

Final Research Proposal

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Section 1. Introduction and Literature Review*Research Question:*

When weighing the merits of full transparency versus restricted access, the needs of both the public and the subjects of the material must be taken into consideration. The role of the archivist is tested by the privacy versus access debate once records become the domain and responsibility of the archive. Some donors may impose restrictions as conditions of their donation, or materials accessioned by the archive present threats to an individual's or organization's reputation if made fully accessible to the public. Yet the public expects their right to access to be acknowledged and honored, sometimes regardless of the content of the records. So how is a compromise reached that will grant the public access while protecting the integrity of the materials' owners or subjects?

Operational Definitions:

Access: records made available to a person or persons at an archive, generally after a request, and provided in a secure reading room facility within the confines of the archive.

Archive: records center where records are accessioned, processed, stored, and users can access records with the assistance of the archivist.

Classified: Materials restricted to specified personnel due to issues involving security of an individual, group of individuals, or institution, usually connected with a government organization.

Collection: a set of records that were donated together as a complete entity, which have been accessioned, processed, and stored together as a unit.

Donor: an individual or entity that gives a collection of records to an archival institution.

Privacy: protection of information of a personal nature, especially if it could harm or embarrass the individual or entity.

Record: a single item within a collection.

Restriction: the refusal of access to records imposed by an archivist or records manager.

Sensitive: an umbrella term used to describe a record that contains information that could pose a threat to security, compromise the integrity and/or reputation of a person or business entity, threaten the physical safety of an individual(s), be detrimental to ongoing court or legal proceedings, etc.

Transparency: the complete and total accessibility to all records and collections regardless of content by the public.

Section 2. Brief literature review

Van Camp, A. (1982). Access policies for corporate archives. *The American Archivist* 45(3), 296-298. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40292509>.

A well-informed argument is made complete by incorporating a variety of components and perspectives. The inclusion of Anne Van Camp's discussion of corporate archives, their need for access policies, and the restriction challenges that they may face would prove beneficial for a research project discussing access and restriction issues; the argument – either for or against – regarding access restrictions to archival materials would be validated by the inclusion of access issues in multiple archival and records management settings. Policies established for controlling or permitting access to records in a corporate setting could serve as a template for other records centers seeking to establish their own policies.

Bradsher, J.G. (1986). Researchers, archivists, and the access challenge of the FBI records in the national archives. *The Midwestern Archivist 11(2)*, 95-110. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41101668>.

Bradsher's article pertains to the special circumstances of just one type of records center – that of FBI case files. Although this narrow focus of archival restrictions may be deemed too specific to apply to other archival institutions, reviewing their strict policies would make a significant contribution to a study that takes into account a variety of access restrictions executed among an array of archival settings. When dealing with special circumstances regarding materials that have been classified as sensitive, the manner in which FBI case files are safeguarded may provide insight into when it is appropriate for archivists to restrict access and how access can be restricted while still observing the rights of public access.

Horn, M. M., & Tharp, M. M. (1991). All the truth that's fit to tint. *U.S. News & World Report 111(20)*, 36. Retrieved from <http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9111112407&site=ehost-live>.

This article contributes to the theory that specific types of materials subject to restricted access are worth considering when examining restricted access in the archival field as a whole. Some exceptions will always be present when discussing privacy versus access, and it is imperative that these exceptions be considered should an archive choose to develop an access policy.

Kennedy assassination papers released. (1993). *American History Illustrated 28(5)*, 10. Retrieved

from

[http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true
&db=aph&AN=9402235427&site=ehost-live](http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9402235427&site=ehost-live).

This article also provides valuable perspectives on specific types of materials that are subject to restricted access. The reasoning behind restricting access to classified materials is relevant to the “bigger picture” in the privacy versus access debate, and opens the door to a discussion about exceptions to access policies concerning archival materials.

Hoff-Wilson, J. (1983). Access to restricted collections: the responsibility of professional historical organizations. *The American Archivist* 46(4), 441-447. Retrieved from:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40292900>.

The inclusion of Hoff-Wilson’s concepts of ethical codes and guidelines among historical organizations with regard to access would offer a different perspective of the access/restriction issue. A highly debated element of the restriction question is the role and responsibility of the archivist – who does the archivist serve first, the public or the records? Introducing ethics into the situation may offer clarity to a murky dilemma.

Suber, P. (2005). Open access, impact, and demand. *BMJ: British Medical Journal (International Edition)* 330(7500), 1097-1098. Retrieved from
[http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true
&db=aph&AN=17082741&site=ehost-live](http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=17082741&site=ehost-live).

Suber's article compliments Hoff-Wilson's article regarding the ethical implications of accessibility, specifically to scholarly articles, contributing further material on the ethics of access.

Valge, J., and Kibal, B. (2007). Restrictions on access to archives and records in Europe: a history and the current situation. *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28(2), 193-214. doi:10.1080/00379810701611951. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/ehost/detail?vid=4&sid=1740c6c4-804f-4905-b5a9-8ed60b900113%40sessionmgr112&hid=122&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=27240177>.

The categorization of restriction types in this article assists in the examination of access restrictions, and how certain types of restriction can be applied to records collections without completely barring access. Selective restriction, while dicey, may be effective in appeasing accessibility requirements while protecting privacy as well.

The journey of access examined in this article would also provide substantial information for my research topic. I felt that Valge and Kibal's article provided insight into both past and current methods of records management in terms of access and restriction that would make valuable contributions to a research project designed to examine issues surrounding restricted access to archival materials.

Panofsky, R., & Moir, M. (2005). Halted by the archive: the impact of excessive archival

restrictions on scholars. *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 37(1), 19-32. Retrieved from <http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19164549&site=ehost-live>.

This article would be of particular relevance due to the dual perspectives of scholars and archivists presented, and the impact experienced by both when dealing with access restrictions. Utilizing multiple perspectives on an issue that is subject to debate would help to clarify the problem and the solutions that can be applied.

Strassberg, R. (1997). The final barrier. *Reference Librarian* 26(56), 95-105.

doi:10.1300/J120v26n56_08. Retrieved from <http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=75410120&site=ehost-live>.

Strassberg's article presents an alternative reasoning behind restricting access to materials – protection from vandalism and theft. This article would be provide valuable information in defense of access restrictions, with protecting archival materials as its key motive. Limiting access to valuable materials to the confines of a designated, monitored reading room presents a type of compromise between transparency and restriction.

Section 3. Statement of Methodology and Analytic Techniques

The survey will be distributed to an array of archival institutions and records centers with differing collection sizes and content, to gather information that represents a cross-section of the archival community. The answers to the survey regarding their employment of an access policy can be grouped for the purposes of assessing privacy and access rights and the leanings toward

privacy or providing access. Surveying institutions that represent various points on the spectrum between full transparency and restricted access will allow for a fuller survey of the policies employed when dealing with the question of access.

The cover letter preceding the actual survey will serve as a request for participation, and will explain to the prospective participants the purpose of the survey, what will be done with the results, how their privacy will be protected, and how their participation will be valuable in my research endeavors. The body of the survey will present a number of multiple choice questions with write-in options – it is important that the length of the survey is manageable so that participants do not discard the survey due to time limitations or lose interest once they have begun. The first part of the survey will include detailed instructions regarding how to complete the survey, to ensure that participants understand how to use the write-in option if they need to use it.

The answers to the survey questions provided by participants will be grouped and calculated into percentages that represent their institutions' practices (e.g. 76% of respondents claim to have access policies in place) where applicable, while other data will be analyzed through qualitative rather than quantitative means. For example, a question that would appear on the questionnaire could proceed as follows: Do you have time-dictated restrictions imposed on any records in your collection? If yes, please check the boxes next to each time limitation that is applied to records in your collection. The answers provided would be grouped together and the results would be written out to relay to the reader how many archives utilize time limitations for restricted access and the lengths of the time limitations they employ. With a qualitative analysis it may be easier to relay to study readers that time limitations may be favored by a particular type of archive or archival collection.

The analyses of questionnaire responses needs to presented clearly and concisely, and situated within the report with corresponding results from the literature review so that readers can view all evidence of each stance (restriction versus full accessibility). Survey results that do not specifically declare for one side or the other should be grouped together and accompany research literature that offers dual perspectives on the debate.

Section 4. Project schedule

The literature review should be completed first – the findings compiled as a result of the literature review can then be assessed for gaps in information, and the survey questionnaire can be designed to fill in those gaps. The time allotted for the literature review should not exceed two months, allowing for ample time to collect information from a variety of published sources. The subsequent creation of the questionnaire based on the information found lacking or in need of more details as a result of the literature review should not exceed two weeks.

No longer than one month shall elapse following the affirmation of participation by the prospective participants – meaning, participants have exactly thirty days to complete and submit the survey after receiving their request for participation. During this thirty days, as participants take the time to complete and submit the questionnaire, the rough compilation of findings based on the literature review should be drafted into a report format.

The most significant amount of time will be spent on analyzing the responses on the questionnaire, and incorporating the data into the drafted report. The combined time allotted for analyzing the questionnaire responses and drafting the final report will not exceed six months. This time allotment will allow for the completion of further research, should the rough draft

require more in depth analyses of any one section or a second questionnaire be warranted for the collection of further data.

Section 5. Qualifications

As a graduate student pursuing an advanced degree in archives and records management, this research project would be the ideal subject for a submission for scholarly publication to bolster my academic achievements. A research project on this scale would exemplify my efforts to establish myself in my field.

Section 6. Significance of the Work (and who it will directly benefit)

The results of the research findings, aided by a survey through which participants provide information on their institutions' access policies, will directly benefit the archival community and other institutions that maintain records retention centers. By providing in depth analyses on the merits of both access restriction and full disclosure, archives and records centers will be presented with all of the information they need to choose whether or not they will develop access policies, and if they choose to do so, they will be able to use the research presented to tailor their policies to fit the specific needs of their collections.

Section 7. Summary.

This research project seeks to explore the merits of both sides of the debate between access restrictions and full transparency for public access to archival materials. While the arguments for both sides are equally strong, and there exists middle ground between the two absolutes, this research project would provide further detailed information on restriction policies

and archives / records centers that would help archivists determine the best course of action for their institutions.

In essence, this research should provide archivists and records managers with the tools to determine which policies would best suit their collections, and how best to suit the needs of their patrons as well as the records entrusted to their care.

Section 8. References

Bradsher, J.G. (1986). Researchers, archivists, and the access challenge of the FBI records in the national archives. *The Midwestern Archivist* 11(2), 95-110. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41101668>.

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- Van Camp, A. (1982). Access policies for corporate archives. *The American Archivist* 45(3), 296-298. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40292509>.