

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

A collaborative research project to evaluate and provide sustainable recommendations for our digital preservation programmes

Digital preservation is a mature concept, but we need to pitch it better

Posted on [6 December, 2016](#) by [Dave Gerrard](#)

Cambridge Technical Fellow, Dave, presents his thoughts on the OAIS and his own elevator pitch about digital preservation from the Pericles/DPC Acting on Change conference in London, last week.

Some of the best discussions at the [Pericles / DPC Acting on Change conference](#) came during the morning panel sessions. In the first, provocatively titled “Beyond the OAIS”, [Barbara Sierman](#), from The [KB National Library of the Netherlands](#), admitted that the OAIS can be confusing for newcomers... and as a newcomer to digital preservation, I agree!

Fellow panellist [Barbara Reed](#), from [Recordkeeping Innovation](#), suggested the OAIS’s Administration function as a potentially-confusing area, and this too struck a chord. I’ve gained some systems analysis and modelling experience over the years, and my first thought looking at the OAIS was that the Admin function looked like a place where much of the hard-to-model, *human* stuff had been separated from the technical, tool-based parts. (I’ve seen this happen before in other domains...)

There's actually a hint that this is happening in the standard's diagram for the Admin function – it's busier and more information-packed than the other function diagrams, which tends to be a sign that it's a bit of a 'bucket' which needs more modelling. This led me to an immediate concern that Admin doesn't sit easily within the overall standard, and I think Barbara Reed had picked up on this too, suggesting that two more focused documents – one 'technical', one 'human' – might make the standard easier to use.

Then [Artefactual Systems](#)' Dan Gilleen asked who we should be talking to about the OAIS outside of the community? Barbara Reed answered 'Enterprise Architects'; and two of the things Enterprise Architects use in their work are domain models and pattern languages. I was glad Barbara made this point, because I had already [come to a similar conclusion](#).

[AV Preserve](#)'s [Kara Van Malssen](#) replied 'communications experts' to Dan's question, suggesting Marketing in particular, though perhaps skilled science communicators might be even better? (Both [Cambridge](#) and [Oxford](#) – among others – put a lot of effort into public engagement with research, and there is a healthy body of research literature about it).

And the importance of communication was further emphasised by [Nancy McGovern \(MIT Libraries\)](#) and Neil Beagrie ([Charles Beagrie Ltd](#)) during the second day's panel session (Preparing for Change). Nancy used the phrase 'Technical Author' at one stage – and it occurred that such input might be a very quick win for the OAIS Reference Implementation? Meanwhile, Neil talked about needing a short, pithy statement that explains what we do to funders...

So here's an attempt at an [Elevator Pitch](#):

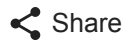
Digital Preservation means sourcing computer-based material that is worthy of preservation, getting that material under control, and then maintaining the usefulness of that material, forever.

This Elevator Pitch is part of the pattern language I'm working on with my fellow Polonsky Fellows, and (I hope, soon) the broader Digital Preservation community. (We're still thinking about that last 'forever', but considering how old some of the things in our libraries are, 'forever' seems an easy way of thinking about it).

The key point that Nancy McGovern made, however, was that we're ready to take Digital Preservation to a wider audience. I think she's

right. The OAIS *is* confusing – it’s a real head-scrambler for a newcomer like me – but it *has* reached a level of maturity: it’s clear how much deep thought and expertise underpins it. And, of course, the same goes for the technology it has influenced over the previous decades. This supports what [Arkivum](#)’s Matthew Addis said in the second day’s keynote – the digital preservation community is ready to take their ideas to the world: we perhaps just need to pitch them a little better?

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