

January 2013

## Ambiguity and the Digital Archivist

Caryn Radick

*Rutgers University - New Brunswick/Piscataway*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Radick, Caryn, "Ambiguity and the Digital Archivist," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 31 no. 2 (2013) .  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol31/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## **Ambiguity and the Digital Archivist**

Caryn Radick

### **Introduction**

The position title “digital archivist” has appeared increasingly within the archival community, reflecting changes brought on by the exponential growth of reliance on technology in our society. Although it is clear that a digital archivist uses technology to preserve and provide access to archival material, the responsibilities of digital archivists differ. As a digital archivist, I became intrigued by digital archivist position announcements – the range of skill sets and desired qualities led me to consider that someone with the same title could have different responsibilities. Discussions with other archivists and librarians brought the realization that being a digital archivist implied different qualities and skills to different audiences: I found I had to clarify my work focused on digitization rather than born-digital.

Position descriptions and other professional discussions indicate that a digital archivist is expected to either create (through digitization of analog holdings) or manipulate electronic files (containing born-digital or already digitized archival material). However, as this article will demonstrate, the differences in and the skill sets needed to work with the original material – analog versus born-digital – are a “fault line” in the definition and usage of the digital archivist title. That is, some statements suggest that digital archivist only refers to someone who is charged with working with born-digital material.

This article examines the term digital archivist as it is used within the archival profession. It demonstrates why the picture that emerges of the digital archivist is blurred by a lack of consistent definitions and descriptions. This article discusses issues that arise when considering how the digital archivist title is treated in several examples of archival writing. These include assertions that are undercut by contradictions, a glossing over of problematic aspects, and a lack of editorial oversight or follow through. Additionally, this article provides a picture of the digital archivist through a content analysis of advertisements for digital archivist positions

that focuses on their wording about requirements for born-digital versus digitization work.

The intent is to examine the wording of publicly available information – that is, information that organizations and institutions chose to post, publish, or disseminate – that includes statements on digital archivists and is meant to shape their work. Having worked as an editor prior to and since becoming an archivist, I am interested in understanding the issues that make it difficult to have a clear definition of digital archivist. What is present in the writing about this title that may be contributing to the confusion? Thus, I have taken an “editorial” approach in my reading, looking to tease out the wording, passages, and issues that highlight certainties and uncertainties of who digital archivists are.

Although some questions that arise during reading could be settled by contacting the authors of the documents or position descriptions, the intent of this article is to demonstrate where and why a reader might become confused in reading about digital archivists. Also, although there is clearly a “wish list” element to many position descriptions, what is ultimately circulated is what the institution chose to publicly disseminate in its name. Further investigation could show that a statement was made in error or simply not edited to reflect the intention of the writers, but at some point it was “published.”

Differences in similar position titles will always exist, in part because institutional size dictates a certain level and number of responsibilities – a lone arranger shop versus a large research library, for example. Although it is unrealistic to think of terms as absolute (“elasticity” accompanies language and helps move it in new directions),<sup>1</sup> it is worth questioning usages that imply that “it goes without saying” the matter of who a digital archivist is has been settled. As will be demonstrated, despite assertions that digital archivist should be used to mean “works with born-digital,” the term remains largely undefined and used in different ways. Attempts to clarify what a digital archivist is or does often muddy the waters through lack of detailed explanation. Others conflate

---

<sup>1</sup> Alice Prochaska’s article “Special Collections in an International Perspective,” *Library Trends* 52, no. 1 (June 2003), refers to the term “special collections” as “almost infinitely elastic”: 139.

responsibilities with title, such as equating working with digital archives with “digital archivist.”

The descriptions of digital archivists are examined in two ways, or using a hybrid approach. First, by demonstrating how two documents meant to provide guidance and instruction regarding digital archives exemplify the problems of how digital archivist is used. These are the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) Digital Archives Committee on Education (DACE) 2011 *Report of the Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force* through which the SAA’s Digital Archives Specialist (DAS) Certificate is laid out (and the online description of the program); and the AIMS work group’s 2012 *Born-Digital Collections: An Inter-Institutional Model for Stewardship (AIMS)* which offers recommendations for working with born-digital material. The second approach is a brief analysis of position descriptions where the digital archivist title is used to describe positions with digitization responsibilities, born-digital responsibilities, or both.

### **Literature Review – Terminology**

Discussions of terminological differences are expected within any profession that is not homogenous, and archival discussions have also formed around uses of terms such as “archive” or “curation” that have been adopted outside of the profession. While the definition of digital archivist has not been examined within professional literature, it has featured discussions of why terminology and definitions matter along with examinations of particular terms.

Michael Piggott, Geoffrey Yeo, and Adrian Cunningham have discussed issues of how a term is used within the archival profession. Piggott and Yeo particularly address why some reluctance surrounds discussion of definitions. Piggott acknowledges the difficult aspects of seeking exact definitions in the introduction to his *Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays* (2012) which he opens with a statement that:

“My attitude problem concerning definitions, however, is different and presents with two contradictory symptoms. Firstly, my faith that defining terms for a diverse audience in even one country is weak....The second symptom relates

to the way definitions are used.... Even choosing between collection and holdings, electronic and digital, record-making and recordkeeping, and archives and archive can become fraught. Never entirely absent either is the attraction of game playing, which archivists seem unusually attracted to: *you can call it 'a reading,' I'll decide if you've misunderstood me, and the clincher what, if anything, is a reading?*" (italics in the original)<sup>2</sup>

Piggott's approach acknowledges one of the major difficulties of terminology: some audiences may never get beyond their differing perspectives on individual terms, thus losing sight of the larger discussion. However, it is necessary to consider what obstacles might further obscure a clear definition. In "Concepts of Record (1): Evidence, Information, and Persistent Representations," Geoffrey Yeo considers the value of examining and providing definitions as a prelude a discussion of treatments of the word "record:"

"Such definitions may not offer unassailable truths but are still useful for many purposes. They assist new entrants to the profession and other inquirers seeking clarification of professional terminology, and they can also be valuable to established professionals when analyzing basic concepts or communicating with customers, experts in other fields, persons in authority, or the wider public."<sup>3</sup>

Regarding resistance to attempts to make definitions definitive or prescriptive, Yeo responds, "Whatever reservations we may have about universal statements, it is legitimate to want to explore the meaning of things and especially their meanings within

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Piggott, *Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Chandos Publishing, 2012): 6.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Yeo, "Concepts of Record (1): Evidence, Information, and Persistent Representations," *American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007): 315–343. Quotation, p. 317. The second part of this article, entitled, "Concepts of Record (2): Prototypes and Boundary Objects," appears in *American Archivist* 71, no. 1, (Spring/Summer 2008): 118–143.

particular communities.”<sup>4</sup> Yeo’s statements aptly address the “why bother” aspect of trying to understand what people or communities mean when they use a particular term. Although it is not unusual that a term such as digital archivist may be defined differently within different communities, one of the problems with this term is that it really is not defined. Instead, the term is treated as an extension of digital archives in professional literature; however, position descriptions indicate that the “digital” in digital archivist can refer to digitization. Given that some instances of the former are not clear in their statements or contain contradictory information, the picture remains fuzzy.

Another reason language and wording are worth focusing on is that dismissing or glossing over different or vague terminology leaves gaps in the discussion. Lack of consensus or arguments about terminology also hinder the ability to speak as an authority both within the profession and in outreach efforts. If we are unable or unwilling to understand each other, we have little chance of presenting a unified message about our profession.

Cunningham gets to the heart of the issues of terminology – and closer to the subject of this article – when discussing the term “digital archive,” which he asserts has been “hijacked” and misused. Although he also acknowledges the problems of definitions, particularly those that relate to “digital,” he states the need for better articulation. “Indeed, the advent of digital archives has only accentuated the unreliability of our terminology. All the more reason, therefore, for us to articulate and assert our meanings with clarity, while at the same time acknowledging the contested nature of the semantic and political terrain.”<sup>5</sup> His approach brings a level of practicality to the terminology issue – stating the need to acknowledge and accept terminology issues and to work to offer usable definitions.

Cunningham’s article contains references to digital archivists and their work, but, as occurs with other examples, that

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Cunningham, “Digital Curation/Digital Archiving: A View from the National Archives of Australia,” *American Archivist* 71 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 532, footnote 7.

term is undefined and is only mentioned in the context of the larger discussion of the term digital archives.<sup>6</sup>

### **Digital Archivists in Professional Literature**

Archival writing implies the digital archivist specializes in born-digital (and possibly already-digitized) material although some writers, such as the authors of the AIMS report discussed below, acknowledge the ambiguity surrounding the title. This section addresses how on examination, statements about what a digital archivist does are unclear. Although documents have been written with the purpose of bringing clarity to issues surrounding born-digital material, they do not tackle the use of language regarding the professionals who work with them.

This section focuses on how two recent documents that make statements about digital archivists highlight these issues in the professional discussion, particularly how the title digital archivist draws from the term [born] digital archives: these are the SAA DACE 2011 *Report of the Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force* and the 2012 *AIMS Born-Digital Collections: An Inter-Institutional Model for Stewardship* which makes recommendations for working with born-digital material. Each document is the product of archival professionals who were brought together to chart a path for ensuring best practices (and practitioners) for the digital future of the profession. As such, the close reading that follows demonstrates how their language reveals some of the issues and uncertainties related to the use of digital archivist.

SAA established the DACE task force with the charge of “developing a detailed professional development curriculum on the subject of digital archives.”<sup>7</sup> The DACE report states that the DAS certificate centers on the skills necessary to work with “digital archives” which they define as born-digital and further differentiates digital archives from digitization:

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. References to digital archivists are on pages 532, 535, 541, and 542.

<sup>7</sup> Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force. *Report of the Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force*. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011): 15. Accessed July 12, 2013, <http://www.archivists.org/governance/taskforces/DACEReport.5.16.11.pdf>.

“The task force agreed that two basic concepts would guide its work. The first was that its focus would be on born-digital records, thus on digital archives rather than digitized archives. The members believed that this distinction was important because it accepts that digital records are a central concern of archivists and because these move the focus of the curriculum away from paper records, which is truly where digitization projects are focused.”<sup>8</sup>

Another SAA definition that supports this view appears in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for the DAS certificate on the SAA’s website. Under the question “What is the difference between ‘digital archives’ and ‘electronic records’?” is the answer:

“‘Electronic records’ are those (whether digital or analog) that require electronic devices in order to be created and used.

‘Digital archives’ are permanent digital records that require a computer to create and use them. The term ‘archives’ may refer to both materials and the repositories that house them; similarly ‘digital archives’ may refer to an archival institution focused on the management of permanent digital records or a cache or collection of such materials.”<sup>9</sup>

The DACE task force is clear that its members believe the language used to discuss digital archives matters. The report acknowledges the necessity of forging common definitions in the area of cutting-edge technology:

“Administering archives in a ubiquitously networked world is no longer a matter for archivists alone. Because born-digital materials are subject to short-lived technologies at the time of creation, their management and preservation

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> Society of American Archivists. “Frequently Asked Questions (and Answers!),” accessed July 12, 2013, <http://www2.archivists.org/book/export/html/14913>.



require a highly coordinated effort. The ability to define roles and responsibilities clearly depends on the extent to which we are speaking the same language.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the purpose of working to bring clarity to digital archives, the DACE task force also obscures its terms, possibly in part through editorial oversight. The report uses the term “digital archives” 140 times, mostly in reference to the DAS certificate. The term “digital archivist” appears six times. Two appear to be accidental, references to the “Digital Archivist Specialist” curriculum.<sup>11</sup> Most likely, this is a slip between “archives” and “archivist,” or might indicate that the initial A stood for “archivist” at one point but was later changed.

The other four references to digital archivists appear in the Appendix E section of the report, which lays out the course descriptions for the DAS curriculum, giving information about intended audiences and learning outcomes as well. Two instances are in the proposed “Thinking Digital” class, which has the intended target audience of “archivists and others who need to think and act as digital archivists.” The learning outcome for the course is “to teach participants how to think like digital archivists in digital environment.”<sup>12</sup>

At first reading, the use of “digital archivist” appears to refer back to the definition of “digital archives” that the DACE task force established in their basic concepts.<sup>13</sup> However, a look at the online course description implies something else about the DAS curriculum: “*Who Should Attend?*: Archivists and others who

---

<sup>10</sup> Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force, “Report”: 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., References to the “Digital Archivist Specialist Curriculum” occur on pages 28 and 56. I considered whether the word “curriculum” (as opposed to “certificate”) might imply that the usage was intentional, but there are 22 uses of “Digital Archives Specialist Curriculum” in the report, leading me to conclude that was the intended term.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 28. One of the “Digital Archivist Specialist Curriculum” usages appears in this description as well.

<sup>13</sup> See page 133-134 of this article for quotation.

are responsible for planning and implementing digitization projects at the beginning and intermediate level.”<sup>14</sup>

Although the website does not carry through the idea that the “Thinking Digital” course is intended for digital archivists or people who want to think like one, the fact that this class is about digitization throws the DACE report’s usages into question and adds further confusion. This declaration contradicts the idea of the DAS “focus” on born-digital collections. The word “focus” might imply that there is room to discuss other, more peripheral, areas of archival practice. However, given that the focus was meant to exclude even files that resulted from digitization, it is confusing that a course based on working with analog materials should appear in the DAS curriculum.

The next reference to digital archivists in the DACE report is in the learning outcomes for the Standards for Digital Archives course description, which says it “provides participants with an overview of the most important standards a digital archivist needs to know and enough knowledge to implement parts of these in their own work environments.”<sup>15</sup> The report’s designated audience carries through to the online description for this course, which asks, “Do you know the most important standards a digital archivist needs to know?”<sup>16</sup> Without a definition or a clear idea of whether digitization is a part of what a digital archivist may do, it is hard to know how to answer.

The final digital archivist reference in the DACE report appears in the target audience in the course description for the “Managing Electronic Records in Archives and Special Collections” course: “This course is intended for digital archivists and electronic records managers, university archivists, curators and others who need to understand and articulate the challenges and solutions for managing born-digital and electronic records in archives, special collections and on a larger campus-wide or

---

<sup>14</sup> Society of American Archivists, “Thinking Digital” course description accessed July 12, 2013, <http://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/course-catalog/f-thinking-digital-a-practical-session-to-help-get-you-started-das>.

<sup>15</sup> Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force, “Report,” 29.

<sup>16</sup> Society of American Archivists, “Standards for Digital Archives,” accessed July 12, 2013, <http://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/course-catalog/f-standards-for-digital-archives-das>.

institutional level.”<sup>17</sup>

In the online course description, this has been modified to “College and university archivists, records managers, and special collections curators whose activities include ingest and management of electronic records.”<sup>18</sup> The dropping of certain terms may relate to the wording issue, but it is impossible to make that determination just by comparing the report and website.

Other slips in definitions occur in Appendix D: The Course Description Data Elements for Digital Archives Specialist Curriculum, which frames the composition of the course descriptions. Each description has a “glossary” category, which the frame says is a “list of important terms in this workshop with a link back to Richard Pearce-Moses’ glossary of archival terms.”<sup>19</sup> However, several of the terms listed in the course descriptions, such as “digital archives” and “digital collection” had not yet appeared in the glossary as of July 2013.<sup>20</sup> The glossary within the report also does not include a definition of “digital archivist.” Rather, with the exception a definition of “digital curation,” the DACE glossary definitions are for terms used to classify professionals in terms of potential audiences for the DAS classes, such as administrator, manager, and practitioner. Given that a glossary for the course descriptions was established, even informal definitions for the listed terms would be useful.

Like the DACE task force, the AIMS work group also set out to look at digital archives (which they refer to as “born-digital

---

<sup>17</sup> Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force, “Report,” 54.

<sup>18</sup> Society of American Archivists, “Managing Electronic Records in Archives and Special Collections,” accessed July 12, 2013.

<http://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/course-catalog/tr-managing-electronic-records-in-archives-and-special-collections-das>.

<sup>19</sup> Digital Archives Continuing Education Task Force, “Report,” 22.

<sup>20</sup> In 2012, SAA established a Glossary Working Group “to establish and maintain mechanisms and procedures for allowing periodic updates and contributions of new content to *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* and to ensure that this important resource adheres to the highest quality professional standards.”

(<http://www2.archivists.org/news/2012/volunteers-sought-for-glossary-working-group>). See *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* by Richard Pearce-Moses, available at: <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary>. Although nonexistent terms referenced in the report may now be added, the report discusses them as if they had already been established.

archives” rather than “digital archives,” with a few exceptions) and are careful to establish the parameters:

“...the challenges of stewarding born-digital material demand new strategies as well as a redefinition of archival workflows. [Accordingly, this emerging challenge will affect the skill-set needed for archivists and the working relationships among archival colleagues as well as those outside our communities and organizations.] If the archival profession aims to preserve and manage born-digital material to standards matching those of paper-based collections, a broader and deeper understanding of these issues must be developed, and this understanding must be incorporated into training of new archival professionals, professional development programs, and continuing education.”<sup>21</sup>

Working on the AIMS project were “archivists, digital archivists, technical developers and repository managers.”<sup>22</sup> The use of both “archivists” and “digital archivists” suggests that there is some sort of distinction between the two designations that goes beyond a superficial difference in title. The AIMS project also acknowledged the level of terminological differences between members of the archival community, between United States and United Kingdom (where the AIMS partnership was based) and within national communities:

“The third challenge was language and terminology. The differences both in use and understanding of terminology between the US and the UK as well as between the archival profession and the digital library world of both countries prompted questions and, in many instances, prevented the acceptance of assumed definitions and understandings. Adding to this challenge was the redefining of traditional archival terms to a born-digital context. The partners

---

<sup>21</sup> AIMS Work Group, “AIMS Born-Digital Collections: An Inter-Institutional Model for Stewardship” (2012): i. accessed July 12, 2013, [http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/aims/whitepaper/AIMS\\_final.pdf](http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/aims/whitepaper/AIMS_final.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

recognized that, despite differences in terminology, the fundamental archival objectives and outcomes required redefinition of the nature of the activities and tasks required to achieve them. To aid in disambiguating these terms, the project partners created a glossary, included in *Appendix A*.<sup>23</sup>

The term digital archivist does not appear in the glossary, nor are there any definitions of archival professionals.

The AIMS project included hiring professionals who were specifically referred to as “Digital Archivists.” Thus the report often contains references to “Digital Archivists” and “the Digital Archivists.” However, the title is inconsistently treated throughout the report (the italics are mine for emphasis):

“The first project milestone was the recruitment and hire of a *Digital Archivist* at each of the four institutions. All four *digital archivists* were initially appointed to fixed-term contracts. However, two of the four posts have subsequently become permanent (at Stanford and Virginia) and the other two (at Hull and Yale) were filled via a secondment. All four institutions will retain these experienced staff members assembled for this project. Once the *digital archivists* were oriented to the technical, organizational, and archival environment of their institution, the project proceeded via two workflows. First, the *Digital Archivists* and their colleagues processed the digital collections identified for the AIMS project, many of which were hybrid collections of digital and paper-based materials. The *Digital Archivists* shared information on all elements of their work.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the inconsistency in treatment is confusing (looking over the report, there are a number of minor editorial issues, so this treatment can be attributed in part to the need for an additional layer of proofreading), it becomes more confusing because the

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., vi.

AIMS framework also contains references to “digital archivists” in a more generic sense, that is, it distinguishes between a digital archivist and an AIMS digital archivist, for example, “The project team collaborated with others working in this area and with the digital archivist community through the following means.”<sup>25</sup> The fact that there is a specific and a generic use of the same term, and that the treatments are not consistent makes it harder to determine who is being referred to in certain cases.

The AIMS report also mentions findings of inconsistencies related to the title of digital archivist. In the section entitled “Archivist Community Events,” the report states, “There were relatively few posts with the explicit job title of digital archivist, and the precise requirements and responsibilities of these posts varied quite dramatically. In the UK there was already quite an established digital preservation community . . . . There are however, only a few examples of posts with the explicit job title of digital archivist.”<sup>26</sup> The report does not delve deeper into the numbers, nor into the varying requirements and responsibilities held by those who have the digital archivist title.

Although formally establishing a definition of the digital archivist title is out of the scope of the AIMS framework, which focused on practices, the discussion leaves a gap. Based on the AIMS “Digital Archivist” titles, it would seem that that AIMS members wish to establish a community of digital archivists with similar responsibilities. However, the report provides no framework within which that might occur; it just observes the differences among “digital archivists” without making any attempt to reconcile them.

Both the DACE and AIMS documents use digital archivist to refer to someone who works with born-digital materials, but do not offer a definition. The usages discussed above highlight both the wording and the discussions that lead to the lack of clarity in establishing an identity for digital archivists.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

## Advertised Position Titles

This section discusses content analyses, focusing on other discussions of “digital” or “special collections” positions, particularly those that mention or offer perspectives on wording and terminology. It also provides a content analysis focusing on digital archivist position advertisements and what they say about the born-digital versus digitization responsibilities of a digital archivist. The advertisements reflect and even further complicate prevailing ambiguities particularly regarding the issue of digital archivists primarily working with born-digital versus digitization.

### *Literature Review of Content Analyses*

Content analyses of position advertisements are another means by which the language surrounding a title – whether the title itself or the responsibilities attending it – is considered. Although library and archival literature frequently feature such discussions, they are often focused more on categories of positions than individual titles.<sup>27</sup> Very few specifically consider special collections or archival positions. Two that do are Michelle Riggs' examination of required knowledge of encoded archival description in job descriptions and Kelli Hansen's look at special collections librarian positions.<sup>28</sup> Where Riggs' focus on an EAD skill set assisted her choice of terms to look for, she also notes the differences in wording of other required skills and a lack of clarity

---

<sup>27</sup> Both John D. Shank's article, “The Blended Librarian: A Job Announcement Analysis of the Newly Emerging Position of Instructional Design Librarian,” *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 6 (2006): 515–524, and Karen S. Croneis and Pat Henderson's article, “Electronic and Digital Librarian Professions: A Content Analysis of Announcements from 1990 to 2000,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 28, no. 4 (2002): 232–237, drew my attention to Gary W. White, “Academic Subject Specialist Positions in the United States: A Content Analysis of Announcements from 1990 through 1998,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25 (November 1999): 372–382. White divides content analyses into three categories, examining: types of positions, skill sets required, or general issues.

<sup>28</sup> Michelle Riggs, “The Correlation of Archival Education and Job Requirements since the Advent of Encoded Archival Description,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 1 (2005): 61–79; Kelli Hansen “Education, Training, and Recruitment of Special Collections Librarians: An Analysis of Job Advertisements,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 12, no. 2 (2011): 110–132.

in some advertisements.<sup>29</sup> Hansen also finds that lack of standardized wording for job titles to be a difficulty in conducting her analysis.<sup>30</sup>

A third, more recent, content analysis article with a special collections focus is “Job Advertisements for Recent Graduates: Advising, Curriculum, and Job-Seeking Implications,” in which Robert Reeves and Trudi Bellardo Hahn conducted a position advertisement content analysis for special collection librarians for entry level positions within the library and information science field.<sup>31</sup> They include jobs that list digitization experience, but say this is “either in terms of digital preservation or digitization for access.”<sup>32</sup> It is unclear whether working with born-digital material is included under those terms although digital preservation may imply that.

Karen Croneis and Pat Henderson looked at announcements for “Electronic and Digital Librarian Professions”<sup>33</sup> and discuss how the complexity of the electronic/digital environment is reflected in the variety of titles that carry those terms, and distinctions between “electronic” titles and “digital” ones.<sup>34</sup> Closer to the vein of this article, an examination of an emerging position title was undertaken by John D. Shank, who looked at announcements for instructional design librarian.<sup>35</sup> Shank also addresses the lack of consensus and definition for the instructional design librarian, claiming it is in part the result of the newness of the title. Ultimately, in going through advertisements he decided to focus on the specific use of

---

<sup>29</sup> Riggs, p. 66–67.

<sup>30</sup> Hansen, “Education, Training and Recruitment,” 113.

<sup>31</sup> Robert K. Reeves and Trudi Bellardo Hahn, “Job Advertisements for Recent Graduates: Advising, Curriculum, and Job-Seeking Implications,” *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 51, no. 2 (2010): 103–119.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Karen S. Croneis and Pat Henderson, “Electronic and Digital Librarian Professions: A Content Analysis of Announcements from 1990 to 2000,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 28, no. 4 (2002): 232–237.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>35</sup> John D. Shank, “The Blended Librarian: A Job Announcement Analysis of the Newly Emerging Position of Instructional Design Librarian,” *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 6 (2006): 515–524.



the words “Instructional Design” and “Librarian” the title.<sup>36</sup> In 2012, Jeonghyun Kim, Edward Warga, and William E. Moen looked at announcements for digital curation positions.<sup>37</sup> The introduction provides examples definitions of digital curation that include working with born-digital and digitization and the article later includes a breakdown of terms used in position titles, with 11% of titles containing the word “archivist.”<sup>38</sup>

Beyond demonstrating that the library and archival professions continue to engage in efforts to understand what skills professionals need, these analyses sometimes gave indications of problematic or difficult-to-interpret wording. The authors tended to see this as a stumbling block in the analysis. In the case of digital archivist, I saw wording as a stopping point; the issues I found in considering the position descriptions informed my curiosity about why the definition seemed so elusive.

### *Method and Findings*

As my initial interest in the differences in responsibilities for the title digital archivist was sparked by reading position announcements, I undertook an exploratory analysis of digital archivist positions advertised on the Archives and Archivists (A&A) listserv, using their 1993–2006 archives and their 2006 to present archives (the sample used for this article includes 2012, but not beyond).<sup>39</sup> I searched the listserv for messages containing the words “digital,” “archivist,” and “position.” Results that were not job advertisements were weeded out. Although a number of job announcements contained these words (for example, several Assistant Archivist position advertisements contained the word “digital”), any position title that did not include the words “digital”

---

<sup>36</sup> Shank, 517. Shank does say that there were cases where librarian was not used in the title, but as a position classification.

<sup>37</sup> Jeonghyun Kim, Edward Warga and William E. Moen, “Competencies Required for Digital Curation: An Analysis of Job Advertisements,” *The International Journal of Digital Curation* 8, no. 1 (2013): 66–83. doi:10.2218/ijdc.v8i1.242.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 71.

<sup>39</sup> The Archives and Archivists listserv for February 1993 to September 2006 are available at: April 1993 to September 2006: <http://listserv.muohio.edu/archives/archives.html>. The listserv archives for 2006 to present are available at <http://forums.archivists.org/read/?forum=archives>.

and “archivist” were also eliminated. I also searched through online sources of job advertisements including Code4Lib, ArchivesGig, and ALA jobList,<sup>40</sup> in this case, only searching for the term “digital archivist.” A Google Alerts request for this term also brought several more recent ads to light.

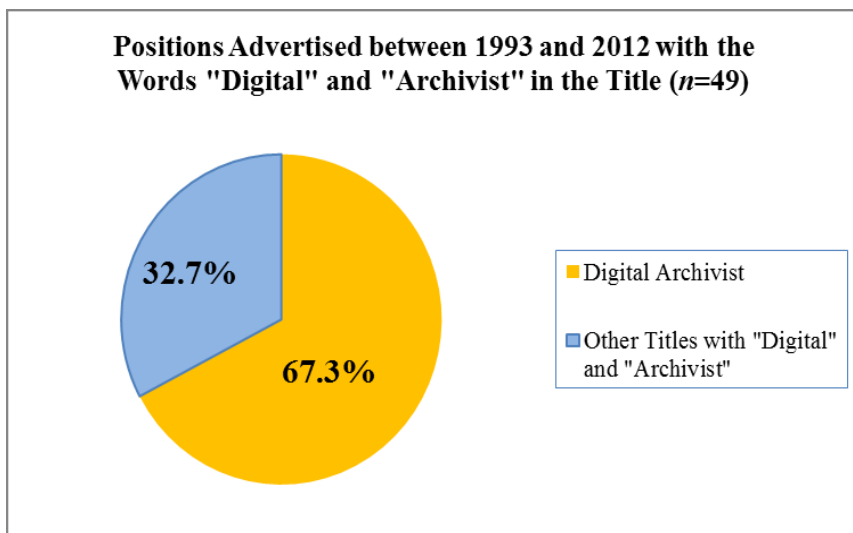
This left a sample of 49 ads. The majority of the titles in the sample (33, or 67%) of the ads were for “digital archivist” and the remainder were for titles such as “digital archivist librarian” or “digital resources archivist”<sup>41</sup> (See Figure 1). I decided to further narrow the focus by looking at the “digital archivist” positions, (with one exception, a title for “university and digital archivist”). I also eliminated job descriptions that appeared to be reposted in cases, for example if a position was advertised twice or more over the course of two to six months. There are some tricks and compromises in doing these sorts of eliminations, and as Robert Reeves and Trudi Bellardo Hahn stated, this process is “more of an art than a science.”<sup>42</sup> When the same or a similar ads appeared after more than a year, I chose to treat them as if they were additional positions (surmising that perhaps the person who had taken the job originally had moved on and that the employer could have made changes in wording), making the ad a “new” advertisement.

---

<sup>40</sup> Job postings on the Code4Lib site are available at <http://jobs.code4lib.org/>; The Archives Gig website is available at <http://archivesgig.livejournal.com/>. ALA (American Library Association) jobList is available at <http://joblist.ala.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> The titles eliminated were: Project Archivist for Digital Records Program; Systems and Digital Resource Archivist; Digital Resources Archivist; University Archivist/Head, Digital Collections; Digital Librarian/Archivist; Archivist/Digital Specialist; Digital Programs Archivist (this appeared twice for the same institution in different years); Digital Archivist/Librarian; Digital Records Archivist; Digital Collections Archivist; Digital Preservation Archivist; Digital Preservation and Electronic Records Archivist; Archivist for Digital Collections; Digital Services Archivist; Digital Initiatives Archivist.

<sup>42</sup> Reeves and Bellardo Hahn, “Job Advertisements for Recent Graduates,” 108.



*Figure 1*

As Reeves and Bellardo Hahn note, the lack of accessible full descriptions can be an obstacle to collecting ads.<sup>43</sup> Many A&A posts were partial, listing a few lines of description before referring to a website that at one point contained the full job ad. Occasionally a more fleshed out advertisement was still available on an institution's website, or the posting had been given in full elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

The postings were analyzed in two ways. I set up an Excel spreadsheet to chart references in these descriptions to duties pertaining both to digitizing analog collections and working with digitized or born-digital material. I noted whether a description included both digitization and born-digital or if the language was vague or ambiguous: for example, references to "digital conversion," which could be interpreted as either converting analog to digital or digital to another digital format; "leading digital initiatives" was also difficult to interpret as referring to born-digital or digitization without other language that made this clearer. The majority of descriptions had some level of specificity

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Code4Lib (Code4Lib.org) had intact job ads going back to 2007. The job description for my position was also only a partial and could no longer be obtained online. To include this information, I used my own copy.

although those relying on overly broad language (such as “leading digital initiatives”) were opaque in their expectations. In many cases, the responsibilities were not limited to “digital” work, but also included more “traditional” responsibilities, such as public service or processing.

Each selected ad was also run through QSR NVIVO qualitative data analysis software. I reread each ad, coding nodes for references to digitization, born-digital, uncertain (again, “leading digital initiatives” with no other language to help translate), and for various “traditional” requirements. Where only part of the ad had been available, that part was coded as it often gave information about expectations regarding working with digitization versus born-digital.

The results show that “digital archivist” positions that are only for working with born-digital records were in the minority. Of those 33 positions that held the title digital archivist, nine (27%) used the term born-digital and did not refer to digitization; nine (27%) used the terms digitize, digitizing, or digitization without reference to born-digital; 12 (37%) referred to both digitization or digitizing and born-digital; three (9%) used neither term (see Figure 2).

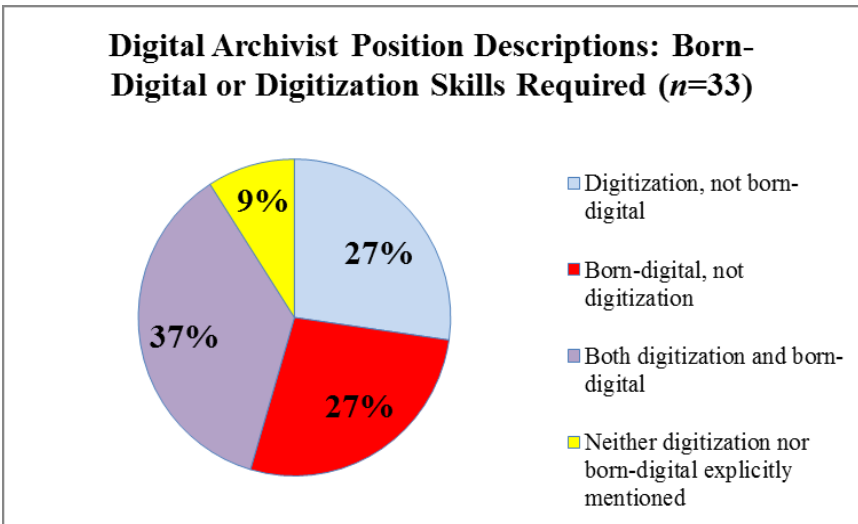


Figure 2

These position descriptions are presumably one of the reasons why the authors of the AIMS framework found such disparities between titles. The advertisements also indicate that digital archivists are expected to perform many of the traditional responsibilities of archival jobs, including reference, processing, and writing and encoding finding aids.<sup>45</sup>

### **Implications and Future Directions**

Although position descriptions tend to be broad, it is important that a description makes clear what skill sets are needed for a position to be successful and effective. Members of the archival and library professions also need to acknowledge that a professional title may not always signify a particular skill set: if an institution's digital archivist is a digitization specialist, further training will be necessary to work with born-digital. A student interested in a course for digital archivists needs to investigate the course to ensure that its content matches the skill set they seek to acquire. Perhaps the most crucial factor is that members of the archival community understand the differences in meaning and can communicate them to each other along with the administrators of their units and libraries.

In the future, it would be worthwhile to survey and interview digital archivists to determine what their responsibilities regarding digitization and born-digital work are, whether their responsibilities adequately reflect the advertisements for their positions or if their responsibilities have changed in the meantime, and what impact, if any, the ambiguity has on them and their work. It would also be worth looking at other titles used for archivists performing digitization and born-digital work to see where their responsibilities align with digital archivists. Another area to explore is other requirements of the position, such as educational background and a more thorough breakdown of which "traditional" archival skill sets are found in these position advertisements.

---

<sup>45</sup> The initial intention of this article was to consider the different responsibilities, but through the course of research, I saw the need to focus on the larger definition of digital archivist, particularly as it pertained to born-digital versus digitization.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown how the use of the title digital archivist reveals both a fault line and a lack of clarity in the archival profession. The term lacks a concrete definition, even in literature that considers the work of digital archivists, and it is often conflated to derive from the more solidly-defined “digital archives.” Although there are assertions that a digital archivist works with born-digital materials, many of the advertisements for digital archivists indicate responsibilities for digitization work. Given differing institutional needs and budgets, it is unrealistic to expect that these duties will always be performed by different people and that such blurred lines of responsibilities will always occur. However, it would also be useful for a standard-bearer such as the Society of American Archivists to include a definition of digital archivist in its glossary.

Terminology issues will most likely always exist within the archival profession. It is useful to keep its “elastic” properties in mind; indeed, terminology should evolve as our missions do. However, it would help avoid confusion if we make the effort to acknowledge and examine rather than dismiss differences and ensure that a definition is established, even if only within a particular context. In the instance of digital archivists, it would be useful if we could balance a greater need for clarity with the understanding that it is unlikely that one uniform definition will ever exist.

**Caryn Radick** is digital archivist at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. She received her MLIS from Rutgers and has a master’s degree in Victorian literature from the University of Nottingham. Her research interests include the intersection of the archival profession and literature and issues of archival professional identity.