

# Vagrant Facts: The Use of Archives as Cultural Heritage and Knowledge Production

**Karl-Magnus Johansson**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4734-5060>

The Swedish National Archives

[karl-magnus.johansson@riksarkivet.se](mailto:karl-magnus.johansson@riksarkivet.se)

## Abstract

Traditionally, archives constitute the authority of facts. This view has been challenged by recognising archives, not as sites of knowledge retrieval but knowledge production, and by questioning archivists and archival practice as neutral, objective, and impartial. This contradiction also applies when considering the relationship between archives and cultural heritage. The traditional view that would regard public documents as cultural heritage contrasts the relationship that includes a more progressive definition of cultural heritage as traces and expressions from the past that are attributed value and are being used today, since nothing is cultural heritage in itself. Hence, it could be assumed that studying aspects that affect the use of archives could provide a wider understanding of the knowledge production that permeates the relationship between archives and cultural heritage. This paper reports a user study, with a participatory design, where 13 heritage master's students performed a task that involved reflecting on their own research processes when using archives regarding vagrancy in late nineteenth-century Gothenburg. In the user study, aiming at gaining a wider understanding of the cognitive processes and epistemological aspects involved in using archives, the observations made by the students in their ethnographic and reflexive research process were analysed. From the analysis of the students' reports, certain tendencies emerged that could be wider understood by their connections with previous research, for example within media theory.

**Keywords:** archival user study; cultural heritage; knowledge production; media theory

## Introduction

In a letter to the editor of the weekly newspaper *The Jewish Floridian*, which was published on 14 July 1944, the director of the Bureau of Jewish Education, Abe Gannis, opposed the newspaper's use of the term "vagrant facts" in the title of the column "Some

Vagrant Facts from a Cluttered Desk.” Gannis stated that “vagrant”, according to Webster’s dictionary, meant “moving about without certain object”, and consequently he concluded: “There’s no such thing as a vagrant fact.” The editor wittily replied, “Brother, that defines the facts that wander into this column.”

The present paper discusses neither the Jewish community in Florida during World War II nor the editorial practices of local newspapers at that time. Instead, the paper is focused on the use of archives in the production of knowledge and cultural heritage regarding vagrants in late nineteenth-century Sweden. The main explanation for the seemingly serendipitous reference to *The Jewish Floridian* in this introduction is Google. While considering “Vagrant Facts” as the title of this paper, I became curious about whether and how the term was used. The first thing that came to my mind was to “Google” it, which is a method of information retrieval commonly used in the late 2010s to obtain initial knowledge about a subject. Google led me to the Florida Digital Newspaper Library, a division of the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries, where a digitised and OCR-scanned version of *The Jewish Floridian*, with the page containing Gannis’s remark, was accessible thanks to the Florida Jewish Newspaper Project. Aiming to highlight “hidden” local and ethnic Florida newspapers, the project chose to focus on “Florida’s first ethnic newspaper of note”—*The Jewish Floridian*.

Just minutes after I began to wonder about the possible usage of the term for the title of my paper, I received some information about how improper an intellectual of the time thought the term was in the vernacular media in 1944. However, the cognitive process of knowledge production that I was subjected to is worthy of further reflection as it includes several factors that affected the connection between my curiosity about the use of the term and the newspaper column in 1944. These factors include the zealous desire of Abe Gannis to compose his remark on the newspaper’s use of what he deemed the contradictory use of English; the humorous choice of the editor of the column to publish Gannis’s remark; the Florida Jewish Newspaper Project’s decision to digitise and OCR-scan *The Jewish Floridian* as the first of many local community newspapers; that the OCR-scanned content was addressable by Google’s search engine; the impression of authenticity and authority that the University Library’s interface gave me; and the timing of my Google-search for “Vagrant fact” in the summer of 2017, when Google’s algorithms made Gannis’s letter to the editor of *The Jewish Floridian* the top result. All these aspects constituted layers of knowledge production, which convinced me, anxious as I am about my English skills, that it might not be the best idea to use the term “vagrant fact” as the title of my paper, since, according to the erudite Abe Gannis, it might have been imprudent.

## **Archives and Historical Knowledge Production**

Gannis’s suggestion leads us to think about facts as stable and fixed, which, from a traditional point of view, characterise the information in archives. Archivist and

professor of information studies Francis X. Blouin Jr. and historian William G. Rosenberg (2011, 15) argued that “the meaning of history itself emerged naturally from the authority of facts, which spoke for themselves” and “the archives were the authority of those ‘facts’.” If understanding the concept of “fact” begins by the question regarding “conventions of representations” (Poovey 1998, xi), a foundation for these conventions in a literate culture would be archival authority. According to Blouin and Rosenberg (2011, 17), “archives and the process of archiving itself connoted authenticity and officialization. Both were at the foundation of an ordered society”.

Regarding the production of historical knowledge, an integral part of society’s facts infrastructure is constituted by preserved and accessible archives. Archival practice has been aimed to assure authenticity, to provide context, and to establish systems of information retrieval. In 2002, archivists and archival theorists Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook criticised the prevailing traditional perception of archivists and archival practice as neutral, objective, and impartial, both within the profession and among users of archives. They argued for the relevance of establishing the concept of “power” in archival theory, a concept they claimed was largely absent even though archives, “ever since the mnemons of ancient Greece, have been about power—about maintaining power, about the power of the present to control what is, and will be, known about the past, about the power of remembering over forgetting” (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 3).

According to Swedish archival law, the archives of public agencies are a part of the Swedish national heritage (Sweden 1990, section 3). This law determines a clear relationship between archives and the concept of cultural heritage, that is, the view of public documents as cultural heritage. However, the concept is often problematised, as constructed and constantly negotiated, not static or fixed. For a progressive definition, we do not even have to look to heritage theory but again to Swedish governmental texts. On 31 May 2017, the Swedish Parliament accepted a bill regarding cultural heritage in which the archival sector was included. In the bill, the term is defined as “traces and expressions from the past that are attributed value and are being used today,” since “nothing is cultural heritage in itself, but becomes it through being perceived and used as such” (Sweden 2017, 57). Hence, it could be assumed that studying aspects that affect the use of archives could provide a wider understanding of the knowledge production that permeates the relationship between archives and cultural heritage, according to the definition stated in the bill.

## **Ethnographic and Reflexive Archival User Study**

In the fall of 2016, I was invited to design and teach a module in the master’s programme Heritage and Modernity at the University of Gothenburg. My intention was that the module would raise the students’ awareness of knowledge production in using archives to perform a task that involved reflecting on their own research processes. Because the duration of the module was two months, although it would run currently with another module, the students would have the opportunity to engage deeply with archival

research. In the user study reported in this paper, the result of the students' work with the task will be analysed.

Archival theorist and computer scientist Joseph Pugh (2017, 72) stated that there is “a neglect of user studies in archives verging on the systematic”. Most research in this small but growing field is carried out in experimental settings where selected groups of users are observed performing defined tasks in closed environments. The underlying purposes of such studies are often explicit, such as optimising the accessibility of archives (Tibbo 2003), designing intuitive systems of retrieval that meet the researchers' needs (Duff and Johnson 2002), identifying optimal search strategies (Daniels and Yakel 2010), and obtaining knowledge about developing better finding aids and user education (Yakel 2002; Yakel and Torres 2003). According to archival theorist Anneli Sundqvist (2017), the least frequent type of research in archival user studies is non-experimental field research in which primary data are gathered in natural settings. Hence, she argued, “the fact that there is little research done in this area is in itself an argument for field research” (Sundqvist 2017). One of the few examples of a field research user study is Shelley Toni Sweeney's (2002) dissertation which studied the in-person use of archives by 14 researchers at archival institutions. The purpose of the study was to understand the cognitive process of researchers by exploring a holistic picture of their experiences (Sweeney 2002, 39). Both Sweeney's open and non-experimental settings, and theories in other fields influence the method used in this paper.

Since the mid-1990s, several explorations of archives and archival phenomena have been conducted in academic fields other than archival science. This development is often referred to as the “archival turn” in humanities and social sciences. In a recent study, Eric Ketelaar (2017), professor of archivistics, categorised these contributions as “archival turns and returns.” He found that one “turn” was aimed to move “from archives as sources to archives as epistemological sites and the outcome of cultural practices” (Ketelaar 2017, 228). A pioneer of this turn is anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler. In studying colonial history of the nineteenth-century Dutch Indies, she introduced the notion of archives as “condensed sites of epistemological and political anxiety rather than as skewed and biased sources. These colonial archives were both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves” (Stoler 2009, 20). Suggesting that archives should be recognised, “not as sites of knowledge retrieval but knowledge production” (Stoler 2002, 90), she argued for a move from understanding the use of archives as an extractive exercise to an ethnographic one. The latter “resides in the disjuncture between prescription and practice, between state mandates and the manoeuvres people made in response to them, between normative rules and how people actually lived their lives” (Stoler 2009, 31).

Furthermore, according to Stoler (2002), scholars of colonial history at the time of her study aimed to challenge the grand narratives of colonialism by turning “quickly and confidently to read ‘against the grain’ of colonial conventions.” She opposed this

reading because she believed that “reading only against the grain bypasses the power in the production of the archive itself” (Stoler 2002, 101). Instead, her suggestion, which became an integral part of her methodology, was to meticulously study the written records of the colonial state. She argued that in encountering archives as the technology of colonial rule, we need to “read for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake—along the archival grain” (Stoler 2002, 100).

In *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, several scholars, mainly historians, discuss their encounters with archives during their research processes—an approach that Ketelaar identified as the “reflexive turn.” According to the editor, historian Antoinette Burton, the volume aspires to offer “a more transparent and ultimately ... a more accountable basis for the production of knowledge about the past.” Her suggestion was to challenge the claims to objectivity in the traditional notion of archives by raising the awareness of “its power to shape all the narratives which are to be ‘found’ there” through “self-conscious ethnographies of one of the chief investigative foundations of History as a discipline” (Burton 2005, 6). Historians have rarely reflected on these encounters with archives in their research publications (Burton 2005, 8; Fellman and Popp 2013).

A contribution to *Archive Stories* was written by historian Durba Ghosh (2005), who presented her encounters with archives in conducting research on local Indian women who cohabited with or married European men from 1760 to 1840 in the first century of British rule in India. Ghosh was explicitly influenced by Stoler in her ethnographic approach to theorising “the logic of the archive, its forms of classification, ordering, and exclusion.” However, she also added to Stoler’s methodological framework: “I would argue that an ethnography of the archive should include accounts of our exchanges with the people we meet and dialogue with in the process of our research” (Ghosh 2005, 28).

An early contribution to the reflexive turn was historian Arlette Farge’s work *The Allure of Archives*, in which she reflected on her research using French judicial archives of the eighteenth century. Among her many reflections were the effects of the remediation of archives. In exploring remediation from paper documents to microfilm and microfiche, she concluded that such processes “undoubtedly allow for new and fruitful ways of questioning the texts.” However, as she disappointingly claims, they “can drain the life out of it” (Farge 2013, 15). Today, the aspects of archival mediation and materiality do not often concern the medium of microfilm. In analysing archival research or the retention of archival information in the twenty-first century, we cannot assume that these encounters are limited to in-person experiences at archival institutions because of the amount of remediated digitised archival content and digital search interfaces regarding archival collections. Furthermore, not only is the mediation of archival information changing the conditions of archival research, but also when obtaining contextual information in research processes.

As previously stated by Steven Lubar (1999, 11 22), the then chair of the Division of the History of Technology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, "New ways of thinking about the nature of technology, knowledge, and power are changing the ways we think about both museum artefacts and archives." These "new ways" that shape our contemporary digital and networked society are now conventions that have practical effects on our encounters with archives. As associate professor of film studies Trond Lundemo (2010, 195) suggested, they also have a deeper impact: "Just to persist in the idea that old archives will prevail falls short of analysing how the digital conventions fundamentally changes not only the politics and priorities of the archive institutions but also how one accesses and thinks about archival material and our 'cultural heritage' at large".

In line with Lubar and Lundemo's assumptions, the ethnographic and reflexive user study reported in this paper is based on a media theoretical approach. Like Sweeney's previous study, this paper aims at gaining a wider understanding of the cognitive processes and epistemological aspects involved in using archives. However, unlike Sweeney's study, instead of observing users, this user study applies a participatory design that lets the users decide what aspects are observed when encountering archives. By enabling the students to identify and discuss the knowledge-producing layers that they are subjected to in their cognitive processes in using archives, they will contribute to the description of the "holistic picture" of such processes. Therefore, the following research questions are posed: What aspects of the use of archives do the students identify as important in their cognitive processes? How can the effect of these aspects be understood in relation to the use of archives as cultural heritage and knowledge production?

## **The Students' Tasks**

The Heritage and Modernity programme was attended by 13 students, ranging in age from 22 to 32 years. With the exception of one student, all were bachelor degree heritage students majoring in history, archaeology, or ethnology. In the main task of the module, the students mainly worked in six groups of two or three, and were handed single files from the Gothenburg police archives in the late nineteenth century regarding "vagrants" who had been warned by the authorities. I selected the sample randomly with the exception of gender: three of the warned vagrants were male and three were female.

In Western Europe, the legal tradition regarding vagrancy, which is a way of controlling poor, unemployed, and/or homeless people, has medieval roots. In Sweden, as in many other countries, the compulsory-service statutes regulated labour from early modern times. In 1885, unemployment was decriminalised, but in that year, a new law regarding "the treatment of vagrants" was adopted. The law defined a vagrant as someone unemployed who wandered around "from one place to another" without having enough money to pay for living expenses, and who was not seeking employment. If a person

was warned as a vagrant once, and then again within two years, he/she could have been sentenced to one year of forced labour (Sweden 1885, sections 1–2).

Although the term “vagrancy” was legally defined, there was an absence of precision in the definition, both juridically and in practice. Vagrancy could be described as a crime of personal condition or a “social crime” rather than in relation to a specific criminal act (Johnsson 2016, 17). The assumption is that the registration of vagrants, as the archival inscription included in the technology of state rule, was a defined area of power relations between the state and the warned vagrant. In other words, governmental paperwork and archival practice that were performances of power. Furthermore, the vague definition of the term “vagrant” seemed to call for discussions regarding how historical knowledge about vagrants could be produced and challenged using archives.

In the module, the students’ main task was to study the vagrant files using an ethnographic and reflexive approach and then to identify the “layers of knowledge production,” such as the inscription and formation of archives or in the interfaces of access and usage. By applying a self-reflective approach to their research process, they were supposed to consider how the method could provide a wider understanding of how heritage is produced by using archives. They were asked to read both the archives and their research processes “along the grain.”<sup>1</sup> The students’ reports, which ranged from five to nineteen pages, were presented, discussed, and examined during two seminars. The written reports, as well as the seminars, are the main empirical material used in this study.

The students were also given a second, less extensive task, which was to critically explore the interfaces connecting archives and the users of archives (Hedstrom 2002). The task used a definition of interface influenced by design theorist Benjamin Bratton (2015, 220), who described it as “any point of contact between two complex systems that governs the conditions of exchange between those systems”. The complex systems in this case were the cognitive processes of the users of archives and the archives. This open definition includes, for example, databases, finding aids, archival institutions’ websites, archivists in reading room information desks, or printed brochures. As visual theorist Johanna Drucker (2014, 147) claimed, interfaces are “sites of power and control”, and thus, the students were asked to investigate different aspects of a chosen interface, such as visibility and exclusion. The results of the second task will not be further discussed here, but in the students’ reports and the following seminars, the experience of the interface investigation played a significant role and clearly affected their performance of the main task.

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1 The beginning of the module included an introductory lecture on archival theory and practice in Sweden. The reading list of the module consisted of Blouin and Rosenberg (2011); Ghosh (2005); Grut (2016); Sjögren Zipsane (2016); and Stoler (2002).

## The Archival Technology of Rule

In media theorist Ben Kafka's (2012, 10) work on the praxis and parapraxis of historical paperwork, he assumed public records to be "all those documents produced in response to a demand—real or imagined—by the state". In a similar approach, legal historian Cornelia Vismann (2008, xii) showed that archives were designed to support the performance of law and government in her study of "the part that official records have in the emergence of the notions of truth, the concepts of state, and the constructions of the subject in Western history". Following these assumptions, the archives of state authorities would "both reflect and constitute power relations" (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 13).

Four of the student groups described that they began their archival research by studying the laws and regulations regarding vagrants in late nineteenth-century Sweden. This was motivated by the aim of understanding not only the terms and legal framework that the files referred to and how references connected the files to other documents but also what kind of information that was recorded by the police regarding the warned vagrants. One group of students concluded that as part of the state archives, the documentation regarding vagrants was a tool used by the judicial administration to control and punish. Another group described that by studying the law, they understood the abbreviation "P.U." in the form. It was short for *Polisunderrättelser*, a publication that was published three times a week and distributed to all police offices, courts, and jails in Sweden. The abbreviation was included in the file because the law regulated the information regarding warned vagrants in *Polisunderrättelser*. The same group of students referred to the regulations stating that the police officer who conducted the interrogation was supposed to be the one who filled out the form. Another group reflected on the authorship of public records and the relation of power in every statement they found regarding the warned vagrant they were studying. They identified "a clear imbalance of power between the educated, male, officer, filling out a form about the unmarried, vagrant woman."

Even though the principle of public access to official documents was applied in Sweden during the late nineteenth century, it is clear that the files were recorded by the police mainly for the judicial system. One of the student groups argued that the state created the category of "vagrants"; thus, through the archive, the warned vagrant, as a vagrant, "is a product of the state." This interpretation is in line with media theorist Bernhard Siegert's (2015, 87) findings that legal writing creates political subjects and thus expresses state power.

The archival moment of inscription includes aspects of media technology (Johansson 2018). In recent years, media historians have systematically elaborated on the epistemological, cultural and bureaucratic effects of prescriptive formats in written cultural discourse (Gitelman 2014; Hess and Mendelsohn 2010; Järpvall 2016). The initial documents that were handed to the students were files consisting of preprinted



forms. One of the groups reflected on that the vagrant file included a field for “nickname.” Their “vagrant,” who was a woman also accused of prostitution, was registered not only in her Christian name, “Anna Johanna Olausson,” but also as “Fat Anna.” This statement led the students to conclude ironically that “an open recorded nickname ... could indicate that somebody probably did not belong to the elite of the society.”

Most of the students interpreted reading “along the archival grain” as involving deep research of any documents that were connected to the file, and they also followed their vagrant subject in other series and archival fonds before and after they were warned as vagrants. This interpretation made them study many more documents in addition to the initial file. One group meticulously followed every lead that their file provided and presented a schematic overview of the flow of information about the “vagrancy” of their warned vagrant through four archival fonds, seven series, eleven files or documents, and *Polisunderrättelser*. Another group mapped the life of their vagrant in various archival fonds and series. Because they found contrasting “facts,” they argued that the ethnographic method of archival research had led them to establish an understanding of how and why some information differed based on the agencies involved in the inscription of statements.

The same group observed that the judicial material contrasted the personal information found in church records and other material: “If we wouldn’t have had the information from the police archives, her life story would have been continuous and without gaps or remarks.” However, the students explained, the initial vagrant file and the police reports referred to in that file disrupted that image. Another group acknowledged the following self-reflection: “Since we knew from the beginning that she was warned as vagrant, we almost frantically tried to find evidence of what went wrong in her life.” None of the students, except one group, said that they had found any references to their “vagrants” as “vagrants” in any other document except the initial file and related judicial documents.

## **Grainy Paper Files and Digital Media**

In his study of the mediation of cultural information, media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst (2013, 42) argued, “the archive as the condition for our knowledge of history becomes dependent on the media of its transmission.” A traditional archival medium, such as the vagrant files, is handwritten text on paper. In their reports, four groups described the difficulty that they, as novice users, had in reading handwriting of the late nineteenth century. In some cases, this problem was described as the initial obstacle after receiving the vagrant file. Other reports described how certain research trails were blocked because the information was too hard to read. Another group discussed the effects of their own transcription of handwritten information: “If you don’t realise your mistake, you might think that there is no more information to find, and then the research process is over.” Two of the students described that they had started by

mapping their vagrant's life using church records, but the trail ended because of the indecipherable handwriting, and they turned to population databases instead.

Another aspect of the effects of the archival medium of paper archives is its immobility. One group described that the physical location of the archives was a decisive factor in delimiting their research, specifically referring to a lead in non-digitised archival information about their vagrant that was kept in a museum in Northern Sweden. Two groups reported that their vagrants spent parts of their lives in Norway and that they could not receive information from the Norwegian archives although they had requested for it.

In recent decades, digitisation has radically increased the accessibility of archives. In analysing this development, aspects such as selection, access, and interfaces are crucial. In Sweden, large-scale archival digitisation projects have been conducted in which the selection was made with family historians in mind. The effects of this selection clearly showed in the students' reports. The most frequently used and cited archival materials, except the vagrant files, were church records, which are the most digitised and accessible and are well known by archivists. Several factors, such as the inaccessibility of analogue archives, both physically and logically, compared to digitised archives and digital interfaces, have epistemological implications. According to David M. Berry (2017, 106), professor of Digital Humanities, "increasingly, materials that are electronically inaccessible are simply not used." Furthermore, the social structures of the late nineteenth century could be amplified by contemporary digital technology. One group explained that they had no problem finding a digitised old photograph online of their vagrant's parents, who they supposed were of importance in the small parish of Valla on the island Tjörn in Bohus County. However, they could not find a picture of their daughter, who "was just one of many working-class women in Gothenburg of that time."

Regarding the epistemological effects of traditional archival practice, two groups briefly explained that the archives reproduced their subject's identity as a vagrant through its system of categorisation; series of documents in the police archives used the term in their titles. However, the students paid little attention to archival descriptions, lists, or finding aids, which are outputs of the power of archivists (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 2). This result was surprising, because these aspects were presented to the students in the introductory lecture, and they were included in the reading list. For example, Blouin and Rosenberg (2011, 147) stated, "the practices of archival arrangement and description [have] significant implications for the ways historical knowledge is formed."

Instead, digital interfaces, databases, and online resources were widely discussed by the students. One group described that initially, after they were handed their vagrant file, they searched in vain for specific personal information regarding their warned vagrant on the website of the Swedish National Archives, concluding that "online searchability MUST become more clear." Other groups paid attention to the complexities of finding

information in databases and their connection to physical documents. The focuses of the students' reports suggested that the perceived usability of and attention given to digital interfaces—mainly not digital finding aids—tended to reduce the relevance of critical examinations of traditional archival practices. This result is perhaps in line with Berry's (2017, 107) conclusion, "Computation threatens to de-archive the archive, disintermediating the memory institutions and undermining the curatorial functions associated with archives". This issue is connected to the technological differences in how analogue and digital information is processed. According to Ernst (2013, 86), digitised archives are "alphanumeric so that, unlike traditional archives, they no longer primarily reside in the medium of the vocalic alphabet but have a genuinely mathematical component," a process that concerns "the textuality of the classical archive by developing new forms of finding aid."

During the seminars, the students' self-reflective reports led to the possibility of discussing the creation of contextual historical knowledge in a post-Internet situation. In their report, one group said that they "also used the Internet to get a better understanding of the term 'vagrancy'." Their footnote referred to an online OCR-scanned digitised Swedish encyclopaedia that originally was published in 1882. In a similar example, in presenting their contextual knowledge about a particular rough neighbourhood in late nineteenth-century Gothenburg, another group referred to a digitised book that had been written by a Gothenburg poet in 1884. A third group reflected on their research process, reporting that they had to search for information outside the archives, such as at Google.com. These reflective observations were aligned with the situation recognised by DM Withers (2015, 126) in exploring the generational transmission of feminist knowledge in the UK: "Digital technologies—their modes of storage, transmission, organisation and calculation—act ... as conditioning context for our knowledge and perception of historicity in the early twenty-first century. The digitised condition of historicity is composed via the circulation of images, ephemera, text, sound and film, expressive of discrete fragments, rarely the narrative whole."

## **Powerful Archivists and Alluring Archives**

"It's hard to know when to stop," one group of students reported as they described the frustration of knowing that the information they found about their warned vagrant led to new, time-consuming research of sources of potentially important data. Two other students reflected on that the choices they made when regarding the paths to follow in their archival research affected their image of the warned vagrant. Yet another group simply stated that the enormous extent of information in the archives was "overwhelming, almost insurmountable." The perception of the overflow of physical archival information was in relation to its materiality, not least the aspects of the time-consuming work of reading and transcribing handwritten material.

A key aspect of archival research is knowing where and how to search for information. Even if the introductory lecture stressed the value of studying the numerous published

thematic guides to archival research, only one group used this resource, which was a master's thesis available online about archival fonds that contain information about individuals classified as vagrants and regulations regarding vagrancy (Aronsson 2011). The finding that printed archival guides were not widely used by the students, is aligned with the findings of previous user studies that guides and national lists of holdings are the least of available search tools used by researchers (Duff and Johnson 2002, 476; Duff and Johnson 2003, 81; Sweeney 2002, 26, 230).

All student groups expressed that an important knowledge-producing layer in their research process was the contact with archivists and their professional expertise in finding archival content. Three groups described that they were fortunate because they had the opportunity to talk to archivists that had specific knowledge about fonds regarding sailors and judicial archives. Another group described the support they received from an archivist at the City Archives in Gothenburg, and that long after their visit they received emails containing suggestions of possible archival trails although the students had not specifically asked for this information.

Although they acknowledged the helpfulness of archivists in explaining how to use databases and finding archival information, one group described feeling inferior when they visited an archival institution because of their lack of knowledge about archives. "This superiority [manifested by the institution] is probably nothing conscious, but the impression it gives might result in some people feeling uncomfortable in the archives' premises." Another group argued that a situation in their research processes in which they were dependent on the archivists as experts produced an unequal situation; the archive and the state still have more power than the users of archives. This reflection contrasted results of previous user studies, in which expert users "did not seem to be concerned that they were dependent upon staff to assist them. Being served or being independent simply was not an issue for them" (Sweeney 2002, 213).

In their self-reflections, all students said that a knowledge-producing layer of their archival research consisted of their own backgrounds, opinions, experiences, and how they were affected by norms of contemporary society. For example, one group carefully collected information, such as church records, about their vagrant to ensure that they obtained as complete a life story of her as possible. They then realised that two of her moves from one place to another coincided with the deaths of two of her children. At the time of her first daughter's death, she left her family and native rural home for a life in the city of Gothenburg. When her second daughter died, she left Gothenburg to move back to her parents, and then a couple of months later, she emigrated to Norway. The students concluded, "These indications gave us a view of her that she was a woman that wouldn't take ... the bad situations she got stuck in. By saying this, we would like to point out that our interpretation is a construction ... since it's based on our opinions and the norms of our society."

Another group wondered why their warned vagrant had become a prostitute because the reason was not included in the documents: “Maybe her life was predestined as an illegitimate child to a dead father and a poor mother that already had two children, for whom she received poor support?” The fragments of information to be found in the church records, in relation to their own understanding of the time, draw them to ask this conclusive question.

Whether we accept Ernst’s (2004, 48) statement that the “archive does not tell stories; only secondary narratives give meaningful coherence to its discontinuous elements” or not, the students’ reports showed that the limited information found in the archives led them, as users, to create narratives. According to Farge (2013, 32), “To feel the allure of the archives is to seek to extract additional meaning from the fragmented phrases found there.” This issue might also arise from material conditions, in which the allure of the archives could be enhanced by the tactile, authentic feeling of an old handwritten document, which is quite different from the experience of searching Google. Ernst (2004, 48) even suggested, “the more cultural data are processed in electronic, fugitive form, the more the traditional archive gains authority from the very materiality of its artefacts (parchment, paper, tapes)—an archival retro-effect.” Perhaps the statements of both Farge and Ernst could be related to the feeling of working with archives in a traditional reading room in the late 2010s, which two of the students described as “The experience of being able, on your own, browse the old, dry, and dusty documents. You realise the significance of the materiality of the documents. And the feeling when you finally find something you are looking for is really incredible!”

## **Conclusion**

The limited user study presented in this paper examined the results of the ethnographic and reflexive archival research by 13 master’s degree students in the heritage programme. The students’ reports showed that the task they had to study the archives “along the grain” evoked an understanding of archives as sites of knowledge production to the users of archives. Thus, in their research processes, they identified aspects of the use of archives as knowledge-producing layers. In the analysis of the students’ reports, certain tendencies emerged. These tendencies could be wider understood by their connections with previous research. For example, the traces of archival practices seemed to be both challenged and obscured by digitisation and digital interfaces. Moreover, in alignment with the findings of previous user studies, contacts with reference archivists were considered an important knowledge-producing layer in the research process. However, in contrast to previous studies, some of the students in this study reflected on the powerful position of archivists in such interactions.

A more progressive definition of cultural heritage, such as “traces and expressions from the past that are attributed value and are being used today,” should be applied in considering the relation between archives and cultural heritage. For such a definition, the results of this user study indicate that we need to pay attention to aspects that

condition the processes of historical knowledge production in using archives. Archives as cultural heritage are then, perhaps not “vagrant”, but represents processes that are affected by knowledge-producing layers that challenge the factual authority of archives and that could be further identified and critically studied.

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