

## Radical Collaboration and Research Data Management: An Introduction

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### Radical Collaboration: Framing the Concept<sup>1</sup>

Engaging in good practice for managing digital content and collections for the long-term increasingly brings domains together in new and/or unfamiliar ways. Addressing short- and long-term opportunities and challenges for research data management brings together diverse skills, experience, and perspectives of creators and curators across archives, libraries, museums and other academic organizations. As a scenario for exploring radical collaboration, research data management is ideal—a timely and high-profile community space that benefits from and increasingly requires working together to achieve common objectives.

The concept of radical collaboration means coming together across disparate, but engaged, domains in ways that are often unfamiliar or possibly uncomfortable to member organizations and individuals in order to identify and solve problems together, to achieve more together than we could separately. In this discussion, radical collaboration adapts the concept of radical candor to the desire and need to work together productively and collectively.

This introduction provides working definitions of key concepts and terms to make radical collaboration possible, explores some

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possible approaches and opportunities, and suggests some considerations and implications for engaging in radical collaboration. In subsequent sections of this issue of *RLI*, contributing authors explore examples

and aspects of collaboration leading to radical collaboration, and the concluding section suggests a path forward and some principles to guide that path towards radical collaboration.

### **Using Working Definitions to Build Understanding**

Developing working definitions to build and ensure a shared understanding of core concepts is an effective tool for community building and for engaging in radical collaboration. The term “working definition” itself is a core concept for radical collaboration. When a new collaboration starts, members bring their individual and often idiosyncratic definitions with them, often unaware that others may understand these terms very differently. It is easy to avoid this frequent stumbling block to working together across domains—begin each new initiative with a review of terms and by filling in gaps in required terms, sharing them with new members as the group grows as part of an essential orientation process.

In practice, formal definitions, like those found in glossaries, emerge in a community once practice has been agreed upon and formalized and members have an increasingly mutual understanding of concepts and principles. At early stages of community development, before formal definitions emerge, it is common to find that the same terms mean different things in different domains and to members within the same domain. Using terms differently as domains come together to collaborate leads to ambiguity and confusion that presents a challenge for community building. Developing and sharing working definitions is a way to deepen and broaden understanding as we come together to work on shared objectives. We can extend and clarify working definitions as needed, so they provide a great tool for bringing different experiences and perspectives together, for forging a shared understanding.

This section shares some examples of working definitions we are using in discussing radical collaboration.

**Collaboration:** Though collaboration is viewed as a familiar concept, it is a term that is often used to refer to activities that are not truly collaborative. Some definitions of collaborate include: to work jointly on an activity or project;<sup>2</sup> to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor;<sup>3</sup> and from late Latin “collaboratus,” past participle of “collaborare” to labor together, from Latin “com-” + “laborare” to labor.<sup>4</sup> In this discussion, collaboration means: “to rely on others to do agreed upon things for or in concert with you and to be relied upon to do agreed upon things for or in concert with others.”<sup>5</sup>

Identifying what something is not can be an effective way to build understanding. Collaboration is not:

- letting a purported partner know what you did after you did it;
- basic information sharing that has no measurable impact on the sharer or receiver of the information; or
- simply allowing someone to be present or to observe without providing them with the means to inform and influence what happens as a result of an interaction.

The most productive and sustainable collaborations begin with common interests and responsibilities, by defining problem statements together. Being able to rely upon others results from accrued trust based on the perceived reliability of partners.

Trust becomes possible when member expectations and roles are defined through iterative discussion and lessons learned,

what went well and what might be better next time. It is not possible to achieve success if we do not know what it looks like. Collaborations become sustainable when a critical mass of a community’s members

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perceive that there is a track for reliability, which becomes an incentive for continuing to collaborate. Members—sometimes subsets—of other communities and domains, form a new community. A new community thrives by devoting time to getting acquainted.

**Community:** Communities may be formal or informal; large or small; short-lived (for example, for the life of a project or initiative) or ongoing (for example, the growing and cumulative group of people engaged in digital practice); or loosely or tightly integrated because community affiliations depend on context. In this discussion, community refers to: “a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.”<sup>6</sup> Examples help with shared awareness and understanding. Examples of my communities include: the archival community, the digital preservation community, the digital practice community, the LGBTQIA community, dog parents, and many others.

**Digital practice:** When we talk about digital practice, what do we mean? The working definition of digital practice that I use is: “to continually work [using digital technology] to bring content **and lessons** from the past for the benefit of the present on behalf of the future.”<sup>7</sup> It is important to emphasize that good digital practice is cumulative, iterative, responsive to organizational and technological change, inclusive, and open. Whenever we look back through time, we increasingly perceive past practices and other forms of norms as quaint—that is a natural occurrence as our communities advance and as we become more familiar with available tools and technologies. That does not mean we cannot not learn from past practices, only that we should be thoughtful and kind in looking back. Not only can we learn from the past, but good practice dictates that we take the time to understand and bring lessons forward, many of which continue to apply to any digital content. Neglecting to learn from the past—from our own domains as well as others—wastes time, opportunities, and our limited resources.

**Radical:** We are using “radical” in the sense of favoring extreme change in existing practices. See the next section for a discussion of radical collaboration.

### **What Makes Collaboration Radical?**

A useful path for answering this question begins with a concept called radical candor, defined and popularized by Kim Scott.<sup>8</sup> Scott explains the term using two dimensions: “care personally” and “challenge directly.” **Radical candor** succeeds at both of these dimensions and represents the ideal for providing feedback. When you engage in radical candor, you tell people what you believe they need to hear, not want to hear, in a way that allows them to address your feedback, and in the best of circumstances, to grow or advance.

Here is a brief overview of the other three quadrants that illustrate how you should avoid providing feedback:

- **Obnoxious aggression** results from challenging directly and not caring personally, an approach that may succeed in dominating others, but also alienates them;
- **Manipulative insincerity** fails on both dimensions by neither caring about nor challenging someone to achieve what you want at their expense; and
- **Ruinous empathy** happens when people care, but fail to challenge, a version of killing people with kindness that cannot result in progress.

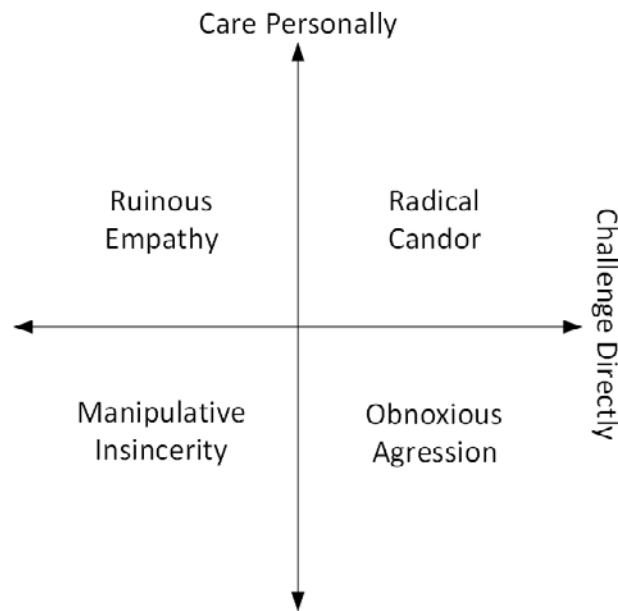


Figure 1. Radical Candor by Kim Scott

When I learned about radical candor, radical collaboration became a natural corollary, an essential element of being able to collaborate effectively. Adapting the radical candor grid (Figure 1) identifies and calls out interactions that are not collaborative and are insufficient for collaboration. In the dimensions of the radical collaboration grid (Figure 2), “care personally” becomes “commit communally,” and “challenge directly” becomes “engage interactively.” Radical collaboration is inclusive, involving commitment and effort by most or all members that are broadly representative of the various aspects of the common interests or problem. Radical collaboration does not mean standing back from or passively observing a community building effort, then expecting to control or influence the outcomes of that interaction. Like radical candor, radical collaboration embraces the two dimensions: commit communally and engage interactively. Radical collaboration represents the ideal for interacting with people to achieve common objectives, what collaboration should be and seldom is. When you engage in radical collaboration, you participate in an interaction of two or more people allowing the group to achieve and sustain outcomes that members could not individually, the resulting community flourishes—successes are visible and measurable,

and people want to join. Here is a brief overview of the other three quadrants of radical collaboration that illustrate how you should avoid interacting with people:

- **Dominant coordination** may involve all or most of the members using dictatorial means that may control the direction, but limits the impact by failing to leverage the strengths of the whole;
- **Exclusive interactions** sacrifice the community by involving a small number of people (often two) for short-term gains at the expense of sustained community-wide action; and
- **Passive sharing** is an interaction that requires little effort and, though labeled collaboration, has the least impact and frustrates community building by being the antithesis of inclusive.

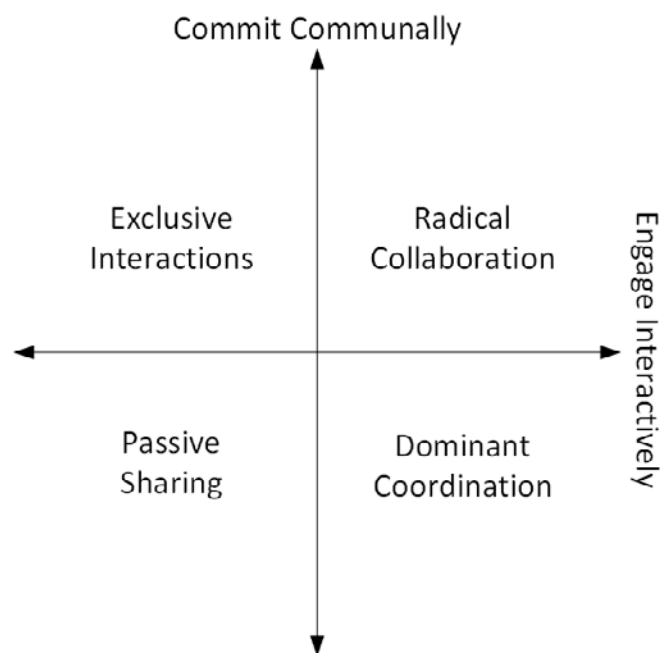


Figure 2. Radical Collaboration

Months after I shared the first version of the radical collaboration grid, I searched the internet for “radical collaboration” not expecting to find much, and discovered the radical collaboration movement.<sup>9</sup> This version of radical collaboration comes from the business world and has a competitive focus as evidenced by one of their guiding quotes, “You

can't compete externally, if you can't first collaborate internally." The discussion of radical collaboration in this issue of *RLI* is about breaking down walls between domains, communities, and professions to build sustainable, inclusive communities that are able to solve problems together by leveraging cumulative strengths. Rather than focusing on individual organizations, which also has benefits, radical collaboration in this context focuses on developing communities that build on organizations.

### **Coming Together**

A primary objective of radical collaboration is to be inclusive—to gather around a shared interest, responsibility, or problem, all of the skills, good practice, and resources, including human. In a new community space, the participants should come from across a range of domains and not be familiar with one another's missions, strengths, experiences, or norms. It is not possible to know the scope, the desired outcomes, timeframes, level of commitment, and other key factors in successful collaborations without coming together to discuss them.

The Inclusion Framework<sup>10</sup> (Figure 3) assists with this objective by emphasizing aspects along the spectrum of inclusivity to consider for community efforts. Some facets of inclusion are increasingly familiar, for example, social and demographic, and some will need to become more familiar to bring our best efforts to emerging and evolving challenges for our cumulative communities, especially when technology plays a significant role in finding and sharing possible solutions. Professional inclusion is key to working across domains, understanding what everyone brings to discussions and problem-solving. Technical inclusion includes both the full range of technical skills that may be needed, and an acknowledgment that technology—the skills, the equipment, the training, the opportunity to gain experience—is not equally distributed, creating a have/have-not challenge that radical collaboration can help address. The terms technical and technological are often used interchangeably, a tendency



that can increase technical exclusion. Technological tends to refer to computers, though technology is a much broader term than that. In digital practice, we all have technical expertise—a deep knowledge of techniques that require skill—though we may not all be well versed in the machines, tools, and know-how of computers. We all have something to bring to the table.

<p><b>Social and demographic inclusion</b></p> <p>Not excluding anyone based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, or any other characteristic or preference</p> <p><b>Showstopper:</b> First and foremost ensure that people are safe.</p> <p><b>Professional inclusion</b></p> <p>Not excluding anyone from related or impacted professions, groups, and domains</p> <p><b>Technical inclusion</b></p> <p>Not excluding anyone from the opportunity to develop and share skills, have access to current tools, techniques, and emerging technologies</p>
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Figure 3. Inclusion Framework

We may believe that we are being as inclusive as possible in all of these ways, but intending and achieving can be a distance away from each other. Our own experience and expertise may limit our views and perspectives and reduce our ability to address new challenges without us realizing it. Radical collaboration is iterative and cumulative, including more people, skills, and knowledge as we better understand our shared problem spaces and discover the often untapped possibilities unlimited access to domains enables.

## Sharing the Table

If we imagine good practice for digital practice taking place at an inclusive table that brings people together in shared spaces to solve mutual problems, we can begin to think about how to set that table. When we begin working on a new or less familiar problem, it is not possible to know the full extent of what inclusion could or should mean—we need to gather information and listen before convening. It make take some effort—discussion, sharing some working definitions, adjusting and aligning expectations—to develop an understanding of

who might be most able to come together to address our current and emerging challenges. We often come together to work on problems, though we do not tend to reach across the boundaries of domains, professions, or organizations to tap the wealth of relevant skills. What could it look like if we did that?

As an example, the roundtable below is set for digital practice with research data management in mind. The listed domains and strengths of each are only examples. The beauty of a roundtable is that there is no

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head—when we come to the roundtable, we should determine roles and responsibilities based on the nature of the problems and our cumulative needs as those evolve. People may come and go over the phases of a project; someone who convenes a group may not lead it. An inclusive roundtable enables us to come together and play to our strengths. Professional inclusion is like a trip to the

candy store for engaging in good digital practice—who would we like to work with? Through an ongoing learning process and an open search for contributors, we will discover common interests, overlapping members, and intersecting objectives. A question we should ask sooner and more often is: who is not at the table and why?

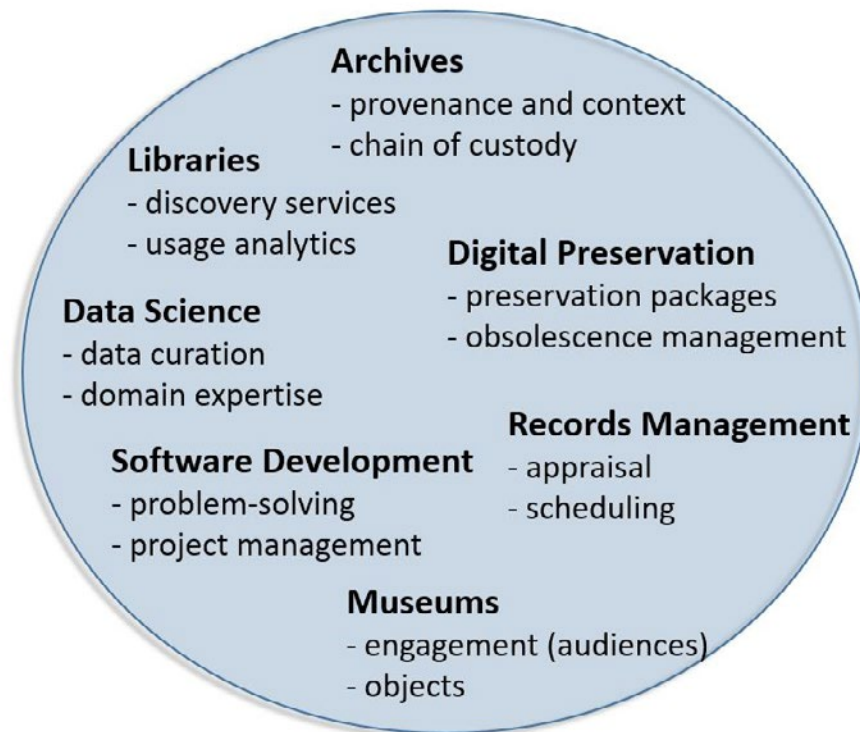


Figure 4. Roundtable for Digital Practice<sup>11</sup>

In practice, we cannot fit everyone who might need or want to be at the table, but we can be sure that the combination of people at the table and who have access to the table is inclusive, representative, and responsive.

### **Emerging Distributed Digital Practice**

In part, what we are experiencing is a shift to an emerging generation of digital practice. Generations of practice reflect the problems each emerged to address. People working in teams within and across domains, organizations, and communities develop and share tools, techniques, skills, and experiences. As new technologies emerge, a new generation of practice will be needed that is suited to the new and evolved capabilities, needs, and gaps of that combination of technologies. Each new generation should build on previous

generations. Right now, distributed digital practice is emerging that reflects advances in computer processing speeds, capacity, and storage. As a result, there is a lot of effort on artificial intelligence, machine learning, and related fields—areas that take advantage of those advances. We are always dealing with hybrid collections that are the results of multiple generations of digital practice. It is not that previous generations of practice are bad, only that there is an increasing dissatisfaction with existing practice because it was not built to do what the new technologies require. Generations of practice follow generations of technology; a shift to distributed technology naturally leads to distributed practice.

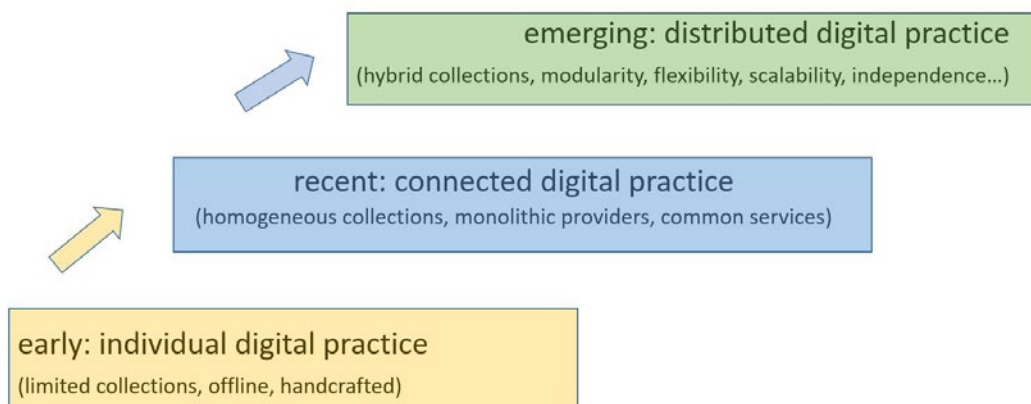


Figure 5. Generations of Digital Practice

The emergence of a new generation of digital practice is often full of tension and strife as people experience the emerging generation in different ways and at different paces based on interest, timing, and need, and as the need continues to engage in current practice. This can be frustrating and unproductive or it can be an ideal moment and opportunity to engage in radical collaboration, to become a learning community together. If we revisit the working definition of digital practice—“to continually work [using digital technology] to bring content and lessons from the past for the benefit of the present on behalf of the future”—we can extend it to become a working definition of distributed digital practice. The definition would continue: “achieved through radical collaboration across all domains that are

interested, engaged, reliant upon, or willing to help to continually devise, implement, and improve solutions in response to ongoing technological change.” An emerging combination of technologies transforms the ways in which content is created, how research is done, how we learn, and how knowledge is taught. Distributed digital practice, as we build it, will enable us to curate and preserve the results of this transformation and to leverage the capabilities to improve and advance our own practice. We cannot succeed at distributed digital practice if we do not embrace radical collaboration.

### **Building (an Inclusive) Community**

We have organizational tools available from developing previous generations of digital practice that can help us become an inclusive community actively and successfully engaged in distributed digital practice. The stages of an organizational maturity model—a community being a type of organization—can help.

Common stages of organizational maturity model:<sup>12</sup>

1. **Acknowledge:** understanding that this is a local concern
2. **Act:** initiating projects
3. **Consolidate:** transitioning from projects to programs
4. **Institutionalize:** incorporating larger environment; rightsizing programs
5. **Externalize:** embracing inter-institutional collaboration and dependency

When we transition to a new generation of practice, the starting point is acknowledging that there is an unmet challenge as individuals, as organizations, as a community. This acknowledgment leads to the need and desire to act, generally in the form of a project—the number of distributed digital practice projects is increasing rapidly, for example, machine learning and artificial intelligence are everywhere.

The transition from stage 2 to stage 3 for a community represents a particular challenge for inclusion because the skills are concentrated in a group of early adopters who are developing expertise in the skills needed for the emerging generation of practice. This concentration leads to exclusion, people who know and people who don't. This is the transition point our emerging distributed digital practice community is at—it is time for early adopters to carry on developing and advancing their expertise and it is time for popularizers to step forward, people who care about the objectives and whose skills include raising awareness, effective communication, and other means that expand community.

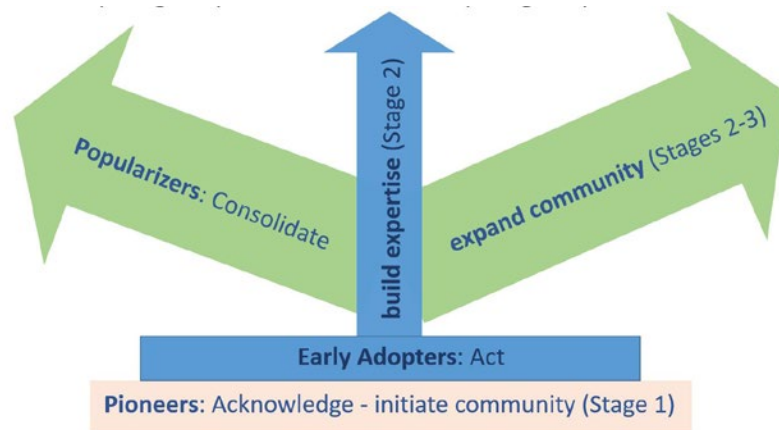


Figure 6. Building Sustainable Programs for Communities<sup>3</sup>

The exhaustion caused by endless projects, a characteristic of stage 2, eventually encourages organizations and individuals to develop more sustainable programmatic responses, first basic then increasingly advanced. Programs then use projects strategically to advance programs. More and more organizations have developed stage 4 programs for digital practice—we have a foundation and a growing community base for achieving distributed digital practice, building on what we have learned. Distributed digital practice requires working across domains, institutions, and communities. We will be discovering what stage 5 that intentionally includes radical collaboration will look like as we transition to distributed digital practice.

## Some Guiding Principles for Radical Collaboration

This introduction lays out the core concepts around radical collaboration and provides some context for the contributions that follow in this issue of *RLI*.

These are some considerations in thinking about how we begin to engage in radical collaboration:

- Raise awareness through open discussion—listen and assume good intent; use inclusive terms (for example, digital practice) and adjust.
- Be aware of using our own lens and our cumulative progress in viewing our past—it’s like saying, “Those dratted people in the ’90s refused to use social media!” before that was possible.
- Balance advocacy and inquiry—determine when to make your case, and when to listen and learn to deepen your awareness and understanding
- Continue from now—facing forward (informed by lessons learned)—look for opportunities—expect the unexpected.

The concluding section of this issue of *RLI* will build on this starting point to help envision what radical collaboration will look like.

## Endnotes

1. I defined and explored “radical collaboration” as a concept in a series of presentations in 2017 and 2018, including “Collaborating across Communities: Leveraging Our Strengths for Sustainable Programs and Services” (13th International Digital Curation Conference, Barcelona, Spain, February 21, 2018), [http://www.dcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/IDCC18/PresentationsIDCC18/NMcGovern\\_IDCC2018.pdf](http://www.dcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/IDCC18/PresentationsIDCC18/NMcGovern_IDCC2018.pdf).



2. *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “collaborate (v.),” accessed November 29, 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/collaborate>.
3. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “collaborate (v.),” accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaborate>.
4. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “collaborate (v).”
5. Nancy Y. McGovern, “Presidential Address” (Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Portland, Oregon, July 27, 2017).
6. *Google Dictionary*, s.v. “community (n.),” accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.google.com/search?q=dictionary%20google#dobs=community>.
7. McGovern, “Presidential Address.”
8. A brief and engaging video of Kim Scott defining radical candor that provides a great overview of the concept is available online: “INBOUND Bold Talks: Kim Scott ‘Radical Candor’,” January 20, 2017, 14:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yj9GLeNCgm4>.
9. Example of the radical collaboration movement in industry: Radical Collaboration website, accessed November 27, 2018, <http://www.radicalcollaboration.com/>.
10. McGovern, “Collaborating across Communities: Leveraging Our Strengths for Sustainable Programs and Services” introduced the Inclusion Framework.
11. This paper introduced the roundtable for digital practice and includes additional information and context: Nancy Y. McGovern, “Archives, History, and Technology: Prologue and Possibilities for SAA and the Archival Community,” *American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 9–2.
12. Anne R. Kenney and Nancy Y. McGovern, “The Five Organizational Stages of Digital Preservation,” in *Digital Libraries: A Vision for the 21st Century: A Festschrift in Honor of Wendy Lougee on the Occasion of Her Departure from the University of Michigan*, ed. Patricia Hodges,



Mark Sandler, Maria Bonn, and John Price Wilkin, SPO Scholarly Monograph Series (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Scholarly Publishing Office, The University of Michigan, University Library, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.3998/spobooks.bbv9812.0001.001>.

13. McGovern, “Archives, History, and Technology: Prologue and Possibilities for SAA and the Archival Community.”

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