Exploring the “Small World” of Literary Archival Collections: A Pilot Project
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Abstract

Standards in archival description provide the ability to leverage interconnectivity in archival materials. However, research to date examines this interconnectivity in collections – American literary figures. The archival community has long accepted the “small world” of record creators as well as the interconnection of materials throughout repositories as relied upon anecdotal evidence to support this assertion. This pilot project explores the opportunities and challenges to linking social network analysis to investigate this small world.

Textual Data and the Potential of Linking

Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (EAC-CPF) offers the opportunity to link information for entities and resources represented in cultural heritage materials. Through three separate relationships, EAC-CPF is intended to leverage the relationship of entities with other persons, entities with functions or activities, and entities with resources.

“Small World”:

Social Network Analysis

As adages go, “it’s a small world” is one that archivists, purveyors of personal papers and corporate body records, are familiar with. Without question, archival records are expected to reveal the connectivity of human activity – in work, family, art, and fun. Social network analysis has made significant advances since Milgram’s small world experiment detecting our “six degrees of separation,” but does this research help us to understand historical relationships and are the relationships documented?

Relevant Resources: (from
• Robert Chester Ruark papers, 1942-1965, #4001, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
• Grenadine Etching (1947)
• I didn’t know it was loaded (1948)
• One for the Road (1949)
• Grenadine’s Spawn (1952)
• Horn of the Hunter (1953)
• Richard Garther Walser papers, 1879-1988, #4168 Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
• Oscar Jackson Coffin papers, 1879-1991, #3907, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Work History:
• Hamlet News Messenger
• Sanford Herald
• Washington Post

Analysis example: Robert Chester Ruark

Connections identified in UNC fin 1942-1965, #4001, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Conclusion: What Can Social Network Analysis Tell Archivists?

Social network analysis can be used to examine the degree to which existing archival description will provide the baseline information for creating linked data. Some of the values will be easy to determine, while others may be obscured by existing archival descriptions.

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