

Radical Collaboration: An Archival View

Nancy Y. McGovern, Director, Digital Preservation, MIT Libraries

On the one hand, this is a great time to be an archivist working in academic libraries because there is growing interest and focus on archives and archival collections. On the other hand, this is a challenging time to be an archivist working in academic libraries because we are only at the starting point of building a better understanding of the domains and professions that contribute to the work of libraries, including archivists. As an example, different domains working in different organizational contexts have different understandings of what we mean by archival collections, manuscript collections, and special collections—this is a fundamental issue and an ideal starting point for a radical collaboration discussion. When I say:

- “archival collection” I mean the accumulated records of individuals and organizations that an archives is mandated or intending to keep based on a documented appraisal process;
- “manuscript collection” I mean the accumulated papers of individuals that an archives and manuscript repository of some kind has accepted responsibility for preserving; and
- “special collection” I refer to an accumulation of content that may be related by subject, media, form, creator, or other basis that is deemed by a collecting repository to have ongoing value.

I would never include archives as a type of special collection, and for me, special collections encompass more than rare books—both of which statements I have heard any number of people share in defining these terms. In addition, there are overlapping collections traditions that may make references to different types of collections confusing. In the archives and manuscripts tradition, manuscript collections often refer to personal archives that are typically associated with people of the parent institution of the archives. These manuscript collections are acquired much like other archival collections would be, by donation

or deed of gift. In the rare book and manuscript tradition, manuscripts may refer to individual documents or similar resources that are generally created by external sources and are often purchased by the collecting repositories. For effective collaboration, it is useful to know when the same terms are used in different ways.

If libraries and archives start with questions about our shared areas of responsibility and concern, there will be a growing understanding of our roles, responsibilities, interests, and desired futures in our conjoined professions. Libraries and the library community far outnumber archives and archivists, so archives are most commonly found in academic libraries rather than separate organizations as they might be. How do we come together and achieve our individual and collective goals? Radical collaboration can help.

A challenge that appears to be increasing as practitioners and researchers from more domains become interested in archives and special collections is that key terms like “archives,” “archivist,” and “archiving” are used in different ways, especially in a digital context. We have seen that a lack of clarity on terminology leads to ambiguity and misunderstandings resulting from a belief that people are talking about the same things in the same ways when they are not, which works against productive collaborations.

“If libraries and archives start with questions about our shared areas of responsibility and concern, there will be a growing understanding of our roles, responsibilities, interests, and desired futures in our conjoined professions.”

To forge effective collaboration, it is important to explore perceptions of archives and archiving.

How do we develop a common understanding of what we do?

To an archivist:

- Archives are **organizations** that collect the records of individuals or organizations, or the **building** (or portion thereof) housing archival collections.
- Archival practice is the professional **discipline** of administering such archival collections and organizations.
- The archival community refers to archivists anywhere who have training and expertise in **archival principles and practice** (for example, “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics”).¹

The information technology profession, commonly referred to as IT, often uses “archives” and “archiving” to refer to **aggregations** of digital content and the storage of digital content respectively. Archivists would not typically view these activities and outcomes understood from this IT perspective as archival, nor do they equate to preservation, an essential, more robust, and collaborative concept.

How do we understand the roles that may be involved?

Non-archivists who curate content may use “**digital archivist**” to refer to anyone who works on digitized or other digital content of any kind, rather than to an archivist who is steeped in archival principles and practice. Historians and other researchers may refer to archiving to mean capturing, documenting, or recording history and milestones.

It is observably confusing to have these different understandings of these core concepts circulating within the same organizations, and it can be frustratingly hard to be heard and to bring attention to the need to develop shared and inclusive working definitions of these terms that are central to what archivists do.²

Community archives have become an important focal point in addressing equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the context of collections. Good archival practice always involves working with

creators of records to enable the long-term preservation of and access to organizational and personal archival collections. One definition of community archives is “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control.”³ This term is worth mentioning here because of its significance today and because the term is used in different ways by different proponents. Often the content of community archives may provide important historical documentation and may include all kinds of valuable materials, though not include archival records. For collaboration, the community archives movement can provide opportunities for partnerships that include creators more actively as well as introduce challenges by limiting participation based on perceptions of who belongs at this table.

Disambiguating Digital Archives and Digital Preservation

Digital practice will continue to evolve—evolution is inherent in being responsive to ongoing technological change, a core principle of good digital practice. It is common in applied fields like ours that the terminology we use evolves as we develop our generations of good practice. As discussed in the introduction to this issue of *RLI*, developing working definitions is an effective technique for engaging in radical collaboration—begin with a shared understanding.

As we advance our practice, we specialize. Within our digital community, we have two paired yet distinct specialties—digital archives and digital preservation—that are often conflated, further diminishing the clarity we need for productive discussions when we collaborate. I use these working definitions for these key terms:

- **Digital archives** includes the range of real-time activities for all phases of the digital life cycle from the intent to create to creation and through the phases of archival curation: appraisal, description, access, reuse, and beyond, with the objective of ensuring that selected digital content is able to be preserved.

- **Digital preservation** all activities organizations or individuals engage in over time to ensure long-term readability/usefulness of specified digital content.

These two specialties work in partnership and one person may be responsible for both, but the real-time activities of digital archives and the over-time activities of digital preservation have specific tools, techniques, requirements, and practice that we need to address. You might say that digital preservation picks up where digital archives leaves off, and there would be no need for digital preservation if not for digital archives. Depending on how the scope of digital archives is defined—specific to the management of archival content or generically referring to the management of digital content—digital preservation may have a broader mandate than digital archives, being responsible in many case for the preservation of digital content of all kinds.

One way to better understanding the similarities and distinctions between digital archives and preservation is to compare them side by side, the purpose of the Digital Archives and Preservation (DAP) Stack illustrated in Figure 1 below.⁴

Why “stack”? Because it is very common for organizations to take a technology-first or technology-only approach to digital practice. IT discussions often refer to the combination of technologies in use in their organization as their stack. Digital preservation includes as a foundational component infrastructure of the kind that the IT stack in part represents. The DAP Stack provides the organizational perspective to pair with the technological perspective of the IT Stack. There are six layers of good practice in the DAP Stack: governance, collection scope, acquisition, workflows, life cycle storage, and monitoring, with characteristics that distinguish real-time (digital archives) and over-time (digital preservation) planning and action. For radical collaboration, these are core concepts that need to be explored before building partnerships that are able to leverage the cumulative strengths of these partnered domains.

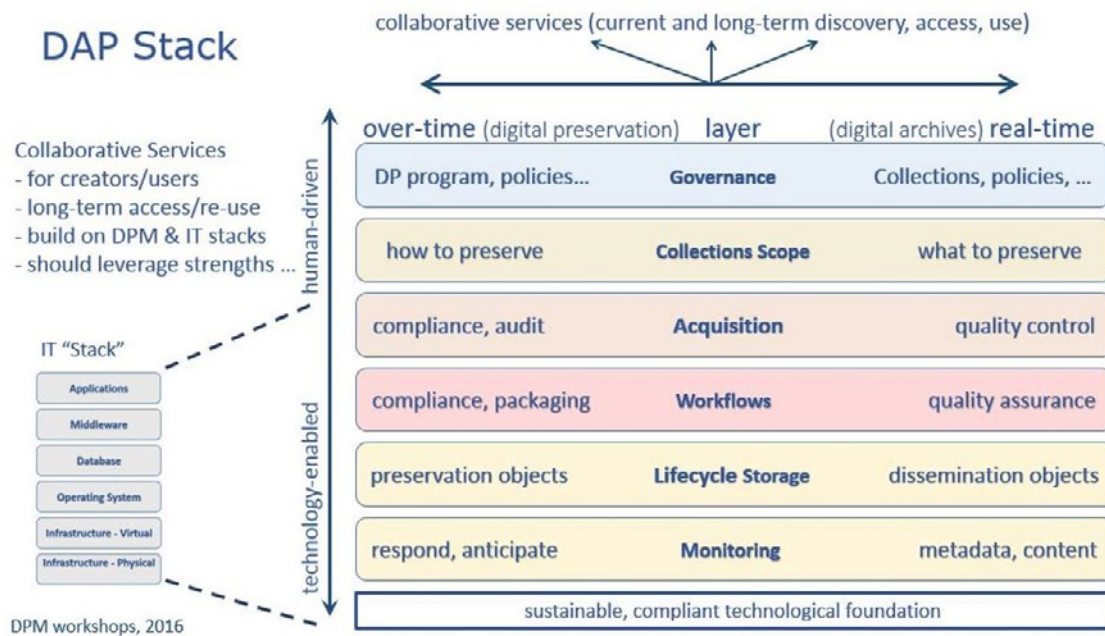


Figure 1. Digital Archives and Preservation (DAP) Stack

Digital Practice and Research Outcomes

The roundtable for digital practice discussed in the introduction to this issue of RLI is intentionally set for radical collaboration to achieve mutual objectives for research outcomes—to help researchers from the very start of their work to create, manage, preserve, enable discovery of, share, and reuse the outcomes of their work. There is wide agreement within the digital community that research data can take just about any form—by default that engages all of the domains (data science, archives, libraries, digital preservation, records management, museums, and software development). There is no hard line between research data and administrative and other data—the perception of data is based on context, need, and use. There are ongoing discussions of big data, which might be intentionally big (for example, ongoing often homogeneous accumulations of observational data) or might become big (for example, incremental, possibly longitudinal, often heterogeneous, accumulations of data). Some archivists have engaged in the long-term management of data of all kinds in digital form for decades and in physical form for much longer. No single domain

“The roundtable for digital practice...is intentionally set for radical collaboration to achieve mutual objectives for research outcomes....”

owns or could own research data management across its life cycle. There is sometimes an awkward distinction made between active and archived data that may assign long-term responsibilities for data to archives and assume that current

activities may be best done by other domains. That approach overlaps with but often does not include digital archivists and may complicate long-term preservation of data because essential discussions about sustainability requirements do not begin soon enough. In addition, there is an obvious and increasingly urgent need in research data management for records management, an allied field to archives, to help address retention and scheduling issues that would be tremendously helpful in the near-term and long-term management of research data. Radical collaboration will allow us to bring together the necessary knowledge, skills, and practice to work on research data together.

Considerations for Radical Collaboration That Engages Archives and Archivists

What will success look like when archives achieve professional inclusion within academic libraries? These are some considerations and suggestions for being inclusive of archives and archivists as we work to achieve radical collaboration:

- Remember that digital archives may refer to aggregations of archival records or to any digital content an individual or institution may be managing, whether or not the intention is to preserve the content.
- Examine the current and possible roles around digital practice to enhance collaboration, understanding that roles like digital archivist have many different definitions.
- Be aware that people often conflate digital archives and digital

preservation, these are distinct if co-dependent domains.

- Make time to revisit institutional policies and practices to enable collaboration and inclusion—local archival practice in academic libraries has been established perhaps without input from archivists or may not yet reflect digital practice.
- Convene community discussion to explore distinctions between archival collections, manuscript collections, and special collections.
- Encourage the local and community-wide use of accepted working definitions of these and related terms and concepts that are the essence of an archivist's identity and a basis for professional inclusion.

Within the context of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), examples of success might be convening directors of ARL archives to collaborate directly with archivists rather than through layers of organizational administration.

Endnotes

1. "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," Society of American Archivists, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.
2. For example, Clifford Lynch and I had a productive discussion about the ambiguity in his article "Stewardship in the 'Age of Algorithms'" (*First Monday* 22, no. 12, December 4, 2017, <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/8097/6583>) due to his various references to archives, archivists, digital archives, and archival practice that do not reflect archival practice as engaged in by archivists who adhere to archival principles and practice.
3. Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepard, "Whose Memory, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9 (2009).

4. For a more extended explanation about the concepts and components of the DAP Stack, please see this video: DataONE, "DPM 'Stack': A Management Infrastructure Frame for Digital Preservation that Parallels Technical Infrastructure," December 13, 2016, 53:11, <https://www.dataone.org/webinars/dpm-“stack”-management-infrastructure-frame-digital-preservation-parallels-technical>.

© 2018 Nancy Y. McGovern



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

To cite this article: Nancy Y. McGovern. “Radical Collaboration: An Archival View.” *Research Library Issues*, no. 296 (2018): 53–61. <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.296.8>.