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Conference Review: Europeana “Making Digital Culture Count” 2022

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Author(s): Caroline Jeffra [1] ✉

[1] Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), the Netherlands.

The Europeana 2022 conference on the theme “Making Digital Culture Count” was held 28-30 September 2022 in the Hague (NL) and online. The three day conference was filled with presentations and lively discussions on current initiatives, planned projects, and contemplating the future direction for Europeana and those using or contributing to it. Each day was given a particular theme; events included hands-on workshops, keynote lectures, panel discussions, and hybrid sessions. Many of the conference’s sessions remain available to

view online and have been collected into a playlist of 42 videos on YouTube. The full program is available on the Europeana website.

> Viewed as a whole, the content presented during Europeana 2022: Making Digital Culture Count paints a picture of a movement toward stronger ownership, self-determination, and the creation of data.

Daily themes

The first day of the conference centred on "Perspectives and provocations on the data space for Cultural Heritage". The content of the presentations, in their various formats, were largely concerned with the mechanics and implications of digital cultural heritage data management. How can 3D content be stored and presented? How does Open Data relate to inclusion and co-creation? How is impact measured in digital cultural heritage? A thread running through all of this is the concept of a "data space": that is, the reorganisation of digital content so that data ownership is placed at the core of its architecture.

The hybrid session "Culture & Tourism: from a project case study toward data spaces synergies" (Pavel Kats, Alex Tourski, Marc Francesch, Alexander Raginsky) in particular proposed a model for moving forward, where rather than submitting data to multiple individual (and often commercial) platforms who store it and manage it while offering functionality and interactivity to users, web 3.0 could see data held, managed, and maintained by its owners. In this case, platforms can act as data 'presenters' who offer functionality and social interaction relating to the data but not acting as the holders or owners of that data. The implications for data ownership and maintenance are exciting, and the prospect of shifting the power balance in favour of data owners rather than data presentation platforms was an encouraging message emphasized throughout the day.

The second day of the conference focused on "Stories, Culture and Society". Several sessions addressed this theme by exploring how to seek out, support, and capture the stories told by diverse communities: underrepresented, or at-risk voices. Notable contributions included "WE-Hope. Out of War Experiences, Hope for the Future: memories and storytelling for social inclusion" (Heather Hughes), "Digital family stories - students as historians" (Juha-Pekka Lehtonen and Sari Halavaara), and "ESACH – a case study of youth involvement and inclusion" (Meetali Gupta and Sorina Neacsu). Other sessions expressed the need to cultivate a continued interest and appetite for storytelling. This might be achieved by exploring how stories are constructed alongside digital culture as in the cases of "Community-led Storytelling through Open Access Collections" (Amanda Figueroa and Noa Rui-Piin Weiss), "3D reconstructions for storytelling" (Kate Fernie, Catherine Anne Cassidy and Daniel Pletinckx), and "Back to the future: Making highly-accessible 2D digital exhibitions for online storytelling" (Louise Cole).

Alternatively, the next generation of storytellers might be supported through professional relationships and personal growth, as highlighted in “Journal d'Ambroisie: Online Galaxy for the Pioneering Voices of our Generation” (Emma Gabor and Dorottya Ágoston) and “New professionals and how to build opportunities for them: the example of the ESACH 2021 Madrid meeting” (Miguel Senra Hermana and Raul Gomez Hernandez). It was in fact these recurring themes which featured most prominently in the panel discussion for “Stories, Culture and Society”: fostering storytelling and sharing from diverse communities, employing digital culture to support story creation, and the professional development of storytellers and digital culture professionals. Questions posed to the panel ranged from tackling the scale of the individual-as-storyteller right the way up to speculating on the implications of stronger ownership of digital culture at the institutional level and everything in between. Panel members Mr Gee (Data poet), Hans Looijen (Museum van de Geest), Lisa Peter (Royal Horticultural Society), and Guy Tilkin (Federation of European Storytelling) kept focus on a broader message of storytelling as co-creation, an activity which transforms a person through an act of sharing into a member of a community.

The final theme of Europeana 2022 for day three was “Technology matters”. The sessions presented within this theme granted insights into a multitude of case studies exploring the way that technologies for digital culture have been applied. Some focused on bridging the gap between the digital and the physical, whether as a cultural exchange in “East meets West: A Virtual Exchange for cultural heritage between Poland and the Netherlands” (Spyretta Leivaditi and Angelos Konstantinidis) or to supplement cultural activities, as in “Tangible digitisation: Turning a digital museum object into an accessible experience” (Tina Schneider). A standout presentation belonging to this group was “Digital Innovation of Cultural Heritage in Slovenia” (Matevž Straus), which showcased a number of approaches to digitally enriching cultural heritage tourism across Slovenia. The site-specific strategies shared during the session could easily serve as models for other cultural heritage tourism destinations to assess how they might integrate digital interpretation tools into their own presentation strategies.

Broader themes

A broader theme underpinning the daily thematic groups was notable across the whole of the conference. Major crises which directly impact the preservation of cultural heritage as well as underlining the urgency of its responsible digitisation were ever-present; the ongoing war in Ukraine and the climate crisis were topics which were at least touched upon, if not a central theme, within a great many presentations.

Standout discussions of conflict-response heritage digitisation came from Ivan Erhel during the “Technology matters” panel discussion as well as from Sebastian Majstorovic in the hybrid session “Collaborative Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO)”. Erhel spoke of ongoing efforts to create 3D models of Iraqi cultural heritage, emphasizing that the fact that much architecture was built of clay means that the ongoing

conflict has led to a situation where, in his words, “the tangible is becoming intangible”. By training and supporting locals to record monuments and sites, and asking them to train others, vulnerable sites are recorded so that they need not disappear completely. Majstorovic, on the other hand, focused his attention on preserving the archives of Ukraine. This has been made possible by relying on a rapidly-assembled network of invested volunteers to backup public-facing web sites and archives. At the same time, the group has been working on sourcing equipment and training to further aid with rapid digitisation of vulnerable archives. In both cases, these examples of digitisation and archiving in the face of tremendously destructive and ongoing conflicts are both a roadmap for skills development for heritage institutions, organisations, and professionals, while also serving to illustrate focal points for attention for those who might wish to contribute.

The ongoing climate crisis was also raised throughout numerous discussions, bookended by Caitlin Southwick of Ki Culture as she provided a sustainability-focused provocation during the first panel discussion (“Making Digital Culture Count: Perspectives and provocations on the data space for Cultural Heritage”) as well as the keynote on the final day (“Heritage for the Future”). Southwick’s keynote in particular raised a number of thoughtful points, especially with respect to what sustainability entails from an organisational perspective. Her message mirrored an undercurrent throughout the three days: collaborative co-creation as a valid and meaningful avenue for positive progression. Institutional transitions toward ecologically-founded practices require a collective effort, just as the act of widening meaningful participation comes through ownership - explicit inclusivity requires integrating different voices early.

Viewed as a whole, the content presented during Europeana 2022: Making Digital Culture Count paints a picture of a movement toward stronger ownership, self-determination, and the creation of data. This relates to the way that data is stored and shared, perhaps as part of a data space where control is no longer handed over to private or commercial companies. This also relates to the capture and production of digital data, where the collective efforts of individuals ensure that both the digital and physical remains of culture are captured at a scale to keep pace with threats, whether human made or natural. This also relates to reducing the barriers to participation in creating and curating digital culture, from cultivating new professionals in the field to bringing lesser-heard voices forward to tell their stories. The diverse efforts reported upon during the three days of the conference create a roadmap for implementation while also offering creative visions of what can be aspired to through adjusting perspectives on collecting, curating, storing, and sharing digital heritage.

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Corresponding Author

Caroline Jeffra
Independent researcher
Address withheld by the editors (GDPR)
the Netherlands
E-mail Contact