

# **Providing Access to Born-Digital Records: Survey Report**

Results of a survey of organizations providing access to born-digital materials,  
conducted in August 2015 by the RAO Access to Electronic Records Working Group

## **AUTHORS:**

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## **Introduction**

Born-digital and hybrid collections are quickly becoming the norm among archival accessions. To better understand how institutions currently deal with these materials, the Access to Electronic Records Working Group, a subgroup of the Reference, Access, and Outreach Section, conducted the Access to Born Digital Content survey. The survey was designed to gain insight into current practices and attitudes towards providing access to born-digital and electronic records and identify the most common associated impediments and challenges.

With regard to current practices, survey questions were designed to answer some of the following questions: Are institutions currently providing access to born digital materials? How? Are there born digital materials that cannot be accessed at all? If so, which materials are being left inaccessible and why? Are institutions creating formal policies and procedures around born digital access? With regard to attitudes, survey questions attempted to investigate the most common obstacles and greatest concerns met when providing access to electronic records. Respondents were also asked to identify the resources they used when developing their approach to born digital access and which kinds of resources they would be most interested in seeing more of in the future.

When analyzing survey responses several strong trends emerged, which allowed the survey team to generate five key findings regarding current practices in and attitudes toward providing access to born digital archival material. This report also provides three broad recommendations for the archival community in order to better approach the shared opportunities and challenges we face as we move forward in providing better and broader access to our born digital holdings.

## **Methods**

Our goal was to identify trends among current workflows being used to provide access to electronic records and common problems or areas for which more resources and education would be useful. We used an online survey to garner responses from a broad sampling of professional archivists and librarians, which we conducted as follows.

### *Survey Development*

A subgroup within the Access to Electronic Records Working Group was tasked with developing the survey. The survey subgroup first identified broad topics to be covered by the survey, and then crafted questions designed to elicit the desired information in as few questions as possible. The survey employed a mix of multiple choice and open-

ended questions to get both information that was easy to quantify and allow respondents to describe their experiences with born digital materials in their own words.

### *Deployment*

The survey subgroup opted to use Google Forms to deploy the survey because it is easy to access and use, while still providing some basic data visualizations to help with survey analysis. In order to reach a broad audience, the survey was promoted through several library and archives listservs and remained open for two weeks.

### *Analysis*

The survey received 86 responses in all, with the vast majority coming from professional archivists or special collections librarians. The most common types of institutions represented were college and university archives (40.7%), special collections (23.3%), and government archives (14%). The survey subgroup used the data visualizations available in Google Forms to help analyze the results from the quantitative questions. We also organized the answers to the free response questions into broad categories in order to more easily analyze the data and identify trends within those responses. From this analysis, our team generated five key findings relating to the challenges and obstacles institutions are currently facing when providing access to born digital materials, and three broad recommendations on how we can, as a professional community, help alleviate these difficulties.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

### *Key Findings*

#### **1) Most institutions have some inaccessible born digital materials.**

Nearly all respondents indicated that their institution provides access to digital materials through open web access to digitized content (60.5%), reading room access to born digital materials (40.7%), remote access to born digital material (24.4%), or some combination of the above. At the same time however, 89.5% of respondents reported that some of their electronic records that were completely inaccessible (see Figure 1 below).

Do you have electronic records that are completely inaccessible? If so, please estimate the volume of your inaccessible electronic records (select range below).

(86 responses)

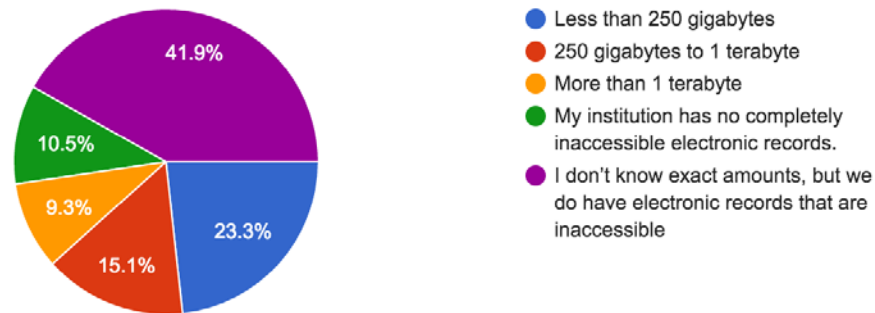
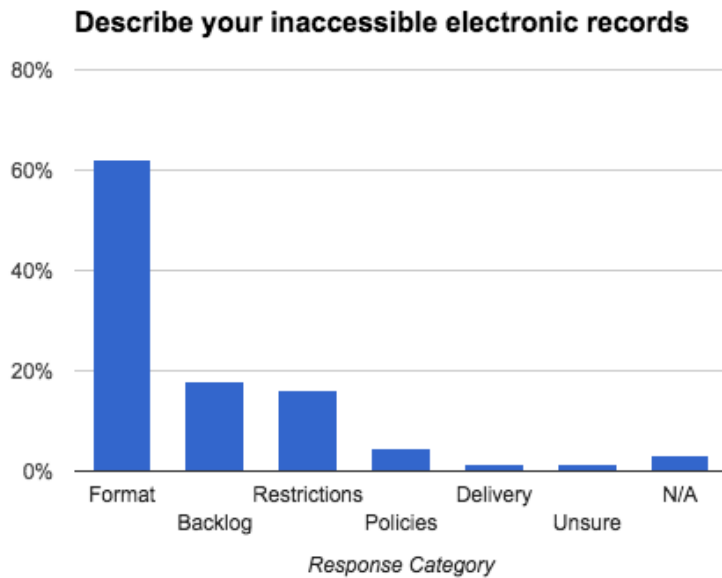


Figure 1: Only 10.5% of respondents reported no completely inaccessible electronic records

The volume of these inaccessible electronic records was more difficult quantify. 41.9% of respondents were unable to estimate the amount of electronic materials in their holdings that were completely inaccessible. Among those that were able to provide an estimate there was a wide range of volumes reported, from less than 250 gigabytes to over 1 terabyte (see Figure 1 above). Despite this ambiguity with regard to the volume of inaccessible records, it was clear from the responses that many institutions are dealing with gaps in providing access to their electronic records.

## 2) Formats are a BIG problem.

In addition to estimating the volume of their inaccessible electronic records, survey respondents were asked to describe them in their own words. The free responses from this question were then grouped into several broad categories in order to better identify common issues and trends among the answers. Each category corresponds to a broad issue with providing access to electronic records, and categories include issues with specific formats, simple backlog concerns, legal or donor restrictions, lack of policies and procedures, or lack of a delivery mechanism for the records. Categories were also included for responses stating that they were unsure how to describe their inaccessible electronic records and for those who did not have any. Figure 2 below shows the percentage of responses that fit into each category. Please note that the total percentage in the chart adds up to slightly over 100% because a small number of the responses fit into more than one category.



*Figure 2: Categorized free responses to the question “Please briefly describe your inaccessible electronic records.”*

A majority of respondents (61%) noted issues with specific formats as contributing to their inaccessible electronic records, making this the most common response category by far. Additionally, the next two most common response categories, which contain answers citing simple backlog problems and legal or donor restrictions as the major contributing factors to their inaccessible electronic records, are concerned with problems that pertain to analog and digital archival materials alike, and are, to a certain extent, an unavoidable part of providing any kind of archival access. Clearly, the major problem respondents face when providing access to specifically electronic records is determining how to deal with the wide variety of formats. Figure 3 (below) provides some insight into the variety of formats respondents deal with when attempting to provide access to born digital materials.

**Please briefly describe your inaccessible electronic records (formats, preservation concerns, etc.)**

format problems--floppy disks and we have no drives.

items on thumb drives and such just placed in boxes. it is just lying there in vault and has not been added to the cloud and is not being assessed for corruption/bit rot, etc.

We have 3+ terabytes that is currently not publicly accessible. Various formats are included: JPG, TIFF, mpeg, wav, DOC, DOCX, PPT, PDF, ect.

If you mean publicly accessible, then anything on the museum side that is in Past Perfect. Only one location uses the public interface of PP5.

Digitized film that isn't adequately cataloged and described.

Databases, word processed files, spreadsheets on older disks.

Scanned slides from the 1960's and 70's. We chose not to make all of them available via our digitization webpage, just a selection, because there are so many.

Mostly format issues - we can deal with most formats, but there are some early ones that we a) don't have a reader for, and b) have not prioritized costs for vending it out.

on inaccessible media

Preservation concerns for some materials and some that don't have the proper equipment to play them.

They are on floppy disks and other obsolete media.

We have a number of records on various formats (floppies/tapes etc) that are inaccessible because they have not been migrated off their original format. We would do that if we have researcher request for it and make available after review of material + gift agreements.

*Figure 3: Sample of first 11 responses to the above question, showing frequency and variety of format problems*

**3) Formal policies and procedures for providing access to born digital materials are often incomplete or nonexistent.**

Nearly half of the respondents (see Figure 4 below) reported having no policies or procedures relating to providing access to born digital materials. This means that, despite the fact that most respondents are providing access to some portion of their born digital materials, many are doing so without standardized guidelines.

If you have policies and/or documentation regarding providing access to electronic records, what resources did you use to develop these policies (check all that apply)?

(86 responses)

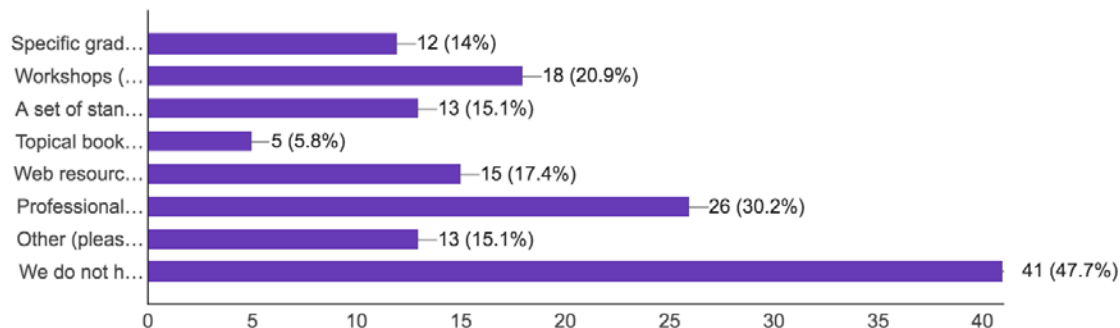


Figure 4: 47.7% of respondents selected “We do not have policies and/or documentation regarding providing access to electronic records.”

#### 4) Partnerships with IT professionals in our institutions are seen as very important in providing access to born digital content.

Partnerships with information technology departments are essential pieces of the access puzzle; without clear communication regarding the technological requirements born-digital records and the needs of researchers, it is nearly impossible to encourage long-term preservation and access of these materials. Survey respondents recognized the importance of close collaborations with IT professionals at their institutions, and a combined 25 respondents identified “Lack of IT support and infrastructure” as the largest obstacle to providing patron access to born-digital records at their institutions.

## 5) Respondents want more resources, and are interested in many different kinds.

What resources would be/would have been helpful to you in beginning to provide access to electronic records (check all that apply)?

(86 responses)

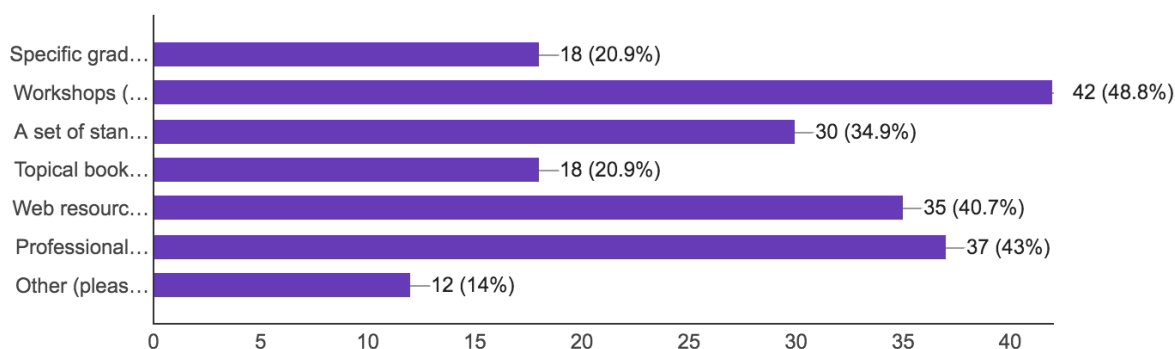


Figure 5: Respondents indicated interest in a variety of resources.

Survey respondents reported interest in a wide variety of resources for providing born digital access, with workshops (48.8% of respondents were interested), professional assistance from archivists or IT professionals (43%), and web resources (40.7%) being the most popular options (see Figure 5 above). Although the work has already been begun in most institutions, professionals are still actively seeking assistance and guidance when it comes to providing access to born digital materials.

### *Recommendations*

#### **1) Give the people what they want (resources in a variety of formats)!**

Survey respondents clearly indicated a desire for more resources to consult regarding providing access to born digital materials. And despite the fact that most of the institutions represented in the survey results have begun providing this kind of access, the survey results also clearly show that most of us still have a significant amount of work left to do in this area. This means that the time is ripe for the development of new resources for archivists and librarians developing procedures and workflows providing access to born digital materials. The survey indicates an interest in many different kinds of resources with workshops, professional assistance from archivists and IT professionals, and web resources being the three most popular options. We believe there is room for useful workshops and web-resources to be developed at the local, regional, and national levels of professional organizations.

## **2) Resources targeted to specific formats**

In addition to the need for more resources geared toward providing access to born digital materials generally, we would also recommend the development of resources for dealing with materials in specific formats. The issue of working with born digital materials wide variety of legacy formats was one of the most often-mentioned problems in the survey results and we believe professionals in this field would benefit greatly from resources targeting specific formats. These could include workshops, conference presentations, webinars, or online guides.

## **3) Development of a resource bank**

The survey clearly showed that there is much room left to be done for providing access to born digital materials, working with a wide variety of legacy formats, and developing policies and procedures around those activities, but it also showed that, at many institutions, this work is already in progress. To avoid duplicating our efforts, we recommend developing a bank of resources so institutions can share their work and experience. These resources could include examples of policies and procedures from those institutions that already have them in place, how-to guides for providing remote or reading room access to born digital materials or for working with specific formats, or case studies in bringing IT professionals within your organization into the discussion on born digital access, or any other resources that might be useful in the process of developing a program for providing access to born digital materials.

## **Conclusion**

The survey illustrates that while there is a range of situational factors impacting access to born-digital content, the fundamental problems are consistent across repositories: inaccessible born-digital collections, legacy formats creating significant accessibility and preservation challenges, and informal or non-existent procedures and policies. The situation has challenges and opportunities. Our professional organizations and affinity groups will have a vital role to play in creating and providing informational resources, and effective partnerships and collaboration with IT professionals at our institutions continue to be of essential value. As born-digital formats increasingly become the norm, ensuring proficiency in providing access to these materials will be critical. The work has already begun, but professional archivists and special collections librarians are on the lookout for new resources to assist them as the field moves into a future of increasing demand born digital archival materials.