

A Survey of Archival Revolutions: Transitional Moments and Paradigmatic Shifts in Archival Enterprise, 1980–2020

Steven D. Booth and Brenda Gunn | archivalrevolutions@gmail.com

...we are entering now the first archival revolution. We are recognizing the cause of our inability to provide adequate care for the permanently valuable papers and records of our society. More importantly, we are deciding that we—we—must take the bull by the horns. There was no quick fix in 1776; there is none now. Bringing change will require grassroots involvement and work by all of us.

-David B. Gracy II, "Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution"

Introduction

In his 1983 SAA presidential address, David B. Gracy II proclaimed that the archival profession was experiencing its “first archival revolution.” Nearly four decades later, we ask the question, “If there was a first, then what are the subsequent revolutions?” The Archival Revolutions Project explores the history of archival revolutions to understand the impacts on the field of paradigmatic shifts in theory, ideas, practice, and perceptions.

From September through October 2021, we facilitated nine focus group sessions with 42 archive workers from across the archival landscape: multigenerational, varying geographical locations, diverse backgrounds and experiences. We asked the participants for their thoughts on what archival revolutions had occurred since Gracy’s presidency, what revolutions may still be unfolding, and whether some revolutions have not succeeded. Finally, we asked the participants how they would define an archival revolution.

From the information gathered, we will propose the transformational moments and paradigmatic shifts that define archival enterprise at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries.

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible with support from the SAA Foundation. We also wish to thank our graduate research assistant, Quintin Jepson, and participants from the Regional Archival Associations and the SAA Council, Distinguished Fellows, and Sections.

Methodology

We received approval from the University of Virginia’s Institutional Review Board (IRB-SBS #4250) to conduct nine one-hour focus group sessions via Zoom where we asked questions designed to elicit participants' thoughts about archival revolutions.

To capture the discussions, we recorded the sessions and then hired a service to transcribe all nine recordings. With the transcriptions, we used the Grounded Theory Methodology to conduct an initial analysis of the data. We then organized the data in Padlet, a web-based collaborative tool, to visualize what we learned from the focus group sessions.

Findings

Based on our initial analysis, we have identified the following shifts in the profession:

- Automation / Technology
- Standards
- Access / Accessibility
- Practice
- Outreach
- Archival education
- Professional literature
- Professionalization
- Associations / Professional service
- Philosophical values / attitudes
- Theories
- Ethics / Privacy
- Labor
- Money / Funding
- Participatory / Post-custodial Archives
- Dismantling White Supremacy
- Societal / Cultural issues

Next Steps

After we conduct a secondary analysis of the data, we will define archival revolutions and compile a definitive list of shifts and transitional moments. We will also make our findings available at www.archivalrevolutions.com and submit them to a peer-reviewed journal for publication.