Digital strategies as our common challenge: The work of Open Resource Center and AuDA

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Abstract

New Media institutions lack on a digital strategy and relay on an isolated, non-coherent, sedimentary and fragile digital environment. After COVID-19, different programs were created to support these institutions, but the question of the maintenance in the long term is unclear. This is a common problem between academic and cultural institutions (museums, archives, etc.), and a network has been created to confront these challenges together.

Keywords

New Media institutions, University, Archive, Digital Assets Management, Digital Strategy, Digitization, digital empowerment

COVID-19 has disclosed the elephant in the room: even New Media related institutions have faced (or are facing at least some) difficulties that show that they are not as well digitally prepared as one may think. While almost all the institutions follow strategies and have clear guidelines for other processes (hiring new people, budgeting materials or services for the projects, etc.) there is no framework for implementing or developing digital tools: institutions depend on the necessity or engagement of staff or system administrators to build and maintain their digital environment, which results in important differences between institutions, departments or projects. In an optimistic description, we may characterize the previous situation as isolated (as tools were implemented separated with no communication between them), non-coherent (or chaotic, lead to specific necessities), sedimentary (understood as an accumulation of discontinuities, i.e. the superposition of tools developed by different projects, some of them already finished) and fragile (generally tools and infrastructure depend on one or few engaged people and there is no clear documentation).

During the first hard phase of the pandemic, institutions reacted with urgency, implementing tools to allow them to continue their work "as usual". The uncertainty of the situation and the urgency back then could justify the short-term oriented implementation, the trial and error approach and the lack of a long-term strategy, which was already a common practice. Nonetheless, the creation of different support programs for "digitization", some of them financially well-endowed, allows confronting this situation from another perspective, focusing on a mid-term planning, which projects that are or have been funded for 3 years: It is problematic to approach infrastructural problems with conjectural solutions, and, considering the administrative rhythm and the complexity of some of the tasks, the time frame seems tight; on the other hand, it is not clear what will happen with the maintenance of these tools and infrastructure once their creators are not funded.

Digitization has been, at least in Germany, the buzzword used by academic institutions to fund solutions to all sort of problems: from video-conference systems and equipment to project management tools, from e-learning platforms to training in digital competences, from acquiring scanners to systems for managing prospective students, just to mention some of them[1]. The *Stiftung Innovation in der Hochschullehre* (Foundation for Innovation in the Universisty Teaching) has been supporting projects to allow German universities to get digital. The Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe (Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design), a new media art and design university, used this possibility to fund Open Resource Center, a project to, among others, develop and implement an archive and media-platform system, Madek, created by the Zürich University of Arts (ZHDK) under (open-source) free software license [1], that should be integrated in the institution. This holistic approach should enable the university to collect digital assets from different actors (e.g. student's projects, research output, or conference videos, presentations, and images) and manage their access or pull them to other interfaces: students can upload project files and share them with others, for example, the press department (that may publish on the institution's website or social media) or the archive (that will take care of archiving it).

This work-flow may sound familiar to other cultural institutions (museums, archives, libraries, production centers or residency spaces), who store their media material in Digital Assets Management systems. These platforms are, in general, proprietary software and outsourced[1] and some professionals have informally shared the feeling that they're not taking the most of it: even if further development is possible (to introduce new features, make it interoperable with other tools and integrate it in the staff's work-flows) the exclusivity enhanced by the proprietary software license makes the costs really high, and it is really difficult to search partners to confront this problem; the approach consists in

taking the software “as it is” and bend the work-flows around it.

Like academic institutions, cultural institutions lack on a digital plan that reflects the discussions and agreements on the different needs and possibilities. There is a separation between non-technical staff and system administrators: the first ones cannot grasp the complexity that maintenance implies, while the seconds are overloaded (more software means more maintenance) and do not understand the needs and cannot offer proper support or documentation [4]. That can explain the difficulties and low rates of adoption of institutional tools (in opposition to paid or free versions of third-party tools used in professional or educational context) in this kind of organizations: even if apparently more convenient for the user, these applications may have various issues that should be discussed in a strategy plan. An appropriate digital infrastructure is a sociotechnical construct in which developing tools is important, but also maintaining them, generate documentation (guidelines, manuals, how-to), organize workshops or training on digital tools (basic in a context of staff turnover), adjust to existent workflows as well as discussion about potential problems and enhancements [5].

In other words, it seems that cultural and academic institutions are facing similar problems, which is coherent if we consider the strong connections between them. That is why Open Resource Center initiated, one year ago, an informal exchange between professionals (from archives to data managers, commissioner for the digital, knowledge-transfer agents, press department, libraries, e-learning projects) working in different institutions (museums, archives, university, art schools) but all of them concerned with digital assets. Since then, the network has been slowly growing and is searching for funds to establish a minimal infrastructure that organizes, takes care and makes these discussions accessible. The network has also started a program to enable their members to understand and confront different aspects: the first monographic session about digital infrastructures took place at the end of January, approaching an issue for everyone in the network but with different perspectives (from not having a proper digital infrastructure, to solving difficulties in its maintenance or facing interoperability issues). This network of professionals proposes to confront, together, our common challenges and design sustainable development strategies for the digital environment of New Media institutions.

References

[1] For more information on the Project, see the project’s official website: https://madek.zhdk.ch; for a more technical approach, see the GitHub repository: https://github.com/Madek, both accessed on March 10th, 2023.

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[3] Richard M. Stallman, “Free Software Is Even More Important Now”, *Free software free society: selected essays of Richard M. Stallman* (Boston: Free Software Foundation, 2015), 28–33.

[4] Nadia Eghbal, *Working in Public: The Making and Maintenance of Open Source Software*, (San Francisco: Stripe Press, 2020).

[5] Nadia Eghbal, “Roads and Bridges: The Unseen Labor Behind Our Digital Infrastructure” (Ford Foundation, ca 2016), https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/learning/research-reports/roads-and-bridges-the-unseen-labor-behind-our-digital-infrastructure/ accessed on March 10th, 2023; Richard M. Stallman, “Why Free Software Needs Free Documentation”, *Free software free society: selected essays of Richard M. Stallman* (Boston: Free Software Foundation, 2015), 40–42.

Author Biography

Víctor Fancelli Capdevila is Digital Archivist at the Open Resource Center in the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, a project developing an Archive and Media Platform as well as enhancing a culture of documentation among the university. In this context, AuDA (Austausch Digital Assets, Exchange about Digital Assets) was created to discuss digital challenges with other institutions. He has also been teaching courses about archives, digital empowerment and awareness of digital tools.