

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

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

The Ethics of Working in Digital Preservation

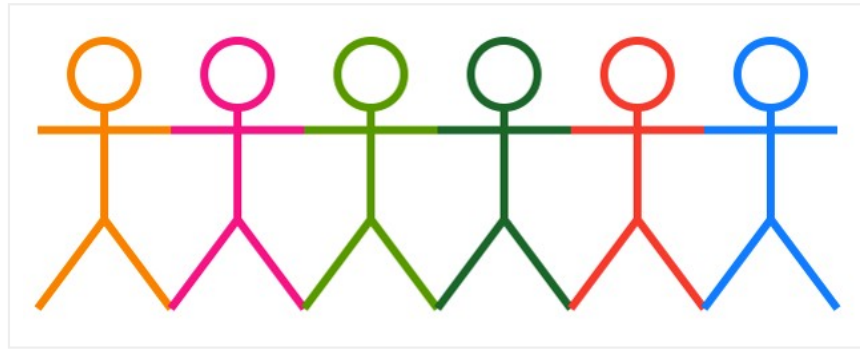
Posted on [5 April, 2018](#) by [somaya](#)

Since joining the DPOC project in 2016, I have been espousing the need for *holistic* approaches to digital preservation. This has very much been about how skills development, policy, strategy, workflows and much more need to be included as part of a digital preservation offering. Digital preservation is never just about the tech. There is a concern I must raise: ***how we play nice together***.

Since first drafting this post in October 2017, there have been several events I would be remiss not to mention. Ethics and how we conduct ourselves in professional contexts have been brought into the current social consciousness by the #metoo movement and the recent matter regarding [Chris Bourg's keynote at the Code4Lib conference](#).

Working Together

We know digital preservation *can't be done alone*, and I believe the digital preservation community is well on the way to accepting this. One single person cannot hold all the information about every type of file, standard, operating system, disk file system, policy, carrier, hardware, peripheral, protocol, copyright, legislation as well as undertake advocacy, suitably negotiate with donors etc.



— Dream Team – Library of Congress Digital Preservation
Outreach and Education Training Materials

For each digital preservation activity, we need a ‘dream team’. This is a term Emma Jolley (Curator of Digital Archives, National Library of Australia) incorporated into the 2015 Library of Congress [Digital Preservation Outreach & Education](#) (DPOE) Train the Trainer education programme I took part in. This understanding of the needs of complementary skills, knowledge and approaches very much underpins the Polonsky Digital Preservation Project.

Step by Step, Hand in Hand

If I think back to my time working in digital preservation in the mid-2000s, it was a far more isolating experience than it is now. Remembering the challenges we were discussing back then, it doesn’t feel as if the field has progressed all that much. It may just be slow going. Or perhaps it’s fear of making a wrong decision?

As humans, we know we have the capacity to learn from mistakes. We’ve likely had someone tell us about the time they (temporarily or permanently) lost data. The short-term lifespan of media carriers, inter-dependencies between different components, changes to services where data may be stored ‘in the cloud’ and the limited availability of devices (hardware or software) to read and interpret the data means that digital content is fragile (for many reasons, not only technical) and is continually at risk.

There are enough lessons of data loss out there in the wider world that it is imperative we acknowledge these situations and learn from them. Nor should we have to face these kinds of stressful situations alone; it should be done step-by-step, hand-in-hand, supporting each other.

Acknowledging Failure

Over recent years, the international arts and cultural sector has begun to share [examples of failures](#). While it is easy to share successes, it's far harder to openly share information about failures. Failure in current western society is definitely not a desirable outcome. Yet we learn from failure. As a response to 'ideas' festivals and TED talks, events such as [Failure Lab](#) have been gaining momentum.

The need to share (in considered ways) about failures in digital preservation is somewhat new, however it's not an entirely new concept. (The now infamous story of [how parts of Toy Story 2 were deleted](#) have helped illustrate the need for regularly checking backup functions.) More recently, at [PASIG 2017](#), one of the most memorable presentations of the whole conference was Eduardo Del Valle's *[Sharing my loss to protect your data: A story of unexpected data loss and how to do real preservation](#)*. I believe I speak for many of the PASIG conference attendees when I state how valuable a presentation this was.

In May 2017, the [Digital Preservation Coalition](#) ran possibly the most useful event I attended in all of 2017: [Digital Preservationists Anonymous](#) (aka Fail Club). We were able to share our war stories within the safety and security of [Chatham House Rules](#) and learn a lot from each other that will be able to take us forward in our work at our respective institutions. Hearing another organisation that is further ahead, inform us about the tricky things they've encountered helps us progress better, faster.

iPres 2017 and the Operational Pragmatism Panel

Yet there are other problematic issues within the field of digital preservation. It's not always an easy field to work in; it doesn't yet have the diversity it needs, nor necessarily respect the diversity of views already present.

[Operational Pragmatism in Digital Preservation: Establishing context-aware minimum viable baselines](#) was a panel session I facilitated at [iPres 2017](#), held in September 2017 in Kyoto, Japan. The discussion was set out as a series of 'provocations' (developed collaboratively by the panellists) about different aspects digital preservation. (*Future blog posts are yet to published about the topics and views presented during the panel discussion.*) I had five experienced panellists representing a range of different countries they've worked in around the world (Canada, China, France, Kenya, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA) plus myself (originally from

Australia). Another eight contributors (from Australia, Germany, New Zealand, the UK and the USA) also fed into forming the panel topic, panel member makeup or the provocations. Each panellist was allocated a couple of minutes to present their point of view in response to each provocation. Then the discussion was opened up to the wider audience. It was never going to be an easy panel. I was asking a lot of my panellists. They were each having to respond to one challenging question after another, providing a simple answer to each question (that could be used to inform decisions about what the 'bare minimum' work could be done for each digital preservation scenario). This was no small feat.

Rather than the traditional panel presentation, where only a series of experts get to speak, it was intended as a more inclusive discussion. The discussion was widened to include the audience *in good faith*, so that audience members could share openly throughout, if they wished. However, it became apparent that there were some other dynamics at play.

One Person Alone is Never Enough

Since I first commenced working in digital preservation in 2005, I have witnessed the passion and commitment to viewpoints that individuals within this field hold. I expected a lively discussion and healthy debate, potentially with opposing views between the panellists (who had been selected to represent different [GLAM](#) sectors, organisation sizes, nations, cultures, backgrounds and approaches to digital preservation).

As I was facilitating the panellists for this demanding session, I had organised an audience facilitator (someone well-established within the digital preservation community). Unfortunately, due to circumstances out of our control, this person was unable to be present (and an experienced replacement was unable to be found at short notice). This situation left my panellists open to criticism. One panellist was on the receiving end of a disproportionate amount of scrutiny from the audience. Despite attempts, as a lone facilitator, I was unable to defuse the situation. After the panel session finished, several audience members remarked that they didn't feel comfortable participating in the discussion.

Facilitating a safe environment for both panellists and for the wider audience to debate topics they are passionate about is vitally important, yet this failed to occur in this instance. As a result, the panel were unable to summarise and present conclusions about

possible 'minimum baselines' for each of the provocations. It's clear in this instance that a single facilitator was not enough.

Community Responsibility

In this respect, we have failed as a community. While we may have vastly differing viewpoints, it is essential we cultivate environments where people feel safe to express their views and have them received in a professional and respected manner. The digital preservation community is growing – in both size and diversity. We are aware we need to put in place, improve or refresh our technical infrastructures. Now is also the time to look at how we handle our social infrastructure. It is my opinion that there is a place for a wide range of individuals, with a vast variety of backgrounds and skills needed in the digital preservation field.

There are people who are already working in digital preservation and who have great skills. They might not all be software developers, but they know how to project manage, speak, write, problem-solve, and are subject matter experts in a wide range of areas. The [value of diversity has been proven](#). If we only have coders, computer scientists or individuals from any one background working in the field of digital preservation, then surely, we will fail.

Moving Forward

In the hours and days following the panel, I reached out to my communities online for pointers to Codes of Ethics, Codes of Conduct and other articles discussing challenging situations in similar industries. Borrowing from other industries and adapting to fit the context at hand has always been important to me. I don't want to reinvent the wheel and would prefer to learn from others' experiences. The panel 'provocations' presented were not contentious, yet how the discussion evolved throughout the duration of the panel somewhat echoes other events that have occurred within the tech industry.

At the time of publishing this post, neither the digital preservation community nor iPres has a Code of Conduct or Code of Ethics. There have been mentions of the [lack of an iPres Code of Conduct](#) in previous years. For iPres 2018, developing a [Code of Conduct](#) has become a priority. However, it shouldn't have taken us this long to put in place some frameworks of this type, given we all know we must work collaboratively if we are to succeed. Back in 1997, UNESCO suggested that if Audiovisual Archiving was a profession,

it would also require a Code of Ethics ([Audiovisual archives: a practical reader – section 4, pages 15-17](#)).

Codes of Conduct and Codes of Ethics are a starting point. Several examples include:

- Archives and Records Association (ARA), UK & Ireland – [Code of Ethics](#)
- The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM), Australia – [Code of Ethics and Practice](#)
- Digital Library Federation (DLF) – [Code of Conduct](#)
- Geek Feminism – [Code of Conduct](#)
- International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) – [Code of Conduct](#)
- International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives – [Code of Ethics](#) and [Code of Conduct](#)

There's a longer list of Codes of Conduct and Codes of Ethics that have been [compiled over the past six months](#) since iPres 2017. Even the [Loop](#) electronic music makers summit (an initiative of the [Ableton](#) software company) I attended last November in Berlin, had in place a thorough [Code of Conduct](#).

Building Better Communities

Codes are not enough. This is about building better communities.

[A 2016 article](#) emerging from the tech community has a list of suggestions for facilitating the development of 'plumbers' (and therefore functional infrastructure) rather than 'rock stars', under the section titled: "How do we as a community prevent rock stars?".

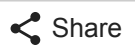
Building and maintaining infrastructure is typically not fun nor sexy – but this is what digital preservation demands. Without us working collaboratively and inclusively, we will not be able to acquire, preserve or provide access to the digital content we are the stewards of. This is because we *won't fully understand the contexts* of the individuals producing the content, if we don't have the same kind of diversity within our own field of digital preservation.

Diversity may not be easy, but neither is digital preservation. While it might not be rocket science per se, we're accustomed to working on hard and complex things. Here are some suggestions to help us take the next step(s):

- **Organisers:** encourage, model and – where necessary – enforce ‘good practice’ behaviours codes
- **Participants:** recognise, appreciate and celebrate the privilege of being able to debate digital preservation as part of what we do. Allow and encourage minority, less confident and new voices to hold an equal place in our discussions
- **Everyone:** recognise and work towards addressing our own unconscious biases and privileges

Like Kenney and McGovern’s [Three-Legged Stool for Digital Preservation](#) (a model our [DPOC project](#) is very much based on), where the organisational infrastructure, resources framework and technological infrastructure are of equal importance, recognising that the complexity of the digital preservation challenge is best addressed through multiple perspectives is essential. We must model and welcome the benefits of our diversity. Each of us brings something unique and every skill or bit of knowledge is valuable.

SHARE THIS:



This entry was posted in [ethics](#), [iPres 2017](#), [strategy](#) by [somaya](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#) [<http://www.dpoc.ac.uk/2018/04/05/ethics-of-digital-preservation/>] .

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)