

Digital Preservation at Oxford and Cambridge

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

DPOC Project reflections

Posted on [20 December, 2018](#) by [Sarah](#)

Outreach and Training Fellow, Sarah, shares some of her reflections about the DPOC project as it draws to a close. Note: she wrote this post on a sunny day in September, before she left for maternity leave. She wants everyone to know things may have changed a bit by now.

It's a sunny, cool autumn day in September. It is my last day before maternity leave. The project will continue on for another three months, but for me this feels like the end. By the time this is posted, it will be a cold winter day in December and the future of DPOC might have changed. I hope the next few months will bring more announcements, more ideas and more changes.

It seems like just yesterday [we were picking a name for the project](#). Suddenly I am depositing datasets and publications as we begin a massive self-archiving component of the project. Things are starting to wrap up and it feels a little strange. So, I am going to take some time to reflect on what I have learned during the project not just from Oxford, but the wider digital preservation community.

People are constantly being undervalued in favour of technological solutions

It is so easy to just run to technology to solve a digital preservation problem. After all, our collections are digital so the solution must therefore be digital. This means that people are constantly being undervalued, overlooked and not given the opportunity to learn in a field that is always advancing. Technology has a place of course; they are our tools. But that's just it, **they are tools**. Tools do not use themselves to their own ends. We need people to use them, to check them and to maintain them. Even in digital preservation, people have a place and we need to accept that. I'm not saying that to ensure we all have a job in the future, I'm saying that because people are the ones that make the decisions, run the quality checking processes and write the documentation. Whatever digital preservation may look like in the future, it needs to have people in it. Technology alone won't save us.

Research and time to learn isn't encouraged enough

Because of the previous point, it often means that existing staff are stretched to capacity. Not even with digital preservation work necessarily, but any digital work in general. It means there's no time to advance skills or answer complex questions. Things have to get done and that means that something has to get dropped.

Unfortunately, that's always learning and research. In a field that is always changing, our knowledge and skills have to change to. We expect paper conservators to stay up to date with the current treatments, tools and chemicals. We also expect them to rigorously test and experiment before treating any work on paper. We should expect a similar level of research and care for our digital collections. They can be damaged, altered and lost. Just because they can also be copied easily doesn't mean they are safe from all of that. A look back into your personal digital life is likely proof enough of that. IT departments are not immune to permanent loss; many of them have yet to adopt good digital preservation practices and so are often at risk.

Community and collaboration are everything

In the face of resource constraints, it is always the knowledge of the community that gets things done. It's the open, collaborative nature of a small group of people that means tools and idea are shared. Work is undertaken collectively and people are generous with their

time and expertise. I'm not sure how digital preservation would advance any other way. As it is, it's a real struggle to get decent investment in it. Even this project was built on collaboration, which underpins that it's hard to do this in isolation. It's sad to see that project collaboration coming to a close now; there are so many possibilities for working together in the future. And this is what draws me to digital preservation—knowing there are a lot of smarter, generous people to always learn from.

Do something, no matter how small

Decisions around digital preservation might be hard to make, but make them. Sometimes there's so much to do that conversations can jump from one thing to the next with little or no focus. Pick something and do it. There will always be more to consider—more collections, more processes, more tools, more people. The problem is that sometimes all we see are all of the problems and every one of them feels incredibly urgent. But looking to tackle all of the problems at once will likely bury you. I will point back again to the resource constraints, but also to the practicality that we cannot start off doing everything. If we could, the DPOC project and projects like it would never exist. The point is: we can't. So be strategic. Look for the most important, the quick wins, the practicable: start there. Just don't try to do it all; you may end up doing nothing.

So what is next?

Now that the project is concluding, the question is: has digital preservation become business as usual at Bodleian Libraries? The answer is: we're not quite there yet, but we're still fighting for it. At the time of writing this post, there were a number of technical projects starting to improve workflows. There will be more collaborative digital preservation work with the GLAM institutions.

But all of it is project work. However, the fact that there are projects still happening at all gives me hope that we can keep advocating for a longer-term, sustainable programme. This message underpins every project and every report we deliver. That is a good place to start.

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