

Consolidating the Preservation, Description, Discovery, and Access of Digital Archives

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Abstract: How can the community best promote large-scale access to digital records? This 10-minute platform presentation describes a unique answer to that question. By integrating archival principles into our digital repository and digital library, we are lessening the need to describe digital content in a separate archival management database.

This presentation will first review the methods, goals, and findings of the Archival Connections research project (<http://archivalconnections.org>). This is an attempt to rethink archival description from the ground up, based on the properties of heterogeneous digital records and on direct user needs. Specific examples will illustrate new ways that the community can facilitate aggregate description and access while allowing item-level description, when warranted. By taking seriously a core DACS principle (“Description follows arrangement”), we advocate extreme simplification in system design.

The talk continues with a demonstration of our “Medusa” system, providing an overview of a repository architecture that consolidates preservation, description, discovery and access. The arrangement decisions that archivists make will be automatically ‘read’ and represented, without need to create a separate finding aid or entry in an archival management system. The architecture provides archivists with broad options for providing access to collections of born-digital content, including automatic metadata extraction, customizable metadata profiles, and low (or even no) item-level requirements—with more to come. For users, the system features an user-friendly tree browser that incorporates IIIF protocols, while also facilitating bulk downloads. Overall, the system provides integrated and unified access to digital content by blending the strengths of preservation and access systems.

About the Authors:

Chris Prom is Assistant University Archivist and Andrew S.G. Turyn Professor at the University of Illinois. He is also Publications Editor and Chair of the Publications Board for the Society of American Archivists. His past work on the Practical E-Records Project and his current experience teaching the SAA course Arranging and Describing Digital Records, inform the work described in this platform presentation. He holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of Illinois.

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