Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Increasing Access to Digital Archives Is a Complex Problem, and More Collaboration Between Archivists and Users Is Needed to Enact Solutions

Jaillant, L. (2022). How can we make born-digital and digitised archives more accessible? Identifying obstacles and solutions. Archival Science, 22, 417-436. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-022-09390-7

Christine Fena

Article abstract

Objective – To outline current levels of access to digitized and born-digital collections, investigate and identify obstacles to increasing access, and suggest possible solutions.

Design – Semi-Structured online interviews.

Setting – Archives, libraries, and museums based in the UK, Ireland, and the United States.

Subjects – A total of 26 practitioners in archives, libraries, and museums including 12 women and 14 men.

Methods – The researchers recruited participants from existing personal contacts and those contacts' colleagues, with attention toward diversifying in the areas of gender, career stage, institution size, and geographical location. Twelve interview questions were sent to interviewees in advance, but the questions were tailored to each interviewee during the interview with follow-up questions asked as necessary. A team of three Digital Humanities scholars conducted 21 interviews with the 26 subjects, and all but three interviewees agreed to be named in the resulting article. All interviews were conducted in May 2021, except one, which was conducted in November 2020.

Main Results – The author discusses relevant paraphrases and quotations from the interviewees under four headings: "Obstacles to access to digitised collections," "Born-digital collections: from creation to access," "Current levels of access to digital collections," and "Possible solutions to the problems of access." Key obstacles to access that emerge throughout the discussion include technological obsolescence, copyright and permissions, data protection of sensitive materials, lack of a market for born-digital records, and the problem of scale and skill gaps. Strategies to increase access include enhanced collections, less restrictive legislation, new access interfaces including virtual reading room software, use of artificial intelligence to increase discoverability, and web archives. The author makes distinctions between born-digital (e.g., emails) and digitized (e.g., scanned photographs) content throughout the discussion of results.

Conclusion – There is a paradox between the focus on data analysis in current research and the difficulty researchers have in accessing cultural data through digital archives, but increasing access to digital collections remains a challenging and complex problem. The author highlights some possible solutions that emerged from the interviews, including artificial intelligence, but also emphasizes the need to bring together an interdisciplinary community of both archivists and users, to continue shifting the conversation surrounding digital collections from focusing on preservation to focusing on access, and to advocate for changes to legislation, digitization practices, and copyright clearance.

E **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**

Evidence Summary

Increasing Access to Digital Archives Is a Complex Problem, and More Collaboration Between Archivists and Users Is Needed to Enact Solutions

A Review of:

Reviewed by:
Christine Fena
Undergraduate Success Librarian
Stony Brook University Libraries
Stony Brook, New York, United States of America
Email: christine.fena@stonybrook.edu

Abstract

Objective – To outline current levels of access to digitized and born-digital collections, investigate and identify obstacles to increasing access, and suggest possible solutions.

Design – Semi-Structured online interviews.

Setting – Archives, libraries, and museums based in the UK, Ireland, and the United States.

Subjects – A total of 26 practitioners in archives, libraries, and museums including 12 women and 14 men.

Methods – The researchers recruited participants from existing personal contacts and those contacts' colleagues, with attention toward diversifying in the areas of gender, career stage, institution size, and geographical location. Twelve interview questions were sent to interviewees in advance, but the questions were tailored to each interviewee during the interview with follow-up questions asked as necessary. A team of three Digital Humanities scholars conducted 21 interviews with the 26 subjects,

and all but three interviewees agreed to be named in the resulting article. All interviews were conducted in May 2021, except one, which was conducted in November 2020.

Main Results – The author discusses relevant paraphrases and quotations from the interviewees under four headings: "Obstacles to access to digitised collections," "Born-digital collections: from creation to access," "Current levels of access to digital collections," and "Possible solutions to the problems of access." Key obstacles to access that emerge throughout the discussion include technological obsolescence, copyright and permissions, data protection of sensitive materials, lack of a market for born-digital records, and the problem of scale and skill gaps. Strategies to increase access include enhanced collections, less restrictive legislation, new access interfaces including virtual reading room software, use of artificial intelligence to increase discoverability, and web archives. The author makes distinctions between born-digital (e.g., emails) and digitized (e.g., scanned photographs) content throughout the discussion of results.

Conclusion – There is a paradox between the focus on data analysis in current research and the difficulty researchers have in accessing cultural data through digital archives, but increasing access to digital collections remains a challenging and complex problem. The author highlights some possible solutions that emerged from the interviews, including artificial intelligence, but also emphasizes the need to bring together an interdisciplinary community of both archivists and users, to continue shifting the conversation surrounding digital collections from focusing on preservation to focusing on access, and to advocate for changes to legislation, digitization practices, and copyright clearance.

Commentary

Discourse surrounding digital collections has recently been changing. A Digital Preservation Coalition report suggests that the focus has shifted away from preservation and toward appraisal and processing (Prom, 2019). Additionally, the Born-Digital Archives Working Group recently released "Levels of Born-Digital Access," which focuses exclusively on access (Peltzman et al., 2020). Making digital collections more accessible and usable is a formidable problem facing archivists and users alike, with significant impacts toward researchers' ability to analyze and understand history, culture, and society in the digital age. Solutions involve probing issues related to copyright law, ethics, and whether the archivist needs to take a more active role in reorganizing and interpreting content.

This article was appraised using "The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool" (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014). The study's strengths include the author's significant expertise; she has years of experience as a digital humanist, extensive publications, and collaborations with multiple funded projects that focus on digital archives. In addition, the author includes the interview questions within the body of the article, and the interviewees represent a variety of geographic areas and different types of institutions including archives, libraries, and museums.

However, there are several limitations to this work. As the author acknowledges, large cultural institutions are over-represented, and the method of recruitment, through existing networks, makes it possible that the results are distorted. No inclusion or exclusion criteria are specified. No institutions from Asia or continental Europe are included, nor institutions from anywhere in the Global South.

Another significant issue is that the author never explains the method of analysis. It is unclear whether the four headings in the results narrative emerged from analyzing the text of the interviews, as they might if qualitative content analysis was used, or if the author had already chosen these headings as preconceived categories. There is also no discussion of whether a theoretical framework was used to create the interview questions. Finally, the quotations and paraphrases from the interviews are mixed in with quotations and paraphrases from existing literature. This sometimes makes it difficult to parse which ideas emerge from the new research.

Despite these weaknesses, the article provides a rich and detailed discussion of the many challenges facing access to and use of digital collections. The quotations and paraphrases from the interviewees reflect a variety of perspectives from over two dozen archivists, as well as different strategies practitioners are trying to address the problems they are seeing in the field. The author does not try to simplify a complicated array of issues, makes clear distinctions between born-digital and digitized content, and focuses on the need for archivists and users to work together to better understand and confront the many challenges facing digital collection access. Although the author does not make a detailed or prescriptive proposal for how to move forward, the discussion is a good starting point for those looking to fine-tune their understanding of the many problems facing access to digital archives, as well as some possible solutions.

References

Jaillant, L. (2022). How can we make born-digital and digitised archives more accessible? Identifying obstacles and solutions. *Archival Science*, 22, 417-436. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-022-09390-7

Peltzman, S., Dietz, B., Butler, D., Walker, P., Farrell, J., Arroyo-Ramirez, E., Macquarie, C. Bolding, K., Helms, A. M., & Venlet, J. (2020). *Levels of born-digital access*. Digital Library Federation, Council on Library and Information Resources. https://osf.io/r5f78/

Perryman, C., & Rathbun-Grubb, S. (2014). *The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool*. http://www.jotform.us/cp1757/TheCat

Prom, C. J. (2019). *Preserving email*. (2nd ed.). Digital Preservation Coalition. http://doi.org/10.7207/twr19-01