

5 YEARS OF ARXIFORUM

In November 1995 a group of archivists within the Association of Archivists of Catalonia (AAC) set up a working group on the Internet to find out from and to disclose to our colleagues what this new "invention" was and what it could offer archivists.

This was a logical step after the creation of the Association of Archivists of Catalonia website.

AAC made the most of Rediris' readiness to host forums for scientific or academic debate and asked Rediris to create our list.

On 23 October 1998, a message about the ISAD-G set the way for the Arxiforum distribution list. Five years and thousands of messages later, Arxiforum has become well established as a system for exchanging information on the Internet and is used very day by over 1,500 archivists from Catalonia and other nations.

We are now convinced that if Arxiforum did not exist, someone would have to create it. Why?

Distribution lists enable a large number of people to connect immediately at any time and receive and distribute information in a way that is not possible by many other means. This is where its success lies.

Another advantage of such immediacy is the accumulation of knowledge that it produces as these messages are also filed and may be found using powerful search engines.

Rediris hosts over 50 lists, of which ours is one of the five with most members. It therefore is a useful and prestigious service, despite problems of visibility and associativity. Studies on distribution list operations have compared relations between subscribers to professional associations. Arxiforum is, from this perspective, a large association with over 1,500 members.

As the number of members who subscribe to Arxiforum grows, it becomes more representative, not only geographically, but also with regard to subject matter and interests.

Transferring the content, which is still pending, of the five years in which the list has been active, will enable us to sketch out fluxes of interests, common areas, announcements, presence and impact on training, the private and the public sector, research projects, R+D grants, and especially European Union awards, etc. The following list provides an idea of examples of matters dealt with:

Planning: Files on construction work awards (municipal archives)

Classification: Classification records (municipal archives/genealogical archives)

Description: Application of the ISAD(G), diffusion of EAD, photographic collections, architectural collections

Services: Quality of service, service charter

Conservation and Restoration: Disasters in deposits, digitisation of collections

Administration: Organic dependence of the archive, the work situation of archive auxiliaries

Job offers: Civil service examinations, complaints on procedure, programme requests

Diffusion policy: Information on archive websites, diffusion projects in schools, creation of new lists (BibCat, Archivaria)

Offers of products of professional interest: Training, publications, services for companies in the sector

Bibliography: Bibliographical searches, particularly manuals

IT: Requests for information on applications for the comprehensive management of archives, document management, image processing

Controversies such as spontaneous and enriching debates, have also taken place on Arxiforum. Particularly memorable are those on the Salamanca Blood Papers or the degree in Recordkeeping as opposed to one in Documentation.

The list as a communication tool

Information exchange systems are extremely important for us, just as they are for any professional group. They enable us to be up-to-date and provide for training. The Internet, in this case, is just another medium, another way in which content circulates. Arxiforum (like the Association's web page) is therefore a tool that fulfils what are now traditional, proven methods of information circulation such as publications, training courses, workshops and congresses, etc.

These new formats are not intended as replacements but are perfectly complementary. If the transmission of content at a congress or in a publication is vertical (from the speaker to the audience or from the writer to readers), in a distribution list, the relation is more transversal. Anyone can be a specialist in a specific subject and thus serve the professional group as a whole. Everyone benefits in the end because everyone gives and receives. This format has

virtues and shortfalls. Knowledge is democratised but it does require the monitoring of the quality of contributions.

One thing should be clear. The quality, and to a lesser extent, the quantity of contributions to the list determines the end result of Arxiforum. Messages of a low quality level or contributions that we consider to be outside our professional area should be combated by our right to reply. Likewise, Arxiforum was not created for simple passive readers. Subscribers have to participate in a daily exchange of information and only a diversity of contributions will enrich the group as a whole.

Unlike other forms of written communication, the exchange of electronic messages is more similar to oral communication in its spontaneity and immediacy of reply than it is to the elaborate, well-prepared messages in conventional publications. A high qualitative level of messages is not necessarily threatened by this spontaneity, at least when the list's level of maturity allows for a system of self-regulation that focuses it within desirable qualitative levels. How is self-regulation achieved? Through participation.

Passivity is related to what the experts call the "critical mass" of a list. Who constitutes the Arxiforum's critical mass? This notion can be illustrated using the 80/20 rule. Approximately 80% of contributions are made by 20% of the total number of subscribers. The remainder are passive observers who only read the messages.

One significant detail is that in 2003 there were 1,022 contributions to Arxiforum. 128 of these were from Catalan archivists. This accounts for 12.5% of contributions.

Let us apply this 80/20 rule. If we acknowledge that approximately 1,022 of contributions are from 20% of the subscribers, 128 messages written by Catalan archivists amount to 2.5% of contributions.

Thus, in answer to the above question on the critical mass of Arxiforum, only a small percentage of Catalan archivists belong to "our list".

Our opinion, whether it be criticism, agreement or comment, etc. only enriches the group as a whole if it is published. We thus wish to encourage you to give your opinions and change from passive observers to participants.

Arxiforum is also a way to build the profession and make it better and more visible in society.

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