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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.