

Building Best Practice for Access to Born-Digital Records

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Abstract: Archivists have spent the better part of the past two decades working to establish standards and best practices for acquiring, appraising, arranging, describing, and preserving digital archives. For many reasons, however, methods of providing access have been more difficult to define. In 2017, the Digital Library Federation (DLF) Born-Digital Access Working Group formed with the intention of both researching current methods and creating a community of practice surrounding these issues. With origins in working sessions at Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual meetings in 2015 and 2016, the group has built upon foundational research in order to facilitate defining best practices for born-digital access. Since the beginning of 2018, the group has focused on two primary objectives: proposing recommendations for implementing a leveled approach to various access-related activities, modeled on the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA)'s Levels of Preservation document; and researching the behavior and needs of users of born-digital resources. This report expands upon research presented at the 2018 SAA Research Forum, including group development, informing scholarship, initial steps and findings, and next steps for this ongoing project.

Background

The Born-Digital Access Working Group originated from a 2015 survey conducted by a group of archivists interested in expanding the discussion around born-digital access practices. The survey results were presented at the SAA annual meeting later that year during a session designed to inspire participants to tackle solutions to an overarching professional problem. One initiative that sprang from this session was the development of an archivist bootcamp designed as a venue to share ideas and tools for providing access to born-digital materials. The first bootcamp took place in spring 2017 at the New England Archivists conference in Hyannis, Massachusetts. Feedback from the event confirmed a lack of professional resources, particularly concerning training opportunities for providing access.

In addition to the survey and hackfest initiatives, other professionals were contributing to the discussion around the topic of born-digital access. In 2016, Shira Peltzman proposed the addition of an access area to the NDSA Levels of Preservation document on the Library of Congress' *The Signal* blog. In the same year, Matthew Farrell and Brian Dietz led a "Tiers of Access" unconference at SAA's Electronic Records Section meeting. Groups spent the session discussing how characteristics of collections and materials might influence the level at which they could be made discoverable and accessible.

In an effort to bring a wider array of information professionals into the discussion, the bootcamp group that had grown out of the 2015 SAA Hackfest applied for membership and was approved as the Born-Digital Access Working Group in Fall 2017. At that year's DLF Forum in Pittsburgh, Jessica Farrell and Ashley Taylor facilitated a 90-minute working lunch where the group discussed roadblocks, successes, and challenges, both immediate and long term. Two initial areas of focus emerged: one to create a resource addressing access needs in a manner similar to the NDSA document, and another to ensure that access model is grounded in user needs, based on a survey of users of born-digital resources.

Problem Statement



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Providing access to born-digital archival collections has a reputation of being both intimidating and challenging to practitioners, whether they are new additions to the field or longtime professionals. Relatively few professional resources exist to guide institutions in providing access, and a dearth of case studies, publicly available policies, and comprehensive surveys make finding a standard model to mirror difficult. Additionally, many researchers' conceptions of archives are still grounded in physical research material, and use of born-digital collections is still relatively new and growing, resulting in a lack of understanding about what users of this material both want and expect. Though literature surrounding this topic is beginning to expand, additional research and resources are needed for further development.

Method of Approach

For the reasons described in the above Problem Statement, the Working Group set out to provide recommendations about practices for providing access to born-digital materials and language for talking about that activity. They also aimed to cultivate relationships and engage with various communities of practice, including archivists, librarians, donors, and researchers, which is a category that itself is comprised of many additional fields of study. Group members felt strongly that this work was needed because preservation efforts are meaningless without the promotion of use and access. Furthermore, documenting and sharing successful use cases enables improved understanding of user needs and provides a foundation on which to base individual efforts. Finally, having a tangible proof of concept to show administrators can help garner more resources to improve the baseline approach and also concretely illustrate the theoretical problems around born-digital access.

Organizationally, membership in the group is entirely volunteer-based, with the average number of members not exceeding 30 individuals. Group members represent mainly academic institutions, which reflects the makeup of DLF as a primarily institutional-based organization. The Working Group is only loosely hierarchical, with members shaping the direction of the initiatives with no explicit top-down direction. This organizational structure reflects a community approach and contributes to an energetic and dedicated atmosphere.

In order to tackle these issues, the Working Group organically formed two subgroups, based generally on archival practice and user research. The Levels of Access Subgroup has been charged with developing a practical and aspirational grid for levels of access that is similar in format to the NDSA levels of preservation chart. The subgroup began by establishing several components of access- such as description, tools, and security- then divided into smaller groups to map activities within the specific areas to the various levels. The content has been informed by a literature review of suggested best practices as well as practical experience. Feedback received from various methods described below will also inform the content.

The second subgroup is focused on Access Practices and Outreach, with the goal of identifying and involving the relevant and diverse user communities in the discussion. The subgroup began by identifying potential use cases and roadblocks to providing access by looking at the 2015 survey data and reviewing group discussion at the DLF 2017 Forum. They are constructing a network of individual and community users of digital archival material, such as journalists, K-12 teachers using primary sources, genealogists, and other scholars, in order to pursue feedback about the kinds of access researchers would prefer to see. They will distribute a survey that has been improved by undergoing user testing prior to distribution and findings will be shared publicly on an open access platform in 2019.

Current Work

The working version of the Levels of Access grid breaks down access considerations into six categories:

Description; Tools; Researcher support and discovery; Policy and documentation; Security; and Accessibility. Three levels of access are outlined for each area. Accompanying the grid will be a report that defines key terminology and expands upon the summary information provided in the grid view. The subgroup members are currently discussing whether a simplified version of the chart would be a useful tool for the practitioner community. Additional products, such as a report to present the chart information in a different format, are still being determined.

The Access Practices and Outreach group has focused their efforts on developing a survey targeting users of born-digital material designed to elicit feedback about both experiences they have had accessing digital archival collections, as well as their ideal scenarios for both access and use of these materials. Through this work, they aim to identify and hear from communities of practices whose feedback can provide ongoing influence on the development of access methods and best practices.

Next Steps

Beginning with the 2018 SAA Research Forum, the Born-Digital Access Working Group has taken part in several events to share its preliminary work and begin soliciting feedback. The Group organized a session at the BitCurator Users Forum Los Angeles in September, and also hosted a working breakfast at the 2018 DLF Forum in Las Vegas in October. At both events, attendees reviewed and discussed the Levels grid, the survey draft, and other potential deliverables. The Levels of Access subgroup is now reviewing and incorporating the feedback received at these events.

The user survey has undergone review and evaluation by the Harvard User Research Center, and participants are now in the process of securing appropriate Institutional Review Board permissions from their institutions. The user survey is slated for distribution in 2019 with results shared publicly later that year in an open access platform. Survey distribution will focus on professional listservs for known users of archival resources, including instructors, journalists, historians, and librarians, though there will also be direct email recruitment for specific individuals identified during initial attempts at documenting a user community.

A current priority for the group is determining preferred venues for promotion and distribution of the Levels of Access grid and accompanying documentation. A portion of this discussion centers around planning for a sustainable future, which includes consideration of long-term, openly accessible storage, as well as ongoing maintenance of the document. The group recently voted to publish our work only in open access publications.

Conclusion

The Born-Digital Access Working Group is working to address two pressing professional concerns: the development of standards for access, as well as building a better understanding of the communities using these materials. Neither of these efforts will ever be fully complete, especially as technology and research needs change over time. However, the groundwork laid by both subgroups during 2018 sets the stage for what we hope will be the adoption of this set of proposed recommendations, bolstered by an increased cognizance and consideration of user groups, and a continued community of research of practice around born-digital access.

Resources

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