

Examining the “small world” of literary archival collections: A pilot project

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Abstract: New standards in archival description provide the ability to leverage interconnectivity documented in archival materials. However, little research to date examines the level of documented interconnectivity. This pilot project addresses the issue of examining this interconnectivity for one community represented in archival collections--American literary figures. It explores the use of social network analysis to address issues of descriptive clarity and comprehensiveness. Stanley Milgram’s identification of the “small world” in the 1960s has been further developed within diverse academic disciplines and a rich set of tools has been developed to explore large- and small-scale research problems. The archival community has long accepted the “small world” of record creators as well as the dispersion of materials throughout repositories. The archival community has relied upon anecdotal evidence to support this assertion. This pilot project explores the opportunities and challenges to adapting social network analysis to investigate the small world of record creators. Using a sample network structure, and exploring the variables that need to be considered, social network analysis is demonstrated to be adaptable in addressing these research problems.

About the author:

Katherine M. Wisser is Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. She has previously served as the Director of Instructional Services at the School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has worked in Special Collections departments in New Hampshire and North Carolina, including a position as North Carolina State University Libraries Fellow and as metadata coordinator for the statewide initiative, North Carolina Exploring Cultural Heritage Online (NC ECHO). She was a teaching fellow at UNC’s School of Information and Library Science, teaching courses on bibliographic cataloging, archival description, abstracting and indexing, advanced cataloging, and the history of libraries from 2000 to 2008, and has taught numerous workshops for NC ECHO and SAA. She has a MA in American History from the University of New Hampshire, a MLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Ph.D. in Information Science from UNC-CH. She has served as EAD Roundtable Chair and Description Section Chair for the Society of American Archivists and President of the Society of North Carolina Archivists. In 2004, she took on the role of Tag Library Editor for the Encoded Archival Context Tag Library, and she currently serves as Chair of the EAC Working Group, which released EAC-CPF standard in March 2010.