Policy Brief

Making it FAIR: Understanding the lockdown 'digital divide' and the development of UK digital infrastructures

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KEY INFO

Research question: How can small museums address the challenges of engaging with audiences during lockdown and beyond, in such a way that new digital content generated is sustainable and FAIR

Policy area or themes

- Places and Communities
- Creative Industries
- Skills and Training
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Methods: Action-based project with a cohort of 8 small museums, followed by a reflective research project by the project team

Geographical area: UK-wide

Research stage: Completed

Summary of the research

Our project responded to challenges faced by smaller museums struggling to engage online with audiences during lockdown. The project team drew on academic researchers, museum sector support organisations and commercial IT practitioners, each bringing different skills and perspectives to bear on both the action and research sides of the work. The partners were University of York, Museum of London Archaeology, Culture24, Collections Trust, The Audience Agency, Intelligent Heritage and Knowledge Integration. Between January and September 2021, the team worked with eight small museums as they navigated the challenges of staying connected with existing audiences, and reaching new audiences, through collections-focussed digital content (the Action Project). The cohort received training, mentoring and technical support to plan and carry out digital storytelling experiments. The Research Project concluded with a critical evaluation of the experiences of all involved, reflecting on the implications for Towards a National Collection and AHRC's longer-term planning of research infrastructure. By considering a fully rounded picture of the digital problems faced by small museums, the project revealed insights into the scope and nature of the national infrastructure challenge.

Policy recommendations

Methodology
A Making it FAIR follow-on project is recommended, with tailored tools for FAIR capacity building and direct funding of small museums to allow their dedicated participation. Museums in the cohort developed a keener sense of the need to monitor and categorise the impact of their projects but reported considerable challenges. **Further**

exploration of small museums' needs in this regard and potential solutions is recommended.

It is unclear how much museums' interests in digital social engagement are specifically linked to the conditions of the pandemic. **Further consideration of the unique impacts of the pandemic on the social media usage and associated training needs of museums is advised before Towards a National Collection assumes this is a priority area for investment in the long-term.**

It is recommended that further research is undertaken into museums' understandings of reach and exclusion linked to online content/media, and to their perceptions of open data. It is possible that the potentials of FAIR data in terms of their ability to fundamentally increase openness, reach and accessibility of collections are misunderstood, hence organisations opt for forms of online practice that appear more inclusive on the surface, even though in reality, their reuse value and positive impacts on people and institutions are highly constrained.

Implementation
Learnings and insights from the operations of medium-sized organisations are important to informing the future roll-out of the recommendations from Making it FAIR. **Further consultation with a representative selection of these medium-sized institutions is recommended.** Equally, the IRO and HEI community has existing digital infrastructure that could be leveraged to support smaller institutions. **An audit of existing IRO digital infrastructure and existing IRO practices of engagement with and redistribution to smaller organisations is suggested.**

In light of global efforts to shift towards online decentralisation (Web 3.0), we may also consider the advantages of more distributed models that enable greater flexibility and co-ownership over the infrastructure, and/or infrastructure that is spread out in a fashion that supports region-specific or subject-specific priorities. **Further investigation into distributed digital infrastructure models is also advised.**

Key findings

- Making it FAIR benefited from small-scale action-based training, premised upon responsive mentoring and support. Such 'person-centred' rationale should be applied to future initiatives.
- Support should be given to developing tools that, like the Making IT FAIR demonstrator, allow content to be captured along with appropriate metadata *at the time of creation and without the person creating it having to do anything extra*.
- Storage space in trustworthy digital repositories should be freely available to smaller museums as part of future infrastructure for the digital humanities, to ensure their data is preserved according to FAIR Principles.

Further information
Final report: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5833768

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