

Viewpoints on community archives: the experts vs the practitioners.

Community archives (local history collections, interest group archives, personal collections and the like) are a recognised part of the archives, library and heritage sector in New Zealand. However very little in-depth research exists about them, and to date their role and purpose has not been clearly defined (Flinn 2007, 2011) or even widely understood (Oliver, 2010).

As a result, there are number of differing perceptions as to what community archives are, and what they do. These differing perceptions can create tensions between community archives practitioners working in community archives and other information professionals, particularly in terms of how collections should be managed.

This paper looks at how community archives are perceived by two particular groups: experts (i.e., academics and practitioners with extensive industry knowledge and experience in archives management) and practitioners (those with sole charge responsibility for a small community archives). Findings are based on personal research, which involved interviews with five individuals responsible for small archival collections, as well as surveys with fifteen experts. While thematic analysis of the two groups identified areas of commonality, there were also some significant differences. Practitioners often viewed experts (or the institutions they represented) as remote or uncaring, while experts perceived practitioners to be non-strategic and underqualified in certain cases. The groups also differently prioritised levels of concern relating to areas such as funding, marketing and community engagement, digital archiving, and training and professional engagement, and had contrasting viewpoints as to how each should be addressed.

Among other things, these differing priorities and viewpoints raise a number of potential issues for the wider industry when it comes to providing ongoing advocacy and support for community archives. Solutions are possible, but all need to stem from a shared understanding that bridges the gap between divergent perceptions. This understanding can be aided by new initiatives such as the development of an agreed working definition for community archives, and the creation of an advocate group. As these are established, these will help to fuel further work that aids industry-wide understanding of, and support for, community archives in all their different forms.

References:

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