From Survey Design to Hackfest: Reflections on Research-in-practice for Born-digital Access

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Abstract: Archival best practices for processing and preserving born-digital materials have developed over the last decade. However, there are no established best practices for providing public/research access to born-digital materials that both scales to match both the volume of born-digital material and acknowledges organizational capacity. We agreed that only by documenting existing practices can we advance the professional discourse around establishing best practices for born-digital access. Therefore, our first phase of research included survey design and distribution, followed by semi-structured interviews. The qualitative and quantitative data were examined to pinpoint aspects of born-digital access that participants classified as gaps and deemed highly important, such as gaps in tools and systems; gaps in resource allocation and advocacy; gaps in archivist skillsets; gaps in understanding users; and gaps in research and policy.

The second phase of research included developing a collaborative hackfest at SAA 2015, where each group was given a specific gap area (as outlined above) and tasked with working on a proposal that outlined possible solutions/strategies for addressing those gaps. The research outcome therefore includes three datasets: survey responses, interviews, and hackfest documents to be utilized for practitioner and researcher discourse on the topic of born-digital access. The research outcome also includes research team reflections on the research-in-practice within the archives field.

About the Authors:

The born-digital access research team includes *Rachel Appel* (Digital Collections Librarian, Bryn Mawr College), *Alison Clemens* (Archivist, Beinecke Library at Yale University), *Wendy Hagenmaier* (Digital Collections Archivist, Georgia Institute of Technology), and *Jessica Meyerson* (Digital Archivist, University of Texas). The research team began their work by conducting a survey on born-digital access practices in cultural heritage institutions in the summer of 2015. They've since worked to analyze their data and share it with the profession in a variety of ways.

The research team embraces an inter-institutional, collaborative approach to problem identification, research, and problem solving. Team members are especially interested in meta-conversations about the state of research and research support mechanisms in the archival field.