

Of course, in such situations, the boundaries between reasonable differentiations based on factual considerations and differences made due to unconscious biases, were always subtle. In order to keep the course, it was key to implement a clear-cut policy and bureaucratic rules regarding professionalism and fairness. Furthermore, it was important for fine-tuning to establish a continuous professional exchange among peer archivists.⁵¹ In turn, users tried to influence the decisions of archivists, for example by mentioning to be a good friend of some influential people, or by threatening to go to the press or to complain to the superiors. Sometimes, users tried to dodge a decision taken by an archivist by asking another staff member the next day.⁵² All this was part of the subtle power play taking place in the reading rooms. The glass partition that separated user zones from staff-only areas aptly symbolizes the approach of the SFA to reconcile the conflicting interests involved at the information interface between state and public. It unmistakably marks the boundary of the state's territory and allows the monitoring of users in the reading room. However, it also makes transparent the working of the state and invites users to seek support in their information needs. Figure 6 gives an impression of this intricate context of a bureaucratic encounter in the reading room of the SFA.

51 See on this also Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 2017, 152–199.

52 See on the ambiguous relationship of power and dependency between archivists and users for example Melichar, *Tote und lebendige Archive*, 2007, 129–144; William F. Birdsall, *The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909–1935*, in: *The American Archivist*, 38/2 (1975), 139–173; W. Kaye Lamb, *The Archivist and the Historian*, in: *The American Historical Review*, 68/2 (1963), 385–391. An interesting discussion on user strategies to influence archivists' behaviour is provided by Catherine A. Johnson/Wendy M. Duff, *Chatting Up the Archivist: Social Capital and the Archival Researcher*, in: *The American Archivist* 67 (2004), 115–129.

Digitization and the human dimension of the reading room

The architectural setting is still largely in place today (see figure 6). However, there have been recurrent organizational and procedural changes that affected the access process and its bureaucratic routines. As shown in the preceding section, from 1985 reading room encounters developed against the backdrop of a long-term increase in usage figures. This was accompanied by increased bureaucratization and deeper deployment of digital information technologies. At the same time, it became increasingly apparent that the regulation of 1966 provided an insufficient legal basis for the increasingly complex tasks of the archives. However, it was not before the late 1990s that the old regulation was replaced by a new modern archival law. From now on, the SFA could base its activities on a federal law instead of a simple regulation.

The Federal Act on Archiving of 26 June 1998 came into effect on 1 January 1999.⁵³ It stipulated the principle of freedom of access for everybody, a general thirty-year closure period prolongable for specific categories of files and the right for everybody to apply for access to files still subject to a closure period. This ended the research privilege regarding archive access and enlarged the potential user base.⁵⁴ The law and the accompanying regulation strengthened the rights of users and clarified the modalities of access.⁵⁵ All access restrictions had to be based on appropriate legal provisions. The criteria for access to archived files, the responsibilities of archive staff and the legal procedures were much more differentiated and precise than before. Where the law and the ordinance offered room for interpretation, the SFA developed detailed implementation guidelines. This significantly limited the archivists' discretion and led to a greater standardization of access services. On the one hand, this meant a loss of personal freedom for the archivists in shaping the situation in the reading room. On the other hand, their decisions became more binding and were easier to communicate. The Archive Act was also of pivotal importance for

53 Federal Act on Archiving of 26 June 1998 (SR 152.1), retrieved from: <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19994756/index.html> (2020-03-11); Ordinance to the Federal Act on Archiving (152.11), retrieved from: <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19994752/index.html> (2020-03-11). Interestingly, the Classified Compilation of Federal Legislation now lists the Federal Act of Archiving under the category 15 Fundamental Rights. The regulation of 1966 had been listed together with the legislation concerning the National Library under the category 43 School Science Culture Technical and Scientific Cooperation, Documentation. This introduced a legally important distinction between the SFA as part of the state's fundamental rights infrastructure and the National Library as part of the cultural infrastructure of the nation.

54 Chiquet/Kellerhals/Koller/von Rütte, Zugang öffnen, 2002, 353.

55 The Federal Act on Freedom of Information in the Administration of 17 December 2004 (SR 152.3), retrieved from: <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/20022540/index.html> (2020-10-02) further strengthened the rights of citizens for access to state information. However, so far the act only concerns few cases of access to archival documents.

the beginning digitization of the access services by creating a stable framework for the development and implementation of the necessary IT infrastructure. The digital transformation consisted of numerous small- and large-scale organisational and technical measures that affected reading room encounters in many ways.⁵⁶ In this context, it is important to notice that the interactions between users and archivists in the reading room have never been isolated events. They have always been just one part (though an important one) of a series of elements constituting the access services of archives. In principle, there have always been various other channels available to users to address archives in the search for information. They could write a letter, make a phone call or send an e-mail, and the archives would do the research and convey to them the required information by the same means or in the form of a photocopy or a digital scan. No face-to-face interaction would ever occur in this scenario. The reality of access to archival information is usually a blend of such remote processes and on-site reading room visits with or without substantial interaction with an archivist.

On the whole, the digital transformation resulted in the reduction of control points in the access process and of user's dependence on the archivist's advice. For example, an online catalogue would eliminate or soften the three first control points mentioned above (the opening hours of the reading rooms, signing in at the counter, requesting finding aids). However, users' dependency had already been reduced before by publishing finding aids for important fonds and manuals that provide context information for orientation. In the commemorative publication for the 200th anniversary of the SFA in 1998, the then head of the archives' IT services underlined the importance of the new technologies and their great potential for the archives' information management in general and users in particular, who could do their research location-independently via the Internet. He proudly stated that the SFA's systematic fonds overview was available online from mid-1996. Overall, however, he lamented the backlog of archives in Switzerland in using information technologies.⁵⁷

Looking back from the present on the digital transformation of these decades, one is tempted to speak of a revolution. However, James W. Cortada reminds us that what from the outside looks like a revolution is, seen from within an organization, an incremental process.⁵⁸ When I started working at the SFA, I became immedi-

56 The following sections are mainly based on my own experiences.

57 Jean-Marc Comment, «Les derniers seront les premiers ou l'erreur est humaine», in: *Festschrift 200 Jahre Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv*, Bern 1998, 33–35.

58 James W. Cortada, *Exploring How ICTs and Administration Are Entwined: The Promise of Information Ecosystems*, in: *Administration & Society* 50/9 (2018), 1213–1237; James W. Cortada, *The Digital Hand*, Vol. 3: *How Computers Changed the Work of American Public Sector Industries*, Oxford 2008.



Figure 6: Swiss Federal Archives – Counter and Reading Room, 2014
Source: Photo collection SFA.

ately involved in this dynamic evolution. Recently, the SFA had put a new database for the archive metadata into operation. It was the technical base to later replace the old paper finding aids. Together with my new colleagues, I participated in the internal training programme for using the database. My first active part in this incremental process of digital change came in 2004/05, when I helped manage the project of refurbishing the reading room. It was, above all, a construction project, but there was also a digital aspect. The question was how to equip the working places. Should we put a computer on every table? Laptops were already quite common among users. So, we decided to install a public wireless LAN. It was the very first in the federal administration.

At the same time, it was decided that paper finding aids were transferred into the reading room. This was not a digital measure in the first place, but it eliminated the control point at the archivist's counter of the advisory service and meant a decisive change for reading room encounters. From now on, users had direct access to finding aids, which they could identify online with the help of the systematic fonds overview.

In 2008, I was entrusted with drafting a midterm vision of the future access. I concluded that by 2025 access would be fully online and that the reading room would have become obsolete; a future already envisioned in the 1998 *Festschrift*: "For the Federal Archives, [...] the time is not too far away, where the documents

can be consulted online”⁵⁹ Since 2005, the SFA have been working on making the archive metadata available online. This goal was achieved in 2010 by the go life of the online research. This gave users more independence with regard to location, working hours and assistance. The role of archivists was changing. Their frontline work in the reading room was superseded by more background tasks. In a way, this trend led back to the old days, when archival cataloguing was based on the principle of pertinence and archivists created elaborate repertories to make it easier for users to search independently. With the same aim of making users less dependent on ad-hoc advice from archive staff, archivists now worked on the improvement of processes, metadata and services for users, and in projects to develop solutions for various issues posed by digitization, ranging from how to safely archive digital born data like databases or audio and video files to how to design the records management in the administration. The consultation of documents still took place mainly in the reading room, but face-to-face reading room encounters between users and archivists became less frequent and less routinized, as users only needed archivists’ advice in special cases. Complicated questions, which required prior in-depth research by an archivist, were better dealt with through email correspondence. Consequently, hours of reading room attendance by archivists were reduced. In parallel, the SFA was planning to replace the rather simple metadata catalogue of the online research by a completely new integrated online access system. A first step in this direction was made in 2016 by complementing the online research with an online chat. With this, the presence of archivists in the reading room was obsolete and users could contact them for research advice online. On-site face-to-face encounters concentrated on the counter of the administrative back office. The online chat functioned as a pilot project in order to gather experience with this medium as a component of the future online access infrastructure.

In autumn 2019, the SFA took a further decisive step to make its vision of a digital archive come true. In the words of the SFA’s deputy director: “Regardless of whether documents are available in analogue or digital form in the archive: they can be consulted online.”⁶⁰ The new access infrastructure to realize this vision consists of two components: a web portal (visible to users) including a fully digital workflow management system in the background and a digitization infrastructure designed

59 Comment, *Les derniers*, 1998, 34.

60 Stefan Kwasnitza, *Auf dem Weg zum komplett digitalen Archiv. Online-Zugang und Digitalisierung “on-demand” im Schweizerischen Bundesarchiv*, *Politik & Kultur*, 3/20 (2020), 19–20. See for a summary of the challenges posed by digitizing archives: Charles Jeurgens, *The Scent of the Digital Archive. Dilemmas with Archive Digitisation*, in: *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, 128/4 (2013), 30–54, retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289762649_The_Scent_of_the_Digital_Archive_Dilemmas_with_Archive_Digitisation (2018-10-28).

for mass production.⁶¹ All access services are now available on the web portal: registration and identification, searching, ordering and consulting of files, submission of consultation requests for files still subject to a legal closure period. Moreover, the access infrastructure is connected to the digital repository. Digital copies of files are stored in the digital repository and ready for reuse. Once digitized, users can download freely accessible files directly from the web platform without any further human intervention. But there is more: the content of digitized files is available as OCR-text.⁶² This means that users' search inquiries take into account not only metadata but also the full text of the primary data. This is much more than just another technical feature. So far users depended on metadata in finding aids and archivists' knowledge about the potential content of archival documents. Now they have direct and unfiltered access to archival information.

In these cases, users interact exclusively with the online interface of the access infrastructure. Neither the reading room nor face-to-face encounters between users and archivists are needed. The control points of the traditional access process (opening hours, signing in at the counter, need for advice, control of order forms for correctness and access authorization, reading room supervision) have either vanished or are dealt with by the technical access infrastructure. The supervision of users' handling of documents is obsolete, as there is no need for consulting the originals and users can work with copies. Signing in is done directly on the online platform. Most orders are checked automatically by the online access infrastructure; only a few special cases still need the approval of an archivist. Users' need for research advice is declining. In particular, the archivist's advice is less needed at the beginning of the research, as most metadata (and ever more primary data) can be searched directly by users without first having to identify the relevant finding aids. Users rather ask for advice after they have already done various database inquiries and got first results, be it that they have not found exactly what they expected, or that they wanted to make sure that their results are complete and relevant.

For the time being, in most cases the access process is still hybrid, shifting back and forth at various points between automated steps and tasks executed by humans.⁶³ But the roadmap is laid out for shifting the balance in favour of automation and realizing the digital archive throughout for all metadata and all kinds of files in the future. However, the notion of a wholly digital archive is not simply about automation. It is just as much about human action as an integral part of the access

61 Online access to the Federal Archives (recherche.bar.admin.ch).

62 This is true for documents from around 1910 onwards when the use of typewriters had become standard for official documents. The majority of documents in the SFA's holdings fall into this category. For handwritten documents, effective OCR has still a long way to go.

63 See on this Fleer, Conclusion, 2018, 1340–1342.

process. As an archivist, I do not feel superfluous, quite the contrary. My contribution to ensuring access to archived information remains relevant, albeit my working practice is changing. I advise the user, who may be anywhere on the globe, from the office or from my home. We interact by online chat, which is a form of communication, we are both still learning how to effectively use the changing access process. Rather than in a particular room localized by GPS coordinates, our encounter takes place on a web platform which is part of the “Internet” that consists of a complex technical infrastructure.⁶⁴ Moreover, digital data (for example digital born databases or extensive text corpus of digitised documents) can be analysed by using machine-based procedures. The development of the necessary data analysis pipelines from digitisation to interpretation of the data can only be achieved in close cooperation between researchers and archivists. In this context, the outmoded figure of the lone nineteenth-century historian-archivist could perhaps be revived in a new form as a partner in innovative research projects.⁶⁵

My account of the years as an archivist in the SFA is far from giving a complete picture, but the few snapshots may illustrate James W. Cortada’s argument of an incremental evolution that embraces many interdependent organizational, technical and professional changes. From this perspective, online access can be considered an extraordinary concentration of change in all these domains. It clearly marks a shift in attitude: the lament of 1998 about archives’ lagging behind has definitely given way to the ambition of being at the forefront of innovation of access services.

Conclusions

Considering the face-to-face interactions in the reading room in terms of street-level encounters means putting them into a bureaucratic context. According to Max Weber, bureaucracy is characterized by rules and standardized processes. Hierarchies

64 Thus, I have turned into what Bernardo Zacka has called a „screen-level bureaucrat”, Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 26.

65 Christoph Graf, *Arsenal*, 2001, 74; Melichar, *Tote und lebendige Archive*, 2007, 131. For two minor examples of possible data analysis approaches see: André Ourednik/Guido Koller/Peter Fleer/Stefan Nellen, *Feeling like a State. The Sentiments Tide of Swiss Diplomacy through the Eye of the Algorithm*, in: *Administratory. Journal for the History of Public Administration / Zeitschrift für Verwaltungsgeschichte* 3/1 (2018), 112–146, doi: 10.2478/ADHI-2018-0044; A Visual Approach to the History of Swiss federal law, in: *DHd (Digital Humanities im deutschsprachigen Raum) Paper presented at the DHd-Conference in Leipzig: Modelling – Networking – Visualization*, March 2016, retrieved from: <http://www.dhd2016.de/abstracts/vorträge-047.html> (2020-03-21).

and interactions are professional and impersonal.⁶⁶ Moreover, it is important to consider bureaucracy as a socio-technical environment, where mundane things like room layout, desks, counters, writing utensil, forms – the entire office technology – play an important role in shaping the concrete interactions between the protagonists.⁶⁷

Looking at the bureaucratic aspect of reading room encounters during the last 170 years, we see that their function as a combination of social, organizational and technical factors has changed. We can largely distinguish between three access settings that followed one another: access in the archivist's office, characterized by a rather close personal cooperation between users and archivists and informal interaction; access in a separated public area, the reading room, characterized by bureaucratic rules, division of labour and rather impersonal interactions; and access by online interfaces, characterized by standard procedures, more division of labour, and location-independent interactions mediated by technical means.

The increasing number of users and the diversification of their social and professional backgrounds called for schemes that enabled mass processing of demands. This implied a continuing bureaucratization of reading room encounters. Up to the 1950s, the SFA tried to withstand this pressure by a rationing strategy. However, it became increasingly evident that this could not be maintained and the SFA began to push for the rationalization of access services. This implied, above all, their bureaucratization. From the 1960s onwards, the counter of the reading room was a more open interface that regulated but also facilitated reading room encounters. Eventually, the reduction of control points diminished the importance of the counter and the archivist became less of a gatekeeper to information than of a mediator.⁶⁸ Staff increases led to a diversification of functions in research advice, administrative processing and logistics services, which in turn required more explicit rules to structure responsibilities and processes. With the digitization of the access process, the definition of rules became even more important. At the same time, technical and procedural standardization had to be pushed further, as it was an indispensable precondition for the deployment of the rationalizing potential of automation.

66 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, Tübingen 1980 [1921–1922]), retrieved from <http://www.zeno.org/nid/20011439831/http://www.zeno.org/nid/20011440007> (2020-03-10).

67 John Law, *Power, Discretion and Strategy*, in John Law (ed.), *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination* (Sociological Review Monograph, 38), London/New York 1991, 165–191.

68 Mediator as a transforming instance in an actor-network, quite in the sense of Bruno Latour, see: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford/New York 2005, 339.

This article showed that the reading room and, in particular, reading room encounters have always been changing according to the requirements of the overall access context. While the reading room premises as such are losing their function, the encounters will keep going, though in other forms, as the evolution of archival access continues in many respects. I will therefore conclude with a few considerations about the future of the reading room. First of all, the digital archive throughout means that it loses its role as the pivotal locality for access services. The meaning of “reading room” will have to be reconsidered as a more virtualized, maybe even metaphorical concept. Secondly, it dramatically sharpens the socio-technical character of reading room encounters. Face-to-face interaction is no longer supported just by paper and pencil or typewriter. Considering Bruno Latour’s notion of “actant” describing hybrid human – non-human actor configurations, it becomes evident how important the technical part of such human-technical actants in the bureaucratic context has become in the wake of digitization. The technical based complexity of these actants closely connected to their digital devices is much higher than it has been in the times of paper and pencil.⁶⁹ In fact, we could even speak of the online access system as a fully technical fifth actant that participates in the interaction between user, archivist, administration official and stack attendant.

Thus it is quite probable that in the future archives will no longer have to plan the access process in terms of the architectural setting of access premises but in terms of designing the access process itself according to the needs and capabilities of users, archivists and technology. Seen from the present user-orientated approach, the challenge is integrating all these elements in order to serve users best. Maybe, the glassy counter of the existing reading room is a good metaphor to guide the online access interface. As a partition, it clearly marks the legal constraints to access. However, the glass also stands for transparency that gives users control over their research and empowers them to get access to the relevant information. It also symbolizes the visibility of the archivists behind the counter who continue to be there to help users, albeit by different means. Online access allows users who need support in their research to contact an archivist by chat or try the chatbot available 24x7. In addition, they can continue to send inquiries by email or phone.

69 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 2005, 71; Bruno Latour, On Recalling ANT, in: John Law/John Harsard (eds.) *Actor Network Theory and After*, London/New York 1999, 15–26; Jim Johnson [Bruno Latour], *Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer*, in: *Social Problems* 35/3 (1988), 298–310; John Law/Michel Callon, *The Life and Death of an Aircraft: A Network Analysis of Technical Change*, in: Wiebe E. Bijker/John Law (eds.), *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, Cambridge 1992, 21–52; Barbara Czarniawska, *Social Science Research: From Field to Desk*, London/Thousand Oaks 2014, 58; Michel Callon, *Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay*, in: John Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: a New Sociology of Knowledge?* London 1986, 196–223.

At the preparatory workshop to this special issue the participants were sceptical about closing the reading room. They feared the loss of the human dimension in the access process, maybe the archivist's intuition that cannot be easily replaced by a technical system, probably – or should I say hopefully – not even by artificial intelligence. Indeed, this is a serious issue. Today, we are still learning how to include wisely the new access tools into the access process. Tomorrow, we will have to find out how to optimally integrate ourselves as humans into the technical system.

Expanded access services always went hand in hand with increased bureaucratisation of processes and more impersonal interactions. So far, digitization has reinforced this trend because digital applications are based on the same bureaucratic principles of regularity, predictability and routines. Like bureaucracy, digital systems have pushed for more standardized procedures and tend to narrow the discretion of archivists. On the one hand, this has been a deliberate effect that helps to better implement bureaucratic standards needed for coping with demand-supply dilemmas of street-level bureaucracy and securing equal treatment of all users. But users' needs are always diverse and conflicting, and may even become more so in the future. In order to adequately handle the many particular access situations, discretion on the street-level will presumably remain important in the archival access context. But, if this will be the discretion of the archivists alone is, in the light of the most recent discussions in the field of artificial intelligence, an open question. As an historian and archivist I will leave the preliminary last word on this topic to physicist Max Tegmark, a leading proponent in this “most important conversation of our time”. He asks: “[...] we started building machines that could outperform not only our muscles, but our minds as well. So, [...] are we inevitably making ourselves obsolete?” He answers the question by reminding us that “our future isn't written in stone and just waiting to happen to us – it's ours to create”.⁷⁰

70 Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0. Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, London/New York 2017, 320, 335.