

Digital Decisions and Online
Heritage: An examination of
the response of the GLAM
sector to the opportunities of
the internet since 2000

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Dedication

To dad. I got there in the end. I hope you knew I would.

Abstract

The digitisation of a *critical mass* of heritage collections has been an aspiration for successive UK governments and the heritage sector since the year 2000, with the stated aim of reaching new unserved audiences and thereby *democratising* heritage. But analysis shows that only an estimated 8.5% of the UK's collections have been digitised and shared with the public. This research argues that there is a gap between what the UK Government believes is the purpose and value of digitisation and that expressed within the heritage discourse, and that this has been a barrier to digitisation. It examines predictions made during the years 1997-2003, a time when digitisation was being widely debated, and identifies three themes: Digital death and Obsolescence (fears linked to the speed of technological change), Ownership and the Public/Private web (the benefits and threats of sharing collections online) and Authority and Democratisation (the sharing of the curatorial role with visitors and the notion that digitisation can democratise heritage). Interviews with digital heritage professionals reveal they believe cost, time and copyright concerns to have been the main barriers to digitisation. I show that these practical challenges have been exacerbated by external pressures: technological, economic and social but predominantly political. The 2018 DCMS *Culture is Digital* report identifies the main barrier as a lack of digital maturity, but I argue this could equally be described as a lack of business maturity. I conclude that mass digitisation is unlikely to be a priority for heritage unless it can be successfully monetised, but that the Covid-19 crisis has created a new focus on this. I recommend that heritage organisations should take the lead from commercially successful museums like the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, which has successfully digitised almost its entire collection and shared it with no restrictions. I recommend that if the government wants to professionalise the sector, it needs to give British heritage organisations the same creative and financial freedom the Rijksmuseum has enjoyed. For UK heritage organisations, I recommend that a culture of open sharing might prove to be the key to *democratising* heritage, while at the same time helping them to discover the value and purpose of digitisation.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Dedication	ii
Abstract	iii
Contents	iv
List of figures	vii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Digitised Collections: Fifteen years of slow progress	1
1.2 Defining object-by-object digitisation	4
1.3 Evidence of a lack of digitisation	7
1.4 Recoding the Museum	10
1.5 Defining the ‘2000 literature’	13
1.6 Culture is Digital, Museums Are Not Neutral and Covid-19	17
1.7 Defining GLAM	22
1.8 Research Aims and Objectives	24
1.9 Thesis structure	26
2. Methodology	29
2.1 The journalist as researcher	29
2.2 Methods	36
2.2.1 The 2000 literature: a review.....	37
2.2.2 Post-2003: a literature review	37
2.2.3 Semi-structured interviews	38
2.2.4 Analysis of government policy since 2000	38
2.2.5 Case study: the Rijksmuseum	39
3. The 2000 Literature	40
3.1 Historical Context: The New Museology	40
3.2 Historical Context: Gadgetry and Inauthenticity	43
3.3 Introduction to the 2000 literature	46
3.4 Themes: Digital Death and Obsolescence	49
3.5 Themes: Ownership and the Public/Private web	52
3.6 Themes: Authority and Democratisation	58
3.7 Predictions from the 2000 literature	62

4. Post-2003 Analysis	65
4.1 Digital Death and Obsolescence	65
4.2 Ownership and the Public/Private web	72
4.3 Authority and Democratisation	81
5. Digitisation and government policy	87
5.1 Historical Context: 1997 New Labour	87
5.2 Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All.....	90
5.3 Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All	91
5.4 Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life	92
5.5 Understanding the Future: Priorities for England’s Museums	93
5.6 Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone	96
5.7 Digital Culture	99
5.8 The Culture White Paper	102
5.9 The Mendoza Review	105
5.10 Culture is Digital	106
5.11 Covid-19 impact	109
5.11.1 Art Fund Covid-19 Impact	109
5.11.2 Digital Responses of UK Museum Exhibitions to the COVID-19 Crisis	110
5.11.3 Heritage in lockdown: digital provision of memory institutions in the UK and US	111
6. Interview Analysis	116
6.1 Interviewee selection	116
6.2 Question design	119
6.3 Analysis: How much of my interviewees’ collections had been digitised?	120
6.4 Digitisation: what percentage has been digitised UK-wide?.....	123
6.5 Looking back: my interviewees’ expectations	126
6.6 Digitisation stories	127
6.7 Reasons not to digitise	129
6.7.1 Cost	129
6.7.2 Time	132
6.7.3 Privacy and copyright	135
6.7.4 Fear of obsolescence	137
6.7.5 Expertise or IT skills	139
6.7.6 Lack of political will	142
6.8 Looking forward	144
6.9 Digitisation and democratisation	148

7. Rijksmuseum and the Rijksstudio	152
7.1 Introduction	152
7.2 Rijksstudio: Cost	156
7.3 Rijksstudio: Time	163
7.4 Rijksstudio: Expertise or IT skills	165
7.5 Rijksstudio: Fear of obsolescence	167
7.6 Rijksstudio: Lack of political will	169
7.7 Rijksstudio: Privacy or copyright issues	171
7.8 Rijksstudio: Analysis	173
8. Conclusions and Recommendations	178
8.1 The Purpose and Value of Digitisation	178
8.2 The Extent of the UK's Digitisation	181
8.3 Digitisation and government policy	182
8.4 The barriers to digitisation	184
8.5 Recommendations	186
Bibliography	191
List of Appendices	213

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Fig 1. A screengrab from the V&A’s online database, showing a ‘netsuke’. The database was opened to the public in 2012 and updated in 2017. Picture Credit: V&A	6
Fig 2. ‘Current progress of digitising collections among museums with a physical collection, 2017’. From Nesta’s Museums Factsheet 2017. Picture Credit: MTM London	9
Fig 3. Launch dates of some of the first social media companies and smart devices illustrating the regularity of the emergence of new platforms, each of which changed the expectation of users and required a different type of content from digital teams	73
Fig 4. The impact of digital on museums’ business areas (museums vs whole sector), Digital Culture 2014, showing how museums were finding it hard to reap the benefits of digital compared to the sector as a whole. Picture credit: MTM London	101
Fig 5. Types of organisation interviewees worked in. Some organisations appear more than once, eg: A specialist museum that is also affiliated to a university is counted in both specialist museum and university museum boxes	117
Fig 6. Map marking locations of interviewees, to demonstrate geographical spread. Numbers relate to the order in which interviews were completed, a list of which is in Appendix 2. Picture credit: Google My Maps	118
Fig 7. Graph from Nesta’s 2017 Digital Culture report, showing that digitisation activity (Fourth graph: ‘Make existing recordings or archive material/exhibits available for digital consumption’) has decreased since 2013. Picture Credit: MTM London	125
Fig 8. Reasons not to digitise ranked highest by interviewees (blue), or in their top three (red)	131
Fig 9. Winner of Rijksstudio Award 2017: ‘Masterpieces Never Sleep’ - sleep masks created with images taken from famous artworks. Picture credit: Rijksmuseum	155

1. Introduction

When I say that museums have started to learn how to use digital, the important word is 'started', because we have only just begun... Just because every museum in the world now has a website, that doesn't mean museums have great digital, not at all. Far from it.¹

Martin Roth

1.1 Digitised Collections: Fifteen years of slow progress

On the 4th of August 2014 Martin Roth, then Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, gave the TORCH Lecture at the Digital Humanities at Oxford Summer School, the University's annual training event for the Digital Humanities.² In it, he described how museums had survived the emergence of cinema and television, despite warnings from museum directors that they would directly compete for people's leisure time. He went on to argue that far from being damaged by these innovations, museums had adapted, adopted the new technology, and flourished. He described the advent of the internet as another such challenge, one more powerful and disruptive than those that had come before, but also one that presented an opportunity: "the potential to reinvent museums from the ground up ... and to revolutionise the way we relate to our visitors."³ Roth saw the future of the museum as "not an institution, but an open resource... a gateway to all the riches of the collection."⁴ He described how visitors should enjoy a personalised and individualised experience of the V&A's collections, both in person and online. However, Roth felt that the museum sector was far from realising this aspiration, and that in 2014 when the speech was made, the digital revolution he predicted for museums had only just begun.

The creation of publicly available online collections as an open resource was also an aspiration the UK government shared. In 2016, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) stated

¹ Roth, M. (2014) *Ukiyo-e to Emoji: Museums in the Digital Age*. Annual TORCH Lecture, Digital Humanities at Oxford Summer School (DHOxSS). Available at: <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/ukiyo-e-emoji-museums-digital-age> Accessed 28 June 2021. Quote at 9'14".

² TORCH is an acronym for The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities

³ Roth, M. (2014) Quote at 9'59"

⁴ Roth, M. (2014) Quote at 41'50"

its aim “to make the UK one of the world’s leading countries for digitised public collections”, offering “millions of people who cannot physically visit a collection or performance the opportunity to experience the content remotely.”⁵ Two years later, its *Culture is Digital* report reiterated this aim, adding that harnessing the culture sector’s “blend of creativity and technology skills” would secure the UK’s economic future “as we prepare to leave the EU.”⁶ However, while the need to secure the UK’s global status post-Brexit was new, the idea that digitised collections could reach new and previously unserved audiences was not. A similar policy aim had been described in 2001, when museums, galleries and archives were instructed by the DCMS to “make full use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) as a means of making their collections more accessible.”⁷ Fifteen years later, the government’s message was the same; an exhortation to museums and other cultural organisations to digitise their collections, thereby increasing access to them by allowing those who could not visit in person the opportunity to enjoy collections online. The problem was not that this was an unwelcome suggestion to the heritage sector; the 2001 policy aligned with a Museum Directors’ report from 1999 which had envisioned that by 2007, every museum could and should be contributing to a national network of shared resources. The *A Netful of Jewels* report was described by its chairman as “an agenda for action” calling on “galleries and museums to contribute to the most important items on the national agenda: to the creation of a learning society, to social inclusion, and to competitiveness.”¹⁰ UK government policy was clear that digitised collections were

⁵ DCMS (2016) *Culture White Paper*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Crown Copyright. p38/39 Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/510798/DCMS_The_Culture_White_Paper_3_.pdf Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁶ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. p4. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital> Accessed 12 July 2021. The culture sector is defined on the landing page for the 2016 *Culture White Paper* as “the arts, museums and galleries, libraries, archives and heritage” <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-white-paper>

⁷ DCMS (2001) *Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All: Co-operating Across the Sectors to Tackle Social Exclusion*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. p8. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080206194338/http://www.culture.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyre/s/6FB47415-2E61-42CB-9111-5F05C6096CBA/0/libraries_archives_for_all_socialex.pdf Accessed 20 August 2021.

¹⁰ Keene, S. et al (1999) *A Netful of Jewels: New Museums in the Learning Age* Report of the National Museum Directors’ Conference, UK p3 Available at:

a policy priority and had been giving the same message for fifteen years. So why, in 2017, was the innovation charity Nesta, which produces a yearly report measuring the use of technology by cultural organisations, reporting that only a quarter of museums with collections (26%) were offering online exhibitions to the public, with 44% saying they had no plans to do so in the future?¹¹ What was impeding the progress of digitisation?

My interest in this question began in 2014 when, in my professional role as a journalist and video-maker, I was involved in a proposed project to capture digitally a number of Jewish cemeteries in East London that were closed to the public. Having gone online to find out how heritage organisations were creating virtual tours and exhibitions, I was surprised to find very few examples of digitised collections presented for a general audience. Most heritage organisations had a website displaying some or all of the following: an overview of the collection with indicative images, links to ticket sites for temporary exhibitions, details of opening hours, site maps, directions, car parking information and contact details, but very few had openly available exhibitions, or easily discoverable object-by-object breakdowns of what was actually in the collections. There were often online catalogues, but these could be hard to access from the main website, short on description or lacking even a thumbnail image of the object described. When the group I was working with failed to secure funding, I changed my focus, to investigate instead why museums and other heritage organisations weren't routinely offering the public extensive online collections. This thesis therefore seeks to identify, analyse, and seek solutions to the barriers to heritage digitisation. It seeks to explain why organisations have been unwilling or unable to undertake mass digitisation projects, with the aim of helping them to overcome the barriers and offer more of their collections to an online visiting public.

https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/netful_of_jewels.pdf Accessed 1 November 2020.

¹¹ MTM London (2017b) *Nesta Digital Culture 2017 Museums Factsheet*. Nesta. p7. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/dc2017_museums_factsheet.pdf Accessed 10 September 2021

1.2 Defining object-by-object digitisation

UCL's 2008 survey of museums in England and Wales on their use of their collections held in storage, led by the principal author of the *A Netful of Jewels* report Suzanne Keene found that: "Users want museums to publish what is in their collections, preferably online, at least at collection description level."¹³ By also asking respondents to score museum websites on their user-friendliness, design and the amount of information offered, the report makes clear that visitors expect more than simple access to the collections catalogue. It found that of 263 museums that responded, 43 offered collections information, but only 25 "provided adequate information on individual items." Calculated as a percentage, only 9.5% of museums in this small survey were offering digitised collections that were considered 'adequate' for visitors in terms of discoverability (offering "easy access to the information directly from the home page") and the quality of descriptive information attached.¹⁴ From this report, I drew the phrase *object-by-object digitisation* to describe my expectation of online heritage for a general visitor: a detailed object-level breakdown of items in the collection, illustrated with photographs and other images (for example, scans of written material relating to the object) and with a description outlining the object's use, history and importance within the wider collection, an in-person exhibition experience adapted for an online audience: something that engaged the visitor, told a story and positioned the object within its wider context. As an example, when searching the V&A collection, I found an object with a good quality image and description suitable for a general visitor (see Fig 1). But although the *netsuke* object record looked promising at first sight, there were two reasons why it was not a good example of a visitor-friendly museum object. Firstly, it was not on the main website of the V&A, but in their online catalogue, which was held on a separate site. Secondly, there was an article containing further information on the object which was on the V&A's main website but unlinked to the object record (this article has since been replaced

¹³ Keene, S. et al (2008) *Collections for People: Museums' Stored Collections as a Public Resource*. UCL Institute of Archaeology. p9 Available at: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/13886/> Accessed 7 August 2021.

¹⁴ Keene, S. et al (2008) p59

with one about Japan's relationship with Europe, which briefly mentions *netsuke* and does now link to the object record¹⁵). Because objects and descriptions in online collections do not necessarily appear to the visitor in a linear sequence or collected together in one space as they are in physical exhibitions, linked data are vital to help a visitor to navigate from one piece of information to another. Without links, digitised objects can be difficult to find, or remain disconnected from each other. Digital librarians Yoose and Perkins, writing in the *Journal of Library Metadata* describe this as a "tragic squandering" of the riches of heritage collections (they include archives and museums as well as libraries in this definition): "lying fallow inside a Web of documents and untapped relationships"¹⁷ Head of Digital Media at the V&A, Kati Price, describes the difficulty of linking online objects together as the *William Morris challenge*. The most popular search on the museum's website is for a particular William Morris textile design, but visitors were not able to find everything about the designer in a single location, because information existed on at least seven different systems (in a later blog she updates the figure to nine): "Our collections management system, our content management system, our blog, our library catalogue, our archive, our image licensing website and online shop. There are probably others."¹⁹ Price describes this separation of content as a feature of "many, if not most, museum and gallery collections", because "it's quite a difficult task to unite object, library and archive data with editorial content. It's difficult from a user experience perspective. It's difficult from a data perspective. And it's difficult in terms of content strategy."²⁰ Since my initial search, the V&A has brought its collections together into an integrated *Explore the Collections* search function. Price says the process of doing so has been complex and time-consuming, illustrating that digitisation requires a *paradigm shift* in the way online collections are

¹⁵ V&A (nd) 'Japan's encounter with Europe, 1573 – 1853'. *Victoria and Albert Museum website*. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/japans-encounter-with-europe-1573-1853> Accessed 3 March 2023.

¹⁷ Yoose, B. and Perkins, J. (2013) 'The Linked Open Data Landscape in Libraries and Beyond', *Journal of Library Metadata*, 13:2-3, pp197-211 p209.

¹⁹ Price, K. (2019) 'Redesigning the V&A's collections online'. *V&A blog May 13 2019*. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/digital/redesigning-the-vas-collections-online> Accessed 7 August 2021.

²⁰ Price, K. (2021) 'Announcing Explore the Collections'. *V&A blog January 19 2021*. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/digital/announcing-explore-the-collections> Accessed 7 August 2021.

approached, echoing Roth’s idea of digital as a *reinvention* of museums, and indicating that digitisation is far more complex than the creation of technical processes and their application to existing analogue catalogues. For a visitor to enjoy an online exhibition, they must understand not only the story of one object, but how this object is related to others and the historical context in which it was collected. This means that digitisation involves decisions by staff across an organisation, not just technical or digital teams. The descriptive labels that describe and categorise objects are written by heritage professionals and can change over time.

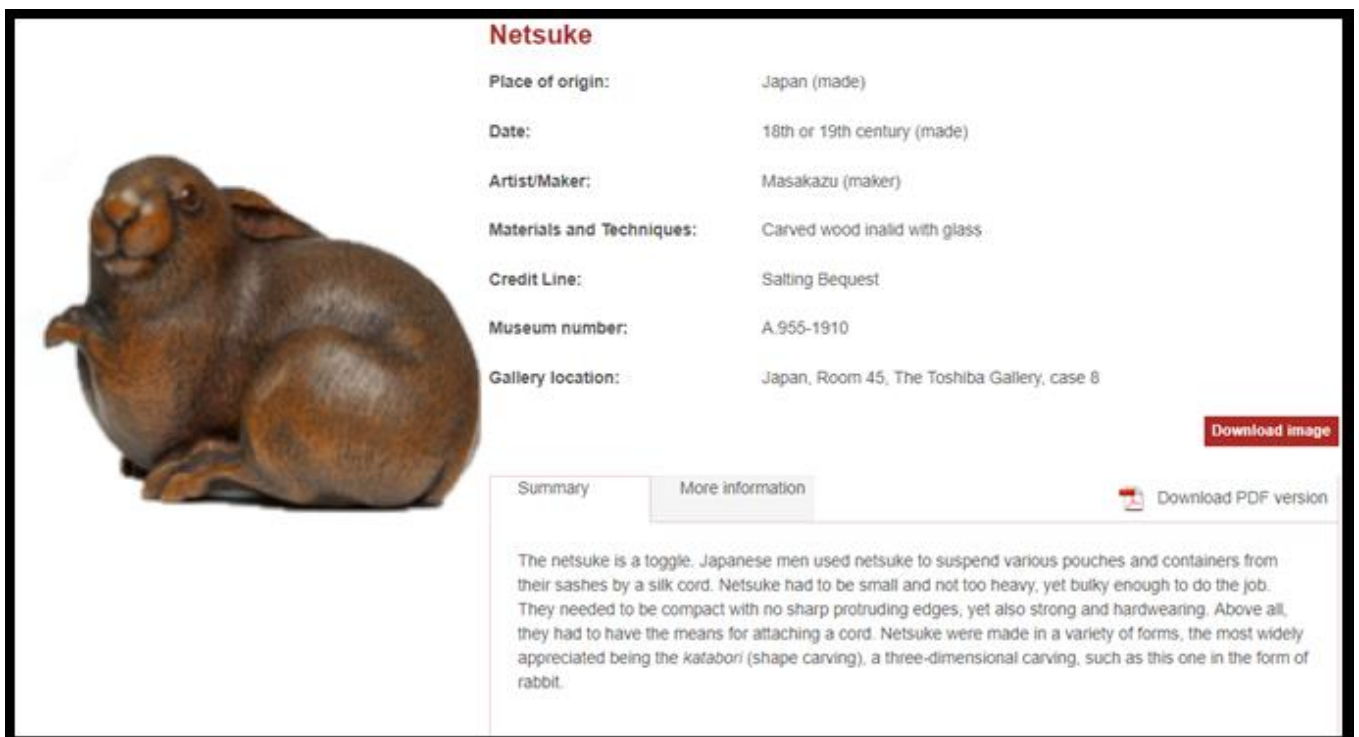


Fig 1: A 2020 screengrab from the V&A, showing a ‘netsuke’ in the form of a carved wooden rabbit. The first line of the description reads “The netsuke is a toggle. Japanese men used netsuke to suspend various pouches and containers from their sashes by a silk cord.” The V&A database was opened to the public in 2012 and updated in 2017. This object record has since been updated.²² Picture credit: V&A.

Objects can be described in multiple ways depending on how they fit into a curator’s narrative and what they are chosen to represent within an exhibition. This is something that a participant at a 2016 meeting of practitioners discussing the integration of metadata across the GLAM sector (a

²² This object listing is still at the same link, but the information has now been updated. Available at: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O228635/netsuke-masakazu/> This version Accessed 2 February 2020

common acronym for Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums)²³ described as one of the potential benefits of digitised collections:

I think the future is about multiple descriptions for the same object: descriptions of different levels and different authorities, of different languages, of different cultural contexts... I am absolutely against the concept of a single record describing an object once and for all. This is not realistic.²⁴

As this participant argues, institutions have the potential to offer multiple interpretations of a single object online, where space is not limited to a small descriptive label. However, this flexibility also creates the need for extra work when digitising an object, both to provide diverse descriptions for different visitor needs and, as Price has described, to link various online objects and descriptions together in a way that is meaningful to an online visitor. In either case, the size and complexity of collections is clearly a challenge when this level of detailed description needs to be applied to thousands or even millions of objects. Was the enormity of the task one of the barriers to digitisation? Perhaps slow progress *was* being made behind the scenes.

1.3 Evidence of a lack of digitisation

Keene's 2008 UCL report had revealed that fewer than one in ten museums were presenting object-level information online that was considered to be of sufficient quality and detail for the expectations of a general visitor, but also found that a quarter of museums were offering online collections "at some level" and almost half of the respondents indicated that they had plans for more digitisation in the future.²⁵ So, had things improved in the years that followed? Ten years later, the UK government's 2018 *Culture is Digital* report provided quantitative data: "61% of our cultural institutions have digitised up to half of their collection. Half of those with a digitised collection have

²³ See 1.7, a discussion of the various ways the museum and heritage sector has been described by my sources, and why I have used the acronym GLAM in this thesis.

²⁴ Unnamed 'discussion participant' in Farneth, D. (2016) 'How Can We Achieve GLAM? Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges to Integrating Metadata across Museums, Archives, and Libraries: Part 2'. p299 *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 54:5-6, 292-304.

²⁵ Keene, S. et al (2008) p58

made some of it available online.”²⁷ It is not possible to make a direct comparison between these two reports for two reasons. Firstly, Keene describes the difficulty of measuring the museums sector quantitatively, due to a lack of clarity about what defines a museum collection (for example, archives and libraries may also hold collections of historical objects of interest to the public), and the difficulty of categorising and enumerating complex collections. She warns that “the sheer diversity of collections and subject specialisms means that generalizing across the sector is not just difficult, but questionable.”²⁸ Secondly, Keene’s report is primarily about the perceived under-use of collections in storage and contains only a single chapter which focuses on the number and quality of digital collections but does not discuss the amount of material digitised. Keene’s survey is, however, large enough to be statistically significant and representative of different museum types, so the figure of around ten percent of museums offering good quality online collections, and a quarter offering digital collections ‘at some level’ is useful as a general estimate of museum digitisation in 2008. Can a similar estimate be drawn from the 2018 *Culture is Digital* report? A closer examination of the segment quoted above is interesting here. On first reading, it suggests that a considerable amount of progress has been made, that by 2018 most museums had digitised a significant portion of their collections. But a more detailed examination of the figures offers an alternative picture. Although it is not credited as such, the information given in *Culture is Digital* was drawn from Nesta’s 2017 Digital Culture report, which contains the same figures in its accompanying Museums Factsheet but breaks them down further (see Fig 2). The 61% quoted - those museums which have digitised ‘up to half’ of their collections - is made up of 46% who had digitised between 1% and 25% of their collections and 15% who had digitised between 26% and 50%. Using the same figures from the graph in Fig 2, but instead adding together the bottom two categories - those who had done no digitisation at all, and those who had done up to a quarter - you could just as easily say that 51% - more than half of museums surveyed – had digitised *up to* a quarter of their collections, a much less impressive-

²⁷ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. p45. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital> Accessed 12 July 2021.

²⁸ Keene, S. et al (2008) p13

sounding claim. Additionally, due to the large range of the category 1% - 25%, museums that had only done a small amount of digitisation would have fallen within it. Responses from my interviewees about the amount of digitisation completed would indicate that it is likely that the average figure within that category is considerably less than a quarter. In Chapter Six, I have used European statistics to try to establish a more accurate estimate of the amount of digitisation that has taken place in the UK and conclude that, as of 2019, it was closer to 8.5% of cultural heritage collections. The *Culture is Digital* report reveals that although most institutions had done *some* digitisation by 2018, the majority had still done very little as a percentage of their collections.

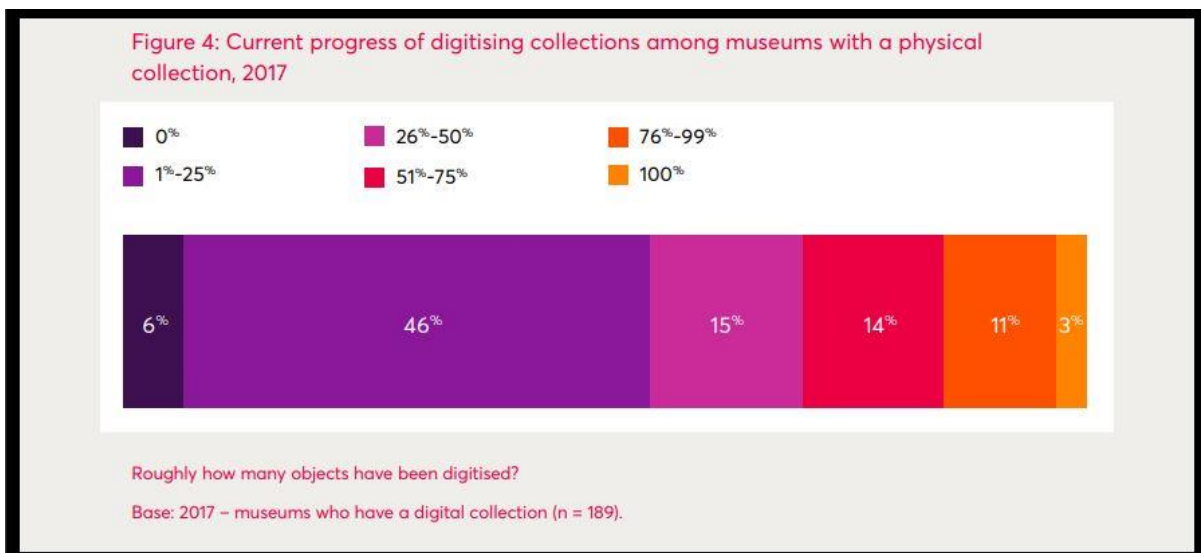


Fig 2: 'Current progress of digitising collections among museums with a physical collection, 2017'. From Nesta's Museums Factsheet 2017. Picture Credit: MTM London.

It was clear that the digitisation of museum collections was falling far short of the *critical mass* of online collections predicted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when practitioners were debating the challenges and opportunities of online collections.²⁹ In 1999, the *A Netful of Jewels* report had confidently predicted that, with the necessary funding, by 2002, 75% of museums would have some collections information online and that by 2007, all museums would be delivering "large volumes of

²⁹ Keene, S. et al (1999) *A Netful of Jewels: New Museums in the Learning Age* Report of the National Museum Directors' Conference, UK p20 Available at: https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/netful_of_jewels.pdf Accessed 1 November 2020.

content, and interactive services, to millions of users.”³³ Was this an indication that a lack of funding was holding back the mass digitisation of collections? From this report, I understood that the cost of digitisation and the way it is funded would be an important part of my enquiry.

1.4 Recoding the Museum

What *was* the status of digitisation by 2007? In that year Professor Ross Parry, a historian of museum media and technology, was also questioning why it was taking so long for the museum sector to embrace the opportunities of the internet. In his book *Recoding the Museum*, he asked: “Why are we still having these same conversations that we began in the late 1960s?”³⁴ Parry asked why, when it was widely accepted that the digitisation of collections was a social good in itself, there had been no corresponding development of virtual museums. By applying the new media theory of Lev Manovich to the problem, and framing it in five different ways, he told two contrasting *stories of digitisation*, one in which museums continued to privilege the material world and “resisted being reshaped by a modish technology”, and another, more optimistic story, in which museums were slowly being reshaped from the inside – *recoded* in Manovich’s language – resulting in the assimilation of new media “not just into their practice but into their very definition and sense of purpose” (similar language to that used by Roth seven years later, when he suggested that the digital space would allow museums to *reinvent* themselves).³⁵ A comment made by Parry in the first chapter reveals that he favours the latter story: “the book concludes by showing how any fissures or tensions between the concept of the computer and the concept of the museum have, in recent years, been moving to a point of resolution – of compatibility.”³⁶ One might infer from this that after a slow start, digitisation began to gain momentum after 2007, but in reality, progress continued to be slow and Parry continued to theorise about why this might be. He was part of a group of museum

³³ Keene, S. et al (1999) p21

³⁴ Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Taylor and Francis: Florence p1

³⁵ Parry, R. (2007) p138

³⁶ Parry, R. (2007) p14

professionals which, at the *Museums and the Web* annual conference in 2014, formulated the *Baltimore Principles*. These guidelines reframed digital training; instead of focusing on technical skills, they recommended a change in mindset to embed digital thinking across the sector. As the group put it, they were moving the debate from being ‘about technology’ to ‘with technology’.³⁷ Building on these principles, Parry went on to set up an ambitious practice-based project aimed at improving digital literacy, which is still ongoing.³⁸ Because the *One by One* project cites digitisation as an example of digital literacy, it is helpful to consider its findings so far. Phase One of the project examined several case study institutions and while it found that they were all involved in digitisation projects, these projects required a particular set of skills: “This area of deployment requires knowledge of digital archiving and databases, as well as expertise around intellectual property and copyright. It draws mainly on the skills of a reasonably small group of specialists.”³⁹ What is interesting is that these specialists weren’t simply those with technical skills, that digitisation required curatorial, archival, and legal knowledge. Phase 2 of the project set out to define more clearly the skills and literacies needed by museum staff. By using surveys and literacy labs (groups of museum professionals brought together for brainstorming sessions), it asked museum professionals what digital skills and literacies they thought museum people needed. The resulting list of suggestions ran to 74 responses ranging from computing competencies (Using Microsoft Office, Using analytics software) to managerial and strategic skills (Change management, Knowing how to develop a content strategy) and personal and attitudinal skills (Empathy, Emotional Intelligence, Curiosity).⁴⁰ The findings of Phase 2 of *One by One* underline the complexity of digitisation and the

³⁷ Parry et al (2016) *It’s All in the Confidence: Co-designing the Future of Museum Digital Literacy*. Museums and the Web website. Available at: <https://mw2016.museumsandtheweb.com/proposal/its-all-in-the-confidence-co-designing-the-future-of-museum-digital-literacy/> Accessed 3 March 2021.

³⁸ Price, K. and James, D. (2018) *Structuring For Digital Success: A Global Survey Of How Museums And Other Cultural Organizations Resource, Fund, And Structure Their Digital Teams And Activity*. Paper given at Museums and the Web 2018, Vancouver. Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/structuring-for-digital-success-a-global-survey-of-how-museums-and-other-cultural-organisations-resource-fund-and-structure-their-digital-teams-and-activity/> Accessed 28 June 2021.

³⁹ Parry, R. et al (2018) p32

⁴⁰ Malde, S. et al (2019) *Understanding the digital skills & literacies of UK museum people - Phase Two Report*. One by One. University of Leicester. p14. Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/2019/05/21/phase-2-findings/> Accessed 28 June 2021.

range of skills required to undertake digital projects and perhaps go some way to explaining why the progress of digitisation has been slow. Phase 3 of the project is now underway and focuses on people rather than skills, examining *empathetic leadership*, which it describes as “the human dimension of museum digital change.”⁴¹

Phase 3 marks a turn by *One by One* away from government digitisation policy, which had previously agreed with its premise that a lack of digital literacy was to blame for a lack of digitisation. The *Culture is Digital* report had pledged to create a set of toolkits, assessment frameworks and factsheets to address a lack of digital literacy in the sector. Using the language of business, it framed the problem as one of a lack of strategy and co-ordination, and suggested technical solutions such as “looking at the common standards needed to make our nation’s great cultural assets more interoperable, discoverable and sustainable.”⁴² But technical and strategic skills alone are no longer the focus of *One by One*, which now describes itself as leading “an emotional turn in museum computing and digital heritage”, focused on people instead and concentrating on the social purpose of technology and change, with the themes of “‘empathy’, ‘precarity’, ‘equity’”.⁴³ The difference between the DCMS’s suggested solution to a lack of digitisation: entrepreneurial strategy-led and business-backed innovation, and that of the *One by One* project: a focus on social justice and person-centred cultural change, reveals that the purpose and value of heritage digitisation are contested. I will argue that this difference of opinion about what heritage collections are *for* forms a significant barrier to digitisation.

This research has been strongly influenced by Parry’s work, but takes as one of its starting points a reconsideration of an aspect of digitisation that Parry discounted in the first chapter of *Recoding the Museum* in 2007. Parry had quoted a 1976 manual on museum computing which described “the

⁴¹ One by One (nd) *About* page. Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/whats-it-about/> Accessed 3 July 2022.

⁴² DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p51

⁴³ One by One (nd) *About* page. Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/whats-it-about/> Accessed 3 July 2022.

practical constraints imposed by the limited resources and technology available to museum collections.”⁴⁴ Naming these as: “resource, priority, structures, skills, time and money” Parry concluded they were “the symptoms rather than the root cause of why museums responded to the computer revolution in the way they did” and sought instead to define a deeper *incompatibility* between computers and museums.⁴⁵ This list of practical constraints struck me as describing well the challenges of adapting and creating content for a digital audience that I had encountered in my own professional practice as a broadcast journalist. In my experience, issues such as a lack of time and money were real and significant barriers to the progress of digitising television news content. Therefore, I judged that they merited re-examination within the heritage context. This research, then, uses Parry’s *practical difficulties* as a starting point, examining the extent to which a lack of resources, skills or other competing priorities impacted digitisation decision-making within heritage organisations.

1.5 Defining the ‘2000 literature’

The first focus of my enquiry was a period of six years around the year 2000 in which academics and practitioners theorised extensively about the value and purpose of digitisation. The *A Netful of Jewels* report was part of a larger theoretical discussion, mainly taking place in the six years 1997-2003, primarily by heritage practitioners, but also those within academia, journalism and government policy (something I describe for brevity as the *heritage discourse*). These sources contained predictions of a future in which it seemed self-evident that museums and other cultural heritage organisations would want to digitise and share the bulk of their collections online. It was a period of reflection about the role the internet would play within the heritage sector, and the ways in which it would affect heritage practice, a time that produced what Keene called “a blizzard of

⁴⁴ Humphrey P.S. and Clausen, A.C. (1976) *Automated Cataloguing for Museum Collections: a model for decision and a guide to implementation*. Quoted in Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Routledge: Abingdon. p2

⁴⁵ Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Routledge: Abingdon. p2

futurology writing from journalists, economists, academics and fashionable commentators.”⁴⁹

Digitisation was frequently described as a process that could *democratise* heritage, by allowing collections to be accessed by more people than could visit a museum in person. Gordon Reid, former Powys County Archivist, who went on in 2001 to lead an all-Wales digitisation project called *Gathering the Jewels*, was an enthusiastic early adopter of the internet, describing it as: “as radical an innovation as the invention of printing back in the middle ages” and wrote: “I do not think it is too fanciful to say that [digitisation] can address issues such as social inclusion and ... encourages a sense of community identity through the participation of local people.”⁵⁰ The article, published in a computing journal and focusing on a digital history project in Wales, described the need for heritage material to be taken “out of the repository and into the public domain” in a process that “is a form of ‘democratisation’ of heritage material, which in the past has largely been in the hands of the academic world.”⁵¹ The confidence in the inevitability of digitisation expressed by Reid (“The challenge is clear: if we do not respond, others will”) was also being echoed in the academic world, with one university librarian predicting: “It is reasonable to assume that society will wish to digitise all nonelectronic information content (writings, compositions, performances, recordings, images, etc.) over the next generation or two.”⁵² The tone of articles such as this made the lack of digitisation that followed difficult to understand. Where was the promised proliferation of online exhibitions that was to revolutionise the heritage world? An analysis of this body of literature, described hereafter as the *2000 literature* has been made in Chapter Three, as a first step in trying to understand why the future it predicted has not - so far - come to pass. The focus was limited to the years 1997-2003 because this period contained the bulk of the relevant literature and was significant in the story of heritage digitisation for three reasons.

⁴⁹ Keene, S. (1998) *Digital Collections: Museums and the Information Age*. Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford. Preface pix

⁵⁰ Reid, G. (2000) ‘The digitisation of heritage material: arguing for an interpretive approach based on the experience of the Powys Digital History Project.’ *Program*, Vol 34, No 2 p143/153

⁵¹ Reid, G. (2000) p153/155

⁵² Reid, G. (2000) p157 and Clark, M.J. (1999) ‘Changing Landscape for the Information Professional.’ *Serials*, Vol 12, No 2 p95

Firstly, in 1997, Tony Blair's *New Labour* government had come to power and begun to invest in the cultural and arts sector, which had traditionally been held at arm's length from government (by the time he left office in 2007, UK government spending on the arts and culture had doubled).⁵³ In his 2014 critique of culture and arts policy from the start of the twenty-first century, *Cultural Capital*, Robert Hewison describes how heritage organisations were informed by the New Labour government that as part of their role, they must now prioritise work to tackle the problem of *social exclusion* and that "this placed previously unheard-of expectations on the arts and heritage."⁵⁴ In return for investment, heritage organisations were instructed to follow the new government's policy priorities in two ways: "The first was that the arts and heritage were repackaged as part of a new economic phenomenon – 'the cultural and creative industries'... The second redefinition ... tried to address the awkward fact that ... access to the arts and heritage was unequal."⁵⁵ With the government instructing heritage to take steps to increase the diversity of its visitors, practitioners naturally turned to digitisation, theorising that one way to reach people who traditionally did not visit museums was to take the collection outside the museum's walls and into the virtual space of the internet. The 2000 literature reflects this; for example, it is no accident that Reid's prediction above suggests that digitisation could help to improve *social inclusion* and *community identity*, echoing buzz-phrases of Tony Blair's government.

Secondly, alongside increased government support there was another new source of funding: the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), now called the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Created in 1994, it initially only funded capital projects and tended to award large sums of money to a small number of

⁵³ Guardian (2007) 'Blair's speech on the arts in full.' *Guardian Newspaper*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/mar/06/politicsandthearts.uk1> Accessed 18 February 2023. Official statistics from Arts Council England show that its expenditure rose from £190,580,000 in 1997/8 to £403,868,000 in 2007/8. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7655/CBP-7655.pdf> Accessed 18 February 2023 p28

⁵⁴ Hewison, R. (2014) *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*. Verso: London. p29

⁵⁵ Hewison, R. (2014) p28

grand building projects.⁵⁷ In 1999, it began to take a more strategic approach, offering smaller grants, prioritising areas of deprivation (in line with government policy) and seeking greater public involvement.⁵⁸ Keene et al had made clear in *A Netful of Jewels* in 1999 that “significant additional and dedicated” funding would be necessary before digitisation could take place.⁵⁹ The perceived availability of this new funding through the HLF prompted optimistic predictions about the ability of heritage organisations to digitise large parts of their collections. But these predictions do not take into account the fact that HLF had adopted a set of guidelines published in 1998 which tied the allocation of funding to increased public access and a requirement to “harness community spirit.”⁶⁰ As I argue in Chapter Four, the HLF’s stipulations for social inclusion and public engagement within its funding guidelines meant that straightforward digitisation projects undertaken in-house by museum staff were unlikely to win funding and that therefore, while there were a slew of new projects in the early 2000s that could have been described as *digital*, they may not have contributed significantly to the digitisation of existing collections.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the years 1997-2003 saw a marked rise in the number of people with personal computers at home and networked computers at work. In 1998, only 9% of households in the UK had internet access. By 2003, this had risen to 46%.⁶¹ In 2000, Prime Minister Tony Blair outlined his intention for everyone in the UK to have internet access by 2005 (this has still

⁵⁷ Maeer, G. (2017) ‘A People-Centred Approach to Heritage: The Experience of the Heritage Lottery Fund 1994–2014’. *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage*. 4:1, pp38-52, p40.

⁵⁸ Maeer, G. (2017) pp41-43

⁵⁹ Keene, S. et al (1999) *A Netful of Jewels: New Museums in the Learning Age* Report of the National Museum Directors’ Conference, UK p19. Available at: https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/netful_of_jewels.pdf Accessed 1 November 2020.

⁶⁰ Ross, S., Economou, M. Anderson, J. (1998). *Funding ICT in the Heritage Sector: HLF Report*. University of Glasgow. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263768046_Funding_Information_and_Communications_Technology_in_the_Heritage_Sector_HLF_report Accessed 7 July 2021. p48

⁶¹ Statista (2021) ‘Share of households with internet access in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1998 to 2020’. *Statista website*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/275999/household-internet-penetration-in-great-britain/> Accessed 28 June 2021.

not been achieved, but had reached almost 93% by 2022).⁶² The conjuncture of these three developments – a new government, a new funding source and new access to the internet - meant that the conditions appeared to be right for museums to begin digitising their collections and offering them to the public. Consequently, practitioners and academics writing in the years 1997-2003 made many confident predictions about how the future mass-digitisation of collections would contribute to the government’s social inclusion agenda by attracting new previously unengaged audiences. Both Reid and Keene et al, along with many others at this time, described a vision of exactly the sort of online exhibitions I had expected to find when I began my search in 2014. Reid described “the careful selection of items ... assembled into a narrative framework with comprehensive interpretation ... with a result somewhere between an electronic exhibition and a magazine.”⁶³ Keene et al wrote: “Museums’ new uses of multimedia will stretch the boundaries of the information age.”⁶⁴ This study begins by considering in detail these six years. By examining the aspirations of the heritage community at a time when confidence was high, the intended purpose and value of digitisation can be determined, but also the perceived challenges and barriers to progress. These perceived barriers could then be cross-referenced against the real-life digitisation experiences of heritage professionals gathered as primary data in a series of semi-structured interviews.

1.6 Culture is Digital, Museums Are Not Neutral and Covid-19

Why re-examine the progress of heritage digitisation now? Again, there are three reasons why a new investigation is timely. Firstly, in 2016, digitisation once again became a stated government policy priority, with the *Culture White Paper* announcing a report “on the key issues to be addressed to make the UK one of the world’s leading countries for digitised public collections.”⁷⁵ In 2018, the DCMS

⁶² Guardian (2000) ‘Tony Blair’s full speech: ‘The e-generation is with us,’ Tony Blair proclaimed at the Knowledge 2000 conference’. *Guardian website 7 March 2000*. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/mar/07/tonyblair> Accessed 14 August 2021.

⁶³ Reid, G. (2000) p155

⁶⁴ Keene, S. et al (1999) p9

⁷⁵ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p45

Culture is Digital report built on this by making a commitment to “develop a new strategic approach to the digitisation and presentation of cultural objects.”⁷⁷ The language used by Matt Hancock, the then Culture Secretary, in the foreword to *Culture is Digital* reveals that the government believed digital heritage could contribute to the country’s success, both economically and reputationally:

The Centre for Economics and Business Research 2018 World Economic League Tables identify this particular blend of creativity and technology skills as the driving force behind the UK’s strong economic prospects over the long term; a powerful combination of talents to project to the world as we prepare to leave the EU.⁷⁸

The tone of *Culture is Digital* is bullish, its Executive Summary describes the sector as the *Creative Industries*, an indication according to Hewison that it was being repackaged as “a new economic phenomenon.”⁷⁹ It advocates decisive actions as the solutions to a lack of digital success (my italics): “Its aim has been to explore how culture and technology can work together to *drive* audience engagement, *boost* the capability of cultural organisations and *unleash* the creative potential of technology.”⁸⁰ This report was released the year after the Conservative Party had failed to win an overall majority in the 2017 General Election, forcing leader Theresa May to seek the support of the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland to form a government. The previous year’s Brexit vote had split the country, and there were fears that the economy could be negatively affected by the uncertainty surrounding the UK’s exit from the European Union. This is reflected in Theresa May’s introduction to the Conservative manifesto for the 2017 election: “The next five years are the most challenging that Britain has faced in my lifetime. Brexit will define us: our place in the world, our economic security and our future prosperity.”⁸¹ Seen in this context, Matt Hancock’s use of overtly corporate language makes sense, as the UK government faced a future outside the world’s largest trading bloc: “By focusing on the synergies between culture and technology – where the UK has dual

⁷⁷ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p51

⁷⁸ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p4

⁷⁹ Hewison, R. (2014) *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*. Verso: London p28

⁸⁰ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p8

⁸¹ Conservatives (2017) *Forward Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future*. p1

Available to download on the Lancaster University website:

<https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/ukmanifestos2017/localpdf/Conservatives.pdf> Accessed 12 March 2023.

competitive advantage – this Digital Culture Report focuses on the use of digital technology to drive our cultural sector’s global status.”⁸² The report instructed the National Archives to “convene a taskforce to address the barriers to the strategic digitisation of collections.”⁸³ This has resulted in an online guide, produced with arts and heritage charity Culture24, and the development of an assessment tool called the Culture Compass, with Arts Council England.⁸⁴ Launched in 2021, these offer practical advice for organisations on how to assess digital literacy and organise, fund and administer digitisation projects. The creation of these tools is considered further in Chapter Five, where I argue that the DCMS has framed the challenges of digitisation as strategic and technical, and the solutions as better organisation, communication and a set of common standards. I question the assumption underlying this: that the solution to a lack of digitisation is better training and skills development and that there is nothing else that is preventing people from enjoying heritage online. In particular, it ignores the fact that many heritage organisations are re-examining their collections in response to social justice campaigns.

This is the second reason to reconsider digitisation now: many museums and other heritage organisations are in the process of questioning their purpose and role in society in response to campaigns such as *Museums Are Not Neutral*, and I have theorised that this may have impacted on digitisation decisions. *Museums Are Not Neutral* is a global movement born out of a conversation on social media between two American art museum professionals in 2017 about “false claims of neutrality on the part of museum institutions.”⁸⁵ La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski’s call to action was that museums should acknowledge: “that what museums take for granted as “neutral,”

⁸² DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p5

⁸³ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p50

⁸⁴ Culture24’s Digital Pathways available at: <https://digipathways.co.uk/> Digital Culture Compass available at: <https://digitalculturecompass.org.uk/> Both accessed 26 August 2021.

⁸⁵ Autry, L.T.S, and Murawski, M. (2019) ‘Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together’. *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019). P1. Available at: <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/public-scholarship/museums-are-not-neutral/> Accessed 7 July 2021.

“objective,” “normal,” “professional,” and “high quality” is all part of a status quo system ... that perpetuates oppression, racism, injustice, and colonialism.”⁸⁷ Discussions about how museums can *decolonise* their collections have become increasingly common within the heritage discourse, particularly among institutions with ethnographic collections. For example, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is undertaking a review of its collection that includes addressing object labelling that could be considered “offensive, inappropriate or exclusionary instead of inclusive.”⁸⁸ I argue that this process of re-evaluation is likely to have impacted on digitisation decisions because, taking the Pitt Rivers example, if text labels in the real museum are being re-considered, any changes would also need to be reflected in an online collection, meaning that progress on digitisation may be slower while decisions are being made. It is also possible that organisations might avoid digitising objects considered to be problematic. Another social justice campaign which has prompted statements of solidarity within museums was *Black Lives Matter* in 2020, an anti-racist campaign sparked by the death of George Floyd, killed by a police officer in the US in May 2020. During the protests in the UK that followed, a statue of merchant and slave-trader Edward Colson in Bristol was torn down. After museums including the British Museum and the National Portrait Gallery tweeted their support for Black Lives Matter, the Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden wrote a letter to heritage organisations designated as Arm’s Length Bodies (16 museums, galleries and the British Library which are directly sponsored by the DCMS) threatening to cut funding to museums and galleries that removed statues linked to colonialism.⁸⁹ He wrote: “The significant support that you receive from the taxpayer is an acknowledgement of the important cultural role you play for the entire country. It is imperative that you continue to act impartially, in line with your publicly funded status, and not in a way that brings

⁸⁷ Autry, L.T.S, and Murawski, M. (2019) ‘Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together’. P2

⁸⁸ Pitt Rivers Museum (nd) ‘Labelling Matters: Reviewing the Pitt Rivers Museum’s use of language for the 21st century’ *Pitt Rivers website*. Available at: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters> Accessed 17 July 2022.

⁸⁹ Twitter (2020) UK Museum Statements in Solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter. Available at: <https://twitter.com/i/events/1272488327984427008> Accessed 17 July 2020.

this into question.”⁹⁰ In their introductory chapter to the book *Museum Activism*, two professors at Leicester University School of Museum Studies, Janes and Sandell, argue that the meaning of the word *neutrality* in museums has changed because of an increase in government and corporate funding. Instead of meaning ‘a lack of bias’, they claim it has become the: “unspoken argument... that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate government and private funders.”⁹³ Chapter Five considers how, while the UK government has repeatedly called for more heritage digitisation, its other policies, for example on accountability for funding, have created barriers instead. I also examine how the existence of a tension between government policy and social justice movements within museums may have negatively affected digitisation decisions.

The third, and perhaps most important event that has put digitisation back on the agenda is the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. With the world’s cultural institutions forced to close to the public because of national lockdowns, heritage organisations have had no choice but to focus on their digital collections, and the uncomfortable truth that in many cases they barely existed. An article for the International Council of Museums reported in 2021 that, Europe-wide, only 20 percent of collections were available online.¹⁰⁰ Online talks exploring the GLAM sector’s response to the pandemic regularly used the phrase *pivot to digital*, suggesting that the primary focus of the organisation had previously been directed at the real-life visiting experience and that focusing on online collections required a turn of some kind.¹⁰¹ Surveys on the impact of the pandemic revealed that many organisations were still lacking the infrastructure and digital skills necessary to take on large

⁹⁰ Dowden, O. (2020) Letter to Arms Length Bodies https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/922293/22-09-20_Letter_to_DCMS_ALBs.docx Accessed 17 July 2020.

⁹³ Janes, R.R. and Sandell, R. (eds) (2019) *Museum Activism*. Routledge: Abingdon and New York. P8

¹⁰⁰ Eagleton, C. et al (2021) ‘Turning a Pivot Into a ‘New Normal’? Online Teaching and Learning with Digitised Collections in Higher Education Contexts.’ *ICOM*. Available at: <https://icom.museum/en/news/online-learning-teaching-digitised-collections/> Accessed 8 July 2021.

¹⁰¹ For example, an interview with the National Gallery’s Chris Michaels is one of many by MuseumNext illustrating that even the largest, best-funded organisations had to completely rethink their online offering. *MuseumNext on YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8YUowiMX-I> Accessed 8 July 2021.

digitisation projects.¹⁰² But although the closure of museums forced staff in many organisations to recognise that they were still primarily focused on physical visitors through the door of the building, the sector *did* respond enthusiastically and in a wide variety of ways to the pandemic lockdown. In an article describing some of these responses, MuseumNext’s Jim Richardson, who hosted a number of online conferences focused on the use of digital during the pandemic, identified not resources or preparedness, but “a willingness to try new things” as the secret to online success for the heritage sector.¹⁰³ Museum scholars Eagleton et al describe how “the pandemic has triggered a shift in mindset by exploring the potential of flexible learning.”¹⁰⁴ Although it may have revealed a lack of digitisation progress in the sector, the focus on online collections as a result of pandemic lockdowns in the UK in 2020 has once again made digital collections a popular subject for discussion within the heritage discourse, as it was twenty years ago. That makes this an opportune moment to ask whether we are any closer to the future predicted in the 2000 literature, and echoed more than a decade later by the Director of the V&A Martin Roth, who described his vision as “a museum without hierarchies... where the experience of the visitor is individualised and personalised, to a degree undreamed of today.”¹⁰⁵

1.7 Defining GLAM

Although this enquiry is primarily an investigation into virtual museums, the acronym GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) has been used throughout to describe organisations within the heritage sector which have physical collections and are therefore likely to have undertaken or considered digitisation. The term is increasingly used by the sector itself because

¹⁰² NEMO (2021) ‘Follow-up survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums in Europe’ *Network of European Museum Organisations*. p5. Available at: https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_FollowUpReport_11.1.2021.pdf Accessed 28 June 2021.

¹⁰³ Richardson, J. (2021) ‘Digital Ideas for Museums in a Post-Pandemic World’ *MuseumNext*. Available at: <https://www.museumnext.com/article/digital-ideas-for-museums-in-a-post-pandemic-world/> Accessed 8 July 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Eagleton, C. et al (2021) ‘Turning a Pivot Into a ‘New Normal’? Online Teaching and Learning with Digitised Collections in Higher Education Contexts.’ *ICOM*. Available at: <https://icom.museum/en/news/online-learning-teaching-digitised-collections/> Accessed 8 July 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Eagleton, C. et al (2021) Quote is at 29’16”

there is a great deal of crossover between the four types of organisations' roles. Literature relating to digitisation also tends to be cross-disciplinary: for example, in Chapter Three, many of the useful insights from the 2000 corpus came from the library sector, which led the discussion on digitisation at this time, perhaps because much of its collections were paper documents that were simpler to scan than diverse objects in a museum collection which required specialist photography. The acronym has also existed in DCMS policy since the start of the period I am examining: for example, the 2001 document that first set out the need for museums to undertake mass digitisation was titled to include the entire GLAM sector.¹⁰⁶ The four types of organisation have collaborated for decades and it has been argued that the advent of digital technology has brought them even closer together:

Government information society policy that promotes universal digital access for all is cited as a key motivation for library and museum collaboration and convergence ... and the digital world is viewed as responsible for dissolving the boundaries between their collections ... as physical objects take on digital forms.¹⁰⁷

Hedstrom and King from the School of Information at the University of Michigan agree that information is too important a resource to be siloed within different organisations in the same sector (their italics): "The differences among the separate worlds of libraries, archives and museums should be subordinated to the emerging need to strengthen what we call the *epistemic infrastructure of the knowledge-based economy* through a new view of collecting and collections."¹¹⁰ Practitioners who have advocated for more joined-up policy argue that "today's end-users have little concern for where these documents are located or what institution oversees them."¹¹¹ Since my

¹⁰⁶ DCMS (2001) *Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All: Co-operating Across the Sectors to Tackle Social Exclusion*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080206194338/http://www.culture.gov.uk/NR/rdoonlyres/6F6B47415-2E61-42CB-9111-5F05C6096CBA/0/libraries_archives_for_all_socialex.pdf Accessed 20 August 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Warren, E. and Matthews, G. (2018) 'Public libraries, museums and physical convergence: Context, issues, opportunities: A literature review Part 1.' *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 2019, Vol. 51(4) 1120–1133 p1128

¹¹⁰ Hedstrom, M. and King, J.L. (2004) 'On the LAM: Library, Archive, and Museum Collections in the Creation and Maintenance of Knowledge Communities.' *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) website*. P1 Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/59/63/32126054.pdf> Accessed 18 August 2021.

¹¹¹ Howard, K. (2013) *GLAM (re-)convergence and the education of information Professionals*. Paper given at the seminar 'A GLAMorous Future? Reflecting on Integrative Practice Between Galleries, Libraries, Archives

inquiry is focused on the perceptions of a general visitor who may not discriminate between types of heritage information online, it makes sense to consider them together. For similar reasons, this research does not confine itself to the UK, even though the inquiry is focused on the barriers to digitisation in the UK only. This reflects the sector itself, one that tends to reach across international boundaries through academia and practitioner events such as conferences. Similar debates about the opportunities of digital heritage were happening simultaneously in the UK and the US in the late 1990s, and US papers are regularly cited by British academics and vice-versa. Conferences, such as those organised by *MuseumNext*, are often pan-European and include American and Australian contributors. This is illustrated by the multitude of *Museums Are Not Neutral* t-shirts in evidence amongst British heritage professionals at 2018's Museums Association conference in Belfast, at which the author was an attendee: the American campaign had clearly influenced staff within the UK's heritage organisations. As a caveat, the author is aware that the heritage discourse tends to favour wealthy English-speaking countries, and that since this research is a reflection on that discourse, its findings are limited in the same way. But, allowing for a wider geographical scope has created the opportunity to undertake a close study of the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands. There is no equivalent of this organisation in the UK in terms of the amount of digitisation completed, and this justifies its inclusion because it allows a comparison not just between museums but of the approach of two different European administrations to heritage policy and the possible effects of that policy on the amount of digitisation achieved in the two countries.

1.8 Research Aims and Objectives

Aims

Despite apparent enthusiasm from the heritage sector for the perceived benefits and opportunities of digitisation, and UK government cultural policy making it a priority since 2000, there has been a

and Museums' 6 September 2013. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/83922/3/83922.pdf> Accessed 18 August 2021.

lack of progress in digitising heritage collections. Research has pointed to a lack of digital literacy as the main barrier and this has now become the focus of the government's response. This research will challenge that conclusion by drawing on the author's practice in television news, which faced similar challenges in the same period, leading to the hypothesis that the challenges of digitisation were essentially practical in nature. Therefore, this research will re-evaluate the *practical difficulties* discounted by Parry as symptoms rather than causes of a lack of digitisation – resource, priority, structures, skills, time and money – to discover if any of these can be argued as having negatively affected the decision to digitise heritage collections. It aims to offer a fresh perspective on a two-decades-old problem and find alternative solutions for those in the heritage sector and government policymakers wishing to see more of the UK's heritage collections online and available to the public.

Objectives

This research will first examine a corpus of writing: literature relating to heritage digitisation from 1997-2003, described as the *2000 literature*, to understand what heritage practitioners thought was the value and purpose of digitisation, as well as its challenges, at a time when it appeared self-evident that most organisations would want to digitise a critical mass of their collections and offer them to an online visiting public. A review of the subsequent literature will examine what barriers and challenges were identified by writers post-2003. The findings of these two reviews will inform a set of questions for heritage professionals, undertaken as a series of semi-structured interviews, or *digitisation stories*, that will give an insight into the real-world challenges of digitisation projects and test whether Parry's practical difficulties have been sufficient in practice to explain a lack of digitisation. Alongside this, in line with its methodology as a *journalistic* study, an examination of the environment within which heritage organisations were working will give context to the practical pressures faced by heritage organisations (for example, the period studied included changes of government, a worldwide global crash and a pandemic) and will evaluate how these factors have changed the landscape in which digital decisions were made, and how it may have affected those decisions. It will examine why successive British governments have continued to demand mass-

digitisation from heritage organisations, and what they believe is the purpose of online collections. It will assess whether there is a disconnect between what heritage organisations and the UK government believe is the purpose of digitisation, and whether this disconnect can itself be described as a barrier. Finally, a case study in the Netherlands is examined. The Rijksmuseum is often cited as an exemplar of exceptional digitisation practice. This claim will be critically assessed, and the museum's digitisation story examined in detail, to understand why the barriers to digitisation identified in this research do not appear to have impeded its ability to create and share online collections.

1.9 Thesis structure

Chapter Two outlines my methodology, I make the case for journalistic enquiry as an academic discipline and reflect on how my professional experience has influenced my research questions, particularly with regard to Parry's practical difficulties. Chapter Three is an analysis of the 2000 literature: particularly its predictions about the possibilities of heritage digitisation from 1997-2003, to discover what heritage practitioners writing between 1997-2003 thought was desirable and achievable when considering putting their collections online. From this, I draw three categories or themes to describe the challenges of digitisation: Obsolescence and Digital Death (technical challenges), Ownership and the Public/Private Web (proprietary concerns) and Authority and Democratisation (issues of status and power) that I take forward into Chapter Four. Chapter Four is a review of the literature post-2003 (including the grey literature of journalism and heritage policy). This chapter follows the three themes and aims to answer the question: has previous research or commentary identified the possible reasons for a lack of progress by heritage organisations in providing object-by-object online collections for the visiting public after 2003? Chapter Five is a review of the UK government's heritage policy since 2000, particularly its policies regarding digital collections, to understand what expectations were placed on heritage organisations and asking: To what extent has government policy influenced digitisation decisions? Have changes in government policy priorities affected heritage organisations' decisions to digitise? Chapter Six analyses

interviewees' responses to the following questions: What were heritage practitioners' experiences of digitisation since 2000? What do they think have been the barriers to digitisation? Do they still believe that mass-digitisation is an aspiration for the heritage sector? Developing from the three themes, I identify seven reasons not to digitise and ask my respondents to rank them in order of importance to see if there is agreement about which are the biggest barriers to digitisation. I take these seven reasons forward into Chapter Seven, which is a case study of the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands and, in particular, its 2012 *Rijksstudio* website, on which the bulk of its physical collection is freely available for re-use, even for commercial purposes. This chapter and aims to answer the question: How has this museum overcome the barriers identified by this research and successfully digitised the bulk of its collection? Chapter Eight concludes by finding that digitisation has not achieved the social aim of democratising heritage, for two reasons. Firstly, research has indicated that digitisation does not alter existing power structures and values within heritage organisations and their collections. Secondly, the professionalisation of heritage since 2000 means that ownership and monetisation have become more important considerations, with the result that the open sharing of collections both with the public and across institutions is not seen as a priority. Although I have judged the practical difficulties listed by Parry to be significant, particularly cost, time and skills (in particular, legal skills in the form of copyright expertise), they do not in themselves form a complete barrier to digitisation. But another of Parry's listed practicalities, *priorities*, does seem to be a significant barrier, although I argue that this is political rather than practical. I conclude that since 2000, the changing policy priorities of successive UK governments and their associated funding bodies, combined with the pressures placed on organisations by external events such as the financial crash of the mid 2000s and ideological movements such as *Museums Are Not Neutral*, have forced heritage organisations to concentrate their resources on challenges in the real world that digitisation has not been able to address. The cost and complexity of digitisation means that organisations have not been able to commit scarce resources while at the same time answering other demands on their time and funds, and digitisation has consequently been given the status of a

'nice to have' rather than a necessity. I have concluded that external forces, political, financial, legal and social, have had a significant influence on heritage organisations' digitisation decisions. The Covid-19 pandemic forced heritage organisations to focus on their digital collections and, with their visitor-in-person income suddenly cut off, they have started to find new and innovative solutions that may in the future mean that digitisation becomes an economically sound prospect. The increasing professionalisation of the sector means that the tools of business can be helpful in assessing prospective digitisation projects, and I have drawn on my findings to produce a series of recommendations for heritage organisations considering future digitisation projects, and for UK governments seeking to encourage object-by-object digitisation.

2. Methodology

In accordance with its designation as a professional doctorate rather than a traditional PhD, the design of this research draws on the author's professional practice as a broadcast journalist and the research project's initial hypothesis – that the main barriers to digitisation are practical in nature - was informed by 25 years of experience in news production, specifically within television newsrooms. In this chapter, I examine the methodology of journalistic practice and defend its methods of knowledge-gathering and analysis, making the case for its suitability as a methodology for research and scholarship. I reflect on how my own practice compares to that of heritage professionals working in the GLAM sector in the early 2000s. I explain how this experience led to the theory that the practicalities of digitisation, such as resource, skills and time, were likely to have been a major challenge to those digitising heritage collections.

2.1 The journalist as researcher

In this section I will draw parallels between the roles of journalist and heritage professional when considering digitisation and argue that this justifies a journalistic methodology. Journalism is often considered under the umbrella of Media Studies, but Australian academic Chris Nash defends it as a distinct field of academic research practice separate to Communication, Media and Cultural Studies and argues it has merit as a distinct research methodology: "Journalism is a research practice in so far as it originates truth claims of significance to publics about the state of the world in some particularity." Journalism examines and analyses issues of current interest in the real world and communicates them to an audience, and Nash names the core concepts that underpin journalistic practice as the *public*, the *present* and the *real*. Using these concepts, I argue that this research is an appropriate subject for journalistic study, because digitisation is a debate happening now in the real world that is of interest not just to the public, but also to heritage experts: "For the purposes of journalism as scholarly research practice, journalists must address and balance the interests and

capacities of dual audiences: experts in the field being reported on, and the intended public.”¹

Journalism is an interpretive and iterative practice of *storytelling*, and it can be argued that heritage practitioners are engaged in the same work, telling stories about the past using objects or other evidence and linking them in a narrative to aid understanding. Heritage practitioners work with academic researchers, and therefore they too have dual audiences, those with in-depth knowledge of their subject, and general visitors with varying levels of knowledge and interest. Their role as interpreters of the past is similar to journalists, who could be described as interpreters of the present. According to Nash, in order to be considered a valid research methodology, “any piece of journalism should be able to locate itself through an exegesis with respect to a defensible position.”²

The core elements of the exegesis are named as a literature review, an exposition on methodology and an evaluation of the journalistic component as the most appropriate methodology in answering the research question. This research contains two literature reviews, one (Chapter Three) critically examines the 2000 literature as a primary source, identifying the perceived threats and opportunities of creating online collections according to heritage professionals in the years 1997-2003. The second (Chapter Four) assesses post-2003 research findings on heritage digitisation to compare against the responses of heritage professionals in semi-structured interviews. The next section therefore contains an exposition on methodology and an evaluation of the journalistic component, in order to justify its qualification as a valid research methodology using Nash’s criteria.

Nash argues that the qualitative methods employed by journalists: “direct observation and audio-visual recording, witness testimony, archival research, document/artefact discovery and analysis, interviewing”, if undertaken reflexively, are legitimate academic research methods.³ This research employs several of these methods, including the direct observation of, for example, conference proceedings. This observation was part of an immersion into the heritage discourse undertaken to

¹ Nash, C. (2013) ‘Journalism as a Research Discipline’ *Pacific Journalism Review* 19 (2) p130

² Nash, C. (2013) p128

³ Nash, C. (2013) p129

gain an understanding of practitioners' views of the purpose and value of digitisation. Other methods included the interviewing and audio recording of heritage professionals as primary data gathering and the analysis of textual sources; including practitioner conference papers and videos, policy documents and journalism. It is appropriate to include a significant element of grey literature within the analysis because much of the debate about the purpose and value of digitisation has taken place in journalism rather than in academia, and on digital communication platforms such as blogs and on social media since they began to emerge in the mid-2000s. These take time to be processed into academic research, by which time the debate tends to have moved on due to the speed of technological change. But can journalistic writing be rigorous enough to justify its inclusion as a source for research? Nash addresses the common criticisms of journalistic practice, naming them as *Empirical* (a crude positivistic approach "with no rigorous methodology underpinning the choice of events and witnesses"), *Temporal* (a restriction to contemporary events "that privileges an intuitive 'news sense'") and *Political* (an engagement with the exercise of power "that must corrupt the detachment required for scholarly analysis.")⁴ He argues that the skills relating to these criticisms: relevant fact-gathering and analysis, the positioning of an event or issue within its context of space and time and an awareness of the location and exercise of power can, in fact, be argued to be strengths and not weaknesses in an academic research project.

The criticism of journalism as *crudely positivist* is drawn from the traditional notion that journalists are neutral seekers of objective truth, which they pass on to their audience without opinion or bias. Professor of Journalism at the University of Madrid Juan Ramón Muñoz-Torres describes this as a well-entrenched misunderstanding that is philosophical in nature. He describes objectivity as having two aspects, one epistemological and one ethical: "The more the "epistemological" conception of objectivity has been criticized as untenable, the more the "ethical" view has developed and

⁴ Nash, C. (2014) 'Research degrees in journalism: What is an exegesis?' *Pacific Journalism Review* 20 (1) p85

prevailed.”⁵ He notes how, as a result of this, *objectivity* has been replaced as the key quality of journalism with terms such as *accuracy*, *balance* and *fairness* but that these are essentially aspects of the same philosophical position, one in which the journalist does not make judgements or give opinions. Muñoz-Torres argues that facts and values cannot be separated: “No journalist can know without making judgements and these necessarily require a previous set of concepts and values.”⁶ He advocates: “a major rethinking of the conception of truth, understood as correspondence between mind and reality, in which both experience and reason play jointly a key role.”⁷ This reframing allows a more realistic picture of good journalism practice, acknowledging that a journalist will critically assess the evidence gathered rather than giving all views equal weight, and allowing them to be reflexive with regard to their own position within the story, in the same way a researcher would. In terms of criticism of journalism as *temporal*, a restriction to contemporary events, Nash describes the news as: “a continuous process of contemporaneous interpretation of shifts in abstract relationships based on the interpretation of observable phenomena.”⁸ This well describes the iterative nature of journalism, a continuous re-examination of the information gathered. Although a research project will tend to last longer than a journalistic enquiry, I would argue that this method of embedding a subject within its particular social and political landscape, make it particularly well-suited to an enquiry about the benefits of digitisation, because the perceived value and purpose of digitisation is a live and continuously developing debate within heritage discourse and is set within a wider framework of social and political change which has affected decision-making.

In terms of the criticism that journalism is *political*, Natalie Fenton’s description of digital journalism in *New Media, Old News: journalism and democracy in the digital age* illustrates the synergy

⁵ Muñoz-Torres, J.R. (2012) ‘Truth and objectivity in journalism’. *Journalism studies*. Routledge, London. Volume 13, Issue 4 p570

⁶ Muñoz-Torres, J.R. (2012) p575

⁷ Muñoz-Torres, J.R. (2012) p580

⁸ Nash, C. (2014) p90

between the journalistic method and the themes of my enquiry: “The ethos and vocation of journalism is embedded in a relationship with democracy and its practice. It is also embedded in a history of commercial practice, regulatory control and technological innovation.”⁹ This research describes how heritage practitioners work within a funding structure that is strongly tied to government control, both through funding and policy. Digitisation has been described by practitioners and policymakers as a democratising force for good, but its value and purpose are contested. It has been strongly affected by issues of commercial practice (private companies digitising large archives), regulatory control (eg: legal issues such as copyright) and technological innovation (issues of obsolescence and skills-shortage). The real-world contemporary context of the digitisation debate is highly relevant to an enquiry about the barriers to digitisation and the *political* aspect of digitisation is particularly important to my thesis. I argue that UK government policy has affected the heritage sector’s decision-making, to the extent that it forms a barrier to digitisation, while, ironically, contained within the same policy documents are instructions to the sector compelling them to undertake more digitisation. Without a close analysis of government policy documents within their wider context of cuts to funding and other political pressures, this contradiction would not be evident.

Both heritage and journalism have faced digitisation challenges. Journalism scholars Eldridge and Franklin describe predictions resembling those made by heritage professionals in the 2000 literature when they explain how, in the early 2000s, academics were discussing how the internet would revolutionise and democratise journalism:

Early forays into understanding journalism in online contexts looked at the internet as providing radical new means of communication... Concepts such as the ‘Network Society’ ... came to the foreground and underlined views of digital spaces as ... ‘decentralized’ as plural online communities replaced more traditional, top-down, hierarchical journalistic organizations... journalism was declared to be a shared practice open to everyone.¹⁰

⁹ Fenton, N. (2010) *New Media, Old News: journalism and democracy in the digital age*. Sage Publications p3

¹⁰ Franklin, B. and Eldridge II, Scott A. (eds) (2017) *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*. Routledge, Abingdon. p2

These ideas: that the internet would have a *radical* effect on communication, and that the transformation would involve a decentralisation of power compare closely with predictions from heritage scholars about the future of digital museums, such as this by digital librarian and archivist Howard Besser in *The Wired Museum* in 1997:

The widespread dissemination of networked digital information from the cultural arena is likely to have a similar effect on other forms of culture, moving them into personal spaces where the user asserts more control over how quickly and when the interaction takes place.¹¹

Reid, too, echoes the idea of a *shared practice open to everyone*: “This process is a form of ‘democratisation’ of heritage material, which in the past has largely been in the hands of the academic world. The whole approach to the delivery of services is changing, and the expectations of Internet users will hasten that change.”¹² Both the media and heritage sectors were theorising that the internet would create a new era of communication, by allowing organisations to extend their reach beyond traditional outlets and by shifting creative power from organisational structures of authority towards the consumer/visitor. Eldridge and Franklin describe how digital journalism fundamentally challenged the perceived purpose of journalism and the power structures within news organisations: “The juxtaposition of digital ways of working have collided with normative understandings of journalism’s societal role. This has shaken the primacy of traditional news media organizations ... and blurred entertainment and information in new ways.”¹³ Once news articles began to be shared on social media in the mid-2000s, two things happened. Firstly, news began to compete directly with other forms of information and entertainment for the attention of users, and secondly, because data could be gathered about the popularity of news stories, editorial decisions

¹¹ Besser, H. (1997) ‘The Transformation of the museum and the way it's perceived’ in Jones-Garmil, K (ed) (2003) *The Wired Museum*, Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p154.

¹² Reid, G. (2000) ‘The digitisation of heritage material: arguing for an interpretive approach based on the experience of the Powys Digital History Project’ *Program*, Vol 34, No 2 p155

¹³ Franklin, B. and Eldridge II, Scott A. (eds) (2017) *The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*. Routledge, Abingdon. p4

began to be made in favour of more popular content. Because most organisations were initially offering online news within existing budgets and without generating income, success was measured by an increase in online engagement: increased clicks or numbers of subscribers. As a result, stories that could elicit increased online engagement were prioritised. The authority of the journalist could be said to be lessened by the blurring of boundaries in the online space, a place where users had more power to choose what they would like to consume, and who might not categorise objects of consumption as 'news' but might think of it more broadly as 'entertainment'. The heritage sector was facing the same challenges, with authority and the curation of online content a key topic within the 2000 literature:

The general public may view culture less as something to consume and more as something to interact with... This may further erode the authority of the curator as the leading figure who places images within a context. A possible result may be an erosion of high culture in general, with the curator's role becoming somewhat akin to that of a film critic.¹⁴

The challenge of writing differently for an online audience was also being faced by heritage organisations undertaking digitisation projects. Warning museums "to take a long hard look before they leap into the digital realm", museum studies academics Cameron and Robinson argued that online visitors require more descriptive interpretation of objects online than they were offered in the bricks-and-mortar museum: "Digital technology challenges the notion of a singular, fixed, homogenous, and authoritative museum voice and lends greater legitimacy to multiple interpretations of objects and the collections where they reside."¹⁵ The need for additional staff and different workflows and processes were challenges for both the heritage sector and in journalism. The experience of adapting existing practice to accommodate an online audience: the need for extra dedicated staff with particular skills to write longer and more structured copy, plus a change in content choice to encourage engagement, appeared to me to map quite neatly to Parry's list of

¹⁴ Besser, H. 'The Changing Role of Photographic Collections with the Advent of Digitization' in Jones-Garmil, K. (ed) (1997) *The Wired Museum: Emerging Technology and Changing Paradigms*. P118. American Association of Museums: Washington. p121

¹⁵ Cameron, F. and Robinson, H. (2007) 'Digital Knowledgescapes: Cultural, Theoretical, Practical, and Usage Issues Facing Museum Collection Databases in a Digital Epoch' in Cameron, F. and Kenderdine, S. (eds) (2010) *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse*. MIT Press: Massachusetts p178

practical difficulties that he had discounted as symptoms of the incompatibility between museums and computers rather than causes: “resource, priority, structures, skills, time and money.”¹⁶ Parry’s list therefore became the core part of a developing hypothesis, as I predicted that the practical difficulties of digitisation could prove to be sufficient barriers to heritage digitisation, questioning Parry’s theory that there must instead be some deeper *incompatibility* or *disconnect* between “the concept of a museum and the concept of a computer.”¹⁷ A journalistic approach has allowed a hypothesis to emerge from practical experience, which has then been tested using journalistic methods of interviewing and analysis, but with a reflexive element that allows it to avoid charges of ‘crude positivism’. Because much of the current debate is taking place in practice, it is appropriate to focus this enquiry on the development of digitisation theory through practice, as an investigation into the cultural value of digital engagement with heritage indicated in 2016:

Responsive practices and user engagement is moving at a much faster pace than much of the discussion in the academic literature, leading to an imbalance between digital developments and the reflective case studies such literature generally employs. In effect, the cutting edge of exploring digital possibilities in heritage is now firmly in the realm of practice.¹⁸

2.2 Methods

In line with the journalistic methodology outlined by Nash, this is an iterative research project, led by a literature review and utilising journalistic skills of interviewing, text analysis and contextualisation. Led by its findings, the narrative structure of the research evolved over time to include an analysis of UK government digitisation policy since 2000, and a case-study of the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, as an exemplar of good digitisation practice.

¹⁶ Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Routledge: Abingdon. p2

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ King, L., Stark, J.F. and Cooke, P. (2016) ‘Experiencing the Digital World: The Cultural Value of Digital Engagement with Heritage’. *Heritage & Society*, Vol. 9 No. 1, May, 2016, 76–101 p96

2.2.1 The 2000 literature: a review

Having identified the 2000 literature as a rich source of debate about digitisation at a time when its purpose and value were unproven, I undertook a review of the six years from 1997-2003, asking the question: What did heritage practitioners writing between 1997-2003 think was desirable and achievable when considering putting their collections online? What were considered to be the benefits of digitisation and what were the perceived challenges? From this analysis, I drew three themes, broadly around technical issues, ownership and authority: Digital Death and Obsolescence: had the technology itself been a major barrier to digitisation? Was the speed of technological change considered too fast, risking obsolescence and the loss of digitised content? Was the equipment too expensive; did staff feel they didn't have the right skills to use it? Ownership and the Public/Private Web: was there a concern over copyright; were there ideological issues with sharing content with complicated rights issues, or those co-owned by artists or donors? Or was there a more simple cost-benefit calculation that it was not worth the cost of digitisation because visitors were not prepared to pay to see online collections? Authority and Democratisation: was the idea of sharing content as a social good in itself widely held within organisations and, if so, what was holding them back? Was there debate about how to interpret collections online to attract a more diverse audience? Did curatorial staff have concerns about how material shared freely online would be used? Was there fear around conceding the curatorship of collections to visitors?

2.2.2 Post-2003: a literature review

The review of the 2000 literature considered its texts as a primary source, because it was being analysed as a contemporary record of the thinking of heritage practitioners about digitisation at a time when digitisation work was just beginning. A second, more traditional literature review was then undertaken, examining the more recent theorisation of digitisation practice, with the aim of discovering whether the questions raised by the first review had been answered. It followed the same three themes drawn from the 2000 literature, examining the development of debate over

issues relating to technology, ownership and authority. The insights gained from the second review gave context to and aided the analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews with heritage professionals undertaken in parallel.

2.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

The two literature reviews informed a set of questions asked in a series of semi-structured interviews with heritage professionals who had experience of digitisation projects (for full question list, see Appendix 1, for a full list of interviewees and dates of interviews, see Appendix 2). I asked my respondents to look back to the year 2000, if they had been working in the heritage sector at the time, to remember what they thought was the purpose of digitisation and what they'd hoped it could achieve. I then asked for their *digitisation stories*, using open-ended questions to elicit detailed accounts of digitisation projects, with particular reference to how decisions were made, either to digitise or not to digitise parts of their collections. I asked my respondents what they thought were the barriers to digitisation, using a list of seven *reasons not to digitise* based on Parry's *practical difficulties*. Finally, after asking them to look back 20 years, I asked them to look forward and, using the knowledge they had gained through their previous digitisation experience, estimate how much more would have been digitised in twenty years' time and whether there would ever be a time when their entire collection was available for an online visitor.

2.2.4 Analysis of government policy since 2000

The release of the DCMS report *Culture is Digital* in 2018 had confirmed that object-by-object digitisation remained a government policy priority. But its language struck me as very different from the policy documents of the 1997 Labour government. It described digitisation as a means to improve the UK's reputation as a leader in the international market and its tone was much more corporate than the documents instructing the heritage sector to adopt a social inclusion agenda, as set out by Tony Blair's Labour government in 2001. This prompted me to review the heritage digitisation policy documents of successive UK governments from 1997 to the present day, to

understand the political pressures heritage organisations were being put under, and to theorise about how these may have affected their digitisation decisions. I analysed policy documents relating to heritage digitisation to discover what UK governments thought was its purpose and value, and considered whether this aligned with or contradicted the purpose of digitisation as revealed within the wider heritage discourse.

2.2.5 Case study: the Rijksmuseum

The Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands is regularly cited as a good example of both digitisation and the democratisation of heritage.¹⁹ I decided that this, too, merited further study. How had it overcome the identified barriers and digitised almost its entire collection? I used the *reasons not to digitise* from my interview questions to examine the Rijksmuseum's 2012 'Rijksstudio' project from several different perspectives, asking how and why the Rijksmuseum had been able to digitise the bulk of its collection and share it with the public for free and with no restrictions, when so many others had not.

This research began with a search for online museums, and the discovery of a mismatch between a predicted abundance of online collections around the year 2000 and the failure of these collections to materialise in the years that followed. A period of six years was identified (1997-2003) when confident predictions were made about the opportunities of the internet for the heritage sector, and these predictions matched my expectations as a visitor in 2014. I conjectured that since they had the same expectations of the use and purpose of heritage collections as I had when I first began this research, these same writers may also have identified the challenges to digitisation, and therefore this body of literature required further investigation. There follows an analysis of the 2000 literature and an assessment of the perceived opportunities and threats to the heritage sector due to digitising heritage collections.

¹⁹ eg: Suarez (2008) and Pekel (2014)

3. The 2000 literature

Although the World Wide Web had been invented in 1989 and was made freely available to the public in 1993, the number of people with internet connections at home and work had only reached a quarter of the population by 1999. That figure then grew rapidly, with half the UK population able to access the internet by 2002.²⁰ This was happening at a time of major public sector reform following a change of UK government in 1997, and a debate in the heritage sector about the social and political role of museums. This was the context in which the 2000 literature was written, and which influenced its predictions and warnings.

3.1 Historical Context: The New Museology

The arrival of internet-connected computers into people's homes and workplaces happened at a time of philosophical questioning within the heritage sector about the role and function of museums. Known as the *New Museology*, this had begun in the 1980s and was described by the movement's originator, art historian Peter Vergo (who edited a book of the same name) simply as "a state of widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old' museology."²¹ He argued there had been a tradition of museums seeing themselves as standing outside the world of politics and ideology, with collections created by curators who had an objective understanding of what historical objects and information we value and want to conserve as a society. Museums were assumed by visitors to be a trustworthy authority, offering evidence that created a narrative telling the 'truth' about our shared past. Instead, Vergo argued, we must acknowledge that a museum is a complex series of decisions made by a particular group of high-status people: "the wishes and ambitions, the intellectual or political or social or educational aspirations and preconceptions of the museum director, the

²⁰ Statista (2021) 'Share of individuals using the internet in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1990 to 2018'. Statista website. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1124328/internet-penetration-uk/> Accessed 20 September 2021.

²¹ Vergo, P. (ed) (1997) *New Museology* Reaktion Books. 4th Edition (first published 1989) p3

curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor.”²² For this reason, he argued, museums are not objective, neutral or apolitical. Vergo appealed for the needs and wants of visitors to be put at the heart of museum collecting policy, saying a new way was needed to measure the success of exhibitions, because traditional methods based on the number of visits or the amount of money raised were not sufficient to describe the value of a visitor’s engagement with heritage collections. *The New Museology* challenged the idea that a curator can transmit their understanding of a collection to a visitor simply by displaying objects or works of art accompanied by a label containing a small amount of descriptive text:

The present fiction in museums - that every visitor is equally motivated, equipped, and enabled 'to experience art directly' - should be abandoned. It is patronising, humiliating in practice, and inaccurate ... something more than the traditional curatorial 'hands-off' approach is called for.²³

Another contributor to the book, Nick Merriman, described the results of a 1985 survey in which he found that museums were perceived by certain social groups as being ‘high culture’ and ‘not for them’. He theorised that this was because museums reflected and legitimised the country’s “dominant culture”, thereby excluding those who felt they were not part of that culture.²⁴ The questions raised by the New Museology began a debate that has resulted in museum movements such as *Museums are Not Neutral* and campaigns to *decolonise* museums, but whether the theories of the New Museology have been fully absorbed into actual museum practice is contested. A survey by Social and Cultural Policy researchers McCall and Gray in 2014 found that the take-up of the principles of the New Museology has been partial and patchy because they are broad and ambiguous ideas which can be interpreted differently by different people within an organisation. Because of this, the ideas contained within the New Museology may be just one of many other considerations museum staff take into account when making digitisation decisions. McCall and Gray

²² Vergo, P. (ed) (1997) *New Museology* Reaktion Books. 4th Edition (first published 1989) p3

²³ Wright, P. (1997) The Quality of Visitors’ Experiences in Art Museums. In Vergo, P. (ed) *New Museology* Reaktion Books. 4th Edition (first published 1989) p147

²⁴ Merriman, N. (1997) Museum Visiting as a Cultural Phenomenon. In Vergo, P. (ed) *New Museology* Reaktion Books. 4th Edition (first published 1989) p165

argue that the numerous endogenous and exogenous demands on museums are “making these organisations ripe for the creation of confusion and competition about their management; the functions that they will be expected to undertake; and the objectives that they will be expected to pursue.”²⁵ I argue that while the New Museology has undoubtedly been an important influence on decisions to digitise collections, the fact that it is not always fully embedded in the policies and processes of heritage organisations means that it is not always the main driver of digitisation projects. Decision-makers may believe that, rather than prioritising the needs of the visitor by creating online collections designed to attract new and previously underserved audiences, that the purpose of digitisation is to provide additional income in the form of image sales, or that it is best used as a promotional tool. This has led to an uncertainty about the purpose and value of digitisation and, as a result, it has sometimes become less of a priority, particularly when there are so many other demands on dwindling museum incomes.

The questions raised by the New Museology were reflected in the 2000 literature, as the purpose and value of digitisation was debated. Some commentators were optimistic that online collections could reach new audiences that were not being served by the bricks and mortar museum. But there were also fears about whether they posed a threat to the authority of the curator: if online visitors could curate their own exhibitions, how did this affect the role of the curator and the museum itself, and did this matter? There was also a rekindling of a decades-old debate on the use of technology in museums and whether the online visiting experience could be made meaningful without the presence of original *authentic* physical objects.

²⁵ McCall, V. and Gray, C. (2014) Museums and the ‘new museology’: theory, practice and organisational change. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Volume 29 (Number 1) p23

3.2 Historical Context: Gadgetry and Inauthenticity

Computers, as Parry described it in 2007 “followed a sometimes bumpy and circuitous road into the museum.”²⁶ For some curators, technology negatively affected the museum visiting experience because only the original object had ‘authenticity’. According to Parry, this view was influenced by German philosopher Walter Benjamin, whose work had given rise to the idea that an object had an ‘aura’ that was eroded when a reproduction was made of it: “This questioning of what was authentic and whether the ‘aura’ could ... be preserved within a digital surrogate appeared to bring into question all that was genuine, trustworthy, reliable and valid about the museum experience.”²⁷ The debate over whether digital technology somehow ‘intruded’ into what should be a physical and in-person experience is as old as modern computing itself. In 1957, Freeman Tilden, known as the ‘father of heritage interpretation’, described his opposition to ‘gadgetry’ such as automated guided tours in US National Parks as follows:

There will never be a device of telecommunication as satisfactory as the direct contact not merely with the voice, but with the hand, the eye, the casual and meaningful ad lib, and with that something which flows out of the very constitution of the individual in his physical self.²⁸

The idea that putting technology between a visitor and an artefact created a barrier to an ‘authentic’ experience persisted into the 1980s, when the introduction of interactive displays into museums became common. Some commentators argued that heritage was turning what should be an educational experience into mere entertainment. Immersive exhibits such as ‘The Blitz Experience’ where visitors “sit in a cramped bomb shelter, to hear the whine and crash of bombs, and to grope their way out into a half derelict street scene” were felt somehow to cheapen the heritage

²⁶ Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Routledge: Abingdon p2

²⁷ Ibid p64

²⁸ Tilden, F. (1957) *Interpreting Our Heritage*. University of North Carolina Press, Third Edition p95

industry.²⁹ Stratton describes how: "'Heritage' became widely used as an adjective to help sell jewellery, picnic hampers and housing estates."³⁰ The word *heritage* had become, for some critics, synonymous with commerce, a *theme-park* experience that did not constitute a genuine visitor engagement. It was suggested that the authenticity of an object was lost in the dual act of making a copy and selling it: "With the authority of the artist and the sacredness of the original removed, does art then become even more a victim of the marketplace?... How will the general populace relate to photographic images sold alongside other commodities on the information superhighway?"³¹

In the 1990s, the heritage sector began to recognise that online collections had their own unique qualities that made them more than simple surrogates. A new idea was emerging in the heritage discourse; that the latest technological innovations could create more than just a poor reproduction of the 'authentic' experience. Instead, digitisation could offer something with its own value and particular strengths, that could inform and delight visitors by allowing them to see objects in more detail than they could in their real-world setting: "Visitors ... will be able to use a computer and a high-resolution video monitor to place images of artworks side by side for comparison... Museum goers will be able to become, in effect, curators, and design their own shows."³²

The *Mona Lisa* could be more easily studied today in a high-resolution image over the Internet than in the galleries of the Louvre, where dim lighting, thick ultraviolet-filtered, bulletproof glass, zealous crowds, and protective guards keep us at arm's length from the painted surface.³³

²⁹ Stratton, M. (1996) 'Open air and industrial museums: windows on to a lost world or graveyards for unloved buildings?' in Hunter, M (ed) *Preserving the Past: the rise of heritage in modern Britain*. Alan Sutton Publishing p169

³⁰ Stratton, M. (1996) p167

³¹ Besser, H. 'The Changing Role of Photographic Collections with the Advent of Digitization' in Jones-Garmil, K. (ed) (1997) *The Wired Museum: Emerging Technology and Changing Paradigms*. P125. American Association of Museums: Washington.

³² Honan, W.H. (1990) 'Say Goodbye to the Stuffed Elephants' *New York Times* January 14th. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/14/magazine/say-goodbye-to-the-stuffed-elephants.html?pagewanted=all> Accessed on 25/2/18

³³ Anderson, M.L (1997) Introduction to *The Wired Museum*, Jones-Garmil, K (ed). Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p21

These days we tend to understand and accept that online heritage has its own value that is not dependent on its status as a surrogate of ‘the real thing’. This is partly because of the proliferation of information that we absorb every day from social media images and videos. It is also understood that online content such as video can be not just an aid to the understanding of physical objects, but can itself *be* the object on display.³⁴ But still, the idea that seeing an object in person is a more authentic experience persists within the heritage sector. As one of my interviewees commented: “There’s also a lot to be said about an original item isn’t there? And you know we mustn’t forget that digital does lose quite a considerable dimension of the object itself.” (Fiona Courage, The Keep)

For visitors, it seems less important to distinguish between ‘original’ and ‘reproduction’. Consider, for example, the success of the Natural History Museum’s ‘Dippy’, a plaster cast replica of a diplodocus skeleton that has attracted record crowds during its tour across the country between 2018 and 2021.³⁵ There has been no debate over whether Dippy is ‘inauthentic’ just because he happens to be a copy. Matthew MacArthur, director of new media at the National Museum of American History describes how “the line that divides the physical and online worlds, particularly for younger audiences, is increasingly blurred.”³⁶ It seems that today’s museum visitors are used to having both and considering them interchangeable: “While in the minds of many scholars there remains a qualitative difference between physical experiences of heritage and those mediated digitally, some emerging audiences may no longer question digital content in quite the same way.”³⁷

³⁴ In an image in *Recoding the Museum*, Parry references the 2004 Turner Prize exhibition, which was dominated by film and video works.

³⁵ Natural History Museum (2019) ‘Record-breaking visitor numbers for the Natural History Museum in London and Dippy on Tour’ *NHM Website* 27 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/press-office/press-releases/record-breaking-visitor-numbers-for-the--natural-history-museum-.html> Accessed 18 August 2021.

³⁶ MacArthur, M. (2011) ‘Get Real! The Role of Objects in the Digital Age’. In Adair, B. Filene, B. and Koloski, L. (eds) (2011) *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. Pew Center for Arts & Heritage: Philadelphia p64

³⁷ King, L. et al (2016) ‘Experiencing the Digital World: The Cultural Value of Digital Engagement with Heritage’ *Heritage and Society* Vol. 9 No. 1, 76–101 p85

3.3 Introduction to the 2000 literature

By the year 2000, a quarter of homes had internet access, almost double that of the previous year, and this would rise to more than half by 2005.³⁸ It was becoming the norm for an office worker to have an internet-connected computer terminal at their desk and a personal computer or laptop at home. It was becoming clear to the GLAM sector that this was an opportunity to reach new audiences by digitising their collections and offering them online. This prompted what Keene described as “a blizzard of futurology writing from journalists, economists, academics and fashionable commentators.”³⁹ Two influential books led the field. In 1997, *The Wired Museum* brought together a collection of writing from North American museum professionals. Alongside practical guidance on data standards, coping with rapid software iterations and image quality and security, was the idea that the purpose of these practicalities was to allow for interoperability: “a means to reach horizontal integration of resources from many geographically disparate and multi-platform institutions.”⁴⁰ The sharing of content between different organisations was held up as an aspiration, and was often claimed to be one of the purposes of digitisation. It was assumed that visitors would want to see objects from different organisations in the same place, an online ‘meta-museum’, because “no museum has in its keeping the sum total of human knowledge. Each holds pieces of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle.”⁴¹ But there were also fears that sharing images could lead to a lack of attribution, negatively impacting the reputations of the organisations who held them.

Widespread sharing of copies, argued Besser, could be a double-edged sword, cheapening the value

³⁸ Statista (2021) ‘Share of households with internet access in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1998 to 2020’. *Statista website*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/275999/household-internet-penetration-in-great-britain/> Accessed 28 June 2021. Percentages are: 1999: 13%, 2000: 25%, 2005: 55%

³⁹ Keene, S. (ed) (1998) *Digital Collections: Museums and the Information Age*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford. Preface pix

⁴⁰ Johnston, L. ‘Imaging in Museums: Issues in Resource Development’. In Jones-Garmil, K. (ed) (1997) *The Wired Museum: Emerging Technology and Changing Paradigms*. P108. American Association of Museums: Washington.

⁴¹ Macdonald, G. F., and Alford, S. ‘Conclusion: Towards the Meta-Museum. In Jones-Garmil, K. (ed) (1997) *The Wired Museum: Emerging Technology and Changing Paradigms*. P277. American Association of Museums: Washington.

of original works of art and cultural objects but, at the same time, having “a significant democratizing effect.”⁴² There was a tension between what was considered best for the visitor: open access to the collections of different organisations through a single point of entry, versus what was best for the organisation: having proprietary control over access to and use of its own collection, which could be considered its marketable asset.

In the UK the following year, Keene published *Digital Collections: Museums and the Information Age*. In common with *The Wired Museum*, much of the book sets out the latest thinking on technical standards and data management, but the final chapter, *A crystal ball*, describes a future in which high quality heritage information is shared over networks Europe-wide. For this to become a reality, Keene suggests that a government-funded central organisation would need to be created to “advise museums on creating digital collections that meet common standards ... create a framework for centrally collecting royalties and licence fees ... and facilitate communication between the electronic publishing industry and museums as content providers.”⁴³ Keene admits she has taken an optimistic view of the future, one based on strong government support and inter-organisation co-operation.

There were warnings that the rapid iterations peculiar to internet technology would quickly cause online collections to become obsolete. The cost and technical expertise involved in digitisation meant that many organisations were considering using commercial partners and this raised fears about the influence of the corporate world on the heritage sector, particularly among US public historians such as Rosenzweig: “Will the public history Web survive the onslaught of these mega operations? Will “authority” and “authenticity” reside with the corporate purveyors of the past?”⁴⁴

⁴² Besser, H. ‘The Changing Role of Photographic Collections with the Advent of Digitization’ in Jones-Garmil, K. (ed) (1997) *The Wired Museum: Emerging Technology and Changing Paradigms*. P118. American Association of Museums: Washington.

⁴³ Keene, S. (1998) *Digital Collections: Museums and the Information Age*. p108. Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford.

⁴⁴ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) ‘The Road to Xanadu: Public and Private Pathways on the History Web’ *Journal of American History* Vol 88, No 2 p577

From a legal perspective, copyright was identified as a possible minefield due to the need for specific permissions to exhibit objects online, exacerbated by incomplete catalogue records and the huge size of some collections. Finally, there were wider curatorial concerns about maintaining the quality of the visiting experience, the need to provide multiple interpretations for different audiences depending on their level of knowledge and interest, and the challenge to the role of the curator as a trusted source in an unregulated space.

Many of the warnings about the challenges to the curatorial role came from the library sector, where there were anxieties about the size of the task ahead but also fears that staff would be judged 'out of touch' for not wholeheartedly welcoming new technology:

Many of us ... give the impression, that we are eager to embrace the new technology of digitisation ... others may perhaps be fearful of voicing their real reservations ... perhaps out of fear of being considered not to be "up to speed" or at the "cutting edge" of technology or, to be deemed to be old-fashioned, out of date, or even worse, "past it".⁴⁵

Within the 2000 literature, there were more optimistic voices than pessimistic ones in terms of how online collections would affect heritage organisations and those that worked in them, but although they were fewer, I considered the perceived threats to be more useful as an object of study, since this enquiry is about a *lack* of digitisation progress, and therefore I was looking for possible barriers to digitisation identified by those working within heritage at that time. Therefore, what follows is an analysis of the 2000 literature, with the identified concerns falling into three categories: Digital Death and Obsolescence (technology and skills-related concerns), Ownership and the Public/Private Web (proprietary and reputational concerns) and Authority and Democratisation (fears about threats to the fundamental roles of curator and museum).

⁴⁵ Reidy, D.V. (2002) 'The electronic Icarus: some problems and some solutions in digitisation' *Information Services & Use* 22 p151

3.4 Themes: Digital Death and Obsolescence

Some of the concerns raised about the difficulties of digitisation in the 2000 literature were related to the nature of the technology itself. The perceived instability and iterative nature of digital formats, for example, led to gloomy predictions about the *digital death* of online heritage collections due to obsolescence: “Archivists, librarians, public officials, and others have loudly warned about the threatened loss of Digital records and publications for at least two decades. Words such as “disaster” and “crisis” echo through their reports and conference proceedings.”⁴⁶ Much of this debate happened first within the library sector. One US University librarian cautioned colleagues that the digitisation process itself was not straightforward: “Although digitization seems deceptively easy - just a matter of running a scanner and throwing an image on the Web - it is not. Even an intensive week-long workshop barely touches the surface.”⁴⁷ Image quality was a regular theme because digitisation can be undertaken not just for the benefit of an online visiting public, but for the purposes of object preservation or as a record of an object’s changing condition over time. Digitisation for archiving purposes required a much higher resolution than, say, a marketing team would need in order to share an image on a website. Michael Seadle, a digital librarian and co-author of the journal *Library Hi Tech*, came down firmly on the side of preservation, warning against digitising in haste: “Anyone digitizing primarily for access faces the temptation to do a quick and dirty job that suffices for the kind of size and resolution that is usable today on the Web. This means that for preservation purposes ... the scanning could well have to be redone – a major expense.”⁴⁸ Photographing objects in high resolution (denser picture quality using a higher number of pixels, or DPI – dots per inch – containing a high amount of picture information) is far more expensive, but surely, argued Seadle, it makes sense to digitise at a high enough quality to suit both access and

⁴⁶ Rosenzweig, R. (2011) *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age*. Columbia University Press: Chichester p7 (originally published in *American Historical Review* 108, no 3, June 2003).

⁴⁷ Seadle, M. (1997) ‘Digitization for the masses’ *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 25 Issue 3/4 p119

⁴⁸ Seadle, M. (1997) p124

preservation aims? “Although the digitization literature puts strong emphasis on the need for balance, ultimately it favors preservation.”⁴⁹ Seadle’s warning that quality should not be compromised when considering digitisation projects reminds us that the quality of an online heritage experience is not just a technical but also a *curatorial* concern, something that is reflected in later research. King et al’s 2016 study on the value of digital engagement with heritage found that: “One obvious but important mantra emerging from our survey of heritage professionals is that ‘it must be done well’.”⁵⁰ Concerns over the quality of digitised collection images, as well as the cost and time involved in creating high resolution images, might have delayed decisions to digitise. The need for digitised collections to endure for reasons of preservation may also have affected the choice and timing of equipment purchases such as digital storage. An oft-quoted line from Jeff Rothenburg in *Scientific American*: “Digital Information lasts forever – or five years, whichever comes first”⁵¹ was turning out to be painfully accurate: “Although apparently meant to amuse, this remark is dangerously close to the truth; for some digital resources it may even be an over-estimate.”⁵² Heritage preservation time is measured in decades, whereas the digital world moves and iterates much faster, requiring constant updating. It is easy to see why there were reservations about the benefits of digitisation for conservation purposes, as Margaret Hedstrom, Professor of Information at the University of Michigan School of Information observed: “The two terms “mass storage” and “longterm preservation” embody a contradiction in the current state of affairs of digital library development... Our ability to create, amass, and store digital materials far exceeds our current capacity to preserve even that small amount with continuing value.”⁵³ For example, CD-ROMs are regularly mentioned in the 2000 literature as the latest method of digital storage: “Just

⁴⁹ Seadle, M. (1997) p120

⁵⁰ King, L. et al (2016) p83

⁵¹ Rothenberg, J., (1995) Ensuring the Longevity of Digital Documents, *Scientific American*, Vol. 272, no.1, pp 24-29, quoted in Russell, K. (1999)

⁵² Russell, K. (1999) ‘Digital Resources into the Future: Digital Preservation and the Cedars Project’ *Serials*, Vol 12, Issue 3 p260

⁵³ Hedstrom, M. (1998) ‘Digital Preservation: A Time Bomb for Digital Libraries’ *Computers and the Humanities* 31 p191

because you retain a CD-ROM does not mean it can be opened and accessed. There is little point in preserving a digital object, if access is not possible.”⁵⁴ True to this prediction, CD-ROMs (An acronym for ‘Compact Disc Read-Only Memory’, disks containing digital information that can be read by computers but not rewritten or erased) are effectively obsolete as the latest computers tend not to contain CD drives. In her 1998 article, Hedstrom appeals for more research into digital preservation policies and processes, describing the problem of obsolescence as ‘a time bomb’, requiring digital librarians to overcome issues of “resource constraints, competing priorities, and lack of technical expertise”, concerns that echo Parry’s *practical difficulties*.⁵⁵

Of course, digital objects may be more than surrogates, or copies of an original; the object being collected may itself be digital-only, such as a video or digital artwork, something described in the heritage discourse as *born-digital*. An object that exists only in digital form is in danger of extinction if stored in an inaccessible format. Again, it was a digital librarian who identified that obsolescence was happening faster with every iteration of storage: “Ironically, while stone tablets may be expected to last for thousands of years, and paper for hundreds of years, a floppy disk or magnetic tape may last only ten years, while the average life of a Web page is about 70 days.”⁵⁶ The danger was that obsolescence could lead to *digital death* if online heritage resources became inaccessible: “A manuscript not deemed to be of contemporary value which sits on a shelf can be re-discovered decades or even centuries later, declared an invaluable resource and preserved for years to come. In a digital environment – nothing is preserved by accident.”⁵⁷ Because of this, Russell identifies born-digital objects as a more urgent priority than creating digital surrogates: “Preserving ‘digital only’

⁵⁴ Russell, K. (1999) p260

⁵⁵ Hedstrom, M. (1998) p192

⁵⁶ Haddad, P. (2001) *From Digitisation to Virtual Reality: Is Global Knowledge a Blessing or a Threat?* National Library of Australia Staff Papers p2. Available at: <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20040916090514/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/21336/20011011-0000/www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/2001/haddad1.html> Accessed 28 June 2021.

⁵⁷ Russell, K. (1999) p263

resources presents the most complex challenges because for this material there may be no alternative but to rely on the digital object in the future.”⁵⁸ Could it be that concentrating scarce resources on born-digital heritage had, in the years that followed, diverted focus away from digitising physical collections? Russell argues that in fact, the biggest barrier to digitisation is not technological at all, but legal; the complexities inherent in the ownership and rights restrictions of heritage collections: “In many cases, the technical issues may pale in comparison to problems associated with copyright, responsibility/ownership, digital collection management and costs.”⁵⁹ This has proved to be prescient, particularly in relation to copyright.

3.5 Themes: Ownership and the Public/Private web

In 2002, copyright was described as “perhaps the worst ‘minefield’ to enter in the whole digitisation debate” by the Lead Curator of Italian Collections at The British Library, who warned that the complexity of intellectual property laws meant authors and publishers would be reticent to share their work online: “because they feel that there is little or no control as to who has access to the material.”⁶⁰ The opportunity to digitise heritage collections was focusing attention on the fact that the ownership of heritage collections can be complicated, and that institutions are not always legally entitled to share their collections freely. In a paper presented at the *International Conference on Information Law* in 2011, researchers Fouseki and Vacharopoulou identified four areas where they may fall into dispute: “ownership of intellectual property (content/information about the collections); ownership of physical objects; ownership of digital images; ownership of the processes to produce digital content.”⁶¹ Heritage organisations may hold objects that have been donated with restrictions attached: for example, that they must not be loaned to other organisations. Items accessioned before the internet existed may need to gain the permission of an artist or their estate

⁵⁸ Russell, K. (1999) p260

⁵⁹ Russell, K. (1999) p262

⁶⁰ Reidy, D.V. (2002) ‘The electronic Icarus: some problems and some solutions in digitisation’. *Information Services & Use* 22 p154

⁶¹ Fouseki, K. and Vacharopoulou, K. (2013) ‘Digital Museum Collections and Social Media: Ethical Considerations of Ownership and Use’. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 11(1): 5, p7

before they can be copied and shared online. Although a work may be out of copyright in the country in which it is held, copyright restrictions differ from country to country, which means that something made available online in the UK could break copyright laws in, for example, the US. There, corporate interests have challenged and extended copyright expiry dates “in part due to the aggressive lobbying of the Disney Corporation, whose Mickey Mouse was scurrying toward the public domain”⁶². Social historian Roy Rosenzweig, reviewing the growth of history resources online in 2001 and reflecting on their accessibility, uses this example to illustrate how legal action by private companies to protect their marketable assets had impacted on the heritage sector: “The 1998 copyright extension delivered the single greatest blow to the creation of a free, public historical archive; yet historians were barely at the table when that act passed, crowded out by the high-priced suits from the big media conglomerates”.⁶³

Because the internet was a brand-new outlet for publishing, the rules regarding image sharing were adopted from existing copyright laws, and this could create problems when creating surrogates to represent an object online. A photographer may claim copyright in an image of an object, even when the object being photographed is in the public domain. This issue has been the subject of a legal dispute between Wikipedia and the National Portrait Gallery, after an American student downloaded a series of high-resolution images of parts of a portrait that were available online, reassembled them, and uploaded the resulting high-resolution image of the full artwork to the public domain website Wikimedia Commons. Although the artwork was in the public domain because its creator had been dead for more than 70 years, the National Portrait Gallery argued that the images of the artwork it had created constituted new and therefore copyrighted works in their own right. Unhelpfully, there was no satisfactory conclusion to the case: “Instead, both parties

⁶² Rosenzweig, R. (2001) ‘The Road to Xanadu: Public and Private Pathways on the History Web’ *Journal of American History* Vol 88, No 2 p563

⁶³ Ibid.

eventually entered a dialogue in which they agreed to disagree.”⁶⁴ This lack of clarity in the law relating to surrogate images online has been extensively researched by Dr Andrea Wallace, who describes its complexity as creating “a vacuum of binding legal guidance on how institutions should proceed” when digitising artworks or other heritage objects.⁶⁵ She has concluded that copyright issues create a ‘systematic barrier’ to open access and that “there is no consensus in the UK GLAM sector on what open access means, or should mean.”⁶⁶ My respondents agreed that copyright was a significant barrier to digitisation, and this is analysed further in Chapter Six.

The complexity of copyright law and its predicted negative impact on the sharing of heritage collections was one of the predictions that emerged clearly from the 2000 literature, but there was also a wider debate over the social versus the corporate role of heritage organisations in a free-market environment such as the internet. The *opening up* of collections to a wider audience was considered one of the great benefits of digitisation. It was argued that digitised collections would allow anyone with access to the internet to view heritage objects that they were unable to visit in person, or that weren’t currently on display: “All repositories, whether libraries, museums or record offices, have items that never see the light of day for a number of reasons... If some of these neglected collections were publicised in this way they might be more widely used.”⁶⁷ Alongside preservation, giving the public access to collections is at the heart of heritage practice, and it seemed obvious that digitisation would fulfil this role. But there were concerns from those who made income from image sales: “Many museums are reluctant to distribute their documents and

⁶⁴ Fouseki, K. and Vacharopoulou, K. (2013) p2

⁶⁵ Wallace, A. (2017) Access and the Digital Surrogate: Openness as a philosophy. Paper given at the National Digital Forum in Wellington, New Zealand. Available to view at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crKUIxIX3sY&feature=youtu.be> Accessed 22 February 2021.

⁶⁶ Wallace, A. (2022) 'A Culture of Copyright: A scoping study on open access to digital cultural heritage collections in the UK'. *Towards A National Collection/Arts and Humanities Research Council*. Available at: https://openresearch.community/documents/wallace-andrea-a-culture-of-copyright-a-scoping-study-on-open-access-to-digital-cultural-heritage-collections-in-the-uk-research-report-towards-a-national-collection-ukri-2022?badge_id=1132-organizations Accessed 31 December 2022. p1

⁶⁷ Reid, G. (2000) 'The digitisation of heritage material: arguing for an interpretive approach based on the experience of the Powys Digital History Project' *Program*, Vol 34, No 2 p153

images in public networked environments because of the ease of intercepting, copying and redistributing electronic data in their exact original form.”⁶⁸ There is a tension here between the use of digitisation as tool for social justice: a way to share collections with new, previously unserved audiences, and its opportunities for the *business* end of museums: the need for institutions to raise more of their own income, whether directly through image sales, or by using the internet as a promotional tool. Should heritage organisations have been following the example of corporate interests and attempting to monetise their online collections as a way of gaining much-needed income? Some corporations, particularly in the US, had bought up large academic, archival, and photographic collections and offered access by subscription. While it may be argued that only a large corporation would have the financial means to digitise large corpora of documents, there was concern about the influence a small number of private interests had over the digitisation of historical documents:

Increasingly important online collections of historical data are in the hands of commercial vendors such as Bell & Howell and the Thomson Corporation ... and Corbis, with its unparalleled archive of historical images. These are the exemplars of the private history Web – a growing realm both under corporate control and accessible only to paying customers.⁶⁹

Rosenzweig argues that private corporations may lack the “scholarly fastidiousness about accuracy and contextualization”⁷⁰ that characterise the heritage professional. He also argues that, without a historian’s perspective, private companies may have different priorities when choosing what to fund, and that this will give their own interests undue weight when considering digitisation projects: “The heavy corporate funding naturally raises the spectre of probusiness bias in what gets digitized. The AT&T Foundation, for example, has supported the digitizing of the Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers.”⁷¹ Information technologist Richard Wiggins warned that private companies may choose what to put online, and more importantly, what *not* to put online, using self-serving criteria: “In

⁶⁸ Maier, E. (1999) ‘Will online images prove to be a multimedia cornucopia for museums?’ *Aslib Proceedings*, Vol. 51 Issue: 10 p331

⁶⁹ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p553

⁷⁰ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p577

⁷¹ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p559

many cases, corporations may consciously avoid maintaining historical documents for fear of litigation. Ford, IBM, and other major companies have been sued in recent years for infractions alleged to have taken place over 50 years ago.”⁷² Ford and IBM were accused of contributing to apartheid between the 1970s and 1990s by providing South Africa with military hardware – vehicles and computers - that allowed the ruling regime to continue its oppression of black people. The case was dismissed in 2014 but illustrates why some companies might be cautious about giving public access to their historical documents.⁷³ Private companies may decide not to digitise to minimise reputational risk, but it might be argued that heritage organisations are businesses too. As I will describe in Chapter Five, the 1990s saw a government-led drive to professionalise heritage, encouraging institutions with collections to do more to make corporate partnerships, and to bring in more of their own income. This was reflected in the 2000 literature, which often used the language of business when discussing digitisation, as Lyn Elliot Sherwood, former director of the Canadian Heritage Information Network, illustrated in *The Wired Museum*: “To accomplish the transition from experiment to reality... we will need to be concerned about all aspects of the cultural industry “chain”: markets and sales, distribution, production, and intellectual property or rights.”⁷⁴ This drive towards professionalisation may have led to internal pressure from management for staff to find ways to monetise their collections, by selling images or branded merchandise, which in turn could have led to discussions on how to retain control over access to high-resolution images, thereby creating a barrier to digitisation: “In this new world, information becomes a strategic asset. Managing and exploiting that asset is a critically important task if museums are to retain a significant voice in our cultural discourse.”⁷⁵

⁷² Wiggins, R. (2001) ‘Digital Preservation: Paradox & promise’ *Library Journal* Vol126, Issue 7 p13

⁷³ Stempel, J. (2014) ‘Ford, IBM win dismissal of 12-year lawsuit over apartheid abuses’. *Reuters*. 28 August. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-apartheid-lawsuit/ford-ibm-win-dismissal-of-12-year-lawsuit-over-apartheid-abuses-idUSKBN0GS2P120140828> Accessed 28 June 2021.

⁷⁴ Elliot Sherwood, L (1997) ‘Moving from Experiment to Reality: Choices for Cultural Heritage Institutions and their Governments’ in *The Wired Museum*, Jones-Garmil, K (ed). Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p133

⁷⁵ Hermann, G. (2003) ‘Shortcuts to Oz: Strategies and Tactics for Getting Museums to the Emerald City’ in *The Wired Museum*, Jones-Garmil, K (ed). Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p70

Although the possibility of monetising online collections was a regular feature of the 2000 discourse, by 1999 there was already some scepticism about whether people would actually pay for online visits. Information scientist Edith Maier warned: “The potential revenue museums can expect from marketing their assets should not be overestimated.”⁷⁶ This would be borne out by later experience, but in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was still hope that digitisation could bring financial rewards. But this idea was unpalatable to those who believed that digitisation could *democratise* heritage and should therefore not be driven by market forces: “Just as “open source” code has been the banner of academic computer scientists, “open sources” should be the slogan of academic and popular historians. Academics and enthusiasts created the Web; we should not quickly or quietly cede it to giant corporations.”⁷⁷ In the introduction to *The Wired Museum*, the language used is that of war (my italics): “Museums need no longer accede to being marginalized because of the *relentless onslaught* of powerful commercial interests... With networked digital technology available through the cable box or through the air, it will be a *battle of wits* to get our multiple messages across.”⁷⁸ Within the 2000 literature, we can see indications that digitisation was regarded as not just an opportunity, but a democratic duty in the face of corporate competition. And, while this duty arose from the mission of GLAM organisations to educate and share their collections, it was also made explicit by government policy. In 2000, Tony Blair’s New Labour government released a policy guidance document making it clear that museums, galleries and archives must contribute to the government’s drive to tackle social exclusion: “Museums, galleries and archives have a role to play in helping to exploit the new technologies to generate social cohesion, community involvement and participation, and to aid lifelong learning.”⁷⁹ Social inclusion as a policy was a natural fit for galleries

⁷⁶ Maier, E. (1999) ‘Will online images prove to be a multimedia cornucopia for museums?’ *Aslib Proceedings*, Vol. 51 Issue: 10 p333

⁷⁷ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p578

⁷⁸ Anderson, M.L (1997) Introduction to Jones-Garmil, K (ed) (2003) *The Wired Museum*. Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p32

⁷⁹ DCMS (2000) Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100113222743/http://www.cep.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/centers_social_change.pdf Accessed 24 March 2020 p8

and museums, which were already engaged with outreach and educational work. But how could an instruction to share and democratise heritage be squared with the pressure to professionalise and monetise its assets, which required a more closed and protected approach? And, taken to its extreme, the idea of democratising heritage could be seen as a threat to the institutions themselves. If visitors were being encouraged to consume heritage freely and on their own terms, where did that leave the authority of the curator, and the authenticity of the heritage experience?

3.6 Themes: Authority and Democratisation

A notable concern in the 2000 literature was that the creation of online collections could pose a threat to the authority (and in some cases, the very existence) of the heritage professional. Besser argued that the sharing of heritage information online would negate the curatorial role: “The general public may view culture less as something to consume and more as something to interact with...This may further erode the authority of the curator as the leading figure who places images within a context.”⁸⁰ Anderson argued that, on the contrary, far from being made redundant, curators would be increasingly in demand to create multiple levels of interpretation to describe and contextualise objects in online collections: “We will welcome the arrival of a multifaceted interpretative model, offering numerous ways to enlighten our visitors about our artworks, rather than offer up a single point of view that has been traditionally held.”⁸¹ The seemingly limitless space of the internet allowed heritage professionals to theorise that perhaps visitors should decide for themselves what they felt was interesting or important, and that this would be a form of *democratisation*: a ceding of curatorial authority, allowing the visitor more agency to shape their own experience of heritage collections. Arguably, for this to work, entire collections would need to be digitised so that visitors could choose for themselves what they found interesting. Australian academic Dr Fiona Cameron has been a leading advocate for a radical rethinking of the interpretive role of museums and for her (and colleague Dr Helena Robinson), digitisation provided an

⁸⁰ Besser, H. (1997) p121

⁸¹ Anderson, M.L. (1997) p17

opportunity to reassess the curatorial role by offering multiple interpretations of objects, allowing them to be enjoyed in different ways by visitors with different levels of interest and expertise:

Digital technologies and information systems offer the potential to promote inclusive practices to a large degree through new discursive, relational possibilities ... these capabilities offer the opportunity to emancipate museum objects from narrow and exclusive cultural, disciplinary, and museum-based understandings afforded them through their relegation to particular curatorial areas and institutions.⁸²

Cameron and Robinson argue that for a collection to be truly democratic, multiple interpretations of the same object would be needed, but the difficulty presented by this suggestion is immediately apparent: it would be a herculean task. Even small museums can hold tens of thousands of objects, and the largest 8% have more than a million.⁸³ The wording of text labels in the physical museum is often done by committee, and can take a considerable amount of time, even for a single object. To make matters even more time-consuming, Canadian art director Maxwell L. Anderson suggested involving local communities in the curation process: “It changes the relationship with members of the local community when they are asked to contribute to the telling of their own history, turning it into more of a partnership.”⁸⁴ Creating multiple interpretations of objects in collaboration with local communities would involve a major investment of time, but perhaps that is the price of democratisation, with the possible result that new, previously unserved audiences could be attracted. In the introduction to *The Wired Museum*, Anderson described how he believed digitisation would create: “a new generation of potential visitors... Museums stand to become far more important to more people.”⁸⁵ But for this to happen, he argued, heritage organisations must work not just with their visiting public, but with each other, to create an: “ever-expanding global pool of networked information.”⁸⁶ As digital librarian Haddad had argued, because “users in the

⁸² Cameron, F. and Robinson, H. (2007) ‘Digital Knowledgescapes: Cultural, Theoretical, Practical, and Usage Issues Facing Museum Collection Databases in a Digital Epoch’ in Cameron, F. and Kenderdine, S. (eds) (2010) *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse*. MIT Press: Massachusetts p172

⁸³ Data on museum collection sizes taken from MTM London (2017) *Nesta Digital Culture Report 2017*. Nesta. Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/digital-culture-2017/> Accessed 28 June 2021.

⁸⁴ Anderson, M.L. (1997) p17

⁸⁵ Anderson, M.L. (1997) p26

⁸⁶ Anderson, M.L. (1997) p25

digital world do not care who holds the information,” GLAM organisations should collaborate to allow visitors to search multiple institutions from the same platform.⁸⁷ But there were concerns that increased sharing could lead to a loss of the protective role of curatorial staff as keepers of our shared past:

Sending information into the digital world of cyberspace is a scary concept for museums... For years they have protected this material and the information about it. Museums continue to take this responsibility seriously and have been hesitant to share even textual information about collections over electronic networks.⁸⁸

For heritage organisations, digitisation could be an uncomfortable prospect: “Many people have already discovered that sharing authority and resources is terribly scary, unfamiliar, and hard.”⁸⁹ The concerns expressed by those who feared that digitisation would lead to a loss of authority were in contrast to those, like Reid, who believed that a future of open sharing was inevitable and should be embraced lest heritage organisations miss out on the opportunities it presented: “If we do not respond, others will, and we will have no control over the process. But we should not do this out of fear of being left behind; we should do it because it is the right thing to do.”⁹⁰ Taking it a step further, Digital Consultant Steven Smith warned his audience at the 1998 *Museums and the Web* conference that those who did *not* digitise faced extinction:

The presence of museums on the web doesn’t just make sense, it is an imperative. If management fails to utilise the World Wide Web to improve access and equity of access to its collection ... if it fails to add value to its collection in this age of information ... then one day management may just wake up to find that its collection is no longer sought after nor supported by government and the private sector and its business is no longer viable.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Haddad, P. (2001) p2

⁸⁸ Jones-Garmil, K. (2003) ‘Laying the Foundation: Three Decades of Computer Technology in the museum’, in Jones-Garmil, K (ed) (2003) *The Wired Museum*. Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p57

⁸⁹ Newman, A (2001) ‘Social exclusion zone’ and ‘the feelgood factor’ in Corsane, G (ed) *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (2005), Routledge, Abingdon p 336

⁹⁰ Reid, G. (2000) p157

⁹¹ Smith, S. (1998) *Digitising Collections: The Redefining of Museums*. Museums and the Web 1998: Toronto. Available at: https://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw98/papers/smith_s/smith_s_paper.html Accessed 8 January 2023.

This was also Rosenzweig's view. He warned that for those institutions interested in attracting historical researchers to their collections, there may no alternative but to digitise:

Will digitization create a new historical research canon in which historians resort much more regularly to works that can be found and searched easily online...? Years ago, the New York Times ran an advertisement with the tagline "If it is not in the New York Times Index, maybe it didn't happen". Could we arrive at a future in which, if it is not on the Web, maybe it didn't happen?⁹²

Rosenzweig argued that the democratisation of Heritage required online access to a *critical mass* of historical information: "Can professional historians look forward to a future in which they can access all the documentary evidence of the past with the click of a mouse? How far have we already come toward reaching that dream? Not far enough yet."⁹³ He bemoaned the fact that while enthusiasts and grass-roots historians had digitised large amounts of material, it was not always rigorously fact-checked, and that "the largest volume of historical documentation exists within the deep Web of online databases and the private Web of materials open only to those who pay", a restriction of access that was clearly exclusionary and therefore undemocratic.⁹⁴ The pressure for online collections to create income was at odds with those who argued that online collections could democratise heritage, because monetisation requires the proprietary protection of heritage assets, potentially creating a barrier to free sharing. But the 2000 literature provides no real consensus on what democratisation of heritage actually means beyond broad notions of providing access and allowing visitor co-creation and curation. Although fears were expressed that digitisation could pose an existential threat to the curatorial role, there was a general feeling that failing to engage with the online world would be a mistake because, as Rosenzweig warns, if historians didn't provide information, private companies would, and that most certainly would *not* democratise heritage:

We should be vigilant about what might be lost if the grass-roots energy and the cooperative spirit of enthusiastic amateurs, enterprising librarians, and archivists pursuing personal

⁹² Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p562

⁹³ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p549

⁹⁴ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p559

historical passions and public understanding of the past are squashed by the advance of a corporate juggernaut chasing private profit.⁹⁵

3.7 Predictions from the 2000 literature

The 2000 literature predicted a future of widespread online sharing of collections by the heritage sector, not just with the public, but in collaboration with other institutions. There were warnings that copyright would be a major barrier to digitisation, and that large corporations would be the main competitors, trying to win the role of information provider in the online space. It was believed that the role of heritage professionals would change, but that digitised collections would be in demand. Most in the field of public history recognised that the benefits could be considerable: “The ability of the Web to reach a mass, worldwide audience and to provide flexibility and depth to the visitor's extended museum experience are valuable features of the Web that many museums will incorporate into their offerings.”⁹⁶ The opportunities of digitisation were seen as the ability to share collections with previously unserved audiences, as well as across organisations, thereby *democratising* heritage. The threats were seen as threefold: Firstly, *technical*: the fear that fast-changing digital storage iterations would make collections inaccessible, the disappearance of born-digital heritage. Secondly, *proprietary*: the fear of being left behind by innovative and wealthy corporations, the loss of ownership and control of collections information, the complexity of copyright law. And finally, *curatorial*: an existential threat to the authority of the curatorial role.

The confidence that heritage collections would be in demand was accompanied by a confidence that organisations would embrace digitisation and rapidly make progress sharing their collections. Besser speculated that a significant percentage of information would be digitised within a matter of decades, and that the online museum could even begin to replace its bricks and mortar counterpart: “As the general populace begins to visit more on-line exhibits, will a museum become more notable

⁹⁵ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p578

⁹⁶ Cody, S.A. (1997) ‘Historical Museums on the World Wide Web’ *The Public Historian*, Vol. 19, No. 4 p53

for the strength of its on-line presentation than for the contents of its collection?"⁹⁷ But alongside this, art librarian Donny Smith questioned the value of the online museum, saying its purpose had not yet been established:

I am not entirely convinced that digital museums are worthwhile, yet the only way to know for sure is to continue working on them. Work seems to create its own meaning as it goes, and probably digital museums have unthought-of value as themselves, not merely as surrogates for physical museums.⁹⁸

What was notable about this early literature was the unshakeable confidence of practitioners in the innate value of heritage collections, and an assumption that they would be of great interest to the virtual visitor. Of course, social media, with its all-consuming demands on our time and attention, was yet to emerge. As it transpired, the *giant corporations* that would become heritage organisations' competitors were not companies with physical products to sell, but social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. There is no doubt that these platforms allow users to do what might be described as *curating their own exhibitions*, but these days, these are much more likely to consist of a collection of personal photographs than a visitor's response to an online heritage collection. Another assumption evident in the 2000 literature was that, given access to heritage collections online, new and previously unserved audiences would be reached. In fact, as later research revealed, the heritage sector was not particularly successful in this regard; instead, the *Culture is Digital* report acknowledged that digital heritage tended to double-serve existing visitors rather than reach new ones.⁹⁹ Research would begin to suggest in the late 2000s that providing access alone does not necessarily lead to meaningful engagement and cannot be said on its own to *democratise* heritage.

⁹⁷ Besser, H. (1997) 'The Transformation of the museum and the way it's perceived' in Jones-Garmil, K (ed) (2003) *The Wired Museum*, Second Printing. American Association of Museums, Washington DC p167

⁹⁸ Smith, D. (2003) 'The Surrogate vs The Thing' *Art Documentation* Vol 22, No 2 p14

⁹⁹ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p21

The 2000 literature revealed that there was an awareness that a period of great change was underway, and that much of it would be difficult to predict: "What is clear is that: the 'experts' will overestimate the changes that will occur in the next couple of years but also desperately underestimate the changes that will occur in ten."¹⁰⁰ And, in one key insight, Rosenzweig recognised that decisions around digitisation would ask existential questions of heritage organisations: "One of the most vexing and interesting features of the digital era is the way that it unsettles traditional arrangements and forces us to ask basic questions that have been there all along."¹⁰¹ I will argue in the next chapter that, in the years that followed, asking themselves these 'basic questions' would shake museums' confidence that online collections have an innate value, and that they can reach new and previously unserved audiences online.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, M.J. (1999) 'Changing Landscape for the Information Professional' *Serials*, Vol 12, No 2 p98

¹⁰¹ Rosenzweig, R. (2001) p25

4. Post-2003 Analysis

The 2000 literature had revealed that, although there were concerns about the challenges of digitisation, heritage professionals considered online collections a social good in themselves, because they believed they could *democratise* heritage by allowing it to be shared with new, previously unserved audiences. In the years that followed, practitioners began to experience the complexities of making online collections a reality. The idea of democratic resource-sharing was still an aspiration, but there were internal and external pressures: social, political, and financial, that created obstacles to digitisation. This chapter examines the post-2000 literature, using as a lens the three themes identified in the previous chapter.

4.1 Digital Death and Obsolescence

Due to the rapid development of web functionality, including the ability to upload video and high-resolution images to websites, obsolescence was a continuing concern after 2003. The term *Web 2.0* was adopted in popular commentary in 2005 as the principal way to describe this evolution, although the changes it describes date back as far as 1999.¹ Although Web 2.0 gave the heritage sector new opportunities, it also required more technical expertise, and this meant “additional information specialists... to support greater level and complexity of work.”² A 2006 article on library digitisation surveyed the literature from 2000-2005, and outlined three different strategies being used to prevent digitised material becoming obsolete: Refreshing – “copying digital files from one storage medium to another”; Migration – the “transfer of digital materials from one hardware/software configuration to another” and Emulation – “the development of software that

¹ Allen, M. (2012) ‘What was Web 2.0? Versions as the dominant mode of internet history.’ *New Media and Society* 15(2) pp260–275

² Roberts, A (2001) ‘The changing role of information professionals in museums’ in Parry, R. (ed) (2010). *Museums in a Digital Age*. Routledge p27

performs the functions of obsolete hardware and other software.”³ The challenge of keeping constantly evolving hardware and software up to date was well illustrated in 2013 by Erik Buelinckx, scientific researcher at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage in Brussels. He describes a project begun in 1989 when the Institute began digitising its collection of one million original photographs of Belgium. This ambitious plan was a learning experience for the organisation, which conceded that “certain decisions proved to be very fruitful, but also sometimes rather painful,”⁴ particularly in terms of coping with obsolescence:

The first series of scanned images were delivered on tape... A couple of years later when CD-ROMs and hard drives seemed a better way of storing, it turned out that on the new computers with more modern tape drives the old tapes couldn't be read, so for a while an old machine had to be reinstalled ... A poor soul was appointed to transfer the content of hundreds of tapes to hard drives and CD-ROM... Similar problems turned up when it got known that CD-ROMs weren't as stable as promised.⁵

Obsolescence was also increasingly a problem for *born-digital* heritage, because by definition it only exists in digital form and is therefore vulnerable to being permanently deleted. Complete websites were liable to disappear without notice when funding for maintenance ran out, or institutions changed hands or went bust. Although the Internet Archive (a US non-profit organisation funded by charitable trusts and philanthropic foundations with the mission of providing ‘Universal Access to All Knowledge’) had been using its Wayback Machine to archive web pages since 2001, not everything could be saved.⁶ US social historians Cohen and Rosenzweig describe the demise of *My History is America's History*, a 2002 personal history archive that was taken down after President George W. Bush replaced the leadership of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which managed it. Because much of the information couldn't be accessed by the Wayback Machine, that content was permanently lost:

³ Lopatin, L. (2006) ‘Library digitization projects, issues and guidelines: A survey of the literature’. *Library Hi Tech* Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 273-289. p283 (Second and third quotations are noted as being from Lazinger, S. (2001), *Digital Preservation and Metadata: History, Theory, Practice*. Libraries Unlimited. Englewood, CO.)

⁴ Buelinckx, E. (2013) ‘Digitizing Photographic Archives: Project-linked Opportunities and Pitfalls, The role of Europeana in an institutional digitization landscape’. *Digital Heritage International Congress* p87

⁵ Buelinckx, E. (2013) p88

⁶ Internet Archive ‘About Us’ page available at: <https://archive.org/about/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

Sadly, the Internet Archive only has copies of four of the stories from *My History*, and those are from featured famous names such as B.B. King. Stories from the other, lesser known contributors were gated behind a search form and thus could not be archived by the Internet Archive's computers.⁷

The loss of *My History is America's History* is an illustration of the instability of the internet as a storage space. The website's funding was for a time-limited period and one of its significant backers, Internet Service Provider PSINet, had collapsed in the *dot-com bust* of the late 1990s, when the over-inflated value of new technology companies created a stock market bubble, which soon burst when those companies failed to be as profitable as predicted. The ephemeral nature of internet content means those whose job is the preservation of historical information must approach its use with caution: "The loss of such a well-funded and popular site should give pause to any historian planning a digital project."⁸ The loss of born-digital heritage had been identified as a major concern in 2001 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁹ In 2003, it released its Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage making born-digital heritage a priority, "considering that the disappearance of heritage in whatever form constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all nations."¹⁰ Work to preserve born-digital heritage is complex because, as well as requiring storage space, the huge amount of data being collected needs to be indexed and interpreted, necessitating the allocation of major research grants.¹¹ In 2017, a book on the subject, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Born-Digital Content*, concluded that the problem of preserving born-digital content had still not been satisfactorily solved. In the foreword, Trevor Owens, Head of Digital Content Management at the Library of Congress said a change in the way practitioners think about digital heritage was needed. He describes the phrase *born-digital* as awkward but necessary,

⁷ Cohen, D.J., and Rosenzweig, R. (2006) *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia. p220

⁸ Cohen, D.J., and Rosenzweig, R. (2006) p221

⁹ UNESCO (nd), part of its mission statement, available at: <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>

¹⁰ UNESCO (2003) 'Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage'. *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. Available at: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html Accessed 28 June 2021.

¹¹ For example, three major projects are described by Jane Winters from the Institute of Historical Research in her *Digital Historian* blogpost 'A Year of Big Data' in 2016: Available at: <https://digitalhistorian.org/2016/05/26/a-year-of-big-data/> Accessed 28 June 2021.

because for most GLAM professionals, *digital* equals *digitisation* rather than *born-digital*: “Librarians, archivists and museum professionals need to collectively move away from thinking about digital, and in particular born-digital, as being niche topics for specialists... we can’t just keep hiring a handful of people with the word ‘digital’ in their job titles.”¹² Owens concluded that the GLAM sector was finally coming round to the idea that born-digital content should be dealt with using the same collection-management strategies as physical objects, and that born-digital is not “a technical problem that the right system can solve.”¹³ But, he says, this was not yet the prevailing approach (my italics): “Managing born-digital content will *eventually* become the core function of information management in libraries and archives.”¹⁴

While born-digital heritage remained problematic, the challenges of obsolescence and digital death are mentioned less in the later literature, particularly post-2010. This may be because the need to constantly update hardware and software had become normalised as technology was embedded into workflows. As one interviewee put it: “I suppose that’s just in budgets. It’s just assumed that that’s going to be something to have to deal with.” (Gavin Wilshaw, University of Edinburgh).

Technical discussions after 2003 focused more on standards: agreed specifications for image formats and mark-up languages (annotations added to a text allowing it to be searched). As Parry describes it, the standardisation of object descriptions had been “at the heart of the new systemisation of collections management” since the late 1960s, when it was becoming clear that computer databases would become central to museums’ practice.¹⁵ He ascribed the focus on standards to the notion of interoperability: the idea that content should be searchable across platforms, indicating that the creation of shared online collections was still considered desirable (my italics): “*Compatibility and*

¹² Owens, T. (2017) Foreword in Ryan, H. and Sampson W. (2017) *The No-Nonsense Guide to Born-Digital Content*, Facet Publishing, London pxi

¹³ Owens, T. (2017) pxiii

¹⁴ Owens, T. (2017) p4

¹⁵ Parry, R. (2007) p37

integration of standards and formats, and how to manage surrogates created using technologies that may soon become obsolete, are constant themes across the board.”¹⁶ Parry describes the aspiration of a shared collections database as an idea with a long history: “The ideal of a common catalogue of all collections had been in the background of UK museums from the inception of the Museums Association in 1889.”¹⁷ Could a lack of agreement over shared standards have been a barrier to digitisation, causing delays while decisions were made over the formats and specifications of images and descriptive text, based on the assumption that interoperability was going to be a requirement? Certainly, those working on the Europeana project, an aggregator platform with a mission to “develop expertise, tools and policies to embrace digital change” were becoming aware of a lack of common standards, saying they had been forced to take a “lowest common denominator” approach “necessitated by the diversity of metadata standards that are used in different institutions, different domains, different countries.”¹⁸ Europeana reported that: “The metadata is often very basic, in some cases because digitisation programmes have put their resource into the digitisation of items rather than their cataloguing.”¹⁹ The expectation that interoperable content with detailed metadata was required for digitisation, so that content could be shared across platforms, may have felt like a technical challenge too far for those considering digitisation projects. But agreed standards were not simply a technical issue; digital librarian Ingrid Mason argued that standardisation is driven by socio-political forces, and that there was a social duty on heritage organisations to set the standards needed, so that all organisations could participate, a call for what could be described as the *democratisation* of information sharing: “Cultural practitioners must transfer the social awareness, integral to their roles as cultural information creators and knowledge

¹⁶ Newell, J. (2012) ‘Old objects, new media: Historical collections, digitization and affect’ *Journal of Material Culture* 17 (3) 287–306 p288

¹⁷ Parry (2007) p88

¹⁸ Purday, J. (2009) ‘Think culture: Europeana.eu from concept to construction’. *The Electronic Library*, Vol. 27 Issue: 6, pp.919-937, p927

¹⁹ Purday, J. (2009) p927

enablers, into their shaping of information standards for digital cultural heritage.”²⁰ She argued that institutions in wealthy countries must help to develop standards, to ensure that they are collaborative: “Openness in cultural information standard-setting permits broad and rich participation in design.”²¹ Even in technical discussions about standards, the idea is once again raised that digitisation is seen as a way to *democratise* heritage and that heritage organisations have a duty to share their collections freely because in some sense this is a ‘social good’.

While standardisation is familiar territory to the heritage sector because collected objects have always been classified, categorised and organised, the continually expanding capacity of the internet meant that agreed standards were constantly changing: image resolutions and video formats were increasing in size, website-building tools offered increased complexity in design and functionality, all of which made decision-making about standards very difficult. It also meant that where descriptive information had previously been simplified to fit into restrictive software formats, now it could be complicated, extensive and multi-layered. As Parry describes it: “It is almost as if with the newer more fluid systems and more amenable software of post-documentation, museums are learning to be comfortable with heterogeneity and chaos again.”²² Post 2010, audience expectations of the quality of the online experience had risen with the improvement in functionality of social media and content-sharing platforms and, as a result, straightforward object-by-object digitisation was beginning to feel like old news. Digital discussions had moved on to the use of *disruptive technologies* such as VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality).²³ A good example of this is the Natural History Museum’s partnership with Sky to create a David Attenborough VR experience.²⁴

²⁰ Mason, I. (2007) ‘Cultural Information Standards – Political Territory and Rich Rewards’, in Cameron, F. and Kenderdine, S. (eds) (2010) *Theorizing Cultural Digital Heritage*. MIT Press, Massachusetts p235

²¹ Mason, I. (2007) p228

²² Parry, R. (2007) p56

²³ New technologies that shake up an established industry or create a new industry. Cambridge dictionary definition: “A new technology that completely changes the way things are done.”

²⁴ NHM ‘Hold the World’, more information available at:

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/march/explore-the-museum-with-sir-david-attenborough.html>

This has seen the veteran broadcaster recreated as a virtual tour guide - a hologram - for which he had to be captured by more than 100 cameras. In the experience, he shows off a number of the museum's exhibits, which the viewer can 'hold' and manipulate in three-dimensional space. The 18-month project, which reportedly had 100 people working on it, was an impressive technological feat, but was limited to just a handful of objects, due to the complexity of creating each one.²⁵ The 2018 *Culture is Digital* report had suggested that heritage organisations should find corporate partners with which to undertake digitisation projects, and this is the kind of project that you can imagine would excite investors, in a way that *digitising the catalogue* would not. The *Culture is Digital* 2019 update also mentions VR and AI (artificial intelligence) saying that: "Next generation companies working in spheres like immersive technology are seeking out cultural and creative partners to test the limits of their technology and create new experiences for audiences."²⁶ For most heritage organisations, projects like these are not within their scope: such an investment of cost and time is certainly not something your average local authority-funded regional museum could aspire to, especially if the project only results in the creation of a small number of digitised objects. Big-ticket projects like these will be possible only for a small number of large, national, or well-funded organisations, and those with 'star' objects that can draw a large crowd.

New devices and platforms were emerging in the latter half of the 2000s that would require a more agile approach to collections sharing. Smartphones (phones with the internet search capabilities and word-processing functions of a computer) and social media would radically change the way organisations communicated with the public and place new demands on digital and social media teams within heritage organisations (see Fig 3). Where it had previously been enough for a heritage

²⁵ Burgess, M. (2018) 'Turning David Attenborough into a hologram requires a lot of cameras.' *Wired Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/sir-david-attenborough-hold-the-world-vr-hologram-natural-history-museum-sky> Accessed 21 July 2021.

²⁶ DCMS (2019) *Culture is Digital: June 2019 Progress Report*. Foreword by Jeremy Wright, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital/culture-is-digital-june-2019-progress-report> Accessed 12 July 2021.

institution to have a website, it now needed to consider building an app to allow guided tours on mobile phones, and social media accounts to communicate directly with visitors.²⁷ With new social media platforms being developed each year, it must have felt to digital teams that the goalposts were constantly being moved in terms of what was expected, and what was possible. Working in this difficult decision-making environment, heritage organisations also had to navigate the legal complexities of ownership and image-sharing.

4.2 Ownership and the Public/Private web

The 2000 literature had contained many warnings about the complexities of copyright law, and it has indeed proved to be a significant barrier to digitisation. There are two reasons why; the first is that in-copyright artworks and photographs are generally not chosen for digitisation, because of the work involved in seeking additional permission for online usage, and this creates a bias towards older objects: “As an institution with, in its collection, thousands of artists it is financially impossible to make an agreement with all the different rights organizations involved. So here the famous black hole of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century is clearly a problem.”²⁸ The second is that when a digital copy is made from an out-of-copyright work, organisations sometimes claim new copyright in the surrogate image, although the rules are open to interpretation. In her keynote speech at the National Digital Forum in 2017, cultural heritage lawyer Andrea Wallace described a “vacuum of binding legal guidance on how institutions should proceed”²⁹ when sharing digital surrogates online. This has been described as having a “chilling effect on creativity”³⁰ with curators anxious not to face

²⁷ The word ‘app’ is short for an ‘application’, typically a small, specialised programme downloaded onto mobile devices such as phones and tablets to allow them to function like computers.

²⁸ Buelinkckx, E. (2013) ‘Digitizing Photographic Archives: Project-linked Opportunities and Pitfalls, The role of Europeana in an institutional digitization landscape’. Proceedings of a meeting held 28 October - 1 November 2013, Marseille, France. *Digital Heritage International Congress* pp87-90 p90

²⁹ Wallace, A. (2017) *Access and the Digital Surrogate: Openness as a philosophy*. Paper given at the National Digital Forum in Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crKUJxIX3sY&feature=youtu.be>

³⁰ Aufderheide, P. et al. (2016) ‘The impact of copyright permissions culture on the US visual arts community: The consequences of fear of fair use’. *New Media & Society* Vol. 18(9) p2020.

penalties for breaking copyright restrictions. A survey of nearly 3,000 arts professionals in the US found: “Widespread lack of confidence and misconceptions about fair use; resulting in exaggerated and consequent delays, deformations, and failure to execute mission.”³¹

2001: Wikipedia – a crowd sourced information space allowing anyone to contribute
2002: Friendster - enabled features like music streaming and social gaming
BlackBerry – first <i>convergent</i> phone allowing web browsing and email
2003: MySpace – allowed extensive profile customisation
2004: Facebook – first social network with more than a billion accounts
Flickr – photo sharing
2005: Bebo – blogging and interactive questionnaires
YouTube – video sharing
2006: Twitter – allowed direct interactions with previously inaccessible people
2007: Tumblr – shortform blogging and ability to combine different types of content
Apple iPhone – most successful smart phone – incorporated first ‘apps’
2010: Instagram – a focus on images rather than text
iPad – hand-held computer with the added functionality of a smart phone
2011: Snapchat – communication disappears and is not archived
2017: TikTok – short creative video content shot on phones

Fig 3: Launch dates of some of the first social media companies and smart devices illustrating the regularity of the emergence of new platforms, each of which changed the expectation of users and required a different type of content from digital teams.

As well as the difficulties of understanding a complex legal situation, there is an added complication in that often the object in question was usually acquired long before there was any need to obtain the extra permissions necessary to display it online. Once again, the problem is compounded by the size of collections. Objects on display may have been donated, and when they were gifted to the organisation no request for online use was made. Contact details in the acquisition paperwork may be incomplete, or not up to date. When dealing with art collections, there may be many

³¹ Aufderheide, P. et al (2016) p2012

stakeholders who would need to be contacted for permission to display the same work: the artist or their estate, the current owner of the piece, perhaps even another gallery from whom the artwork is on loan. When multiplied by, potentially, hundreds of thousands of objects, the size of the task is prohibitive. It is easy to see why the simplest course of action is to leave any potentially difficult item out of the list of objects to digitise, although it is interesting to note that those who did put in the extra work to clear copyright reported that it was worth the extra effort: “In the end, I think we cleared 3,000 copyrights, and 99.95% of those were positive.” (Adrian Glew, Tate Archive)

As well as falling foul of intellectual property rules, concerns were raised that creating online collections could negatively affect an organisation’s right to benefit from its ownership of an object. Parry points to the fact that for curators, the information about an object is part of what gives it value: “The object and the information about that object have been forever fused, part of the same whole in museum curatorship”³² Europeana's Harry Verwayen agrees that heritage organisations believe their value lies in their authority as owners and interpreters of their collections, and that openly sharing on the internet can diminish that value:

Heritage institutions are the gatekeepers of the quality of our collective memory, and therefore a strong connection between a cultural object and its source is felt to be desirable. There is a fear that opening up metadata will result in a loss of attribution to the memory institution, which in turn will dilute the value of the object.³³

The fact that an object has been selected, verified and attributed a value by a cultural heritage institution is, for Verwayen, what gives it value. But it has also been suggested that a more creative approach, allowing an object to be freely copied, altered and reimagined can also create value of a

³² Parry (2007) p76

³³ Verwayen, H. et al (2012) *The Problem of the Yellow Milkmaid: A Business Model Perspective on Open Metadata*. Europeana White Paper No. 2. Available at: https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Publications/Whitepaper_2-The_Yellow_Milkmaid.pdf Accessed 7 July 2021. p4

different kind, and that this approach may be more *democratic*. In 2018, researcher Helena Barranha investigated a series of copies of a medieval painting, the 1488 *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni* by Domenico Ghirlandaio, housed at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid (a work which appears on both Google Arts and Culture and Europeana). She noticed that although it has been adapted and copied in many different styles (you might perhaps describe it as an early example of a *meme*), none of these interpretations were linked to the museum's website and did not appear in searches from it. Barranha argued that this was a short-sighted approach that ignores the need for museums to engage in a wide-ranging conversation with potential new audiences who may encounter one of the adaptations without being aware of the original:

The online dialogue with the audiences should not be limited to the momentary and frequently superficial interaction through social media. By linking institutional contents to external resources, museums can bring the cultural diversity of networked cultures into their official digital platforms in a consequent and meaningful way.³⁴

Barranha believes that, rather than being something to fear, the unstructured and unconstrained nature of the online world could be used to benefit heritage organisations, by opening up dialogue and building relationships with those who wouldn't ordinarily be aware of their collections. This could be described as a way of *democratising* heritage, because by allowing users to create their own artworks, new and previously unengaged audiences could be attracted to heritage collections.

The reason there was so much concern that the value of collections be preserved when digitising is both financial and political. Firstly, the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath had a worldwide impact on the economic health of heritage organisations. In the US, the collapse of Lehman Brothers bank had a direct effect, as it was a major sponsor of museums across the country, and elsewhere there were hiring freezes and cuts to operating budgets.³⁵ In the UK, regional museums suffered as

³⁴ Barranha, H. (2018) 'Derivative Narratives: The Multiple Lives of a Masterpiece on the Internet' *Museum International* Volume 70, Issue 1-2 P32

³⁵ Vogel, C. (2008). 'Museums Fear Lean Days Ahead'. *New York Times*, 19 October 2008. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/20/arts/design/20muse.html>. Accessed 7 July 2021.

council budgets were cut.³⁶ The Museums Association reported in 2014 that serious effects caused by the financial crash and subsequent government austerity measures were still being felt six years later:

Museums have been obliged to reduce opening hours and access, introduce charges, cut exhibitions and free events, and curtail school visits and outreach work. Some well loved institutions have closed to the public... one in 10 respondents has been forced to consider selling objects from collections to generate income.³⁷

Financial pressure forced heritage organisations to focus on exploiting the value of their collections in a specifically monetary way in order to survive, and this may have constituted a barrier to digitisation because freely sharing collections on the internet may have been seen as *giving away* something that could be monetised. The idea of charging for online collections continued to be a theme post-2003 but, unfortunately, as well as being expensive to create and maintain, it was becoming evident that online collections, and the internet more generally (with the exception of online shopping), remained stubbornly resistant to monetisation. Early hopes that sales of images or pay-per-view exhibitions could provide an income were proving to be over-optimistic. A 2009 Arts Council presentation concluded that "currently the market for charging for arts content online appears challenging. For research participants the point of the internet is that it is free."³⁸ Even when there was a market for digital photographic reproductions, the cost of administering this was often greater than the income from the images themselves. Even so, there was often a resistance from funding or administrative bodies to closing down any income stream, however small. As one interviewee commented:

I do recall now, in those ... early conversations, back around 2004 and 2005, was the idea of earning income from these things... And it just didn't make commercial sense... even in the year where we had our highest level of income, it never actually covered the staff cost of

³⁶ Museums Association (2011) 'The Impact of Cuts on UK Museums'. *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://archive-media.museumsassociation.org/19072011-cuts-report.pdf> Accessed 11 May 2021.

³⁷ Museums Association. (2014) 'Cuts Survey 2014'. *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1123548> p3

³⁸ Keaney. E. (2009) *Digital opportunities research programme: findings from phase 1*. Arts Council England. Available at: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/4795764/> Accessed on 7 July 2021.

digitising that. And I think public sector bodies are often very good at ignoring that. They're very good at looking at turnover, and not really at profit. (Kevin Bacon, Brighton Pavilion and Museums)

This unwillingness to discount possible income streams, however small, can be seen as a barrier to digitisation. A 2018 research project exploring the limits of open and shared access to collections at National Galleries Scotland found that “commercial considerations were a barrier to openness, and that more open access would be possible but was hampered by priorities around income generation.”³⁹

Politically, heritage organisations were also being asked to prove their value as a condition of grant funding. With budgets under pressure, many organisations naturally turned to sources such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund for funding to undertake digital projects. But these funds came with a requirement that projects would be monitored and evaluated, not to prove a financial value, but instead a measure of engagement aligned with the political values of the government of the day. For the 1997 New Labour government under Tony Blair, that meant a commitment to improve social inclusion: “Publicly funded heritage projects, such as those funded through the HLF, are expected to meet targets for community involvement, representative inclusion and 'widening participation', with evaluated and measured outcomes, often by external evaluators.”⁴⁰ *Value* in this context is calculated in terms of the richness of the experience for those involved in the project, often community groups. By accepting funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, organisations were asked in return to show engagement with previously unserved audiences, to align with the Blair government's social inclusion policy. The result of this was a series of short-term projects set within those unserved communities, rather than purely digitisation projects. The projects may have

³⁹ Ross, J. (2018) *Digital Collections, Open Data And The Boundaries Of Openness: A Case Study From The National Galleries Of Scotland*. Paper given at the Museums and the Web Conference 2018, Vancouver, available here: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/proposal/digital-collections-open-data-and-the-boundaries-of-openness-a-case-study-from-the-national-galleries-of-scotland/> Accessed 7 July 2021.

⁴⁰ Richardson, L.J. (2014) *Public Archaeology in a Digital Age*. PhD Thesis. University College London. Available at: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1436367/> Accessed 7 July 2021. p27

had digital outputs in the form of project-specific micro-sites or apps, but there was generally no funding for maintenance of these. A 2017 report by an international NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) looking at the challenges of global knowledge-sharing summed up the result of years of project-funding, describing a legacy of “zombie websites... haunting the internet”:

This syndrome is well established and the causes are familiar: short funding cycles; the appeal of the new ... the speed of change in ICTs; the eternal problem of demonstrating the impact of knowledge investments; and our expectations as users these days that information should be available free and instantly.⁴¹

These projects tended to involve the creation of new heritage material and not the digitisation of existing collections. In fact, it was the HLF’s policy as far back as 1998 *not* to fund object-by-object digitisation projects *unless* they had an element of added value through community engagement: “Simple transfer of existing catalogues to digital form could be excluded from HLF funding, unless it results in the creation of a genuine value-added element to public appreciation and understanding.”⁴² Digitisation is expensive even in its simplest form, so the requirement for community involvement may have made planned digitisation projects too complex and expensive to consider.

The impact of the financial crash and years of austerity that followed meant the heritage sector had to design its projects to fit the grants available. This would have created a project-based approach, with a tendency to create new heritage material rather than digitising existing collections, and I argue that this was a barrier to digitisation. In the next chapter I will demonstrate that additionally, by forcing the heritage sector to follow the government’s political priorities, the funding restrictions created by the UK government in the early 2000s made digitisation projects more difficult to

⁴¹ Brandner, A and Cummings, S (eds). (2017) *Agenda Knowledge for Development: Strengthening Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals*. Knowledge for Development Partnership, Vienna. Available at: <https://www.k4dp.org/agenda/#:~:text=The%20Agenda%20of%20Knowledge%20for,society%20by%20the%20Year%202030>. Accessed 7 July 2021. P15.

⁴² Ross, S., Economou, M. Anderson, J. (1998). *Funding ICT in the Heritage Sector: HLF Report*. University of Glasgow. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263768046_Funding_Information_and_Communications_Technology_in_the_Heritage_Sector_HLF_report Accessed 7 July 2021. p19

undertake, thereby creating another barrier to digitisation. An analysis of government policy relating to the heritage sector since the year 2000 explores this further in Chapter Five.

GLAM organisations trying to take a more commercial approach to exploiting the value of their collections may have been hesitant when it came to sharing their collections with commercial partners. As predicted in the 2000 literature, both commercial and not-for-profit organisations were building aggregation platforms. Google Arts and Culture and Europeana, the EU-funded *meta-aggregator* were creating websites allowing partner institutions to display their heritage objects alongside those of others. According to Google, its *Arts and Culture* section, originally called *The Art Project*, came about in 2011 as a result of the enthusiasm of a small group of employees who had a now familiar-sounding idea to *democratise* art: “It started when a small group of us who were passionate about art got together to think about how we might use our technology to help museums make their art more accessible ... to a whole new set of people who might otherwise never get to see the real thing up close.”⁴³ Thousands of institutions have contributed tens of thousands of high-resolution images to Google and Europeana since then. But some museums and galleries are concerned about ceding image control to Google. One museum commentator noticed that a Google search for Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* revealed a top image result that, although it was credited to the correct institution: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), if clicked on, the image link directed the searcher not to MoMA’s website, but the Google Arts and Culture app. He concluded:

Submitting your collections to Google may indeed help you fulfill [sic] your museum’s mission, but it may also cost you an opportunity to support your museum’s margin. I could argue that you are competing with Google for ownership of your objects, but you are definitely competing with them for attention and web traffic.⁴⁴

⁴³ Sood, A. (2011) ‘Explore museums and great works of art in the Google Art Project’. *Official Google Blog*. Available at: <https://googleblog.blogspot.com/2011/02/explore-museums-and-great-works-of-art.html> Accessed 7 July 2021.

⁴⁴ Faber, N. (2018) ‘Should Your Museum Partner with Google Arts and Culture?’ Available at: <https://cuberis.com/should-your-museum-partner-with-google-arts-and-culture/> *Cuberis*. Accessed 28 June 2021.

Another danger of relying on a third-party platform is that if its funding disappears or it is no longer technically supported, organisations then have little control over what happens to their content. A recent example that illustrates this is the closure of Europeana’s UK pipeline. With the exception of a few major contributors such as the British Library, anyone who wants to contribute to Europeana must use an accredited national aggregator in their own country, and this is the only route into the system. In the UK, that pipeline was managed by Culture Grid and run by the Collections Trust. But, Arts Council England, which supported Culture Grid, decided in 2015 that it would no longer fund it. So, although Collections Trust is continuing to pay the server fee for the existing database, at the time of writing there is currently no pipeline available for most heritage organisations to contribute new material to Europeana. Kevin Gosling, Chief Executive of the Collections Trust, says that even within government, this development isn’t widely known:

Routinely, and hilariously, people like the Government Art Collection occasionally get in touch and say: ‘we’d really like to put stuff into Europeana, how do we do that?’ And we just go, ‘trot along the corridors to DCMS, knock on the door of the people who could fund the replacement aggregator and make it happen’. (Kevin Gosling, Collections Trust)⁴⁵

The reason for the closure of the Europeana pipeline is likely to have been because the UK government is planning to build an aggregator of its own. Through UK Research and Innovation, a non-departmental public body created in 2018, it is funding an £18.9 million project called Towards a National Collection (TaNG), with the aim of “creating a unified virtual ‘national collection’ by dissolving barriers between different collections.”⁴⁶ It will be interesting to see whether organisations are willing or able to contribute a significant proportion of digitised heritage collections to justify its status as a *national collection*, and whether the value and purpose of online collections can be determined and exploited as a result of collaboration between organisations (as predicted in the 2000 literature).

⁴⁵ Interview with the author, full transcript available in Appendix 2.

⁴⁶ Towards a National Collection (nd) ‘About Us’. *Towards a National Collection* website. Available at: <https://www.nationalcollection.org.uk/about> Accessed 10 September 2021.

4.3 Authority and Democratisation

The social inclusion agenda of Tony Blair's 1997 Labour government had become embedded in heritage practice in the years that followed and the sector continued to theorise to what extent new, more diverse audiences could be attracted and engaged using digitisation. This was happening alongside a wider debate in the sector over whose heritage should be collected and how much authority curators should have in the telling of heritage stories. Practitioners were exploring projects which involved the co-curation and co-creation of heritage, in collaboration with previously unserved communities they wanted to engage. Two examples from the US are useful here, as public historians began to ask bold questions about the historical authority of museums and the debates they began would influence the UK's heritage discourse in the years that followed. The first is the 2011 book *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. This collection of essays by funding body the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage in Philadelphia tries to answer questions such as: "Do the changes that our culture is experiencing fundamentally challenge museums' traditional relationship to their constituencies? ... Are museums actually being asked to let go of their position as historical authorities?"⁴⁷ In one chapter, Matthew MacArthur, director of new media at the National Museum of American History, asks how digitisation is altering museums' relationships with their visitors and concludes that, while audiences might enjoy experimenting and creating their own experiences online, this engagement can be limited, and in fact many will seek the expertise and curatorial choices of traditional museum exhibitions instead:

For now, the most sought-after type of interactivity in the learning process still seems to be real communication by and with those who know the collections best – not only curators, but artists, creators, collectors, and users of objects. Any effort to directly or indirectly facilitate such communication, and do so openly so anyone can benefit from the exchange, will enhance museum learning experiences.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Adair, B. Filene, B. and Koloski, L. (eds) (2011) *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage: Philadelphia p11

⁴⁸ MacArthur, M. (2011) 'Get Real! The Role of Objects in the Digital Age'. In Adair, B. Filene, B. and Koloski, L. (eds) (2011) *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage: Philadelphia p60

The book features a series of examples of collaborative projects, but the hand of the curator is always evident. It seems that there is a limit to how far heritage organisations can really ‘let go’ of their collections, and a curatorial expert will always be needed to guide the collection, interpretation and evaluation of historical evidence. The second example is a radical rethinking of a museum’s purpose, by Nina Simon at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History in California, known as the MAH. As new executive director, Simon reasoned that if unserved audiences weren’t engaging with heritage collections despite the best efforts of curators, then perhaps the institutions and collections themselves needed to change. She developed a new approach to inclusion policy, which she called ‘OFBYFORALL’: “We decided at the MAH, we had to ask some new questions. That we were going to ask: ‘What are we willing to change about this institution to welcome new people here?’”⁴⁹ Simon felt that the MAH’s visitors didn’t represent the diverse community in which the physical museum building was sited. She wanted to create an organisation consisting ‘of’, created ‘by’ and thereby ‘for’ everyone, so she began to bring in the local community to create its own exhibitions and events. More staff were brought in to reflect the diversity of the population of Santa Cruz. Young people were recruited to bring other young people into the museum, with ideas such as gender-neutral bathrooms. The result was a quadrupling of income, a quadrupling of staff numbers and an 8-times increase in visitor numbers. There is no doubt that financially and socially, the MAH is a success story. But what was missing from that story was the MAH’s collection. For example, in a forty-minute talk to the *MuseumNext* conference in 2018, the word *collection* didn’t appear once and there was no reference to its existence. A search of the MAH website reveals that it does have one – 300 contemporary artworks and 7,000 historical objects, mainly from the early 1900s – but in order to be *of, by and for all*, the collection had to take a back seat to newly-created artworks built around community memories, and events using the MAH as a social space. These two examples show that it is still unclear how object-by-object digitisation can democratise heritage. MacArthur

⁴⁹ Simon, N. (2018) *Nina Simon: OFBYFOR ALL*. Museumnext Conference 2018: London. MuseumNext Vimeo channel. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/276300637> Accessed 12 July 2021.

concludes that audiences still demand curated content and are not always looking for co-curation or the freedom to interpret their own experiences. On the other hand, the MAH example suggests that for some organisations, the collection itself will never attract new audiences, and that the problem lies within the content of the collection itself.

While object-by-object digitisation is still government policy, the 2018 *Culture is Digital* report reveals a contradiction at its heart when it comes to democratisation. While suggesting that access to online collections will increase visitor numbers by “enabling cultural organisations to engage more people and to reach out to new audiences,” in a section two pages later it warns that digitisation on its own is no silver bullet.⁵⁰

Simply making digital content available does not mean that audiences will automatically engage... Whilst some parts of the population are being ‘double served’ by physical and digital cultural offerings, others remain on the outside. This means that, at least for some, technology is not a way to drive cultural engagement.⁵¹

The *access equals engagement, equals democratisation* assumption was one that appeared first in the 2000 literature, but it was becoming clear that offering access to collections does not automatically attract new audiences, something the Arts Council had predicted in 2009: “The evidence suggests that as it stands digital is unlikely to draw a new wave of previously unengaged audiences to the arts.”⁵² In 2016, two research projects also questioned whether providing access to digitised collections could democratise heritage by engaging previously unserved communities. Taylor and Gibson, writing in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, examined the relationship between democratisation and digitisation and concluded that far from having a democratising

⁵⁰ DCMS (2018) p18

⁵¹ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p21

⁵² Keaney. E. (2009) *Digital opportunities research programme: findings from phase 1*. Arts Council England. Available at: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/4795764/> Accessed 7 July 2021. p43.

effect, “certain digitisation activities can subtly reinforce non-democratic structures.”⁵³ They argued that digitisation merely transferred existing power dynamics into the online space, which meant that visitors were often presented with a traditional top-down curated experience, rather than an invitation to dialogue (although they accepted that there are exceptions). They argued that this is because: “Much of the attention given to democracy through digitisation has focused on the ability to reach larger user numbers, rather than how the discourse itself is created and mediated.”⁵⁴ The authors reference Laurajane Smith’s *Authorised Heritage Discourse*, developed by Smith, Professor of Heritage and Museum Studies at the Australian National University, in her influential 2006 book *Uses of Heritage*. In it, she asserts that the content and interpretation of heritage collections is controlled by privileged and powerful institutions, and that heritage discourse “takes its cue from the grand narratives of nation and class on the one hand, and technical expertise and aesthetic judgement on the other.”⁵⁵ Taylor and Gibson conclude that the mere fact of digitisation itself had not challenged existing power structures in the heritage world. This issue was also raised in a second research project published the same year: *Writing in Heritage and Society*, a Leeds University cross-departmental group of health, philosophy and entertainment scholars surveyed heritage professionals to try to calculate both the financial and cultural value of digital heritage, asserting that online engagement has not historically been well understood, and has therefore been hard to measure. While discussing the ethical difficulties of undertaking participatory projects with communities, they remark:

For most questionnaire respondents, such issues are largely immaterial because the type of participation presented by digital tools is beyond the reach of their organization, due to perceived or actual lack of capacity to achieve this level of engagement... this kind of project is only likely to be possible for organizations as well funded as the British Museum.⁵⁶

⁵³ Gibson, J. and Taylor, L.K. (2016) ‘Digitisation, digital interaction and social media: embedded barriers to democratic heritage’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 5 p2.

⁵⁴ Gibson and Taylor (2016) p2

⁵⁵ Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge p11

⁵⁶ King, L., Stark, J.F. and Cooke, P. (2016) ‘Experiencing the Digital World: The Cultural Value of Digital Engagement with Heritage’. *Heritage & Society*, Vol. 9 No. 1, May, 2016, 76–101. P91

Undertaking truly participatory projects, those that could be argued to be more democratic, is perceived to be more expensive than most organisations can afford. The survey's authors concluded that there is a disconnect between the literature and current practice, because "the large-scale projects often profiled in the literature are beyond the means of many institutions."⁵⁷ They argue that technological advances are happening too fast for the literature to keep pace, and as a result "the cutting edge of exploring digital possibilities in heritage is now firmly in the realm of practice."⁵⁸ These two research projects of 2016, taken together, conclude that digitisation has not democratised heritage in the way the 2000 literature predicted, because it has not been established that providing access to collections online has the effect of reaching new and more diverse audiences. Digitisation projects have been hampered by external pressures, such as economic hardship following the financial crash of 2008 and political pressure exerted by successive governments that have required heritage organisations to prove they are engaging meaningfully with unserved communities while at the same time providing value for money. Because digitisation is expensive, and because unserved communities have proved hard to reach online, this engagement has tended to happen in the real world. Because of the need for community involvement, digital projects that have taken place have tended to involve the creation of new heritage rather than the digitisation of existing collections. And because digitisation has proved to be expensive and time-consuming whilst at the same time not creating income, heritage organisations feel they are unable to prioritise mass digitisation projects because they cannot prove there is a cost-benefit. And, although the government still cites mass digitisation as a policy priority, it appears to be unaware that much of the actual digitisation work has not yet taken place. As I will show in the following chapter, changing government policy has given heritage organisations two competing purposes. While they are being encouraged to share their collections and reach unserved audiences, and have therefore embraced their social justice role, they are at the same time having to professionalise and

⁵⁷ King et al (2016) p94

⁵⁸ King et al (2016) p96

act more like businesses. This requires working in their own interest to leverage the value of their collections, either to create income or attract visitor numbers to prove value for money to their funders. I will argue that this contradiction is at the heart of the heritage sector's problem with digitisation, and that it has revealed a disconnect between heritage organisations' and the UK government's perception of the purpose of heritage.

5. Digitisation and government policy

Because so much of the funding for UK GLAM organisations comes from national or local governments or government-funded public bodies, this chapter considers how the influence of government policy has affected the digitisation decisions made by GLAM organisations. There follows an analysis of policy documents relating to heritage and digitisation released by successive governments in the time period 2000 – 2020.

5.1 Historical Context: 1997 New Labour

The appearance of the internet into people's homes and workspaces in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with a change of national government in the UK. The success of Tony Blair's rebranded *New Labour* party in the 1997 election brought to an end eighteen years of Conservative government and saw the introduction of a new series of priorities and policies that affected the GLAM sector. Since 1979, the Conservative government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had been trying to reduce funding to museums and the arts, warning that heritage organisations would need to professionalise and become more financially self-sufficient. The post-World War II years had seen a ballooning of government funding, with direct subsidies to UK museums growing from £1.24m to £154.6m between 1949 and 1988.¹ According to the Museums Association, "Thatcher was no friend of museums and by ... 1990, many publicly funded museums were in crisis after years of neglect."² Kendall Adams acknowledges that the changes made by Thatcher's government also gave museums more autonomy, and that since that time many had taken the opportunity to diversify their funding structures by opting out of local authority control, being run

¹ Clarke, R. (1991) 'Government Policy and Art Museums in the United Kingdom' in Feldstein, M. (ed) *The Economics of Art Museums*, University of Chicago Press. p271.

² Kendall Adams, G. (2013) 'Assessing the Thatcher legacy' *Museums Association website*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2013/04/01052013-assessing-the-thatcher-legacy/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

instead by independent trusts.³ It might be expected that this would have led to an increasingly independent heritage sector, but according to John Newbiggin, Special Advisor to the Minister for Culture Chris Smith (1997-2001), the government's actions after 1997 had the opposite effect. Newbiggin describes how the incoming Labour government wanted to harness and build on the economic growth of arts and culture. In 2001, it marked this intention by changing the way it described the sector from the *cultural industries* to the *creative economy*: "a much broader range of activities whose relationship to the arts and popular culture was more subtle and complex, but whose economic potency was infinitely greater."⁴ According to Newbiggin, Blair's government wanted to create a new "golden age" for the arts, but in its haste to force rapid change, it took a rather heavy-handed approach:

While the philosophy of the creative economy embraced the significance of the small, flexible and often unique initiative or ecosystem, the desire for change and for the fulfilment of measurable targets imposed the exact opposite – a determination to find industrial-scale policy solutions to explicitly non-industrial issues of cultural policy.⁵

Newbiggin describes how a welcome increase in funding was accompanied by a slew of new targets and other corporate measures of accountability. Cultural commentator Robert Hewison calls this a "Faustian bargain", saying: "Having made its way to the front door of the Treasury, 'Creativity' had to wear a business suit – or at least carry a clipboard."⁶ GLAM organisations were also required to follow the government's policy priorities, most notably *social inclusion*: "Arts and sports bodies which receive public funds should be accessible to everyone and should work actively to engage those who have been excluded in the past."⁷

³ Museums Association (2018) *Museums in the UK 2018 Report*. p10. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/app/uploads/2020/07/31012018-museums-in-the-uk-2018.pdf> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁴ Newbiggin, J. (2011) A golden age for the arts?' *Cultural Trends*. Vol. 20, Nos. 3–4, September–December 2011. p232

⁵ Newbiggin, J. (2011) p232/233

⁶ Hewison, R. (2011) "'Creative Britain': myth or monument?' *Cultural Trends* Vol. 20, Nos. 3–4, September–December 2011 pp235 –242. p239

⁷ DCMS (1999) *Policy Action Team 10: The contribution of Sport and the Arts*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. p5. Available at: <https://collective-encounters.org.uk/library-resource/policy-action-team-10-a-report-to-the-social-exclusion-unit/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

What did promoting social inclusion mean in practice for heritage organisations? Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester Richard Sandell describes the evolution of the concept of social inclusion from a simple financial measure of poverty to encompassing the economic, political and cultural exclusion of particular groups in society. Sandell describes museums as traditionally elitist organisations which “can be seen to represent institutionalised exclusion.” As a result, he argues, when instructed to promote social inclusion, museums tended to avoid too much self-examination and focused instead on what he called *cultural* inclusion: “through addressing issues of representation, participation and access, to promote cultural equality and democratisation.”⁸ Sandell identifies two ways in which they could do this: firstly by directly delivering “positive social outcomes to defined audiences” and secondly by “acting as vehicles for broad social change.”⁹ The problem for those planning inclusion projects was that the government required accountability in return for its funding and these concepts were broad and difficult to prove. Cultural analyst Sara Selwood has argued that there was no effective measure of meaningful engagement with heritage:

The DCMS has found such measures elusive, and ... it is not alone in doing so. Attempting to measure the impact of museums through outcomes is tantamount to measuring what modernism always cast as unmeasurable. Given that the sector still has to get to grips with such basic outputs as visitor numbers, producing evidence of social impact remains essentially aspirational.¹⁰

What did the need to address social inclusion mean for digitisation? The DCMS had set targets for online collections, but they were simple: the number of visits to the website and the proportion of the collection available online. Because it was difficult to categorise online visitors in terms of their social and economic status, it was difficult to prove engagement with unserved communities and

⁸ Sandell, R. (1998) ‘Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion’. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17:4 p410

⁹ Sandell, R. (1998) p412

¹⁰ Selwood, S. (2002) ‘What difference do museums make? Producing evidence on the impact of museums’ *The Critical quarterly*, 12/2002, Volume 44, Issue 4 p75

heritage organisations were therefore disincentivised from undertaking purely digital projects. However, despite being difficult to measure, the assumption that simply providing online access to collections could improve social inclusion, or *democratise* heritage, ran as a thread throughout UK government policy, beginning in 2000 with the document *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*.

5.2 Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All

In the foreword to this 2000 policy guidance document, Culture Secretary Chris Smith described the role of GLAM organisations as “agents of social change in the community, improving the quality of people’s lives through their outreach activities”¹¹. Museums had long held an educational role, but this document created a new social responsibility: tackling poverty and inequality. Smith made it clear that he understood this would be a challenge: “I ... recognise that action to tackle social exclusion will have to be balanced against their other important responsibilities, such as the acquisition of new material, the conservation and interpretation of their collections, scholarship and education.”¹² The Executive Summary that followed was a list of new requirements, including improving access to collections through the use of computer technology, but also an instruction to identify and directly engage with socially excluded communities. Following this, a six-point plan advised GLAM organisations to review their practices and draw up new strategies and evaluation processes.¹³ While the document specifically advocated the use of IT “as a means of making ... collections more accessible”, it contained no guidance on how this increased access could be demonstrated to improve social inclusion.¹⁴ The problems defined as *social exclusion* in the report are: “unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, poverty and family breakdown.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, these were the kind of people who were least

¹¹ DCMS (2000) p3

¹² DCMS (2000) p3

¹³ DCMS (2000) p5

¹⁴ DCMS (2000) p5

¹⁵ DCMS (2000) p7

likely to have access to the internet. Compare that list to a description of the estimated nine million people who have difficulties using the internet, and you can understand why many heritage organisations may have been confused about how online access could be a solution to social exclusion: “being unemployed, retired, disabled, living on a low income, no or few qualifications: these are the biggest predictors of being on the wrong side of the digital divide.”¹⁶ With pressure to show measurable outcomes, a much easier approach would have been to undertake projects in the real world, engaging directly with people in excluded communities. If funding for a project had come through the HLF, this would have the added benefit of ticking its community participation requirements at the same time. By focusing attention on outreach activities in the real world and requiring engagement outcomes, this policy document may have ensured that digitisation began to quietly slip off the priority list of many GLAM organisations.

5.3 Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All

The following year, 2001, a second document was produced, responding to feedback received after the publication of *Centres for Social Change* and a 1999 document, *Libraries for All*. Setting out the government’s vision, Culture Secretary Chris Smith responded to criticisms that it is not the business of heritage to be involved in social regeneration by saying: “I cannot agree.”¹⁷ This document set out a “methodology for developing a strategic approach” for the entire GLAM sector (adding libraries to the list of organisations for whom “social inclusion should be mainstreamed as a policy priority.”)¹⁸ This action plan reads like a business strategy, instructing organisations to identify the socially excluded, establish their needs, “develop strategic objectives”, adapt current practice to fulfil those

¹⁶ Good Things Foundation (2020) *Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included UK*. p3. Available at: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/blueprint-for-a-100-digitally-included-uk-0.pdf> Good Things Foundation website. Accessed 12 July 2021.

¹⁷ DCMS (2001) *Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All: Co-operating Across the Sectors to Tackle Social Exclusion*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080206194338/http://www.culture.gov.uk/NR/rdoonlyres/6FB47415-2E61-42CB-9111-5F05C6096CBA/0/libraries_archives_for_all_socialex.pdf Accessed 20 August 2021. p4

¹⁸ DCMS (2001) p9 and p8

needs, and finally: “Evaluate success, review and improve.”¹⁹ Its tone is emphatic and brooks no dissent. The report includes some feedback from smaller museums and archives, describing:

the gap between aspiration and reality in what they could achieve... (many institutions who do not have computerised catalogues are unable to make their catalogues available on the Internet) ... Similarly, the demands made on both national and local authority organisations for income generation serve as a disincentive to work with socially excluded individuals and groups.²⁰

This feedback appears in a summary of consultation responses but is not addressed within the policy document. I would argue that it shows that the GLAM sector was, in 2001, already aware of the complexities of digitisation and the contradiction involved in requiring organisations to follow policy priorities that necessitated sharing their collections for free, while at the same time putting pressure on them to generate more of their own income.

5.4 Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life

In 2005, the Museums Association report *Collections for the Future* had found that “some museum staff are sceptical about the benefits of investing in digitisation, believing that online access to collections offers a relatively poor-quality experience for a relatively high cost.”²¹ The report pledged to “encourage the MLA and others to find ways of encouraging and supporting more digitisation of collections, and adding value to existing digital resources.”²² The same year, the DCMS put out a consultation document *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life*, aimed at discovering “what aspects of England’s museums need to be addressed to face the challenges of the 21st century.”²³ It describes digitisation primarily in terms of its ability to reach across international

¹⁹ DCMS (2001) p9

²⁰ DCMS (2001) p13

²¹ Wilkinson, H. (2005) *Collections for the Future*. Museums Association. p14. Available at: https://www.museumsassociation.org/app/uploads/2020/06/policy_collections.pdf Accessed 12 July 2021.

²² Wilkinson, H. (2005) *Collections for the Future*. Museums Association. p14. The MLA is the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, a DCMS-funded advisory body (quango) charged with improving innovation in the GLAM sector, abolished in 2010.

²³ DCMS (2005a) *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life – The Value of Museums*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The National Archives. p6. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20071204140725/http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Consultations/2005_closed_consultations/21_century_museums.htm Accessed 12 July 2021.

boundaries: “Digitisation offers the opportunity to broaden the audience for UK museums’ collections to the whole world, but also for museums to add extensively to the value of collections in terms of interpretation, information, access and learning opportunities.”²⁴ The consultation received 75 responses, which were summarised in another document released late in 2005. In the section relating to digitisation, it reported that: “There was a widespread belief that the sector needed to do more to ensure that the opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), electronic access and digitisation were being fully utilised.” There was also “strong support for a joined-up ICT strategy, to include the development of a set of common standards.”²⁵ Accordingly, later the same year, a collaborative working group was set up, made up of museum leaders, representatives of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, and local government and DCMS members. It was given the task of developing a national strategy for the whole sector. The result of this was another consultation document, published in 2006, once again setting out priorities for museums and inviting responses. It only related to England’s museums and was called *Understanding the Future: Priorities for England’s Museums*.

5.5 Understanding the Future: Priorities for England’s Museums

This document follows on from the previous year’s *Understanding the Future* report and is described as being “the second part of a three-stage process to set priorities for museums in England and the public programmes that support them.”²⁶ In its foreword, Minister for Culture David Lammy reveals a new set of priorities for government, introducing the phrase *cultural democracy*, and saying this should be a “guiding value” not just for museums but for the government as a whole²⁷. Cultural

²⁴ DCMS (2005a) p18

²⁵ DCMS (2005b) *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life: Summary of Responses*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The National Archives. p10. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20071204140731/http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_2005/understanding_museums_21century_responses.htm Accessed 24 February 2021.

²⁶ DCMS (2006a) *Understanding the Future: Priorities for England’s Museums*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The National Archives. p4. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20061209031821/http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Consultations/2006_current_consultations/consultation_pem.htm Accessed 25 February 2021.

²⁷ DCMS (2006a) p2

Democracy sounds very much like what is now called *diversity* and it forms a major part of this report. It is not just about giving access to new audiences but involving them in everything museums do: the objects they collect, the stories they tell about them and the staff they employ. It has taken over from *social inclusion*, which appears only once in the document, in a section describing the volunteer programme of the Imperial War Museum. This change may indicate the beginning of a more nuanced understanding that access to culture does not necessarily equal engagement with it. As well as *cultural democracy*, another theme is developed further: the international consumption of UK heritage that was briefly introduced in the first *Understanding the Future* report. This time, it is specifically tied to economic benefit: “Museums’ contribution to our economy is well documented, and the pull they exert on overseas visitors well known. They will help to set the stage for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012, and will be part of what visitors remember when they go home.”²⁸ The report has a whole section on building partnerships, both with commercial partners in the UK, and with an international audience as part of a “cultural foreign policy.”²⁹ In this document we see the start of a perceived role for the heritage sector as a national representative “for Britain’s image, reputation and relationships abroad.”³⁰ These two themes dominate, and digitisation has disappeared from the agenda. The words *digitisation*, *online* and *internet* are entirely absent. *Access* appears a handful of times, but never in relation to computers or digitisation. A closer look at the minutes of the collaborative working group that consulted on the report reveals that digitisation *was* included in the discussion leading up to its publication. In its third meeting, on the 5 April 2006, it was recorded that “the Group was concerned about the assumption that digitising collections in their entirety was an access solution” and members were concerned about:

Whether the focus on providing digitised images, often without sufficient narrative, was providing a quality experience for the user. It was felt that digitisation was not an end in itself, but rather a valuable tool in adding depth and greater understanding to the user experience.³¹

²⁸ DCMS (2006a) p2

²⁹ DCMS (2006a) p26

³⁰ DCMS (2006a) p26

³¹ DCMS (2006b) *Minutes of the Collaborative Working Group Meeting 5 April 2006, MLA, Victoria House*. Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The National Archives. p3. Available at:

Unfortunately, these concerns did not make it into the final document. If it had, this important question about the potential ability of online collections to improve social inclusion would have received a wider audience, particularly among policymakers. The assumption that *access equals inclusion* would continue to appear in later government policy documents, and it wasn't until *Culture is Digital* in 2018 that it was finally acknowledged that digitised collections did not in and of themselves constitute a solution to social exclusion and could not therefore *democratise* heritage.

The third part of the *Understanding the Future* report involved the DCMS asking the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to prepare an "initial action plan" to be delivered at the 2007 Museums Association Conference.³² This would have been welcome across the sector in terms of outlining digital policy, as the Museums Association was calling for a strategic plan for digitisation, describing it as "an urgent priority."³³ But the initial action plan was not published until 2009, and never implemented, probably due to a change of government the following year. So, what was in that third report? The text can be accessed via the National Archives website and describes three aims: "Supporting excellence, promoting partnerships and building capacity."³⁴ It lays out a ten-point action plan, continuing the themes of the two previous reports by calling for a *people-first* approach "particularly to create narratives for new and wider audiences" and introducing the idea of co-curation: "Museums should reflect the trend for people to want to be not merely consumers, but producers, welcomed and engaged."³⁵ Point 9 in the action plan is: Investing in the Digital Future. It

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090902211412/http://www.cep.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/museums_and_galleries/3381.aspx Accessed 12 July 2021.

³² DCMS (2006a) *Understanding the Future: Priorities for England's Museums*. p5. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20061209031821/http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Consultations/2006_current_consultations/cons_of_pem.htm Accessed 12 July 2021.

³³ Cross, S. and Wilkinson, H. (2007) *Making collections effective. Effective Collections: an introduction. Collections for the Future: two years on*. Museums Association. p21. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/app/uploads/2020/06/makingcollectionseffective.pdf> Accessed 12 July 2021.

³⁴ MLA (2009) *Leading Museums: a vision and strategic action plan for English museums*. Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. The National Archives. p3 Available at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100304064112/http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/strategies/museum> Accessed 26 February 2021.

³⁵ MLA (2009) p8/p4

does not talk specifically about digitisation but says: “Through ‘Digital Britain’ the Government has expressed its strategic priority for digital development. The MLA will work closely with others to develop sector-specific responses.³⁶ *Digital Britain* was an initiative mainly concerned with bringing internet access to unserved communities and improving digital infrastructure. It led to the *Digital Economy Act* of 2010, which mainly covered media policy. Unfortunately, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council was not able to continue its work on sector-specific responses, as it was abolished in 2010 in what became known as the ‘Bonfire of the Quangos’, the sweeping abolition of dozens of semi-autonomous government-funded bodies that followed the election of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.³⁷ The MLA’s functions were split between Arts Council England and the National Archives. The move was heavily criticised by the Museums Association, which commented that “in terms of governance, the United Kingdom has ceased to exist as a cultural entity.”³⁸ Heritage policy would now be merged with that of the arts, and this would have consequences for the government’s digitisation priorities.

5.6 Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone

After it was given responsibility for the museums and libraries part of the MLA, the Arts Council asked Baroness Morris to review and adapt its recently-developed strategic framework for the arts, to “embrace the museums and libraries sectors and serve its new wider sphere of influence.”³⁹ The results of this review were published in the 2011 report *Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone*. While this is a fairly standard aspirational document

³⁶ MLA (2009) p13

³⁷ Independent (2011) ‘Bonfire of the quangos: bodies to be abolished’ 23 October. *Independent Newspaper website*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bonfire-quangos-bodies-be-abolished-2107709.html> Accessed 12 July 2021.

³⁸ Anderson, D. (2011) ‘Who should take the lead in cultural strategy?’. *Museums Association website*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2011/02/01032011-who-should-take-lead-in-cultural-strategy/> Accessed 26 February 2021.

³⁹ Arts Council England (2011) *Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone*. Arts Council England. The National Archives. p2. Available at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130201170754/http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/browse-advice-and-guidance/developing-great-museums-and-libraries> Accessed 12 July 2021.

promoting excellence, people-centred policies and skills development, it was accompanied by an evidence review, which is helpful because it examines the “ongoing debates about the role of museums.”⁴⁰ The review notes that museums have changed from being centres of curatorial expertise to a more public-orientated role. It goes on to mention the existence of the social inclusion agenda, but adds that some have argued that it is politically-driven.⁴¹ And, crucially, it asserts that rather than win new audiences, “evidence suggests that ... the main opportunity for digital technology is to enrich and deepen engagement, rather than to draw in people who are not currently engaged.”⁴² The closure of the MLA gave the Arts Council the opportunity to feed back its belief that: “There is no evidence that digital technology in and of itself offers a way to engage people with little or no current interest in arts and culture” into the museum policy debate.⁴³ In the report, digitisation is framed instead as a useful way for museums to do more with their collections, to “show a wider volume of material than can be shown in the physical space.”⁴⁴ Another key aspect of the report is that it recognises that museums have struggled to measure their worth, as part of the wider drive to be accountable. It notes that many organisations have been expending a lot of their energy trying to find a reliable method of proving the impact of their work: “It is perhaps a sign of these sectors’ sense of a need to prove their value to funders that there is so much material in this area. In particular, many studies focus on accounting for value.”⁴⁵ The review concludes that although the MLA and museums themselves had worked hard to understand how best to measure the value of heritage, due to a “lack of robust data based on common indicators”⁴⁶ they had been

⁴⁰ Smithies, R. (2011) *A Review of Research and Literature on Museums and Libraries*. Arts Council England. The National Archives. p7 Available at:

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130201191518/http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/museums-and-libraries-research-review/ Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁴¹ Smithies, R. (2011) p7/8

⁴² Smithies, R. (2011) p26. This evidence appears to have been drawn from the Arts Council’s own research, carried out by MTM London in 2010 and available here:

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20101215175403/http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/digital-audiences-engagement-arts-and-culture-online/ Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁴³ MTM London (2010) ‘Digital audiences: Engagement with arts and culture online’ *Arts Council* p37

⁴⁴ Arts Council England (2011) p9

⁴⁵ Arts Council England (2011) p42

⁴⁶ Arts Council England (2011) p43

unable to find a successful approach. The Arts Council took up the challenge and followed this up with a series of reports aimed at trying to find a way to measure the value of the cultural sector. The first, 2012's *Measuring the economic benefits of arts and culture*, set out a range of suggested methods that cultural institutions could use to put a monetary value on their work.⁴⁷ It outlined four of them: Economic Impact Assessments (the effect on the local economy of drawing in visitors to an area), Economic Footprint Analysis (comparing an organisation's activities with the wider national economy), Contingent valuation (the benefit of a product or service over and above the price paid) and Social return on investment (a way of measuring non-economic costs and benefits known as *social accounting*). The report concludes that no one measure is better than the others, and the most appropriate measure would depend on the size and type of organisation. It warned that organisations should provide comprehensive supporting data on how they reached their valuation figures:

Partly because there have been a number of economic impact assessments in particular that have made grandiose claims, there is scepticism in some quarters towards the claims made by arts and culture representatives for the economic benefits of their work. If you are commissioning work of this kind, it is imperative that your figures be believed.⁴⁸

In 2014, *The value of arts and culture to people and society – an evidence review* took a more holistic view, aiming to measure the sector beyond simple monetary values, claiming that “arts and culture have an impact on our lives in complex, subtle and interrelated ways, and that each benefit relates to a cluster of other benefits.”⁴⁹ These attempts to quantify the value and impact of heritage would emerge again in 2016 as a significant part of the *Culture White Paper*.

⁴⁷ Arts Council England/BOP Consulting (2012) *Measuring the economic benefits of arts and culture*. Arts Council. The National Archives. Available at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130201170948/http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/browse-advice-and-guidance/measuring-economic-benefits-arts-culture> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁴⁸ Arts Council England/BOP Consulting (2012) p32

⁴⁹ Arts Council England (2014) *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*. Arts Council England. The National Archives. p5 Available at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20150205141353/http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/browse-advice-and-guidance/value-arts-and-culture-people-and-society-evidence-review> Accessed 12 July 2021.

How does this discussion of the value of heritage affect the digitisation debate? Digitisation does not appear in the 2012 document and in the 2014 report only once, in a chapter entitled *Evidence Gaps*: “Another noticeable absence in evidence was around the use of digital technologies and how arts and cultural organisations are using this technology.”⁵⁰ The report claims it will undertake more work to understand how digital heritage can increase its audiences: “Over the next two years this same review will map the changing picture of technology in the arts, so we can learn from the experience of those who use technology most effectively, and maximise the potential for arts and culture.”⁵¹ Later reports of the same name don’t, in fact, appear to address this, but it’s possible that this was deemed unnecessary due to the introduction of the *Digital Culture* report, published jointly between the Arts Council and Nesta, which ran for five years from 2013 and had the same remit.⁵²

5.7 Digital Culture

This report, originally planned to run for three years from 2013–2016 but later extended to 2019, aimed to generate quantitative survey data of technology use in arts and culture organisations. The 2013 report found that museums were “less likely than the rest of the sector to report positive impacts from digital technologies, particularly in terms of revenue generation and audience development.”⁵³ This may not be surprising when you consider that people are accustomed to paying for performances of theatre, arts and dance, but expect museums to be free. The 2013 report identifies the barriers to digital as a lack of funding, a lack of time, and a lack of IT skills.⁵⁴ The 2014 report identifies that museums are still not performing as well as other arts and culture sectors: “This raises interesting questions about the appropriateness of different technologies for different

⁵⁰ Arts Council England (2014) p44

⁵¹ Arts Council England (2014) p44

⁵² Formerly known as the ‘National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts’, Nesta became a charity and ‘innovation foundation’ after being abolished along with the MLA in 2010. See Nesta’s website ‘Our History’ page, available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/brief-history-nesta/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁵³ MTM London (2013) *Digital Culture: How arts and cultural organisations in England use technology*. Arts Council website. p5. Available at: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/DigitalCulture_FullReport_2013.pdf Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁵⁴ MTM London (2013) p37

types of cultural institution, and the barriers they face in achieving their digital aspirations.”⁵⁵ The 2014 report also contained a set of fact sheets, one for each organisation type. It shows that while museums report the same types of benefits from digital as other organisations, these are at a much lower level in all but two categories (see Fig 4). In the arts and heritage sector as a whole, the 2014 report lists the same barriers to digital success as the previous year: “70% of arts and cultural organisations cite lack of funding and time, and over a third still feel that they do not have the in-house skills, IT systems or the necessary expert advice to meet their digital aspirations.”⁵⁶ It is worth noting here that galleries are assessed separately from museums in the Digital Culture reports and do much better when asked about the overall impact of digital. This may reflect the fact that paintings are easier to capture digitally in a photograph and display well on a computer screen, or perhaps because, arguably, they can more easily be enjoyed in their own right, requiring less in the way of interpretation. The 2015 survey reported a decrease in digital activity in almost all areas. Its top two reported barriers were a lack of funding and time and the report showed that the percentage of organisations reporting these barriers had increased year-on-year since 2013. Issues with management, out-of-date technology and lack of IT skills were also seen as significant barriers. The associated factsheet on museums reported that: “Since 2013 there has been no significant change in the importance of digital to museums.”⁵⁷ These three reports showed that the barriers to digitisation, particularly in museums, appeared stubbornly persistent. Cost and time remained the main factors, with perceived weaknesses in management and staff skills close behind. 2015 also saw the publication of the Arts Council’s *Making Digital Work*, which drew on what it had learned from the 52 projects funded by the Digital R&D Fund, another partnership between the Arts Council and Nesta, along with the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It contained techniques and templates

⁵⁵ MTM London (2014) *Digital Culture 2014: How arts and cultural organisations in England use technology*. Arts Council website. p12. Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Digital-Culture-2014-Research-Report2.pdf> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁵⁶ MTM London (2014) p12

⁵⁷ MTM London (2015) *Digital Culture 2015. Museums Factsheet*. Arts Council website. p1 Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Digital-Culture-2015-MUSEUMS-FACT-SHEET.pdf> Accessed 12 July 2021.

to help arts and heritage organisations make the most of the opportunities of the digital world and is interesting because the tools it offers are designed to help organisations understand the value and purpose of digitisation, a question that apparently still needed to be asked. Fifteen years since the *Centres for Social Change* report in 2000 had made the heritage sector explicitly answerable to government policy, successive governments had attempted to capture the value of the cultural sector and harness it to further their policy priorities. Whether it be social inclusion under Tony Blair, or diversity and international recognition under the 2010 coalition, policy advice bodies MLA and the Arts Council had wrestled with the difficulty of measuring *value* in heritage, both explicitly as a financial sum and as a wider force for social good and wellbeing.

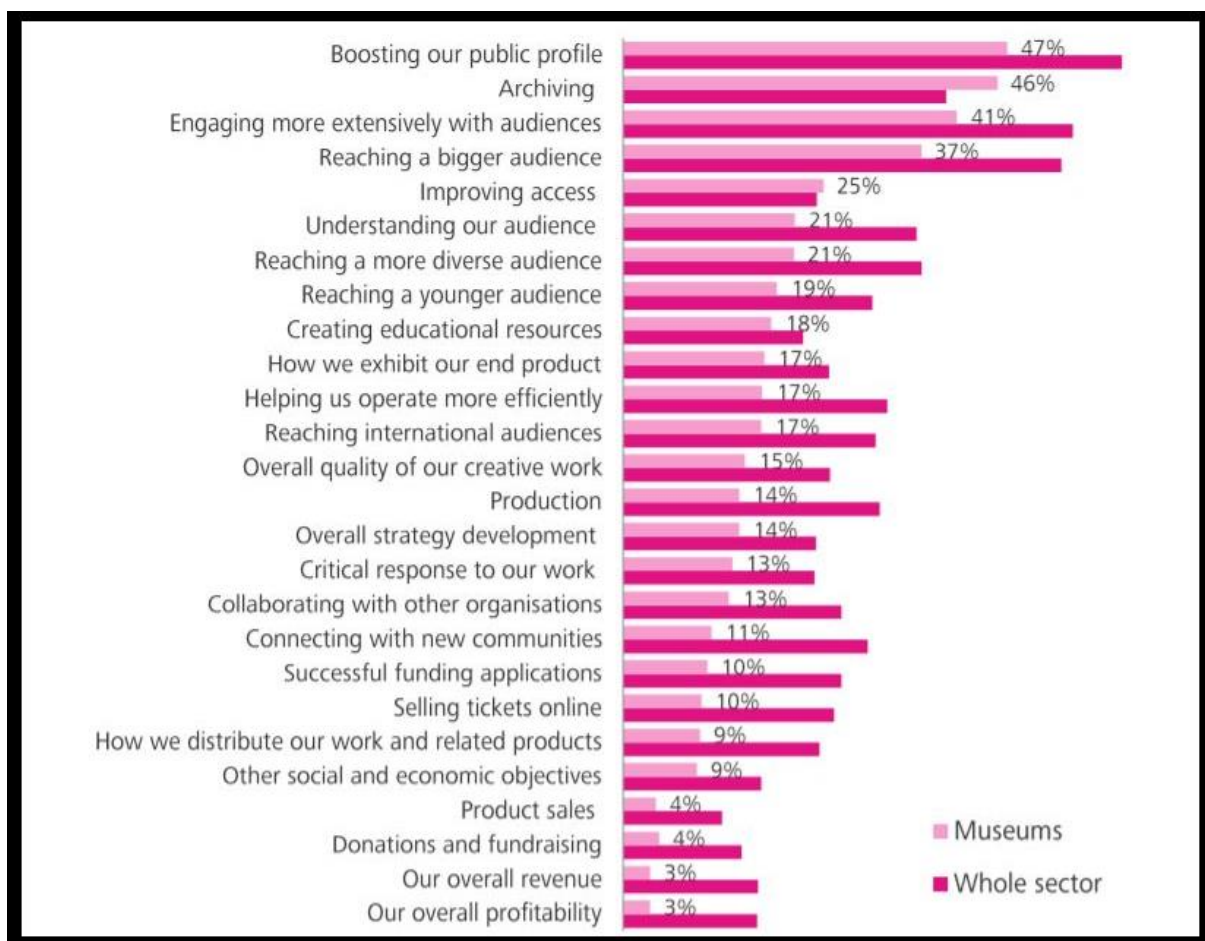


Fig 4. The impact of digital on museums' business areas (museums vs whole sector), *Digital Culture 2014*, showing how museums were finding it hard to reap the benefits of digital compared to the sector as a whole. Picture credit: MTM London

At the same time, the digitisation agenda rose and fell in the background, as organisations attempted to find value in projects that were expensive and time-consuming, and often created no measurable outcomes that could guarantee their continued funding. The Nesta reports found that over time, museums, in particular, were not keeping up with the rest of the sector when it came to making use of digital technology. But, with change of government in 2015 came a new boost to the digitisation agenda, reflected in the publication of two documents: the government's 2016 *Culture White Paper*, and the 2018 *Culture is Digital* report.

5.8 The Culture White Paper

The Culture White Paper was only the second of its kind, with the first released fifty years previously. In his foreword, Culture Minister Ed Vaizey describes it as “not a revolution but an evolution.”⁵⁸ The 2015 General Election had been won outright by the Conservatives under David Cameron. In their manifesto, the Conservatives had pledged to “enable our cultural institutions to benefit from greater financial autonomy to use their budgets as they see fit.”⁵⁹ But, a closer look at the White Paper reveals that it has just as many directives for heritage as the reports of previous governments. The document is split into four sections, each section leading with a statement that reveals the new government's policy priorities. The structuring and order of the document is in many ways more interesting than its contents. For example, in its introduction, the White Paper spends a considerable amount of space setting out the value of culture, in the following order:

- Culture has a positive impact on wellbeing
- Culture can improve health, education and community cohesion

⁵⁸ DCMS (2016) *Culture White Paper*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Crown Copyright. p6. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/510798/DCMS_The_Culture_White_Paper_3_.pdf Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁵⁹ Conservative Party (2015) *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015*. Conservative Party. Theresa Villiers website. p41. Available at: <https://www.theresavilliers.co.uk/sites/www.theresavilliers.co.uk/files/conservativemanifesto2015.pdf> Accessed 12 July 2021.

- The cultural sector makes an important contribution to the national economy and this is increased by its excellent international standing

Putting this emphasis on value at the beginning of the White Paper reflects the huge amount of work undertaken by the Arts Council in the previous five years and reinforces the idea that it is important to the 2015 Conservative government that the impact of heritage should be both measurable and measured. Section one is entitled *Everyone should enjoy the opportunities culture offers, no matter where they start in life*. This is social inclusion back on the agenda, placed front and centre, with the government once again directly instructing heritage organisations to work to improve it:

We are challenging arts and cultural organisations to work even harder to make sure the most disadvantaged in society have greater opportunities to access culture. We will work with Arts Council England to ensure that every single cultural organisation that receives taxpayers' money contributes to fulfilling this duty. And they will report on progress made.⁶⁰

The paper goes on to direct heritage organisations to work harder to diversify their workforces, both in terms of socio-economic background, race and disability.

Section two is called *The riches of our culture should benefit communities across the country* and emphasises the need for leadership and partnership in the regions. It appears to build upon, but does not mention, the work of the *Renaissance in the Regions* programme of 2001. This saw the government-funded creation of cultural hubs allowing heritage organisations to work in partnerships to help reinvigorate badly under-funded regional museums. It was scaled down under the 2010 coalition which replaced "the existing hub network with a group of core museums."⁶¹ In a review commissioned by the MLA in 2009, the programme was criticised for being badly organised and badly run, of having "lost its way" and after seven years, still having "not yet amounted to more than

⁶⁰ DCMS (2016) p23

⁶¹ Gov.uk (2012) 'Museums must think creatively about the future'. *UK Government website*. Crown Copyright. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/museums-must-think-creatively-about-the-future> Accessed 12 July 2021.

the sum of its parts.”⁶² Hewison credits this report with being so damaging that “its main effect was to seal the fate of the MLA when the Coalition government came to power in 2010.”⁶³ But, despite all its problems, the programme did breathe life into struggling regional museums, leading Hewison to conclude that *Renaissance in the Regions*: “had helped to halt the decline of English regional museums, morale had improved, and visitor numbers had gone up, but the MLA had indeed snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.”⁶⁴ In the light of this, perhaps it is unsurprising that the programme is not credited in this section of the White Paper. This second section is also where policy announcements about digitisation can be found. Describing the benefits of digitisation as “obvious”, and linking it to giving access “to millions of people who cannot physically visit a collection or performance”, the White Paper goes on to promise “We want to go further and make the UK one of the world’s leading countries for digitised public collections content ... We will commission a report on the key issues to be addressed.”⁶⁵

Section three is named *The power of culture can increase our international standing*. This section credits heritage with being a major part of the UK’s soft power and adding to the country’s status.⁶⁶ It pledges to do more to bolster “brand Britain” by building on the economic returns of the 2012 Olympic Games and working with partners abroad to protect international heritage sites.⁶⁷

Abandoning its chapter-heading statements for part four, which is simply called *Cultural investment, resilience and reform*, the White Paper pledges to help the cultural sector do more to secure its own funding, by setting up corporate and funding partnerships, seeking crowdfunding and attracting

⁶² Selwood, S. (2009) *Renaissance in the Regions: Realising the Vision*. Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. The National Archives. p101. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20091116111021/http://www.mla.gov.uk/news_and_views/press/releases/2009/~media/Files/pdf/2009/Renaissance_Review_Report2 Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁶³ Hewison, R. (2014) *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*. Verso, London. p117

⁶⁴ Hewison, R. (2014) p117

⁶⁵ DCMS (2016) p38/39. The report on the key issues mentioned here was 2018’s *Culture is Digital*

⁶⁶ DCMS (2016) p42

⁶⁷ DCMS (2016) p44

philanthropic support, saying “The government wishes to see the sector use more of its commercial expertise.”⁶⁸ It ends by announcing a new review of museums, saying: “Museums are jewels in our national crown and we want to ensure that they remain so and are as best-placed as they can be to continue supporting our aspirations for access, place-making and soft power.”⁶⁹ Once again, museums were to be assessed on their digital progress: “The themes of this white paper will run across all three strands of the review with a particular emphasis on shared services, storage, digitisation and resilience.”⁷⁰ This review would become 2018’s *Culture is Digital* report.

5.9 The Mendoza Review

While digitisation would be considered again in detail in 2018’s *Culture is Digital* report, we must first consider the museums review under Neil Mendoza, published in 2017. This independent review was a fresh look at museums and their relationship with government. In his introduction, Mendoza perfectly encapsulates the somewhat claustrophobic and restrictive relationship museums had had with central government since 2000, describing them as “locked in a cultural embrace”:

Government-sponsored museums are some of the only cultural organisations in England, of any type, to hold direct relationships with central government ... They are also the only cultural organisations where government sets a policy of free admission... there is no similar policy for any other form of culture.⁷¹

The review identifies nine priorities for museums, one of which is *Digital capacity and innovation*. Using data from Nesta’s Digital Culture reports, it notes that museums have lagged behind other types of heritage organisation but suggests that this may be because they have taken a more targeted approach that suits their particular circumstances.⁷² In a section called *Digitising Collections*, the report first links digitisation to archiving. It then suggests that while museums are

⁶⁸ DCMS (2016) p55

⁶⁹ DCMS (2016) p57

⁷⁰ DCMS (2016) p57

⁷¹ DCMS (2017c) *The Mendoza Review: an independent review of museums in England*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. p6 Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673935/The_Mendoza_Review_an_independent_review_of_museums_in_England.pdf Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁷² DCMS (2017c) p64

keen to use the internet to broaden and deepen engagement, the quality of an experience can suffer due to the speed of technological development, concluding that “not everything a museum does requires a digital footprint.”⁷³

The tone of the Mendoza Review is much more understanding and sympathetic than previous government documents, but it does suggest that museums should try harder to monetise their digital assets or to raise money through crowdfunding or subscription models.⁷⁴ It accepts that funding has been a major barrier to digitisation, but suggests that a more joined-up approach between the DCMS Museums team and the DCMS Digital Culture team could help support museums to improve their digital literacy and confidence.⁷⁵ The Mendoza Review breaks little new ground in the search for a solution to museums’ lack of progress in digitisation but sets out the challenges they face in a balanced way, suggesting that museums could do more to help themselves, but accepting that the structures they work within can be restrictive and counter-productive. The review’s recommendations suggest a more joined-up approach is needed between government and the bodies it funds, accepting that funding is unlikely to increase and calling for more to be done to wring every last bit of value out of every pound spent.

5.10 Culture is Digital

In tone and content, the independent Mendoza Review is very different to the following year’s *Culture is Digital* report, a much more declamatory document which trumpets the success of the UK’s creative industries and is bursting with positive language: the foreword alone, written by the Culture Secretary of the time, Matt Hancock, contains the phrases *driving force*, *technical brilliance*, *world-class*, *unprecedented opportunities* and *creative excellence*. The main body of the text is also strongly corporate, with the first paragraph of the executive summary containing *competitive*

⁷³ DCMS (2017c) p64

⁷⁴ DCMS (2017c) p65

⁷⁵ DCMS (2017c) p67

advantage, future prosperity, ambitious Digital Strategy, world-leading and capitalise on the opportunities. After the measured language of the Mendoza Review, it feels almost bombastic. In terms of content, it sets out three themes: Firstly, *Using digital to engage audiences*: “there is the potential to reach out to new as well as existing audiences, including those who may have been previously disengaged or uninterested”⁷⁶ Secondly: *Skills and the digital capability of cultural organisations*: “Research shows that organisations who benefit most from digital technology are those who are digitally mature.”⁷⁷ And finally, *Future Strategy: Unleashing the creative potential of technology*: “The UK cultural offer is key to our soft power”⁷⁸ These themes can be described simply as diversity (or alternatively, the social inclusion agenda), digital maturity and corporate partnerships, three threads that can be traced back through previous reports. Despite appearing to be once again calling for GLAM organisations to reach new and unserved audiences, the report does appear to reflect the fact that access does not equal engagement, calling it “no silver bullet” and saying “simply making digital content available does not mean that audiences will automatically engage.”⁷⁹ While acknowledging that digitisation has faced challenges, *Culture is Digital* suggests that better co-ordination and strategy could be solutions, and that the problem is at heart a technical one, which could be solved by: “looking at the common standards needed to make our nation’s great cultural assets more interoperable, discoverable and sustainable.”⁸⁰ This is a return to the idea raised in the 2005 consultation document: that a lack of digitisation could be blamed on the absence of agreed technical standards, a very different problem to the barriers identified by successive Nesta reports: a lack of money, time and skills. This point may once again have been drawn from the wider heritage discourse and brought in from those in the cultural sector who consulted on the document. The contribution of heritage practitioners is evident in official

⁷⁶ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. p9. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁷⁷ DCMS (2018) p10

⁷⁸ DCMS (2018) p11

⁷⁹ DCMS (2018) p21

⁸⁰ DCMS (2018) p51

government publications down the years, as they have been asked to consult on each iteration of policy, and the supporting documents of reports often reveal what the wider heritage sector was thinking at the time. For example, the call for a digitisation strategy in 2005 came from its consultation document *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life: Summary of Responses* and the concern that digitisation was not creating quality experiences for audiences in 2006 can be seen in the document *Minutes of the Collaborative Working Group Meeting 5 April 2006*. As noted in the previous chapter, a lack of agreed standards was often cited as a recognised barrier to digitisation within the heritage sector and this may be why it appears in *Culture is Digital*, whose project team consulted with more than 150 organisations across the sector.

The policy commitments made in *Culture is Digital* are wide ranging, with specific tasks given to particular organisations. For example, Arts Council England, The Space and the Heritage Lottery Fund are instructed to help funded organisations collect, interpret and integrate their data “to drive their audience engagement strategies”⁸¹. In total, there are twelve commitments, involving at least fourteen organisations: heritage practitioners (including the National Archives, British Library, National Gallery and Royal Opera House), funding and support bodies (Arts Council England, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund) and other cultural organisations (the BBC, UK City of Culture and the Intellectual Property Office). The development of a “metrics framework” was announced and Arts Council England was instructed to create a “Digital Maturity Index for the cultural sector, to enable organisations to understand and benchmark their own digital capability.”⁸² The National Archives were to work on a set of common standards “to make our nation’s great cultural assets more interoperable, discoverable and sustainable.”⁸³ The fulfilment of these commitments in 2019 and 2020 means there is now an unprecedented level of support for organisations wishing to digitise. There are resources including strategy guides, evaluation tools and

⁸¹ DCMS (2018) p25

⁸² DCMS (2018) p15

⁸³ DCMS (2018) p16

case studies.⁸⁴ If guidance, advice and assistance is what was missing from organisations' digitisation projects, this influx of useful documents should have solved the problem. But will these online tools and support systems actually change the behaviour of heritage organisations? Since most of these were released shortly before the time of writing, it is too early to tell. There are, however, some conclusions that can be drawn by looking at the recent research into how the Covid-19 pandemic affected digitisation decisions. These give a snapshot of the sector's digital status in 2020, two years after *Culture is Digital* had once again made digitisation a policy priority. They are a helpful measure of whether digitisation had, since 2018, been re-prioritised and whether the guidance given had finally helped organisations to find the value and purpose of digitisation.

5.11 Covid-19 impact

The Covid-19 pandemic forced heritage organisations to shut their doors to the public during nationwide (and worldwide) lockdowns. The UK's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, invoked the first in March 2020. Four months later, in July, museums and other cultural institutions were allowed to reopen with strict social distancing restrictions, but many remained closed for practical and financial reasons.⁸⁵ Practitioners and researchers moved fast to quantify the effect of the Covid-19 lockdowns on the heritage sector. A summary of their preliminary findings can perhaps help to understand whether organisations' attitudes to online collections have changed since the 2018 *Culture is Digital* report.

5.11.1 Art Fund: Covid-19 Impact

This summary report from 2020 offers the following headline findings from a survey of 427 museum staff and directors: firstly, 86% of organisations had increased their online presence or content as a result of Covid-19. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it reports that: "those that had already invested in digital

⁸⁴ Eg: Digital Pathways and the Digital Culture Compass. Available at: <https://digipathways.co.uk/resources/> and <https://digitalculturecompass.org.uk/> Accessed 29 August 2021

⁸⁵ BBC News (2020) 'England's museums and galleries to reopen after 4 July'. *BBC News website*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-53220894> Accessed 29 January 2023

before the crisis tend to be in a better position to meet this challenge. Others are struggling to catch up.”⁸⁶ One curatorial member of staff said: “We are, like other people, trying also to improve our cataloguing, our copyright status, and trying to get as much of our collection online as possible.” While less than half had seen an increase in online visitors to their websites, there were reports of significant increases in engagement with social media content. The survey also found that for many museum staff, finding ways to generate income through online activities was an area of interest.⁸⁷ The report reveals that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown prompted heritage organisations to “rush to get ‘everything’ online.”⁸⁸ This suggests two things. Firstly, online content only became a priority when the bricks-and-mortar museum was shut, showing that in-person visits were still the main concern of most organisations. Secondly, that museum staff believed that online content would be valued by those accessing the museum remotely. The quote above from the curatorial staff member reveals a recognition that time for digitisation only became available due to the closure of the museum, suggesting that a lack of time is a major barrier when the museum is open. The fact that organisations are keen to monetise online content is also revealing, showing that the perceived value of online collections is not just measured in visitor numbers, but is also explicitly financial.

5.11.2 Digital Responses of UK Museum Exhibitions to the COVID-19 Crisis

This 2021 study from the Universities of Warwick and Oxford found that of 88 temporary museum exhibitions due to open between March and June 2020 that had to be cancelled because of the lockdown, only 21 went on to offer online content.⁸⁹ This figure initially suggests that roughly a quarter of museums were planning to offer digitised content in addition to the physical exhibition,

⁸⁶ Art Fund_/Wafer Hadley (2020) *Covid-19 Impact: Museum Sector Research Findings*. Art Fund_ Available at: <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/art-fund-covid19-research-report-final.pdf> Accessed 20 August 2021. p19

⁸⁷ Art Fund_/Wafer Hadley (2020) p16/19

⁸⁸ Art Fund_/Wafer Hadley (2020) p19

⁸⁹ King, E. et al. (2021) ‘Digital Responses of UK Museum Exhibitions to the COVID-19 Crisis, March – June 2020’. *Curator: The Museum Journal*. 64.3 pp487-504. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cura.12413> Accessed 1 August 2021.

but in fact this is not the case, since an unspecified number of these (two are quoted) created online content *only in response to the closure*. This means that *less than* one in four of the museums surveyed were planning to run online content alongside their temporary exhibitions before the pandemic forced the closure of the museum, suggesting that using digital to support and augment physical exhibitions was still not standard practice, and was only prioritised when the physical exhibition was forced to close.

5.11.3 Heritage in lockdown: digital provision of memory institutions in the UK and US

This study, from the University of Brighton, was conducted between April and July 2020 - the UK's first lockdown period. It collected data from the online offerings of 83 heritage organisations in the UK and US. Its aims were to find out what kind of digital content was made available to audiences during this time and whether it was designed to respond to the social needs created by the Covid crisis. The research found that collections-based content was the second most popular type of offering after 'communication', with 29% of UK organisations providing this. But when the data was broken down further and educational resources for schools separated out, specific collections-based content was just 8%, with an additional 7% categorised as 'free database exploration' and 1% offering 3D collections. The report found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, heritage organisations focused on their educational resources during this time, presumably to help students having to undertake their school lessons from home. While attempts were made to reach new audiences, "most efforts from memory institutions were placed on providing a variety of offerings for audiences who already have an interest on the institutions' collection and related activities."⁹⁰ The report lists the priorities set out by the Museums Association and the International Council of Museums for heritage organisations during Covid, and among these is a responsibility to respond to: "immediate societal needs, including supporting vulnerable groups such as the homeless, people suffering from

⁹⁰ Samaroudi, M., Rodriguez Echavarria, K., and Perry, L. (2020) 'Heritage in lockdown: digital provision of memory institutions in the UK and US of America during the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Museum Management and Curatorship*. 35:4, p356

dementia, children needing access to educational material, refugees, minorities and women experiencing domestic violence.”⁹¹ Although the research did not find that museums had done this to any great extent, it did find that:

Through the COVID-19 pandemic the sector has identified audiences and needs with which memory institutions want to engage through digital resources and mechanisms: these include anti-racism activists, audiences characterised through their social condition (lonely, bored) rather than their identity or interests, and those for whom digital may not be an easy or obvious means of communication.⁹²

The groups described in the research are ethnically diverse, those engaged in social justice activism and the socially or politically isolated. These are very similar to those groups identified by the social inclusion agenda of the early 2000s. The report identified that during the Covid pandemic, heritage organisations began to react to the crisis with what might be described as *socially-engaged* responses, offering diverting content for people who were socially isolated, using their spaces to offer sanctuary to people in need or using their platforms to support social justice campaigns such as *Black Lives Matter*. The debate over whether museums should take a stronger social justice role was discussed in Chapter One in relation to movements such as *Museums are Not Neutral*. It seems that the combination of a workforce with time on its hands to reflect on the sector’s role and a global health crisis that forced people into social isolation had the effect of provoking a strong community-driven response: “Buildings shut down but people were not forgotten, partners were not abandoned. Through small acts of care, the museum world would continue to provide joyful distraction and creative engagement in the darker moments of the lockdown.”⁹³ The appropriateness or otherwise of this social role became the subject of debate in the media over the course of the pandemic as questions were raised over whether government-funded organisations with a traditionally neutral political position should become involved in such campaigns. The UK government’s view was that it was not the heritage sector’s role to involve itself in social causes, and

⁹¹ Samaroudi, M. et al (2020) p339

⁹² Samaroudi, M. et al (2020) p358

⁹³ Morse, N. (2022) ‘Care, repair, and the future social relevance of museums’. *Museums & Social Issues: A Journal of Reflective Discourse*. Volume 15, 2021 - Issue 1-2: Special Volume: Repair p32

this became a news story when two trustees resigned after the government tried to stop them from airing their views about the decolonisation of museums.⁹⁴ The rethinking of the political and social role of museums is well illustrated by another debate that took place in the sector during this period, concerning how museums define themselves. The International Council of Museums had split the heritage community over its attempt to rewrite the definition of museums to include the words: “democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue,” prompting the resignation of nine members of Icom’s board, claiming the new definition was “ideological”.⁹⁵ The previous definition had described museums as “in the service of society” but mainly focused on “the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity” ie: its collections.⁹⁶ The amended version, agreed in 2022, was a compromise, retaining the previous focus on collections, while also acknowledging that museums felt they had a significant social role:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.⁹⁷

This debate over the purpose and role of museums could be seen as the logical conclusion of a process that has seen museums try to connect unserved audiences with their collections and perhaps find that they aren’t always of interest to them as they are currently presented. This has led to some organisations moving beyond the objects themselves to become creative community spaces instead (eg: Nina Simon at the MAH, discussed in Chapter Four). It has also led to a divergence

⁹⁴ Savage, M. (2021) ‘UK government’s heritage culture war is stifling museums, say trustees’ *Observer/Guardian newspaper website* 9 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/may/09/uk-governments-heritage-culture-war-is-stifling-museums-say-trustees> Accessed 1 August 2021.

⁹⁵ Kendall Adams, G. (2021) ‘Ideological rift persists as Icom restarts museum definition consultation’ *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/03/ideological-rift-persists-as-icom-restarts-museum-definition-consultation/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁹⁶ CiMAM (nd) ‘Take part in creating the new ICOM Museum Definition.’ *International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art*. Available at: <https://cimam.org/icom-new-museum-definition/> Accessed 5 February 2023.

⁹⁷ ICOM (2022) ‘Museum Definition.’ *International Council of Museums website*. Available at: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> Accessed 5 February 2023.

between heritage discourse and government policy. This can be seen in a 2020 row over the toppling of statues of historical figures linked to slavery, which saw government ministers bringing in new legislation to stop plaques and statues of controversial figures from being removed, and heritage professionals defending the decolonisation movement, saying it “is not about rewriting history but about exploring and uncovering untold stories.”⁹⁸ The government’s reaction highlights the close control the DCMS has exerted over the heritage sector over the past 20 years, beginning with a Labour government’s insistence that the heritage sector should be responsible for improving social inclusion by attracting new and diverse audiences and ending with a Conservative government imposing its own traditional view of the purpose of heritage, to protect it from, as Culture Secretary Robert Jenrick described it: “woke worthies.”⁹⁹ Although the two views can almost be seen to be diametrically opposed: Labour’s social inclusion agenda promoting a more visitor-led multi-layered approach to stories of the past and Conservative policies favouring a more traditional top-down authoritarian approach, all political colours of government since 1997 have required heritage organisations to follow their policy priorities and account for themselves in order to justify their funding. I would argue that although there has also been a continuous policy of encouraging digitisation throughout the same period, heritage organisations have found it difficult to reconcile the two, because meaningful engagement with digital collections has been so difficult to prove.

This chapter is not a complete review of government heritage policy and publications between 2000 and 2020, but instead gives an overview of those relating to digitisation. In doing so, it reveals the amount of effort expended by the government in the past two decades trying to define heritage by a set of quantifiable measures which could then be used to align it to the policy priorities of the day. These were the external political pressures that heritage organisations would have been working

⁹⁸ Kendall Adams, G. (2021b) ‘Minister outlines controversial rules to protect statues from ‘baying mob’’. *Museums Association website*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/01/minister-outlines-tougher-rules-to-protect-statues-from-baying-mob/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

under while making digitisation decisions. Did heritage professionals working during this time recognise and react to these external policy pressures? The following chapter will analyse a set of interviews conducted with heritage professionals involved in digitisation decisions, asking them to identify what, in their experience, were the barriers to digitisation.

6. Interview Analysis

A series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken to gather digitisation stories from heritage professionals. A full list of interview participants and questions is attached in Appendices 1 and 2.

6.1 Interviewee selection

Heritage professionals were sought with experience of undertaking digitisation projects and were initially identified during desk research: for example, the Royal College of Music was contacted in response to an article about a project to “create the largest virtual collection of historically significant musical instruments in the UK.”¹ Some interviewees were selected for their subject-specific knowledge: for example, Jen Ross from the University of Edinburgh was approached after giving a conference paper on the open sharing of online collections and an interviewee from the National Lottery Heritage Fund was able to give a useful insight into funding policy.² A broad range of different types and sizes of GLAM organisations was sought (see Fig 5). In the museums sector, interviewees were drawn from one large national museum, two regional museum groups and several smaller specialist and university museums. A large national gallery archive, a regional archive centre and a private business archive represent the archive sector, and there are interviewees from a university and specialist art library. Galleries are represented by interviewees from Tate Britain, Art UK and Brighton Museum and Art Gallery. An interviewee from a National Trust heritage site was also included. The diversity of the sector means that some organisations represent more than one category: for example, the interviewee from Tate Britain was its archivist and was therefore able to

¹ Royal College of Music (2015) ‘Royal College of Music digitises historically significant instruments’. *Royal College of Music website* 12 November 2015. Available at: <https://www.rcm.ac.uk/about/news/all/2015-11-12museumdigitalinstrumentdatabase.aspx#:~:text=The%20Royal%20College%20of%20Music,to%20the%20Gogle%20Cultural%20Institute>. Accessed 18 July 2021.

² Ross, J. (2018) *Digital Collections, Open Data and the Boundaries of Openness – a Case Study from the National Galleries of Scotland*. Museums and the Web, Vancouver, Canada, April 2018. Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/digital-collections-open-data-and-the-boundaries-of-openness-a-case-study-from-the-national-galleries-of-scotland/> Accessed 18 July 2021.

speak on the digitisation experience of both galleries and archives. An attempt was also made to travel to as wide a geographical area of the UK as possible within the restraints of time and resources (See Fig 6). The lack of diversity in the cultural and arts sector (recognised by the Arts Council, which reported in 2016 that “94% of the Cultural Heritage workforce is white”³) is reflected in a lack of diversity among my interviewees, all of whom are white.

Heritage type	National	Regional	Specialist	Private	University
Museum or Gallery	2	3	5		3
Site/Attraction	1	1	1		
Archive	2	1	2	1	2
Library			1		2

Fig 5: Types of organisation interviewees worked in. Some organisations appear more than once, eg: A specialist museum that is also affiliated to a university is counted in both specialist museum and university museum boxes

The gender split of 10 women and 12 men aligns with recent figures for the cultural heritage workforce (“there are fewer females (43% of the workforce in 2011/12) than males 57%”)⁴. Twenty-two interviews were completed (one interview had two respondents, so twenty-three people were interviewed in total). Interviews were conducted in person and an audio recording was made; details and transcripts of these recordings are available in Appendix 2. All but two of the interviews were conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic, so interviewees’ answers do not reflect any change in

³ Naylor, R., McLean, B. and Griffiths, C. (2016) *Character Matters: Attitudes, behaviours and skills in the UK Museum Workforce*. Commissioned by: Arts Council England, Museums Galleries Scotland, Museums Association, Association of Independent Museums. Available at:

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Museums%20Workforce%20ABS%20BOP%20Final%20Report.pdf> Accessed 18 July 2021. p63

⁴ Parkinson, A., Buttrick, J. and Wallis, A. (2014) *Equality and diversity within the arts and cultural sector in England*. Commissioned from Consilium Research & Consultancy by Arts Council England. Available at:

[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality and diversity within the arts and cultural sector in England.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality%20and%20diversity%20within%20the%20arts%20and%20cultural%20sector%20in%20England.pdf) Accessed 18 July 2021. p42

their attitudes to digitisation following their organisations' responses to the pandemic. Due to lockdown restrictions, the final two interviews were conducted remotely, via phone and Zoom, but questions were not asked about the pandemic specifically. I conducted one additional interview to answer a specific question about Europeana and I received e-mailed answers from the Rijksmuseum during information gathering for the case study in Chapter Seven.

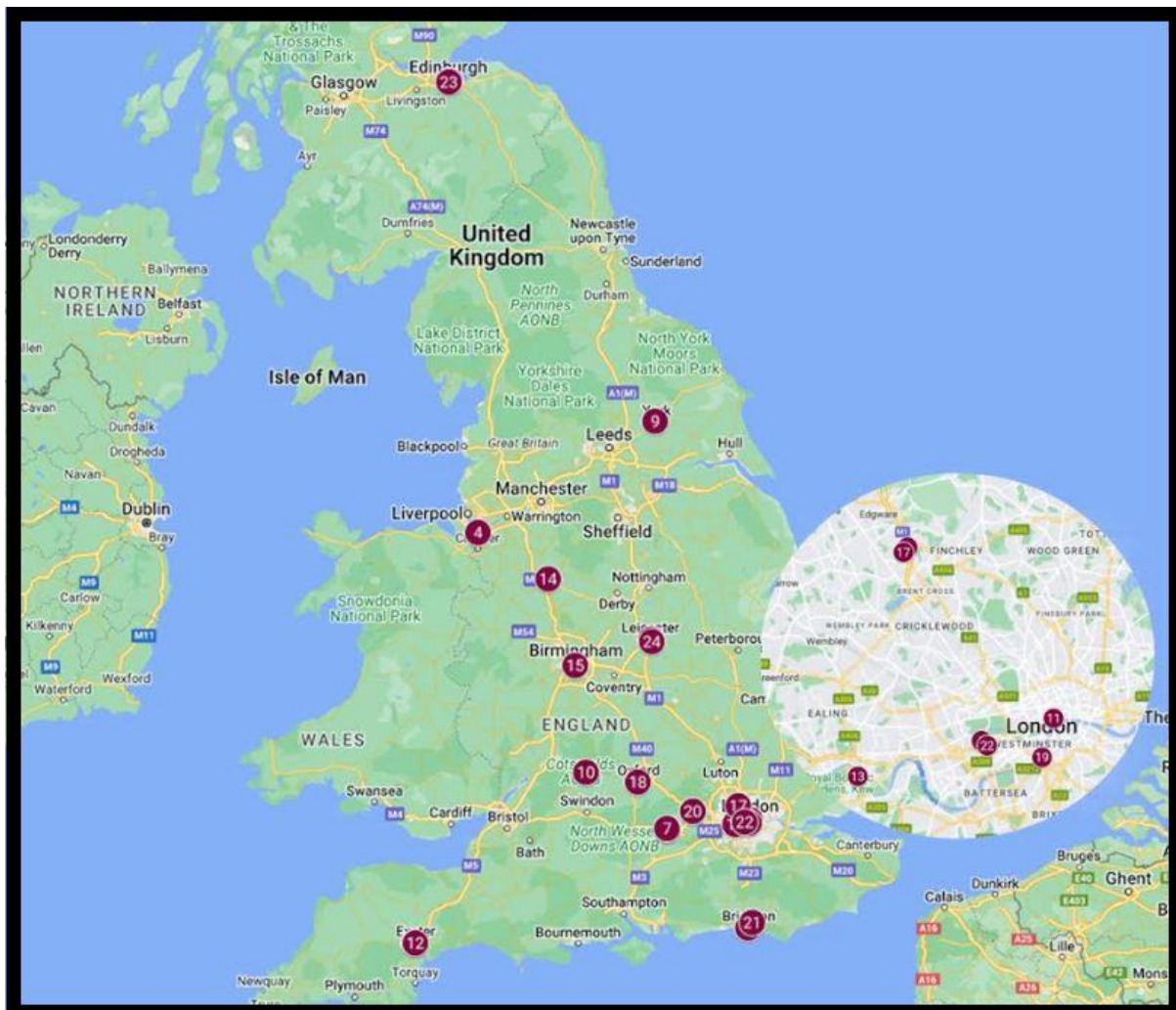


Fig 6: Map marking locations of interviewees, to demonstrate geographical spread. Numbers relate to the order in which interviews were completed, a list of which is in Appendix 2. Picture credit: Google My Maps

6.2 Question design

Interview questions were split into four sections, with interviewees being asked all of the questions that were relevant to their role and experience. Where interviewees were chosen for specific expertise and weren't involved with collections, non-applicable questions were omitted. The four sections were as follows:

Section 1: Introduction - Interviewees were asked about their own background in heritage, and their current role. They were then asked to describe the nature of the collection at the organisation where they currently worked. They were asked to define the word *heritage* and to describe the heritage of their organisation. This was a section designed primarily to gather background information, to get a sense of the size and nature of each collection and the experience and past roles of the interviewee. I was interested to hear how they defined heritage, as their responses could reveal their sense of the purpose and value of heritage collections.

Section 2: Digitisation stories - A series of questions was asked to elicit details of my interviewees' digitisation experience. How were decisions made on what to digitise and when? How was digitisation funded? How were collections interpreted differently for online visitors? Were online visitors considered as important as in-person ones? I then asked about decisions *not* to digitise: were there collections that were considered unsuitable for digitisation or reasons why digitisation was not considered a priority? I offered a set of seven reasons not to digitise and asked respondents to rank them in order, to see if there were agreed barriers to digitisation. These were devised by combining Parry's practical difficulties: "resource, priority, structures, skills, time and money" with the identified barriers from Nesta's Digital Culture reports, specifically 2015's *Top 10 barriers to achievement of digital aspirations* and my own themes drawn from the 2000 literature.⁵ I distilled

⁵ Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Routledge: Abingdon. p2 and MTM London (2015) *Digital Culture 2015: How arts and cultural organisations in England use technology*. Arts Council Website. p21 Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Digital-Culture-2015-Final.pdf> Accessed 4 September 2021.

these into seven categories: Cost, time, expertise or IT skills, fear of obsolescence, lack of political will (in other words, a lack of impetus from management, trustees, or other staff with authority to make digitisation decisions), privacy or copyright issues, and other (to capture any aspect I had not considered).

Section 3: Looking back - I asked my respondents to look back to the year 2000 and asked what their hopes and expectations for digitisation were, to see if their expectations aligned with those from the 2000 literature. I asked how the organisations they had worked in had addressed the opportunities of the internet, and why they thought there had been a failure to digitise the predicted critical mass of material.

Section 4: Looking forward - I wanted to know if the idea of mass digitisation was still an aspiration for the heritage sector, or if it had been overtaken by other developments. So, I asked my interviewees how they thought digitisation would progress over the next 20 years, using the experience of the past 20 years as a guide. I asked them if they thought entire collections would one day be available to view online, and whether, with the benefit of unlimited resources, they would want to see that happen. I also asked them what they'd learned from their digitisation experiences, to see if there was any useful insight into why organisations had chosen not to digitise large parts of their collections.

6.3 Analysis: How much of my interviewees' collections had been digitised?

My interviewees, and the organisations they represent, all had some experience of digitisation, but this varied considerably. At one extreme, a private archive manager was clear that digitisation was not a business objective: "The only things which we have on the internet are our community

archives. That has been because as a private business archive we want to maintain control over our collection” (Judy Faraday, John Lewis Heritage Centre). This was the only negative response in terms of the desirability of digitisation itself. The John Lewis archivist believed that sharing documents from the company’s past raised the risk of misinterpretation and was therefore not in the interest of the business:

We might have something which is of great importance to the business, something that Spedan Lewis said in 1943 ... I’m not saying that he did - but he may have written something about people coming into the country and about whether or not they should be employed. Now, if you take that out of context, that could present a huge reputational risk to the business. (Judy Faraday, John Lewis Heritage Centre)

This response underlines the difference between the attitude of a private company towards sharing its information and the perceived duty of the heritage sector to make its collections available to visitors, as Reid described in 2000: “Where is the public sector in all of this? If we do not respond, others will”.⁶ It also reflects Wiggins’s 2001 prediction that private organisations would be less likely to digitise due to fears about reputational damage.⁷ Every other interviewee agreed to some extent that digitisation was desirable, whether or not they had actually been able to undertake any. At the other end of the spectrum, the Victoria and Albert Museum had its entire catalogue online, but my interviewee admitted that the content varied in quality:

It has the deficiencies you might expect from ... collections this size ... unless an object has been researched recently, the information may not be absolutely accurate... So, some records are extremely detailed, and some records are... well, they have no photograph, they have a strapline that doesn’t really tell you a tremendous amount (Lesley Miller, V&A).

Without good quality images and description, only a dogged researcher would find value in catalogue details alone, and as I argued in Chapter One, a digital catalogue is not the same as a digitised collection unless a lot of work has been done to add additional images, interpretive text, links between objects and searchable metadata, to make it navigable by a non-specialist visitor in

⁶ Reid, G. (2000) p157

⁷ Wiggins, R. (2001) ‘Digital Preservation: Paradox & promise’ *Library Journal* Vol 126, Issue 7 p13

the same way as an exhibition in the real world. This is something the Victoria and Albert Museum has done since my interview in 2017, described by Kati Price in the V&A blog as: “a step further towards a genuinely seamless experience that offers up all we know about our objects in one place.”⁸

Most of my respondents had undertaken more than one digitisation project, usually involving the digitisation of thousands of objects, in some cases tens or even hundreds of thousands. But when asked to estimate it as a percentage of the entire collection, even those who said they had done a large amount of digitisation only estimated that it represented five or six percent:

We’ve been digitising stuff for fifteen years, properly. We have digitised about – depending on whose number you trust – somewhere between a hundred and twenty, and a hundred and forty, million pages’ worth of information. That’s quite a lot. That represents about six percent of our physical collection (Chris Mumby, The National Archives).

Only one respondent gave a figure higher than 6%, but the digitised records lacked images. His answer reveals the challenge of attempting to digitise entire collections:

The Courtauld ran a project, in the 1990s, called the Witt Computer Index, and that was aimed at cataloguing the entire Witt library... It employed ... eight or nine people, over a ... ten-year period, and they managed to catalogue – with no images, because this was 1990s – and they managed to catalogue about ... eight-to-twelve percent of the collection. Now clearly that’s, like, a hundred-year project, if you do it at that level of detail. (Tom Bilson, Courtauld Institute of Art)

Without images, it is hard to imagine how this catalogue could be of interest to a general visitor, particularly thirty years on when high-quality images and videos are an expectation of the users of online platforms. My interviewees’ responses revealed a lack of hard data about digitisation: even where this was available, there was no distinction between online catalogues and digital collections specifically created with a general visitor in mind. How did this compare to the picture in the rest of the UK?

⁸ Price, K. (2021) ‘Announcing Explore the Collections’. *V&A blog January 19 2021*. Available at: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/digital/announcing-explore-the-collections> Accessed 7 August 2021.

6.4 Digitisation: what percentage has been digitised UK-wide?

One of the most difficult issues with asking interviewees about their experiences of digitisation has been trying to quantify the amount of material digitised as a percentage of collections. Most interviewees were able to tell me in detail about the number of items digitised for specific projects, but, perhaps understandably considering the size and variety of objects in collections, could not quantify these as a percentage. But because a few did give me estimates, I looked for figures showing how much of the UK's heritage collections had been digitised, to allow a comparison between the digitisation experiences of my respondents and the UK heritage sector as a whole. It is difficult to find UK-specific figures, which tend to measure *digital activity* rather than digitisation itself, but Nesta did ask Museums in 2017 what proportion of their collections had been digitised and shared with the public. These figures were used in the 2018 *Culture is Digital* report as follows: "61% of our cultural institutions have digitised up to half of their collection. Half of those with a digitised collection have made some of it available online."⁹ A closer look at the figures they are based on reveals that around half of the museums which responded gave a figure of between 1 and 25% (see Fig 2) and only half of those with digitised collections were sharing them online. This tallies with my respondents' estimated figure of around 5-6% of collections digitised. There are also European sources. Europeana's ENUMERATE survey collected data on the percentage of collections that had been digitised in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2017. The results of its 2017 survey has a detailed breakdown of the percentage of collections digitised Europe-wide that bears reproducing here at length:

On average 22% of the heritage collections has been digitised until June 2017... An important side-note is that these are not weighted figures. Institutions with small collections count as having the same in weight as institutions with large collections. Therefore the actual percentage of the digitisation level for all cultural heritage in Europe will most likely be lower... The median probably provides a more realistic indication than average values. In 2017 median values were exactly the same as they were in 2015:

⁹ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. p45. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital> Accessed 12 July 2021.

- 10% of analogue heritage collections has been digitally reproduced already
- 50% still needs to be digitally reproduced
- 40% no need to be digitally reproduced¹⁰

The analysts involved in this survey concluded that because it has been difficult to get data on the actual size of collections from its respondents (which was also my experience), it is more accurate to take a median average than a mean when calculating the overall percentage of collections digitised so far, to avoid the possibility that those who have digitised large percentages of small collections could skew the figures. This gives a figure of 10% of collections digitised, less than half the mean figure of 22%. This is much closer to the 5-6% reported by my interviewees, but it is also a Europewide figure, and although the UK has been a part of this survey since 2012, it has not been a major respondent in terms of the number of organisations taking part compared with other European countries (just 25 out of 983 in 2017— equating to 2.5%). As I will describe in Chapter Seven, other European countries such as the Netherlands have been more proactive in encouraging the mass digitisation of collections. Therefore, it is fair to suggest that the UK’s figure is likely to be lower, and we have some evidence of this. In 2012, Europeana provided a benchmark breakdown by country, revealing that the digitisation figure reported by the UK respondents was 8.5%.¹¹ A report from Nesta reveals that the amount of digital activity undertaken by cultural institutions has decreased since 2013 (See Fig 7). Although this report only measures digital *activity* and not digitisation itself, it reports a drop in every area except email marketing and the sale of tickets in its 2017 report (a comparable graph is not given in the 2019 report). The category that best expresses object-by-object digitisation - *Make existing recordings or archive material/exhibits available for digital consumption* – was down from 60% in 2013 to 51% in 2017.

¹⁰ Nauta, J-G., Heuvel, W. van den and Teunisse, S. (2017) *Europeana DSI 2– Access to Digital Resources of European Heritage*. Pro Europeana website. Available at: https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Projects/Project_list/ENUMERATE/deliverables/DSI-2_Deliverable%20D4.4_Europeana_Report%20on%20ENUMERATE%20Core%20Survey%204.pdf Accessed 18 July 2021. p27.

¹¹ Datasets available at this link: <http://enumeratedataplatform.digibis.com/datasets>

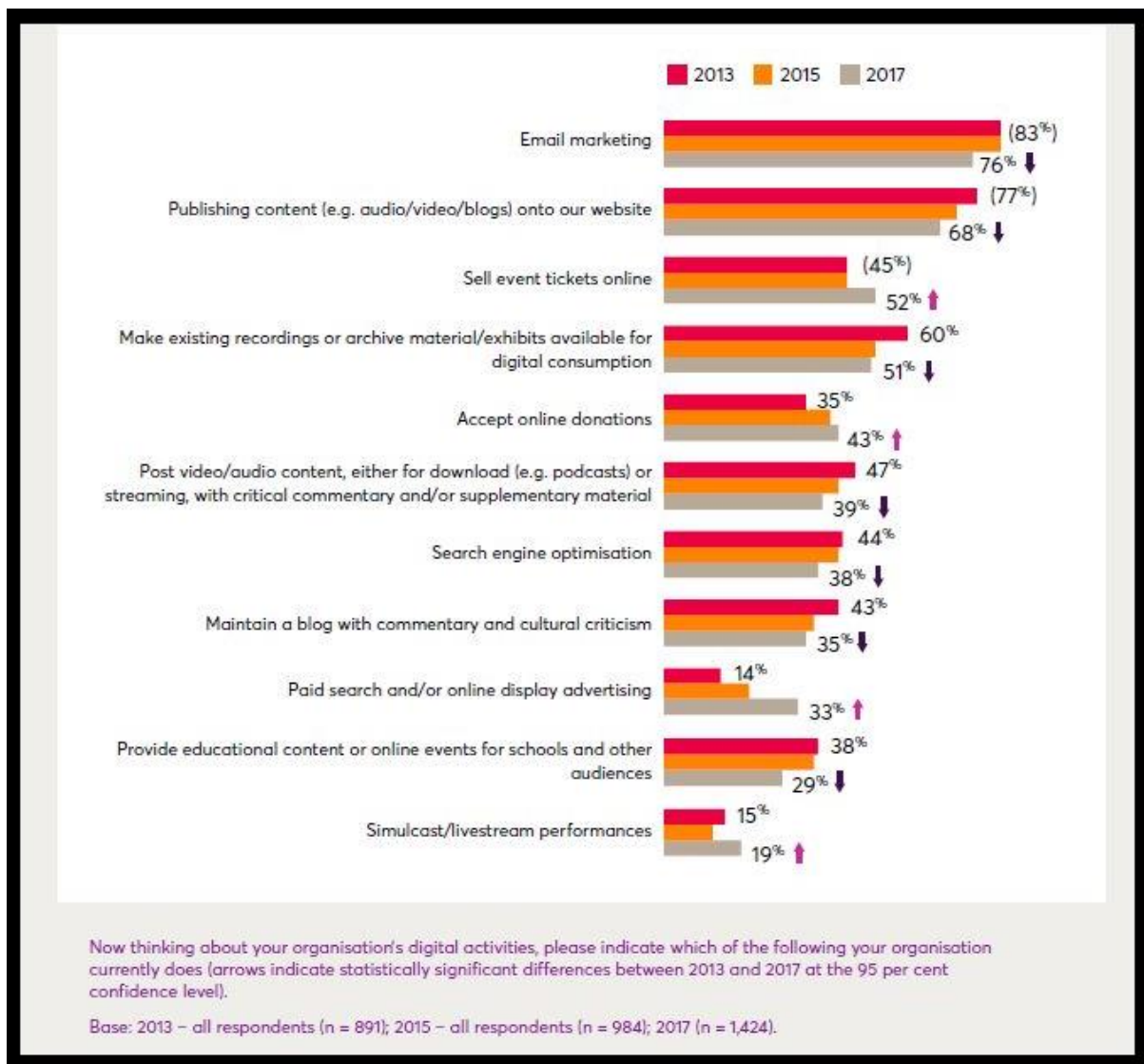


Fig 7: Graph from Nesta's 2017 Digital Culture report, showing that digitisation activity (Fourth graph: 'Make existing recordings or archive material/exhibits available for digital consumption') has decreased since 2013. Picture Credit: MTM London

Taking into account continuing accessions during this time, I propose that a figure of 8.5% for the percentage of collections digitised UK-wide in 2019 is a reasonable estimate, and that, for my respondents, a figure of 6% indicated that the organisation had taken digitisation seriously and had applied itself with energy and conviction to the task. In 1999, the Netful of Jewels report had predicted that by 2002, 75% of UK museums would have some collections information online, and that by 2007, all of them would be contributing to a UK-wide network of online resources¹². The

¹² Keene, S. et al (1999) *A Netful of Jewels: New Museums in the Learning Age*. Report of the National Museum Directors' Conference, UK. Available at: https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/netful_of_jewels.pdf Accessed 28 June 2021. p23/20

report's authors, perhaps wisely, did not look further ahead than 2007, but if they had, judging by their bold predictions, they would have been extremely surprised to hear that by 2020, less than 10% of the UK's heritage had been digitised. The report does give one important caveat, that this predicted progress would require "significant investment ... in the first instance if we are to establish a critical mass of digital content".¹³ A lack of funding has proved to be a major barrier to digitisation, according to my respondents.

6.5 Looking back: my interviewees' expectations

The 2000 literature revealed a confidence in the heritage community that people would be interested in consuming heritage content online. Was that same confidence felt by my respondents? Interviewees were asked to remember what their expectations were for digitisation in the early 2000s. Some were too young or not working in the heritage sector then, but others described an optimism about the prospect of digitising collections: "At that time, we were really, really excited about putting material online." (Tom Bilson, Courtauld Institute); "I think there was a lot of money back then ... and I think we all felt really optimistic, that that funding would continue, and ... the lessons learned would make things much more efficient and cost-effective" (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University). Several respondents felt that enthusiasm had begun to waver for the idea of a major digitisation project by the mid-2000s. The practical difficulties were becoming clear; if done to a high standard, digitisation was expensive and slow. At the same time, there were new financial pressures; funding cuts were taking their toll on staff numbers, and there were new demands on staff time: even where digital teams existed, new social media platforms were creating extra work. What comes through clearly in the interviewees' responses was that the practical difficulties of digitisation were felt to be to blame for the slow progress, rather than any lack of desire or motivation: "It takes a

¹³ Keene, S. et al (1999) p20

long time to curate things, and they need curating otherwise it's all just raw data" (Rick Lawrence, Royal Albert Memorial Museum):

Actually, it just takes a lot of money, and a lot of time, to build really wonderful, usable, digital collections. And I think, by the time people had realised that ... towards the end of the 2000s ... there just wasn't enough money to produce the kinds of 'critical mass' that, really, all the scholars were looking for. (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University)

The frustrations of my interviewees show a perceived need to deliver a high-quality experience, echoing King et al whose 2016 survey into the cultural value of online engagement with heritage found that an "obvious but important mantra emerging from our survey of heritage professionals is that 'it must be done well.'"¹⁴ Anecdotally, I have heard museum staff talk about the amount of work, often by committee, that goes into agreeing the wording of a small information panel. The process of signing off interpretive wording alongside the technical demands and expense of photographing objects to a professional standard have meant digitisation has been a laborious process. After the difficulties of digitisation had become clear, what progress had my interviewees and their organisations managed to make?

6.6 Digitisation stories

When asking about digitisation experiences, I asked about the thinking behind decisions to digitise, and the possible reasons not to. This gave me the chance to understand the drivers of digitisation as well as the barriers. Most interviewees were positive about the concept of digitisation overall, perhaps not surprising since half of them had *digital* or *digitisation* in their job titles. One described digitisation as "the proverbial 'good thing'" (Rick Lawrence, Royal Albert Memorial Museum). What was the driving force behind the decision to start digitising in the first place? There was no single clear response, and many interviewees identified a general feeling simply that this was something that they should be doing:

¹⁴ King, L., Stark, J.F and Cooke, P. (2016) 'Experiencing the Digital World: The Cultural Value of Digital Engagement with Heritage'. *Heritage & Society*. Vol. 9 No. 1, May 2016, pp76–101 p83

I don't remember a great deal of in-depth discussion about it, it was one of these things that just had to happen, and it was like: 'Go and do it. Make it happen.' You know, being the young person who'd just done a Museum Studies course, it was assumed that I should just get on with it. (Zoe Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture)

As the 2000 literature had shown, there was an expectation in the early 2000s that digitisation would be a major opportunity for heritage. Funding bodies reacted to this by making money available for digitisation projects and this appears to have been a spur to organisations to begin digitisation. Three respondents said that they began digitisation because their organisation had opened, closed, or moved, giving the opportunity of getting access to the objects to be digitised. This reveals that an unwillingness amongst curatorial staff to disturb exhibited or stored objects could be a barrier to digitisation. It might also indicate that parts of some collections can be inaccessible, perhaps in deep storage. While *opportunity*, broadly defined, was a driver of digitisation for most, for others the start of digitisation was planned. Two respondents said an internal review was their reason to begin digitisation projects. Two more said that it was a need to create and share educational materials. Two said that their institution's early digitisation projects were for promotional or monetary purposes: "I think that the original idea was to make money out of it. We haven't made any money out of it" (John Benson, National Waterways Museum). Monetising digital content has turned out to be difficult, and John Benson's response is typical of those who attempted to sell images online: most made little money and less profit. But many institutions were unwilling to give up an income stream, even when staff costs to carry out the work were often larger than the amount of income raised:

You could be making something like £1,500 a year from very occasionally licensing and selling images. And that can look okay... what a lot of people will see is the loss of £1,500 that you would be getting. Now, public institutions, and particularly Local Authorities ... are terrible for ... understanding the difference ... between turnover and profit. (Kevin Bacon, Brighton Pavilion and Museums)

The lack of a clear purpose behind digitisation projects was a criticism of early projects. It seems the enthusiasm and funding that drove early digitisation came without a strong sense of exactly how

people would use online collections. This was well illustrated by the story of one interviewee's first job, fresh from her Museum Studies MA and asked to create a website for a new museum:

I suppose, what was in my mind, was the idea of, kind of, democratising the collections, and the idea that the collections are for everybody ... But I don't think I'd got a very sophisticated understanding of that at the time... nobody really thought about what it meant, in terms of making it a quality experience for the user. (Zoe Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture)

In 2014, the HLF commissioned research analysing the quality of previous digital projects and found that they were seen as an opportunity for the organisation to do something exciting, rather than putting visitors first: "they didn't start with the audience needs in mind. They started with what they wanted to do. And of course, any project is not going to succeed if it isn't really addressing audience needs" (Fiona Talbott, Lottery Heritage Fund). The interview data did not show strong agreement on the reasons why digitisation projects were undertaken. But when I moved on to talking about barriers to digitisation, there was much stronger concordance.

6.7 Reasons not to digitise

Interviewees were given a list with seven possible barriers to digitisation and were asked to comment on them from their experience and rank them if possible. Three of the reasons were overwhelmingly chosen as the top barriers to digitisation: cost, time, and privacy or copyright issues (see Fig 8).

6.7.1 Cost

As interviewees had already indicated in their reasons to digitise, funding opportunities were a major reason to begin projects. So, it is not surprising that conversely, a lack of funding has proved to be a major barrier. Digitisation is expensive and time-consuming and interviewees indicated that without funding, digitisation would not have been possible: "Most of the funding we've had has

been external funding. We wouldn't have done any digitisation if we didn't have that project funding" (Caroline Gould, MERL); "To be blunt, it would be a question of prioritising things for which I suspect we can get funding. And we're basically always chasing pots of funding" (Lesley Miller, V&A). The problem is not so much the cost of digitisation as a lack of cost benefit. Online collections have provided little in terms of extra income or other measurable benefits. As Keaney noted in 2009, visitors generally expect online content to be free, particularly arts and heritage content.¹⁵ Because funding is tied strongly to accountability, a perceived lack of interest in a particular object may be a barrier to its digitisation, because one of the only measurable aspects of online collections is the number of views it attracts: "There's a sort of mental checklist that we go through, about how many people we think might be interested in those records." (Zoe Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture). While it can be argued, as it has by the Rijksmuseum (see Chapter Seven), that digitised collections can add *brand value* by bringing financial rewards in the form of corporate sponsorship, this can be a difficult concept to sell to management and trustees. The Rijksmuseum's collection contains internationally famous works that can attract top-level sponsors; for example, its Rembrandt painting *The Night Watch* is such a key asset of the museum that rather than take it off display for restoration, the work is being done inside a specially-built glass case so that visitors can watch it happening live, both in person and online.¹⁶ Recent government guidance suggests that heritage organisations should partner with corporate funders, particularly the tech sector, to undertake digital projects.¹⁷

¹⁵ Keaney, E. (2009) 'Digital opportunities research programme: findings from phase 1.' Presentation for Arts Council England. Accessed 31 October 2018. Available at: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/4795764/> p45

¹⁶ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital/culture-is-digital#future-strategy-unleashing-the-creative-potential-of-technology-2> Accessed 12 July 2021. p60

¹⁷ BBC News (2019) 'Rembrandt: Rijksmuseum begins live Night Watch restoration'. *BBC News website* 8 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-48905867> Accessed 18 July 2021.

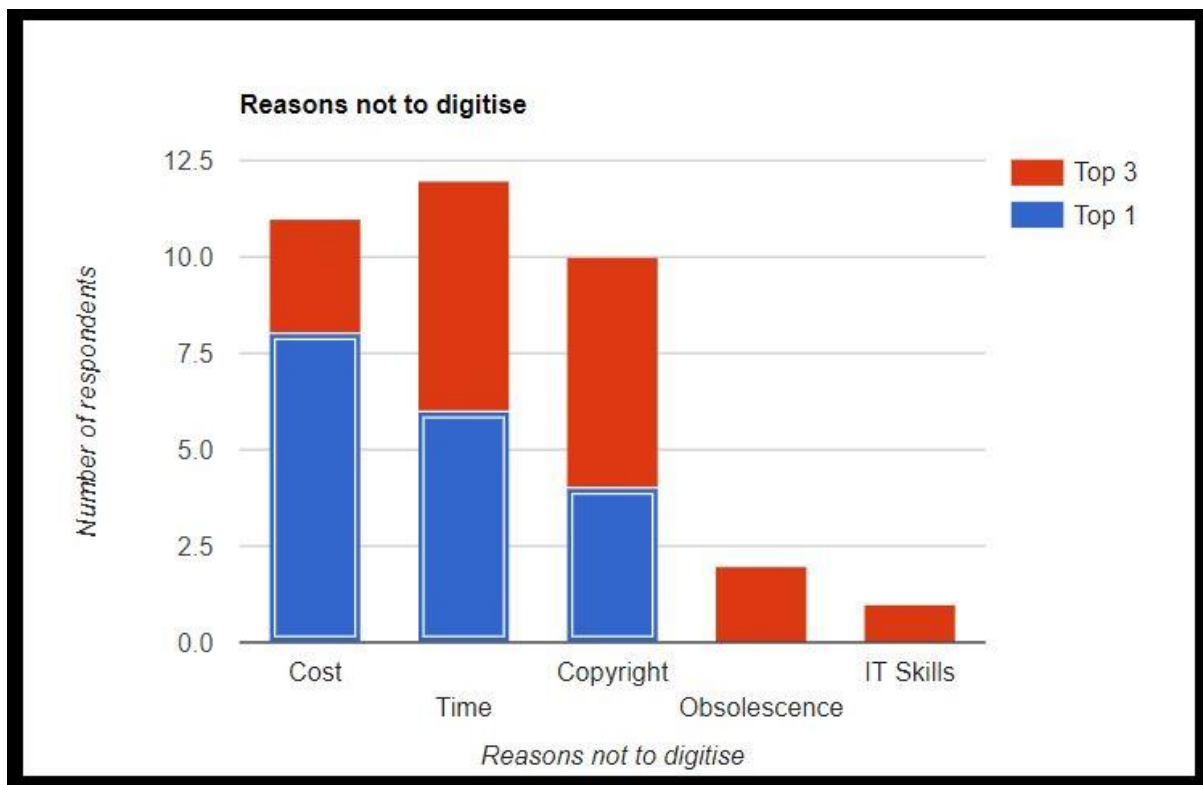


Fig 8: Reasons not to digitise ranked highest by interviewees (blue), or in their top three (red)

But to attract this kind of support, heritage organisations will need to prove the appeal of their collections to visitors, and this means trying to evidence their value in some way:

The sense in which publicly-funded institutions are being asked to evidence value for money, has created a whole set of interesting issues around evaluation... There's ... much more insistence on... being able to somehow prove that the cultural heritage delivers value for society, delivers economic value, delivers educational value ... And nobody can do anything anymore, unless they can find a way to tick those boxes (Jen Ross, University of Edinburgh).

Ross's three measures of value: value for society, economic value and educational value are interesting because they highlight the disconnect between the perceived value of heritage collections and the inability of digitisation to contribute to that value. For example, in terms of *value for society*, if we think about that as something akin to Blair's *social inclusion*, we now know from the government's 2018 *Culture is Digital* report that simply making collections available online is not in itself an effective way to engage the interest of new audiences who would not normally visit the bricks-and-mortar museum.²⁰ The Covid pandemic research examined in the previous chapter

²⁰ DCMS (2018) p21

revealed that most heritage organisations are still struggling to monetise their collections, which means that they rarely deliver *economic value*. And, while *educational value* can be measured in terms of engagement with schools and other educational establishments, it has been described by Selwood as impossible to assess in the general visitor population: "Attempting to measure the impact of museums through outcomes is tantamount to measuring what modernism always cast as unmeasurable."²¹ As part of its *Digital Culture Project*, the DCMS is working with the cultural sector on improving the way funded organisations collect, use and share audience data, so it may be that in future, heritage audiences online will be much better understood, and the value for money argument can be made more effectively. But for my interviewees, a lack of funding was a major barrier to digitisation, and this echoes a warning by Keene in 1999 that significant additional and, more importantly, *permanent* funding would be required to allow digitisation to become an integral part of museums' work:

Just as the maintenance of museum collections themselves is funded as ongoing investment in a permanent national asset, so the ongoing maintenance of digital collections and services, as a permanent national asset for the future, needs to be assured... funding cannot be released by redeploying existing resources.²²

As I will argue in Chapter Seven, the UK's project-led approach to digitisation, resulting in short-term goals and a lack of funding for ongoing maintenance, means that digitisation has never received the kind of sustained funding that Keene argued would be necessary for successful mass digitisation.

6.7.2 Time

Cost and time are closely linked in many respondents' lists of reasons not to digitise. If you take into account those who put time in their top three reasons rather than just those who ranked it top, it was the most popular reason overall. Digitisation takes a lot of time, particularly because, as established by King et al, heritage professionals have high standards, because: "it must be done

²¹ Selwood, S. (2002) 'What difference do museums make? Producing evidence on the impact of museums' *The Critical quarterly*, 12/2002, Volume 44, Issue 4 p75

²² Keene, S. et al (1999) p21

well.”²³ Each object must be photographed to a high standard, and interpretation needs to be written and added. It is not simply a case of making the digital catalogue public, although some institutions have done this. Catalogue information may be patchy or non-existent, as one of my respondents admitted: “A lot of it hadn’t actually been checked, and that’s in terms of accuracy, whether even the fields were completed, or whether it would just almost literally be a name, ‘Coin of Edward the First’ then everything else a gorgeous blank” (Rick Lawrence, Royal Albert Memorial Museum). Releasing information that is incorrect or reveals how little is known about some parts of the collection could pose a reputational risk, and it is understandable that organisations might have held back from publishing a database of records that were never designed to be seen by the public. The alternative is to create new records, but without the funding to employ extra hands to do the repetitive and technically exacting work of photographing, uploading and adding text and metadata, the amount of time required to digitise even small collections can be prohibitive:

The lack of person resource, in some of the museums, is profound, and a huge reason why they can’t be as enthusiastic about digitisation as others. Even to the point where they just don’t have the time to write the proposal that would get the funding to do the digitisation. (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University)

The creation and maintenance of an online collection was a new demand on the time of heritage staff from the early 2000s, but because of cuts across the sector after the financial crash of 2007/8, there was little slack in the system to allow the extra people-hours necessary to undertake large projects like digitising and interpreting the collection. To put the size of the task into perspective, Adrian Glew of the Tate Archive had calculated that without any extra resources, the organisation could digitise 500 items a year within its core budget. Its collection comprises 20 million items, meaning that without extra funding to pay for more people to do the work, it would take 40,000 years to digitise the entire collection. Even where a so-called *digital* member of staff or small team of staff had been appointed, they were often also given diverse responsibilities such as the preservation of born-digital heritage, the design and maintenance of the website, or the creation of

²³ King, L. et al (2016) p83

social media content across a growing number of platforms. Where existing staff took on digitisation projects, there was also time required to learn IT skills and fitting the extra work around their day-jobs: “With the HLF projects, there were no funds for backfilling your post. So, the permanent members of the team, in a sense, took on another full-time role, which was quite difficult, at times, to manage” (Fiona Courage, The Keep). Making *digital* a role for one person or team (often attached to documentation or marketing departments) has been identified as a major reason why digitisation has been slow, because a digitisation project requires a range of skills from across an organisation, rarely to be found within the skillset of a single person. For example, it will require someone to decide which parts of the collection to prioritise (a curatorial or management role), someone to fill in a funding application (an administrative role) or decide that existing funds are to be re-allocated (senior management), someone to decide what extra text interpretation will be needed for an online audience (a curatorial or collections management role), a photographer to take images of the object (a technical and creative role), someone with Intellectual Property skills to rule whether there are copyright issues with sharing the object online (a legal role) and an overarching understanding of how the organisation is to be represented online (a brand management and marketing role). Siting the digital team within marketing can cause disputes because marketing’s view on what is interesting and important to share can be different to that of the curatorial team, and according to one of the team working on Leicester University’s *One by One* project: “It comes down to there's no shared language, common goals, etc. that is bringing them together. And so right now, there's just a lot of conflict, a lot of tension” (Lauren Vargas, One by One, Leicester University). Equally, siting the digital team within documentation can bring problems of its own, because documentation is such an important and well-established part of the day-to-day administration of museums and other heritage organisations that it will always be put first: “You will always prioritise the documentation, over the digitisation. Because the opportunity cost just makes a lot more sense” (Kevin Bacon, Brighton and Hove Museums). The *One by One* project, led by Leicester University, has identified a lack of *digital maturity* as the main barrier to digitisation in the heritage sector and is undertaking a

major research project aimed at improving this.²⁴ It argues that digital skills need to be embedded across every part of an organisation. Perhaps, if they are successful, projects that have been too large to be undertaken by one person – or even a small team – will in future be achievable when the hours of work required can be shared across the staff of an entire organisation.

6.7.3 Privacy and Copyright

Privacy and Copyright issues have proved to be a major barrier to digitisation, as many in the 2000 literature had foreseen. Even where ownership information is known, new permissions need to be sought for online use if acquisitions were made before the existence of the internet. The size of collections means that the work required in establishing who holds copyright and contacting them for permission to use images online can be prohibitive, and organisations often opt for the safe option of putting online only the things that have clear permissions or are out of copyright completely. As described in Chapter Four, the law on copyright in images of objects in the public domain is ambiguous, leading to cultural heritage lawyer Andrea Wallace describing a “vacuum of binding legal guidance on how institutions should proceed.”²⁵ A fear of legal repercussions was felt across the heritage sector, with a “widespread lack of confidence and misconceptions about fair use” reported in a 2016 US survey of arts professionals.²⁶ It was also reflected by my interviewees: “If you don’t own the copyright to somebody’s content, and you publish it, you’re in breach. And if they want to sue you, they can sue you” (Chris Mumby, National Archives); “Copyright is something people are very nervous around and feel like it’s a big piece of work that would need a lot of detail to understand it and get it right. So, I do think that’s something museums worry about” (Lauren Palmer, National Trust). One respondent gave a clear illustration of the difficulties involved in

²⁴ More information is available on the One by One website ‘About’ page, available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/whats-it-about/> Accessed 18 July 2021.

²⁵ Wallace, A. (2017) *Access and the Digital Surrogate: Openness as a philosophy*. Paper given at the National Digital Forum in Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crKUJlX3sY&feature=youtu.be>

²⁶ Aufderheide, P. et al (2016) p2012

digitising and displaying photographic images online. He acknowledged that this was affecting his organisation's choice of what to digitise:

We've got some lovely things, like negatives of the ... mods and rockers fights in 1964. We'd love to use them, but they're in limbo, because we've got the negatives, but we certainly don't have the copyright... [and] having spent five years trying to negotiate them, and then getting absolutely nowhere, took the view: 'Well, we're a museum, we assume we're around forever, let's just wait till they come out of copyright.' (Kevin Bacon, Royal Pavilion and Brighton Museums)

What came across strongly in my interviewee's responses was a fear of reputational damage if copyright laws were breached. Heritage organisations rely on goodwill to acquire and protect artefacts, which are often donated or loaned to them. And because copyright law is complex, staff often don't feel they have the skills necessary to make judgements. Because digital teams are often sited within marketing teams, digitisation staff might also feel they do not have the seniority to make decisions about objects with an unclear copyright status:

One of the things that we noticed, just from our small study, was that a lot of really important decisions were seen to be decisions for the digital teams, but actually, the implications of what they were doing were going to have a massive influence on what was going to happen with the rest of the institution. (Jen Ross, Edinburgh University)

The government's *Culture is Digital* report drew the same conclusion in 2018: "Organisations don't have the skills relating to rights clearance, or access to legal advice around intellectual property rights. This lack of expertise is limiting their ability to create and exploit digital content."²⁷ What is interesting is that, where organisations have taken a more risky position, they usually report positive results. One respondent said that a project to digitise a university's historical PhD theses technically breached copyright but was deemed to be low risk. A takedown policy was put in place, and information about the project was disseminated on alumni channels "and the feedback's been ... overwhelmingly positive" (Gavin Willshaw, Edinburgh University). Another interviewee said his organisation used project funding specifically to test copyright procedures. "In the end, I think we cleared 3,000 copyrights, and 99.95% of those were positive" (Adrian Glew, Tate Archive). But,

²⁷ DCMS (2018) p10

although it may be true that the actual risk of legal action is very low, the complex challenge of staying on the right side of copyright law is well explained by Andrew Ellis from Art UK. The organisation spent ten years digitising all 200,000 of the nation's oil paintings. It took ten years and cost six million pounds, funded by charities, corporations, individuals, and, later, the Arts Council. Andrew began by saying "I think the risk around copyright is probably overstated", but then went on to describe the "massive legal infrastructure" that underpins Art UK's copyright process. He explained that two permissions are needed for each work, one from the collection that holds it and one from the artist, or their estate. Art UK also pays copyright licensing agencies DACS and Bridgeman thousands of pounds a year in fees and has benefited from pro-bono legal advice from the international law firm Freshfields. The organisation has taken out specialist insurance to protect it from legislation. With this expensive and comprehensive framework in place, it is, perhaps, easier to be able to say that the risk of legal action is low. Ellis admits "I fully understand how someone who doesn't have a rights team might say ... 'it's asymmetric here. There's ... probably much more risk to us than there is benefit.'"

6.7.4 Fear of Obsolescence

A fear of obsolescence was a significant concern in the 2000 literature, but, as discussed in Chapter Four, became much less prevalent as a discussion topic in the literature post-2010, with technical debate moving on to the perceived need for common format standards allowing the sharing of digital content across platforms. Accordingly, it was not raised as a significant barrier by my interviewees, appearing only twice in respondents' top three reasons not to digitise. It seems that we now take for granted that we will have to update our hardware and software on a regular basis: "If you'd asked me that question twenty years ago, I would've put that at the top of the list, but I think it's probably bottom of the list now" (John Benson, National Waterways Museum); "I think you just have to accept that things become obsolete... if you let that stop you in the first place, you'd never do anything" (Zoe Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture). While

obsolescence was not considered a significant barrier to digitisation, one respondent reported that the extra funding needed for maintenance *was* an issue, because it added to the already-sizeable costs of digitisation projects:

The maintenance of something is often the bit that seems to get left off. So, you might invest in a team that designs it for you, but then you don't think about future tweaks or keeping it running. So, I, perhaps, think that's almost at the bottom of the list, because I don't think people think about it enough. (Lauren Palmer, National Trust)

A fear of obsolescence appears virtually disappears as a discussion topic in the heritage discourse post-2010 and is replaced by debates about shared standards, which might be expected because once investment had been made in hardware and software, the constant iteration of technology required regular updates to agreed formats: "Compatibility and integration of standards and formats, and how to manage surrogates created using technologies that may soon become obsolete, are constant themes across the board."²⁸ But there was little mention of this amongst my interviewees, with only one commenting on the need for common standards due to the difficulties of sharing material in a joint project with twenty-three other museums: "Why aren't we all using a metadata standard? And ... why didn't we agree this years ago?" (Rick Lawrence, Royal Albert Museum, Exeter). Most did not report that collections were being routinely shared across organisational boundaries, something that was regularly held up as an aspiration in the 2000 literature. This may have been due to a pressure to increase income and therefore not to share content for free:

I think, if you are looking at a position, which we are, where you need paying visitors to come in, and that is your priority in order to survive, then you may have to ... take on those programmes, or those activities, where you know there's likely to be genuine income made, at the expense of things that could create social value, but won't necessarily come back in financial value (Kevin Bacon, Brighton Pavilion and Museums)

Chris Mumby from the National Archives admitted that when digitisation could attract income, this could be a strong driver when making decisions on what to digitise:

²⁸ Newell, J. (2012) 'Old objects, new media: Historical collections, digitization and affect' *Journal of Material Culture* 17 (3) 287–306 p288

The family history guys only want stuff that's got loads of names in it, because that's where they can sell. So, censuses, military records, passenger lists, immigration things, prisoner records ... So, if you're driven entirely by a commercial agenda, your digitisation landscape will exist to fulfil their needs, more than they will your organisational needs (Chris Mumby, National Archives)

The need to exploit the financial value of collections was apparent amongst my interviewees, and may account for the fact that so few were undertaking cross-organisational projects involving shared standards: "We're putting all of this work into a new book, and if I put all of the information online for free, what's the motivation to go and get the book?" (Lauren Palmer, National Trust)

6.7.5 Expertise or IT Skills

Considering that a lack of digital literacy is now cited in government policy as the main reason for a lack of digitisation, it was surprising that it was not identified by my interviewees as a significant problem. Only one respondent put this in the top three reasons not to digitise. Most felt that the necessary expertise existed in their workforces, or could be easily bought in if needed: "Even our volunteers are computer literate" (Judy Faraday, John Lewis Archive). The theory that a lack of digital maturity (which can be described as the concentration of digital skills within a small section of the workforce) is to blame for a lack of digitisation forms the basis of the ongoing *One by One* project, started in 2017 at the University of Leicester, led by Professor Ross Parry. In a paper discussing the project's early findings, Parry describes a *postdigital* discourse within the heritage sector: "The postdigital is allowing us to think about the museum after the digital revolution, where digital is managed normatively, and where digital pervasively becomes innate within a range of operations and definitions within the museum."²⁹ The group leading this *new theorising* had come together in a forum at the 2014 *Museums and the Web* conference held in Baltimore, Maryland and created the *Baltimore Principles*: "articulating the step changes needed for the next generation of digital training

²⁹ Parry, R. et al (2018) 'Development, supply, deployment, demand: Balancing the museum digital skills ecosystem: First findings of the One by One national digital literacy project'. Paper given at *Museums and the Web*, Vancouver 2018. Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/development-supply-deployment-demand-balancing-the-museum-digital-skills-ecosystem-first-findings-of-the-one-by-one-national-digital-literacy-project/>

provision in the museum sector.”³⁰ These principles called for a move from thinking about training as *technical skills* to instead considering *digital literacy*. A 2018 survey of GLAM institutions using a business management tool built by global market research company Forrester found that “none of us have yet embraced full digital maturity.”³¹ In the DCMS’s 2018 *Culture is Digital* report, it was announced that a *Digital Maturity Index* would be created by Arts Council England, the Heritage Lottery Fund and other partners, “to enable organisations to understand and benchmark their own digital capability and set plans in place to make improvements.”³² John White from one of the partner organisations, The Space, was asked to scope out how this digital maturity index might work. He believed it was important that the tool was genuinely and practically useful; that it could help heritage organisations identify the steps they could take to improve their digital maturity rather than being a simple box-ticking exercise. The challenge was making a tool that could encompass the diversity of the cultural heritage sector:

We used to joke, we are talking about trying to build something that is relevant both to the Royal Opera House ... at one end, and three people managing a community duck pond that’s a site of scientific interest at the other end, and you cannot possibly build a single tool that keeps all of those people happy. (John White, The Space)

The tool guides heritage organisations through a process of identifying its strategic priorities and assessing its operational capabilities. During its development, its name was changed from *Digital Maturity Index* to *Digital Culture Compass*, reflecting its evolution into a complex self-assessment tool rather than a simple measurement metric.³³

³⁰ Parry, R. et al (2016) ‘It’s All in the Confidence: Co-designing the Future of Museum Digital Literacy’. Forum description from *Museums and the Web*, Los Angeles 2016. Available at: <https://mw2016.museumsandtheweb.com/proposal/its-all-in-the-confidence-co-designing-the-future-of-museum-digital-literacy/> Accessed 3 March 2021.

³¹ Price, K. and James, D. (2018) ‘Structuring For Digital Success: A Global Survey Of How Museums And Other Cultural Organizations Resource, Fund, And Structure Their Digital Teams And Activity’ Paper given at *Museums and the Web*, Vancouver 2018. Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/structuring-for-digital-success-a-global-survey-of-how-museums-and-other-cultural-organisations-resource-fund-and-structure-their-digital-teams-and-activity/>

³² DCMS (2018) ‘Culture is Digital’. *Department of Culture, Media and Sport*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital/culture-is-digital#future-strategy-unleashing-the-creative-potential-of-technology-2_p15

³³ The Space (2020) ‘Digital Culture Compass Launched’. *The Space* website. Available at: <https://www.thespace.org/news/digital-culture-compass-launched>

I think the DCMS wanted to be able to say ‘currently the heritage sector or the cultural sector is scoring 65 percent in digital maturity. I’m going to come back in two years’ time and then we’ll be scoring 75 percent. Isn’t that marvellous?’ And we’re like, no, that’s completely the wrong approach to understanding the problem. (John White, The Space)

The problem that the compass was trying to address was a complex one, because every organisation has different digital needs, different funding levels, different priorities. This was revealed by the second phase of the *One by One* project, which tried to define “the digital skills and literacies that people who work and volunteer in museums need.”³⁴ Despite approaching the problem with a comprehensive range of methods, researchers could not narrow down the broad range of digital issues suggested as challenges by participants, and concluded that “it would not be useful to over-specify the type of digital skills, literacies and proficiencies required into a single list or standard.”³⁵ In trying to address the complexity of the cultural sector, the *Digital Culture Compass* became a tool that tackled a problem that was not a digital one: “The word digital is deeply misleading and unhelpful because actually it’s a general organisational maturity tool” (John White, The Space). Dr Lauren Vargas from the *One by One* project agrees that business maturity plays a large part in digital literacy and has created a formula: “business maturity plus emotional intelligence equals digital maturity”:

A lot of institutions kind of skip to the end... They’re taking on these ... huge digital or digitisation projects without necessarily grounding [them] in what is needed to make that activity or output successful. Who’s the end user? Why are you doing this? What is the impact going to be? How are you going to resource this? How is it going to be maintained, sustained and evolve over time? (Dr Lauren Vargas, One by One)

What Dr Vargas refers to as *emotional intelligence* appears to be an organisation’s understanding of its own people, how it inspires and involves them in its core values and mission, its understanding of its audiences and its recognition of the need to embed wider social issues like diversity and inclusion. These, too, could be considered business skills. I asked Dr Vargas if it would be fair to describe a lack of digital maturity as a lack of business maturity that has merely been revealed by the advent of

³⁴ One by One (2019) ‘Understanding the digital skills & literacies of UK museum people: Phase Two Report’ Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/2019/05/21/phase-2-findings/> pii

³⁵ One by One (2019) p17

digital? She agreed, comparing it to an iceberg with cracks on the surface: “both the act and the continued evolution of digital and digital practice ... has exposed those cracks as huge chasms that we have to cross” (Dr Lauren Vargas, One by One). Heritage organisations have struggled to professionalise and raise more of their own income because they are very different from private businesses in their funding, organisational structure and purpose. But the need to be more commercially aware came through from interviewees, as practitioners weighed up the benefits of digitisation versus the need to make money from the online space: “I think museums, for their own survival, have to be selfish” (Kevin Bacon, Brighton and Hove Museums). John White noted that it was difficult for heritage organisations to behave like companies, because they simply didn’t have the power to match the salaries available in the private sector:

There are obviously ways that organisations can get more commercially savvy ... but it's a very difficult economy ... As soon as you get a junior person, who comes into an arts and cultural organisation that is passionate about it, gets a certain level of digital skill, they can command a much higher salary going back out into the commercial world. ... So, there's a constant cycle of skills loss. (John White, The Space)

Making decisions for commercial reasons can be at odds with heritage organisations’ missions to share collections and attract new and diverse audiences, something they are also being directed to do by UK government policy. I would argue that this is a problem that becoming more digitally mature will not necessarily solve.

6.7.6 Lack of political will

A lack of political will was not cited by any of my interviewees in the top three reasons not to digitise. It seems that, in the main, digitisation is considered a good use of time and resources: “I think this can usually be overcome by presenting the benefits to visitors and researchers to your senior management” (Richard Martin, Royal College of Music); “Our ethos is, really, to make as much available as we possibly can” (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University). For Jen Ross, who undertook a survey on the meaning of openness in a heritage context, the will to digitise exists at the top level of

management as a concept, but it is those who are tasked with putting it into practice who are forced to make difficult decisions:

When something isn't happening ... people who want it to happen more quickly are very often explaining the lack of progress by calling people ... Luddites, or saying people are stuck in the past... But it isn't about that ... It's always about people's anxieties around the lack of attention to the ... bigger questions that come along with it. (Jen Ross, University of Edinburgh)

These *bigger questions* are, according to Ross, those that reveal the "complexity and nuance" of heritage organisations, for example, their understanding of their responsibility as holders of historical items, something she describes as currently undergoing "an urgent rethinking of what the museum is for":

As the nature of the public's engagement with cultural heritage has ... shifted, and there's been more emphasis on the visitor, and what they need, and what they're bringing ... how do those things come into relationship with each other? And I should think it's ... a really huge question, and it's just taking institutions a very long time to arrive at their own configuration of an answer for what they want to be seen as doing, going forward. (Jen Ross, University of Edinburgh)

Museums must balance the need to attract visitors (and therefore be popular) with the need to be representative and inclusive (and therefore not appeal only to the mainstream). They have responsibilities to their funders, their sponsors and their own vision and mission statements but, more than ever, they are judged on their engagement with visitors. Paula Marincola from The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage in the US argues that this creates an opportunity for the democratisation of heritage:

The country's growing ethnic diversity and its economic crises have pushed museum leaders to recognize that the field's traditional business models need to be revamped. Instead of taking public support for granted, museums are desperate to prove their worth to their communities, a stance that makes them more receptive to outside partners, voices and interpretations.³⁸

³⁸ Marincola, P. (2011) Foreword to *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Philadelphia p11

Digitisation has forced heritage organisations to ask: ‘What is our relationship with our visitors?’ This can be seen in the context of social justice movements such as *Museums Are Not Neutral* that has seen the sector considering whether it has a responsibility to *decolonise* its collections in order to attract black and minority ethnic audiences who might be put off by heritage organisations’ past links to colonialism.³⁹ For heritage organisations, the question is no longer simply ‘what should we digitise?’ but ‘who are we for?’ A much more complex question to answer, and one that may have impeded digitisation decisions.

6.8 Looking forward

Interviewees were asked to think forward twenty years, to predict whether digitisation would still be desirable, and what online heritage collections would look like in the future. Their predictions were made before the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore do not reflect the “renaissance of digital”: a refocus on digital activity prompted by the need to provide online access to collections in response to the closure to the public of most of the country’s public buildings for months at a time.⁴² Having reflected on how they had failed to predict the future in the past, respondents were hesitant to be over-optimistic about the future. Most reflected on the technology itself and the idea that visitors would drive change: “I think it will be much more user-driven ... the interpretation around objects ... And I think augmented reality and virtual reality will become very much part of this” (Rick Lawrence, Royal Albert Memorial Museum).

I was at the museum ... to help with testing the Virtual Reality Experience, based on the Dams Raid... gosh! You know, to actually have this headset on, and be able to, you know, look out of the window ... That sort of thing, I think, is going to be more and more in demand. (Peter Elliott, RAF Museum)

³⁹ The ‘Museums Are Not Neutral’ campaign was created in 2017 by La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawsky. More at this link: <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/museums-are-not-neutral/> Accessed 7 July 2021.

⁴² Finnis, J. and Kennedy, A. (2020) ‘The Digital Transformation Agenda and GLAMs: A Quick Scan Report for Europeana.’ *Culture24*. Available at: https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Publications/Digital%20transformation%20reports/The%20digital%20transformation%20agenda%20and%20GLAMs%20-%20Culture24%20findings%20and%20outcomes.pdf Accessed 23 February 2023

Peter Elliott went on to question whether the distractions of new technology could impede the progress of object-by-object digitisation: “I wonder whether we will ever get round to putting collections fully online, in terms of producing, you know, a digital image ... of, say, Douglas Bader’s log book, or will we skip ahead to the next exciting thing, whatever that might be?” (Peter Elliott, RAF Museum). This inciteful comment reflects the difficulty of predicting how emerging technology will develop in the future, and how it will be used in a heritage context. Discussions on the use of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality in heritage settings are, at the time of writing, already giving way to debates about the use of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning.⁴³ None of my respondents mentioned Artificial Intelligence, but Kevin Bacon recognised that Virtual Reality was only the latest in a long line of technological innovations to capture the imagination:

There is a big danger that Culture is Digital is too defined by technology, and as trends change, and as, you know, certain technologies don’t take off as were expected - I think Virtual Reality is the most obvious one of those, that’s probably likely to crash and burn - people become very jaded and drop the whole thing” (Kevin Bacon, Brighton and Hove Museums).

Focusing on the needs of visitors instead of the technology itself was one of the recommendations of Phase Two of the *One by One* project, to which Kevin Bacon contributed. It described digital literacy as: “Person-centred, led by individuals’ needs rather than technologies or other external drivers.”⁴⁴ Adam Koszary points out that communicating online about collections with visitors necessarily requires digitisation:

Digitisation is the bedrock of how we interact with the public, in the future, on the internet. Without digitised collections, there is literally nothing to talk about ... But it’s more than just having it available. The institution really needs to look at itself, and what it’s trying to communicate, and the different staff need to come together. So, it’s more than just a technical issue. It’s more of a cultural issue. (Adam Koszary, the MERL)

⁴³ For example, a Dutch gallery has been criticised for hanging an artwork created by AI in place of Vermeer’s *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, which is out on loan: ‘Mauritshuis hangs artwork created by AI in place of loaned-out Vermeer.’ *NL Times website 22 February 2023* <https://nltimes.nl/2023/02/22/mauritshuis-hangs-artwork-created-ai-place-loaned-vermeer> Accessed 23 February 2023

⁴⁴ One by One (2019) ‘Understanding the digital skills & literacies of UK museum people: Phase Two Report’ Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/2019/05/21/phase-2-findings/> pii

For Kathryn Eccles, digitisation is still desirable and should continue in the future because it creates more interest in the physical object:

I have terrific examples of people who have created ... digital special collections, that have allowed their students to ... become interested in physical collections, and to go on and do book history research, or ... material culture work. I think that's really intriguing, and makes a really good case for increased digitisation, at whatever scale. (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University)

Some respondents went further, predicting a rejection of the digital world altogether: "I think that re-engagement with the physical ... will be, almost, like a new kind of excitement" (Tom Bilson, Courtauld Institute). But for Parry, discussing the early findings of the *One by One* project, a *postdigital* turn in heritage means the opposite; that organisations become more digitally literate, so that the word *digital* itself becomes unnecessary, because it becomes "innate within a range of operations and definitions within the museum."⁴⁵ This idea was echoed by Fiona Talbott from the National Lottery Heritage Fund:

We need organisations to be able to be much bolder ... moving beyond this idea of 'digital', because ... it's a way of operating, isn't it? But it isn't the only way. And just to take the banking analogy, ... if you're banking online, you don't think: "I'm doing this 'digitally'," you're just sorting your money out... I think that's where this sector needs to be, which is: actually, what is the best visitor experience, now? And perhaps that technology called 'digital' is one way of supporting it, underpinning it, or making it more widely available.

Interviewees had learned through experience that brute access alone is not enough to win new audiences to heritage collections, and the lack of benefit gained from sharing their collections had tempered some of the optimism that had been evident in the 2000 literature: "I remember seeing some daft things about open data. It was going to create a new Industrial Revolution, stuff like that ... I very much like the principles of it, but I've found ... it's really hard to get people very interested

⁴⁵ Parry, R. et al (2018) 'Development, supply, deployment, demand: Balancing the museum digital skills ecosystem: First findings of the One by One national digital literacy project'. Paper given at *Museums and the Web*, Vancouver 2018. Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/development-supply-deployment-demand-balancing-the-museum-digital-skills-ecosystem-first-findings-of-the-one-by-one-national-digital-literacy-project/>

in that.” (Kevin Bacon, Brighton and Hove Museums). Jen Ross suggested that heritage organisations are missing a trick by leaving out the behind-the-scenes curatorial stories of the objects in their collections:

I think there probably are really interesting ways of thinking about the role of the museum, the gallery, as the storytellers. As the people who can give you not just access to the image, but the story of the work ... all the contested, you know, curatorial bun-fights that have happened over it, over hundreds of years, and all of that kind of stuff which is there in the institutional memory, and gives things ... some of their value. (Jen Ross, Edinburgh University)

Due to the complexity and cost of digitisation, most respondents did not foresee a future in which a *critical mass* of collections was digitised, as had been predicted in the 2000 literature, and certainly not within the next twenty years. But, Kathryn Eccles felt that digitisation was already once again becoming a priority for organisations, partly driven by the *Culture is Digital* report: “I think ... we’re coming a bit full-circle. We’re returning to this kind of optimism that we had nearly twenty years ago, around what should be digitised, and ... what sort of public access we want, and what kind of scholarly access we want” (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University). But although there may be a new focus on digital collections, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, when I asked interviewees whether they would digitise everything in the collection if money and time was no object, most of them said no. Seven replied that, in their view, not everything would be of interest to a virtual visitor. Two said there were simply too many items in collections, and one said the money required to digitise the entire collection would be better spent elsewhere. It was felt by two respondents that not everything is appropriate to be digitised, or should only be seen in its context.

I think, users often think that’s probably the best thing to do, is to digitise everything, but it’s not necessarily the case. But there again, I’m toying with two ideas in my head, now ... is it more democratic if one does digitise everything? Because, who knows, even the laundry lists could be of use to someone, you know, doing history of laundries – who knows! So, you can never tell, you know, what might be of use to someone (Adrian Glew, Tate Archive).

The response of my interviewees reveals that they believe there is still a need for a curatorial role, that it is not always appropriate to let visitors decide for themselves what is interesting. This idea is at the heart of the digitisation debate: to what extent do visitors want to be led and guided by the expertise of the curator, and conversely, to what extent should the curator be led by the needs and demands of the visitor? By attracting more people to interact with heritage collections, can digitisation really *democratise* heritage as was predicted in the 2000 literature?

6.9 Digitisation and democratisation

Those, like Reid, who claimed in 2000 that digitisation had the potential to *democratise* heritage meant that providing access online could allow new and unserved audiences to consume and enjoy heritage content. In his view, it also meant that visitors could be involved in the interpretation of their own heritage:

It changes the relationship with members of the local community when they are asked to contribute to the telling of their own history, turning it into more of a partnership. There is an enormous amount of knowledge and expertise ... which can bring photographs, documents or artefacts to life.⁴⁶

Because it is contemporaneous, the notion of *democratisation* is strongly linked in the 2000 literature to Blair's *social inclusion* agenda, which instructed heritage organisations to work harder to attract visitors from diverse or low socio-economic backgrounds who might not feel that heritage collections reflected their interests or cultural histories. *Democratisation* in the 2000 literature could be described as akin to what we would now call *diversity*, an attempt to represent and serve communities of all cultures and educational backgrounds. But there was an assumption at the heart of the claim that digitisation could achieve this, and that was that *access equals inclusion*: that simply providing heritage content online would automatically draw in new and previously unserved audiences. While Taylor and Gibson agree that it has potential to do so, by "facilitating greater

⁴⁶ Reid, G. (2000) 'The digitisation of heritage material: arguing for an interpretive approach based on the experience of the Powys Digital History Project.' *Program*, Vol 34, No 2 p153

access to heritage collections and providing spaces for new voices to be heard,” they point out that this is not inherently democratic, because most digitisation projects measure their success by focusing on the number of interactions with an object, rather than the quality of the interaction: “much of the attention given to democracy through digitisation has focussed on the ability to reach larger user numbers, rather than how the discourse itself is created and mediated.”⁴⁷ This was the experience of Jen Ross, who says there is no value in the data produced by counting online visits:

There are so few things we can actually measure... So then, people just get really obsessed with the things they can measure ... And so, digital footfall, like the number of visitors to the website, is ... the best metric most people have for trying to say why it's worthwhile digitising ... And it's terrible, I mean, it doesn't tell you anything. (Jen Ross, Edinburgh University)

Taylor and Gibson argue that Reid's idea of community collaboration does not necessarily democratise heritage either, because choices about *what* to digitise are often made before visitors are invited to participate, meaning that “certain digitisation activities can subtly reinforce non-democratic structures.”⁴⁸ The *Culture is Digital* report in 2018 concluded that rather than attract new visitors, digitisation tended to *double-serve* existing audiences.⁴⁹ But, the same report suggested that digital technology did provide: “the potential to reach out to new as well as existing audiences, including those who may have been previously disengaged or uninterested.”⁵⁰ My interviewees too believed that democratisation was still an aspiration for the heritage sector:

I think we still do want to democratise heritage. But I think that what's become clearer is that there are no ... big, supra, overarching ways of doing that. I think, a lot of people, in the past, maybe thought: 'Oh, OK, if all museums have a database, then actually, they can all feed into one massive database, and then that'll be a database of the whole of Britain's heritage.' That's never going to happen, for all sorts of technical and intellectual reasons. (Zoe Hendon, Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture)

The UK government is planning exactly that type of database through a project called *Towards a National Collection*, claiming it will “dramatically expand and diversify virtual access to our heritage”,

⁴⁷ Gibson, J. and Taylor, L.K. (2016) 'Digitisation, digital interaction and social media: embedded barriers to democratic heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 5 p2.

⁴⁸ Gibson, J. and Taylor, L.K. (2016) p2

⁴⁹ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p21

⁵⁰ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p9

thus demonstrating that for the UK government, digitisation is still considered a way to democratise heritage.⁵¹ It has collated the findings of its preliminary research and has concluded that there is a deficit of digital skills in the heritage sector and that institutional funding will be needed for digitisation, which will be a key part of any shared database project.⁵² A supporting report by heritage copyright expert Dr Andrea Wallace has recommended that organisations should, wherever possible, share open data without copyright restrictions.⁵³ This project, like the *Culture is Digital* report in 2018, is likely to reignite debate about the value and purpose of digitisation, but it is too early to tell whether heritage organisations will be keen to share their collections freely, particularly if they feel this hinders their ability to monetise their collections. For my interviewees, the purpose of online collections still wasn't entirely clear: "Given that it's now back on the government agenda, we do need to have a serious conversation about it. And I think one of those questions is: 'What is it we're trying to capture? Actually'" (Kevin Bacon, Brighton and Hove Museums). Andrea Wallace's report found a culture of risk aversion when it comes to sharing collections openly.⁵⁶ But there was an awareness among my respondents that in practice it could bring real and tangible benefits, and they all cited the same example:

Some of the bigger institutions have been really good at democratising their content, the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands provide free access to everything and they've really truly integrated their collections search into their website with excellent results (Richard Martin, Royal College of Music).

If you see people like the Rijksmuseum just letting it all out, and Wikimedians in residence... We're slowly on-trend of doing what the internet does well. Rather than trying to make the internet do what we want it to do, we're slowly getting into what they want, what works for the internet. (Adam Koszary, MERL)

⁵¹ Towards a National Collection (nd) 'About Us'. Available at: <https://www.nationalcollection.org.uk/about> Accessed 3 March 2023.

⁵² Paltrinieri, C. (2023) *Consolidation Report: Insights from Towards a National Collection Foundation Projects*. Arts and Humanities Research Council. Available at: <https://zenodo.org/record/7674816#.ZAS-AXbP1PZ> Accessed 4 March 2023.

⁵³ Wallace, A. (2022) *A Culture of Copyright: a scoping study on open access to digital cultural heritage collections in the UK*. Arts and Humanities Research Council. Available at: https://www.nationalcollection.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-03/A%20Culture%20of%20Copyright%20-%20A.%20Wallace_compressed.pdf Accessed 4 March 2023.

⁵⁶ Wallace, A. (2022) P4

I think there's some really well-established research, that shows that if you make your materials available, then you drive interest. I mean, you only have to look at the Rijksmuseum, and the way the Rijksstudio has opened up the collections, and made people work with them in ways that drive capitalism, actually. (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University)

The Rijksmuseum has digitised almost its entire collection and has shared it openly without restrictions since 2012. It is one of very few heritage collections that has not only attained a *critical mass* of digitised objects but has taken the decision not to place any restrictions whatsoever on their use. Despite this, the museum claims it has benefited financially in terms of brand value. Could the UK's heritage organisations learn anything from the Rijksmuseum's Rijksstudio project? In the next chapter, I will examine the conditions under which the Rijksstudio was created and compare the Dutch model of heritage policy and funding to that of the UK.

7. Rijksmuseum and the Rijksstudio

The Rijksmuseum is one of very few museums worldwide that has digitised the bulk of its collection and designated it as in the public domain, which means there are no restrictions on the reuse of its images, even for commercial purposes. This chapter investigates its claim that it has drawn significant value from its online collections despite offering high resolution images online without requiring any fees or attribution. The chapter uses the *reasons not to digitise* from the previous chapter to examine the identified barriers to digitisation in turn, to understand how the Rijksmuseum has overcome each one. It compares Dutch government policy on digitisation to that in the UK to understand the extent to which politics can be said to have had an impact on the museum's digitisation decisions.

7.1 Introduction

When this project began in 2014, heritage professionals from the Rijksmuseum, the Dutch national museum in Amsterdam, appeared regularly at museum and heritage conferences describing their *Rijksstudio*, a website which allowed visitors to curate their own collections of high-quality images with no restrictions.¹ This appeared to be exactly the type of online collection that had been predicted in the 2000 literature. For example, in 1997, Howard Besser from University of California Berkeley had described in detail an online viewing tool that sounds exactly like the Rijksstudio:

With the ability to zoom in and zoom out and to compare close-ups... the spectator is able to participate in activities that previously were almost exclusively within the domain of curators and other professionals. These interactive processes engage viewers and encourage them to function more like participants than spectators.²

The Rijksstudio, released in October 2012, was a website designed to work best on a smartphone or tablet (the first iPad had been released two years earlier). It made 125,000 high-quality images from its art and history collection available for the public to view, curate and download, free and without

¹ Link to the Rijksstudio: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio>

² Besser, H. (1997) 'The changing role of photographic collections with the advent of digitization', in Jones-Garmil, K. (ed) (2003) *The Wired Museum*. Second Printing. Washington DC: American Association of Museums. p119

restrictions. Visitors were encouraged to create their own collections and, crucially, were also permitted to alter and re-use any of the museum's out-of-copyright images for both personal and commercial purposes. The Rijksmuseum even set up an annual competition for the best use of its artworks (see Fig 9). It described its approach as "revolutionary both in its design and in terms of its open data policy" and claimed that the boost to its brand value from giving away its collection for free far outweighed any loss of revenue from image sales.³ As well as the boost to its brand, the Rijksmuseum claimed to have had great success in terms of online visitor numbers. As Peter Gorgels, the museum's Manager of Digital Products told the 2013 *Museums and the Web* conference: "The results of Rijksstudio have far exceeded our expectations ... In the first three months alone, over 32,000 ... portfolios were created, more than 112,000 artworks from the Rijksmuseum's collection were downloaded, and 28,000 sets were made."⁴ At the same conference five years later, Gorgels claimed that the Rijksstudio was "as popular as ever," reporting the creation of more than 300,000 Rijksstudio and the download of more than 5 million high-resolution images.⁵ He claimed that the redevelopment of both the bricks and mortar museum and the Rijksstudio had revitalised the museum's image from "a little boring, a little detached, and overly traditional" into a "love brand."⁶ In 2013, an Economic Impact Analysis by consulting firm Booz and Company valued the Rijksmuseum's contribution to the GDP of the Netherlands between 2003 and 2017 at €3bn, adding that, as of 2013, the museum's refurbishment had added an additional €90m from visitor expenditure.⁷ The report also commented on the museum's *societal impact*, saying the Rijksmuseum "plays a key role in increasing the prestige that Amsterdam and, consequently, the Netherlands,

³ Gorgels, P. (2018) Rijksmuseum mobile first: Rijksstudio Redesign and the new Rijksmuseum app. In Proctor, N. and Cherry, R. (eds) *Museums and the Web 2018* April 18-21 2018 Vancouver, BC Canada p201 Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/rijksmuseum-mobile-first-redesign-rijksstudio-the-new-rijksmuseum-app/>. Accessed 13 July 2021. p200/202

⁴ Gorgels, P. (2013) *Make Your Own Masterpiece!* In Proctor, N. and Cherry, R. (eds) *Museums and the Web 2013*. April 17-20, 2013 Portland, Oregon. Available at: <https://mw2013.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/rijksstudio-make-your-own-masterpiece/> Accessed 13 July 2021.

⁵ Gorgels, P. (2018) p201

⁶ Gorgels, P. (2018) p200

⁷ Strategy& (2021) 'About' page. *Strategy& website*. Available at: <https://www.strategyand.pwc.com/gx/en/about/history.html> Accessed 13 July 2021.

enjoys.”⁸ The key finding was that the Rijksmuseum attracts local, national and international visitors, and that the country benefits from increased tourist income as a result. What is it that makes it such a draw? According to the report, it is the museum’s “mix of art and national history” along with a “monumental building” that makes it “an icon of Dutch identity.”⁹ Although this report relates to the bricks and mortar museum rather than the online Rijksstudio, it can be argued that the website was largely responsible for maintaining the institution’s brand value at this time, since the museum itself was closed between 2003 and 2013 for remodelling (apart from one wing showing a small part of the collection). In fact, the Rijksstudio was originally developed to keep the collection visible and accessible to the public. Brand value is a difficult concept to measure, but this report emphatically places the Rijksmuseum at the centre of the cultural heritage of the Netherlands.

What the Rijksmuseum appears to do particularly well is public relations and promotion, with its staff appearing regularly on the conference circuit to build international awareness of its work. And evidently this has been successful: in 2008, it was described as a “paradigm of excellence” by an American PhD student studying US art museums, who suggested that: “the trends determined in the Rijksmuseum’s curatorial practices may provide an example for contemporary curatorial practices in the United States.”¹⁰ Following a ten-year restoration project, which was not without its difficulties, British historian Simon Schama was invited to review the revamped museum, and described it as: “marvel piled on marvel; wonder on wonder, a fabulous, unending inebriation of stuff.”¹¹ The *Rijksstudio* has enjoyed similar positive coverage, described as a “very admirable project,” one of ten “global R&D projects that are changing arts and culture” and a “groundbreaking new digital

⁸ Booz and Company (2013) *Rijksmuseum – Grand National Product*. Lenoirschuring, Amstelveen, Amsterdam. p7 Available to download at: <https://www.ing.com/MediaEditPage/Rijksmuseum-Grand-National-Product.htm> Accessed 2 March 2023.

⁹ Booz and Company (2013) p6

¹⁰ Suarez, N. (2008) *Curatorial Practices at the Rijksmuseum*. PhD Thesis, Florida State University, Tallahassee Available at: <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu%3A176034> p5/6

¹¹ Schama, S. (2013) ‘Simon Schama: the Rijksmuseum reopens’. Financial Times. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/6050ffc2-96cb-11e2-a77c-00144feabdc0> Accessed 1 June 2020.

collection.”¹² But, Austrian art historian Viola Rühse has observed that there has been a shortage of critical analysis of the Rijksstudio saying: “it is problematic that the positive self-presentation of the museum has too often been adopted uncritically.”¹³



Fig 9: Winner of Rijksstudio Award 2017: ‘Masterpieces Never Sleep’ - sleep masks created with images taken from famous artworks. Picture credit: Rijksmuseum

To date, the Rijksmuseum is still one of only a handful of organisations that has digitised the bulk of its collection and offered it online free and without restrictions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States is another example and others have followed, including Paris Musées.¹⁴ The creators of the Rijksstudio assigned a Creative Commons Zero, or CC0 mark on its out-of-copyright

¹² Davis, B. (2014) ‘Give your content away for maximum ROI: a Rijksstudio case study’. *Econsultancy website*. Available at: <https://econsultancy.com/give-your-content-away-for-maximum-roi-a-rijksstudio-case-study/> Accessed 13 July 2021.

Quinn, E. and Balopoulou, A. (2014) ‘Ten global R&D projects that are changing arts and culture’ *Guardian newspaper 20 June 2014*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2014/jun/20/global-research-development-projects-arts-culture> Accessed 18 July 2021.

Choy, Y. (2013) ‘A bright new age: the Rijksmuseum reopens after a 10 year renovation’. *Wallpaper website 12 April 2013*. Available at: <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/a-bright-new-age-the-rijksmuseum-reopens-after-a-10-year-renovation> Accessed 18 July 2021.

¹³ Rühse, V. (2017) ‘The Digital Collection of the Rijksmuseum: Open content and the commercialization of a National Museum’ in Grau, O, Coones, W and Rühse, V. (eds). (2017) *Museum and Archive on the Move: Changing Cultural Institutions in the Digital Era*. De Gruyter, Berlin. P37

¹⁴ Metropolitan Museum Open Access Policy available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/policies-and-documents/open-access> Accessed 12 March 2023.

McCarthy, D. and Rivière, P. (2020) ‘Paris Musées embraces open access’ *Europeana Pro website*. Available at: <https://pro.europeana.eu/post/paris-musees-launches-its-open-access-initiative> Accessed 18 July 2021.

artworks, placing them in the public domain, and not requiring users to credit them to their parent institution.¹⁵ Considering the positive response to the Rijksmuseum's decision to share its collection without restrictions, why weren't more museums and galleries employing this approach, which was one of the digitisation aspirations of the 2000 literature? Were there reasons why the Rijksmuseum could take this bold step and others could not? An analysis follows, following the *reasons not to digitise*.

7.2 Rijksstudio: Cost

Amongst my interviewees, cost was identified as the top reason not to digitise, with eight respondents ranking it first on the list. One described it as “the great barrier to digitisation” (Kathryn Eccles, Oxford University). They reported that the cutting of budgets over the past two decades meant that they had had to tailor their projects to the requirements of funding bodies: “We're basically always chasing pots of funding” (John Benson, National Waterways Museum). How did the Rijksmuseum fund its Rijksstudio? It was an ambitious project, costing around a million Euros, funded by a grant from the BankGiro lottery, which provides money for arts and cultural groups.¹⁶ The BankGiro lottery is a regular donor to the Rijksmuseum, granting millions of euros a year for acquisitions.¹⁷ The UK's equivalent of the BankGiro lottery is the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It also makes sizeable donations for heritage projects, and, indeed, in its early years, was more likely to make major donations than small ones.¹⁸ But where the early grants were mainly focused on rescue and repair, its policy evolved so that engagement with people became the main driver for funding:

¹⁵ Creative Commons is an American not-for-profit organisation created in 2001 to allow the sharing of creative work, free of copyright restrictions. For more on the Creative Commons CC0 mark, see:

<https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/public-domain/cc0/> Accessed 18 July 2021.

¹⁶ Figure quoted in Rühse, V. (2017) 'The Digital Collection of the Rijksmuseum: Open content and the commercialization of a National Museum' in Grau, O, Coones, W and Rühse, V. (eds). *Museum and Archive on the Move: Changing Cultural Institutions in the Digital Era*. De Gruyter, Berlin. Confirmed in correspondence with Peter Gorgels, Internet Manager of the Rijksmuseum (email in possession of the author).

¹⁷ Rijksmuseum website (nd). 'Overview Funds and Foundations'. *Rijksmuseum website*. Available at:

<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/support/funds-and-foundations/overview> Accessed 25 July 2021.

¹⁸ Heritage Lottery Fund/BOP Consulting (2015) *HLF Major Grants – The first 100*. Heritage Fund website. p2.

Available at: https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/research/hlf_major_grants_-_the_first_100.pdf Accessed 25 July 2021.

“Conservation work had to be accompanied by more attention to people. Participation, involvement, learning became the watchwords.”¹⁹ Despite claiming that its grants were *opening up* collections to visitors, a report looking back on its first 100 major grants also contains an admission that “incorporating new ways of consuming and experiencing heritage – through technology and digital media” was one of the challenges it had not yet successfully addressed.²⁰ This is surprising considering that it was giving out its first major grants in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the opportunities of the internet were a major part of the heritage discourse. Its hesitancy to fund digital-only projects can be explained by a decision it made in 1998, writing into HLF policy that funding for the “simple transfer of existing catalogues to digital form” would not be granted unless there was “a genuine value-added element to public appreciation and understanding.”²¹ As a result, projects that won lottery funding tended to include real people in the real world, rather than those that only offered online access to heritage objects. Fiona Talbott from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, explains why this was done:

There was always that sense we weren’t funding the infrastructure of digital ... I think, perhaps, too many fingers had got burned by things like the New Opportunities Fund, the DigiFund, and things which really hadn’t worked out... there was some institutional fear that, you know, however much money we’ve got, here at the Lottery Fund, it’s still ... finite. Whereas, funding digital infrastructure could be quite infinite. (Fiona Talbott, HLF)

The New Opportunities Fund ran from 1999 to 2003 and was aimed at improving teachers’ IT skills. It was considered a failure, costing £230 million but having a “low impact on classroom practice.”²²

According to one evaluation, the factors that caused the failure were:

Underpreparation of the technological and material resource requirements, failure to motivate teachers, lack of attention to the context in which teachers work, and an

¹⁹ Heritage Lottery Fund/BOP Consulting (2015) p3

²⁰Heritage Lottery Fund/BOP Consulting (2015) p3

²¹ Ross, S., Economou, M. Anderson, J. (1998). *Funding ICT in the Heritage Sector: HLF Report*. University of Glasgow. Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263768046_Funding_Information_and_Communications_Technology_in_the_Heritage_Sector_HLF_report Accessed 7 July 2021. p19

²² Conlon, T. (2004) ‘A Failure of Delivery: the United Kingdom’s New Opportunities Fund programme of teacher training in information and communications technology’ *Journal of In-service Education*, Volume 30, Number 1 p115

underestimation of what is involved in developing knowledge and skills sufficient to change practice.²³

A fear of wasting vast sums of money on new technology that wasn't fully understood and requiring new skills that staff didn't have may be the reasons why, while four of the National Lottery Heritage Fund's first 100 major grants included some digitisation elements, none were digitisation projects first and foremost.²⁴ Projects were also required to have substantial learning or engagement objectives. As Talbott explains: "We were turning quite a hard line, which was ... if it isn't going to be about doing that activity that we call 'learning', then we can't fund it.' ... Some of the legacy of that, with some of those sectors, is still there, in terms of what we will and won't touch" (Fiona Talbott, HLF). The HLF's policies are closely tied to UK government policy, which it describes as 'steering' its work, and this requirement to include learning reflects Tony Blair's policy priority of 'Education, education, education' set out in his Labour conference speech in 1996.²⁵

In the Netherlands, digital skills and policy in the cultural heritage sector were directly supported by the government through a 1999 programme called Digital Delta which continued into the 2000s. Crucially, this funding supported: "the construction of a sustainable information infrastructure. This was a period of rapid growth, with great support from the Ministry of Culture, which allocated €24 million in the period 2004–2008 towards digital activities under what would be known as the eCulture policy program."²⁶ The HLF's unwillingness to invest in digital infrastructure in the UK could explain why the National Lottery Heritage Fund did not offer a grant for anything similar to the

²³ Conlon, T. (2004) p136

²⁴ The vast majority of the first 100 major grant projects by the HLF were for buildings, acquisitions and restoration projects. Only four made any mention of digitisation – the BFI's restoration and digitisation of its film archive, the Royal Geographic Society's digitisation of images and maps, the digitisation of Churchill's papers, and the Riverside Museum's 'creation of online digital access to Glasgow Museums collections' – Full list available at: https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/research/hlf_major_grants_-_the_first_100_case_studies.pdf Accessed 16 June 2020

²⁵ Heritage Fund (2021) 'Policy Directions' *National Lottery Heritage Fund website*. Available at: <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/about/transparency/policy-directions> Accessed 9 March 2023

British Political Speech (nd) 'Leader's speech, Blackpool 1996' *British Political Speech website*. Available at: <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=202> Accessed 9 March 2023

²⁶ Navarrete, T. (2014) 'Becoming Digital: A Dutch Heritage Perspective' *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 44: p159

Rijksstudio, which, although clearly focused on visitor engagement, did not have a *learning* agenda. In fact, the Rijksstudio was criticised by Rühse for stripping out educational material that had appeared on previous iterations of the Rijksmuseum website.²⁷ The major difference between the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund and the Dutch GiroBank lottery is that the latter provides long-term grant support to 67 *cultural partners* rather than taking a project-based approach. This means the Rijksmuseum is supported by generous regular donations and can also request extra funding and awards, allowing it the freedom to make its own decisions on how to allocate its money.

While it seems doubtful that the Rijksstudio project would have received Heritage Lottery funding in the UK, the National Lottery is, of course, not the only source of funding available to museums, and nor is it the Rijksmuseum's only income. The Rijksmuseum receives funding from three sources. It is one-third funded by the state, one third comes from private donations and grants and one third from ticket sales.²⁸ It is well supported by donations, receiving regular income from a number of organisations.²⁹ According to Trilce Navarrete, a specialist in the economic and historic aspects of digital heritage, the largest museums in the Netherlands (of which the Rijksmuseum is one) receive a disproportionate amount of government funding, with 6% of museums receiving nearly 45% of all government subsidies.³⁰ This funding is not tied to government policy, meaning that Dutch museums "enjoy a high degree of independence as far as their functioning and policy are concerned."³¹ In the UK, the equivalent of the Rijksmuseum would be one of the national museums, which are funded directly by government. Unlike the Rijksmuseum, the UK's national museums are unable to charge

²⁷ Rühse, V. (2017) p47

²⁸ Dibbits, T. (2018) Answer given to a question following a speech at Yale University Art Gallery. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMXyBbGX_VE Answer is at 1:02:14

²⁹ Rijksmuseum (nd) 'Support the Rijksmuseum'. *Rijksmuseum website*. Available at: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/support> Accessed 25 July 2021.

³⁰ Navarrete, T. (2014) 'Becoming Digital: A Dutch Heritage Perspective' *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 44: p154

³¹ Bina, V. et al (2017) *Egmus: country report The Netherlands, 2017*. European Group on Museum Statistics. P1 Available at: https://www.egmus.eu/uploads/tx_usermusstatistic/Netherlands_EGMUS_country_report_2017.pdf Accessed 25 July 2021.

entrance fees; free admission at national museums was introduced as a policy by the government in 2001.³² There are 16 institutions directly funded by government: 13 national museums, two non-national museums and the British Library.³³ They are described as *arms-length bodies* or ALBs, but while this description implies a level of autonomy, they are, in fact, closely tied to government. These museums are accountable to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which in many cases has the power to appoint trustees (for some institutions, this responsibility rests at an even more senior level - with the Prime Minister, or the monarch).³⁴ This political element to board appointments made national headlines in 2020 when Downing Street attempted to block the appointment of classicist Dame Mary Beard as a trustee of the British Museum, reportedly because she had pro-EU views.³⁵ The relationship of ALBs with government could best be described as complicated, as a 2014 Select Committee report revealed: "Relationships should be high trust and low cost, but too often are low trust and high cost... We have reviewed the state of accountability for arm's-length bodies in the UK and found inconsistency, overlaps, confusion and clutter."³⁶ The UK's national museums are instructed to follow government policy. For example, a 2017 review of government-sponsored museums makes clear that "alignment with government priorities" is required, for example: "promoting Britain abroad through cultural diplomacy, especially post Brexit, and contributing to tourism, highlighting the UK as a special place to visit."³⁷ This relationship with

³² Gov.uk (2011) 'Ten years of free museums: DCMS-sponsored institutions mark 10 years since introduction of universal free access.' *UK Government website*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ten-years-of-free-museums> Accessed 25 July 2021.

³³ DCMS (2017b) *Strategic review of DCMS-sponsored museums*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. P11. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673938/Strategic_review_of_DCMS-sponsored_museums.pdf Accessed 25 July 2021.

³⁴ DCMS (2017b) p16

³⁵ Brooks, R. (2020) 'Mary Beard blocked by No 10 as British Museum trustee 'for pro-Europe views'' *Guardian Newspaper*. 1 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/01/british-museum-put-mary-beard-on-the-board-despite-downing-st-veto> Accessed 25 July 2021.

³⁶ House of Commons PASC (2014) *Who's accountable? Relationships between Government and arm's-length bodies*. House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee. P34. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpubadm/110/110.pdf> Accessed 25 July 2021.

³⁷ DCMS (2017b) *Strategic review of DCMS-sponsored museums*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. p22. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673938/Strategic_review_of_DCMS-sponsored_museums.pdf Accessed 25 July 2021

government makes the national museums more likely to be risk-averse when a project does not align with policy priorities. The Rijksstudio project was expensive and created no direct income for the museum. It would have been hard to argue to a UK-based board of trustees that giving away high-resolution images to commercial companies for free, without attribution, was a good use of £900,000 (one million Euros) especially as, in the same review of national museums, they were being encouraged to make more from online sales: “We consider that there are potential opportunities from such sales to improve customer service, reduce costs and increase revenue.”³⁸ While the Rijksstudio would not appear on paper to make commercial sense, it has, in fact, been extremely successful in promoting the Netherlands abroad and contributing to the tourist industry and appears to align perfectly with the UK government’s policy as set out in the 2017 review, in terms of its professionalisation and pursuit of commercial income. In fact, one of the criticisms of the Rijksstudio made by Rühse is that it is no more than a promotional vehicle for drawing in corporate sponsorship: “The analysis of Rijksstudio is a cautionary tale of the commercialization of a museum and the abandonment of governmental responsibility for public goods such as culture and education in neoliberal times.”³⁹ Rühse argues that by stripping out educational content from the website and offering a creative experience that in her view lacks depth and functionality, the Rijksstudio offers “a decorative online aesthetic instead of an adequate presentation of the various works”⁴⁰ Since 2015, the Rijksmuseum has begun to address this, adding museum catalogue entries where available, which can be revealed by clicking a link underneath the full-size image. But, regardless of whether its decisions were based on social or financial motives, the Rijksmuseum’s freedom to behave more like an independent corporation has, I would argue, allowed it to make bolder decisions and take more risks than its UK counterparts. Its freedom from government influence has allowed it to focus solely on its own needs, allowing it to seek positive publicity and focus on enhancing its reputation around the world.

³⁸ DCMS (2017b) p33

³⁹ Rühse, V. (2017) p52

⁴⁰ Rühse, V. (2017) p44

The Rijksmuseum is one of the Netherlands' larger heritage organisations, and one of its best funded. It would be tempting, therefore, to conclude that it has digitised more of its collection than other organisations simply because it can afford to. But in their 2017 study about the link between innovation and digitisation in heritage organisations, Borowiecki and Navarrete drew on US research using organisational literature to assess innovation in arts organisations, to test whether digitisation is an indicator of innovation in the UK heritage sector. They found that while wealthier institutions do indeed digitise more, larger institutions with more staff digitise less and therefore "size of institution is possibly less important than the slack available to innovate."⁴¹ Having undertaken a macro, meso and micro-analysis using literature from science and business studies on the factors affecting innovation, Borowiecki and Navarrete found: "The key determinants for innovation at micro level were found to be slack, specialized staff and the presence of a digitization policy."⁴²

Organisational *slack* is an Economics term meaning: "Those spare capabilities and assets of the organisation that are variable reclaimable for re-deployment. They represent under utilised and hidden spare energies within a company that may be recaptured and employed for a variety of tasks."⁴³ Having slack within an organisation has, in the past, been criticised as inefficiency, but more recently, arguments have been made that slack allows space for innovation, and this is the position of Borowiecki and Navarrete: "Firms with organizational slack can absorb failure, can bear cost of adopting innovations and can 'explore new ideas in advance of an actual need.'"⁴⁴ The notion of slack as a space for innovation is relevant to the Rijksmuseum and its development of the Rijksstudio because, for ten years, the Rijksmuseum's building was closed for renovation, giving it time and space to innovate without the day-to-day demands of running a busy museum.

⁴¹ Borowiecki, K. and Navarrete, T. (2017) 'Digitization of heritage collections as indicator of innovation', *Economics of Innovation and New Technology*, 26:3. p236

⁴² Borowiecki, K. and Navarrete, T. (2017) p242

⁴³ Adkins, P. (2005) *Organisational slack resources, the definitions and consequences for business flexibility and performance : an empirical investigation*. PhD Thesis. Aston Business School. p1 (abstract). Available at: <https://research.aston.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/organisational-slack-resources-the-definitions-and-consequences-f> Accessed 25 July 2021.

⁴⁴ Borowiecki and Navarrete (2017) p232. (Quoting Rosner, M. (1968) 'Economic Determinants of Organizational Innovation.' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 12 (4): 614–625)

7.3 Rijksstudio: Time

For my interviewees, time was closely linked to cost at the top of the list of reasons not to digitise.

Taking into account the top three choices, time came out as the most cited reason not to digitise overall, with digitisation being seen as an extra burden on top of a full-time role:

You've got too many concurrent projects running, you know, phones are ringing, not caught up with your emails, etcetera, etcetera... there's all these objects in this store, we don't have any documentation on them, we haven't looked at them, they've not been conserved, let's just forget about it and put our heads in the sand. (Christopher Streek, York Museums Trust)

In 2003, the Rijksmuseum closed its doors for extensive work to its building that was due to take five years, but due to complications, ended up taking ten. This is significant for several reasons. Firstly, this pause in the day-to-day running of the organisation would have given staff and management the space to consider time-consuming projects such as the Rijksstudio. Although one gallery of the building remained open to the public, and a number of 'satellite' galleries continued to show parts of the collection, there would have been much less for staff to do in terms of the demands of the day-to-day running of a large museum. As Peter Gorgels, digital manager of the Rijksmuseum describes it: "Because of the large renovation we had time to realize this project in some kind of 'rest'."⁴⁵

Secondly, the bricks-and-mortar museum was being completely redesigned. Whilst in the planning stages, a decision was made to display different kinds of objects together in a large chronological sweep. Staff were split into working groups, organised by century rather than by type of object, and were asked to rethink the way they displayed the objects from their time period. The working group leaders were instructed to be "enlightened despots", and not to make decisions by committee, as it was felt this would lead to a homogenous result.⁴⁶ When these working groups came back with proposals that included too many objects for the new gallery space, they were dissolved, and new

⁴⁵ Gorgels, P. in email correspondence with the author (email in possession of the author)

⁴⁶ Dibbitts, T., Ahina, W. and Webb, A. (2018) 'Accidentally agile: An interview with the Rijksmuseum's Taco Dibbitts' *The McKinsey Quarterly* 10/2018. P2 Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/accidentally-agile-an-interview-with-the-rijksmuseums-taco-dibbitts> Accessed 25 July 2021.

groups were created with the express task of reducing the number of objects on display. After working through this process, the museum decided it needed to reorganise its management structure as well. As Dibbets et al explain, “the museum's staff inadvertently embraced agile organizational principles - forming, dissolving, and reforming teams that were more interdisciplinary than those it had employed in the past - as it worked to redesign its galleries.”⁴⁷ The renovation of the Rijksmuseum created an internal dialogue about how staff communicated and made decisions. This allowed them to be open to new ways of working and forced them to take more radical leaps in decision-making. Thirdly, the fact that the museum was closed gave staff access to the collection for digitisation. Gaining access to objects can be a significant barrier to digitisation. Items in storage may be off-site and inaccessible. Curators will not want fragile objects handled unless necessary. For three of my respondents, the temporary closure of parts of the museum created an opportunity to digitise or improve digital skills. Fourthly, the closure meant that public awareness of the museum would start to fall. A big digitisation project like the Rijksstudio was the perfect way to announce to the heritage visitor at large that the museum was open for business, albeit virtually. And perhaps it was also a way to deflect attention from the fact that the renovation was not going well:

It took ten years instead of three and the costs were ... much higher than the expected sum of 272 million euro. It also caused much negative publicity because of poor planning and a deficient tendering process, bankruptcy of contractors, the resignation of a museum director, problems with asbestos and an uprising of Amsterdam’s cycling lobby.⁴⁸

The closure of the Rijksmuseum for ten years gave it the opportunity to revitalise its working practices. It gave senior staff time to reconsider the museum’s vision and mission and apply these principles to its website. Objects were accessible for digitisation, and the museum was highly motivated to promote itself as the renovation dragged on longer than planned. All these factors meant that a large, bold project such as the Rijksstudio was conceivable. Notably, even with

⁴⁷ Dibbets et al (2018) p1

⁴⁸ Rühse, V. (2017) p51

extensive time to dedicate to the project, the Rijksstudio digitisation project was still ongoing years after its launch, underlining the huge size of the task facing organisations with large collections.

7.4 Rijksstudio: Expertise or IT skills

My respondents did not consider a lack of expertise or IT skills a strong reason not to digitise, with only one placing it in the top three and none putting it at the top of the list. But some did describe challenges to staff skills: “Taking on new areas like, particularly, preservation metadata and preservation protocols, which we hadn’t really explored fully ... that was a steep learning curve for everyone” (Adrian Glew, Tate Archive). It is helpful here to recall that Phase 2 of the Leicester University-led digital literacy project *One by One* scoped out the range of skills that staff at UK institutions felt were lacking. They encountered a wide variety of responses, publishing a list of 74 different issues raised. These range from basic technical skills such as the ability to type, or to use Microsoft Office programmes, to more advanced technical skills such as coding and using analytics software. Also listed were more general managerial skills that some felt were lacking in their organisations: from communication, problem-solving and change management, to what businesses might describe as *soft skills*: curiosity, openness and “emotional literacy – being able to converse, connect, ask questions, mediate dialogue.”⁴⁹ This list is a useful illustration of why digitisation projects do not simply require technical knowledge, but also managerial and legal skills - the need for more awareness of copyright and GDPR rules appears on the *One by One* list. Is there evidence that the Rijksmuseum was better equipped with skilled digitally literate staff? It has certainly received support in terms of image rights management. In 2011, the Rijksmuseum forged a close working relationship with *Europeana*, the EU-funded heritage aggregation project. The museum’s online team began to prepare its images and metadata so that they could be shared on the

⁴⁹ Malde, S. et al (2019) *Understanding the digital skills & literacies of UK museum people - Phase Two Report*. One by One. University of Leicester. Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/2019/05/21/phase-2-findings/> Accessed 28 June 2021 p14

Europeana website.⁵⁰ This project sparked a debate about attribution labels attached to the images. Staff wanted to add a Creative Commons attribution label CC-BY, which requires that the user credits the owner institution and provides a link to the original source.⁵¹ But they were persuaded by Europeana and a Dutch thinktank to consider putting the images into the public domain instead.⁵² They agreed to do so, but admitted that this was “a serious shift in strategy”:

At the time, several open access groups such as the Wikimedia Foundation, the Open Knowledge Foundation, and others were making a fuss about maintaining the public domain Status after a work is digitised. The result was wholesale adoption of the public domain mark by the Rijksmuseum.⁵³

Later that year, the Rijksmuseum was asked to provide some images for a design competition. At first, it offered a small collection of little-known Chinese drawings. But the museum’s own marketing department pushed for a bolder approach and argued for a larger and more representative collection of images to be offered for use in the competition:

The combination of high quality, freely re-usable digital images resulted in the most used Dataset of the competition and a lot of attention for the Rijksmuseum. This success started a larger internal discussion about making available the even higher quality digital images of the museum and what else could be done with it. This led to the writing of the digital strategy of the museum for the following years.⁵⁴

Partnering with Europeana, an expert in digital policy and practice, helped the Rijksmuseum debate and develop its own approach to digitisation, resulting in an increased confidence to share more of its collection. The museum’s own marketing department then took this confidence forward, arguing for more material to be shared freely online, and this ultimately led to the writing of a digital strategy. Borowiecki and Navarrete found a correlation between the existence of a digital strategy

⁵⁰ Europeana site showing the Rijksmuseum collection is available at: <https://pro.europeana.eu/data/works-of-art-from-the-rijksmuseum> Accessed 30 July 2021.

⁵¹ Creative Commons (nd) ‘Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)’. *Creative Commons website*. Available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> Accessed 30 July 2021.

⁵² Pekel, J. (2014) ‘Democratising the Rijksmuseum: Why did the Rijksmuseum make available their highest quality material without restrictions, and what are the results?’ *Europeana website*. Available at: <https://pro.europeana.eu/post/democratising-the-rijksmuseum> Accessed 30 July 2021. p6

⁵³ Pekel, J. (2014) p6

⁵⁴ Pekel, J. (2014) p7

and the amount of material digitised. They suggested that access to funding, a clear strategy, and skilled staff were key to digitisation success:

We find a link between organizational innovation and adoption of a digital work practice. This is reflected in the organizational attention for creative reuse of collections and in the presence of specialized staff and policy to advance digital strategies found in organizations with a higher share of digitized collections.⁵⁵

The closure of the Rijksmuseum gave its staff time to develop new knowledge and skills. A close relationship with digital partners who were leading the argument for open access gave it the confidence to take an innovative approach, but this was also supported by the expertise that had been developed amongst its own staff.

7.5 Rijksstudio: Fear of obsolescence

A fear of obsolescence was not a great concern for my interviewees. Most expressed that format standards had settled down enough to allow digitised material to remain accessible and that continual updates of hardware and software were now accepted as part of normal working practice: “Even a grumpy old so-and-so like me, I think, has now ... got a degree of confidence that you can digitise things without there being a fear of obsolescence” (John Benson, National Waterways Museum). The word *confidence* is key here: overcoming a fear of obsolescence requires decisions to be made to invest time and money when digital media standards and technology iterate at a rapid pace. The quality of confidence in making digital decisions is very evident in the actions of the Rijksmuseum. As former director Wim Pijbes said: “Of course we do the Old Masters but we are not a ‘yesterday institution’”⁵⁶ The Rijksstudio was designed to respond to the demands of the social media generation, serving a new audience described as the *culture snacker*: “Creative manipulation of images has become commonplace... We think that everybody is (in a way) a culture snacker today

⁵⁵ Borowiecki, K. and Navarrete, T. (2017) ‘Digitization of heritage collections as indicator of innovation’, *Economics of Innovation and New Technology*, 26:3, p243

⁵⁶ Preece, R.J. (2009) ‘Damien Hirst’s diamond skull at the Rijksmuseum: Behind the scenes’ *artdesigncafé website*, June 1 2009. Available at: <https://www.artdesigncafe.com/damien-hirst-rijksmuseum-diamond-skull-2008> Accessed 30 July 2021.

and that it's important for museums to reach them."⁵⁷ The Rijksmuseum was one of the first museums to mass-digitise its collection, but while this chapter is dedicated to its *Rijksstudio*, that was only the first of its online innovations. Since then, it has created two YouTube channels, *RijksTube* and *RijksCreate*. *RijksTube* contains a series of short 'video essays' connecting popular culture with art and *RijksCreative* offers video tutorials on art techniques.⁵⁸ In 2020, the museum released *#Rijksmuseumfromhome*, a series of videos highlighting curators' favourite objects, aimed at engaging people isolating during the Covid-19 lockdown.⁵⁹ The *Rijksstudio* is now just a small part of the Rijksmuseum's online portfolio, and while it was ground-breaking on its release in 2012, Peter Gorgels says it had certain limitations:

It is strange that after more than 7 years it is still a standard in the international museum world. We are now developing the website also in the direction of more storytelling. *Rijksstudio* remains great, but the concept limits other ways of storytelling we want to explore.⁶⁰

Because it has invested in the high-quality digitisation of its collection, the Rijksmuseum is able to reuse its images in new online projects as trends emerge and change. The museum continues to develop its online offering in the fast-moving online world. Always driving forwards, it is well-resourced enough not to fear obsolescence. Its vision of itself as a ground-breaking innovator was developed during the redevelopment of the physical museum and owes much to its senior management.

⁵⁷ Gorgels, P. (2013) *Make Your Own Masterpiece!* In *Museums and the Web 2013*, April 17-20, 2013. Portland, Oregon. In N. Proctor & R. Cherry (eds). *Museums and the Web 2013*. Silver Spring, MD. Available at: <https://mw2013.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/rijksstudio-make-your-own-masterpiece/> Accessed 18 July 2021

⁵⁸ Link to *RijksTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw56Qjdw497hQIXo1vzxjtQ> Accessed 30 July 2021
Link to *RijksCreative*: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSyJmmPVVRZ3Clqm5lqSjMw/featured> Accessed 30 July 2021.

⁵⁹ https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB_wSMz6npKOaxSuQ5k5sv8plZgg4YQ1D Accessed 23 June 2020

⁶⁰ Gorgels, P. (2020) Email correspondence with the author.

7.6 Rijksstudio: Lack of political will

Because of the cost and time involved, large digitisation projects require buy-in at the highest level of heritage organisations, whether that be senior management or, more often, trustees or board members. For my interviewees, a lack of political will did not feature highly in their reasons not to digitise. But the enthusiasm for digitisation of those at the top level sometimes depended on how the institution was funded, and did not always filter down to mid-level staff:

Reading Museum is a Local Authority, and much, much more careful about what they put out, because they see even their tiny image licensing scheme as something to protect. So, putting the collections just out, willy-nilly, is something that is not politically good for them, which means you can be much less creative around what you put out online. (Adam Koszary, Museum of English Rural Life)

The Rijksmuseum enjoys a high level of autonomy from its funders, compared to its UK counterparts, which has allowed its management to innovate without needing to align itself with government priorities or policies. But in the case of its renovation, it also enjoyed full support from the country's leaders. It was backed financially by a gift from the government, and was conceived of as more than just a renovation, but as a grand millennium project:

The renovation of the Rijksmuseum was about more than adapting an outmoded museum to the demands of the time. On 19 September 2000, State Secretary for Culture Rick van der Ploeg wrote to the Chairman of the House of Parliament and the director of the Rijksmuseum that the government had decided on a total makeover of the museum.⁶¹

Three ambitious directors drove the renovation project: Henk van Os from 1989-1996, Ronald de Leeuw from 1996-2008, and Wim Pijbes from 2008-2016. Wim Pijbes made significant changes when he became director midway through the renovation. While it was the vision of two previous directors to exhibit objects chronologically, working upwards from the basement, Pijbes put the most famous Golden Age paintings back at the heart of the building. He credits his background in architectural history for this decision: "The intention was to make each floor a century, and to get

⁶¹ Meurs, P., and van Thoor M-T. (2013) *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam - Restoration and Transformation of a National Monument*. nai010 publishers, Rotterdam and TU Delft. p259

more modern the further you went up the building, but that didn't fully take into account the nature of the collections... I don't want to deny the building - if there is daylight we should use it."⁶² The confidence to make major changes in the middle of a huge project illustrates how the Rijksmuseum we see today, particularly its positioning as an innovator, can be credited to the personality and vision of Wim Pijbes. The decision to give away its collection free and without restrictions is not a widely-adopted policy in the Netherlands. Although other Dutch museums have digitised large parts of their collections, they have not released them to the general public in the same way, and have been criticised for it:

Since about seventy percent of collections are already digitized and only twenty-five percent are published online, the public is missing out on accessibility for the close to fifty percent of the collections that have already been digitized, for which an investment has already been made.⁶³

Even in its own country, the Rijksmuseum is an exceptional case. The current director, Taco Dibbits, has described the role of leadership at the Rijksmuseum:

To push people to think more broadly, to get them out of their comfort zone, and ultimately to do things they never imagined possible. If you want to keep pushing forward, you have to make sure that you and your broader team are seeking out different perspectives... It's all about actively cultivating an open mind and a sense of curiosity.⁶⁴

The Rijksmuseum has benefited from strong government support, whilst still having the freedom to make its own financial and policy decisions. It has been run by a series of entrepreneurial directors, particularly Wim Pijbes, who was Director when the Rijksstudio was first conceived in 2011. This has allowed it to stand out even in the Netherlands, where there has been significant funding and political support for digitisation compared to the UK.

⁶² Hall, M. (2013) 'Dutch Courage' *Apollo London* Vol. 177, Iss. 607 (Mar 2013) p76

⁶³ Navarette, T. (2014) 'Becoming Digital: A Dutch Heritage Perspective' *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 44 p165

⁶⁴ Wouter, A. and Webb, A (2018) 'Accidentally agile: An interview with the Rijksmuseum's Taco Dibbits'. *McKinsey Quarterly*. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/accidentally-agile-an-interview-with-the-rijksmuseums-taco-dibbits> Accessed 30 July 2021.

7.7 Rijksstudio: Privacy or copyright issues

Aside from cost and time, privacy and copyright issues were the other major reason given by my interviewees not to digitise: “Copyright is something people are very nervous around and feel like it’s a big piece of work that would need a lot of detail to understand it and get it right. So, I do think that’s something museums worry about” (Lauren Palmer, National Trust). The Rijksmuseum benefits from the fact that much of its collection predates its copyright laws, which gives it the freedom to share it freely online in a way that many other museums couldn’t:

‘The old masters were born and died before we even had copyright law in the Netherlands,’ said Paul Keller, a copyright adviser for the Amsterdam-based institute Kennisland, who advised the Rijksmuseum ... ‘For modern art museums, what they’re doing would be largely impossible’.⁶⁵

But many collections in the UK also have large out-of-copyright collections and have not taken the same approach. For example, the National Portrait Gallery was criticised for claiming copyright in images of all of its artworks, even when it was unclear who the original artist was.⁶⁶ As set out in Chapter Four, there is a legal grey area when it comes to claiming copyright in photographic images of out-of-copyright works, something which was highlighted in *Display at Your Own Risk* by Andrea Wallace and Ronan Deazley. This project investigated the copyright claims made on the websites of museums and galleries and compared them to those contained in the metadata embedded in the images themselves. It reported a “systemic lack of standardization in digitization efforts and online access,” citing many examples of copyright and rights claims that were contradictory and confusing.⁶⁷ The Rijksmuseum features in this project, because copyright statements claiming rights

⁶⁵ Seigal, N. (2013) ‘Masterworks for One and All’. *New York Times* 29 May 2013. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/29/arts/design/museums-mull-public-use-of-online-art-images.html>

⁶⁶ Masnick, M (2018) ‘Why Is The UK’s Intellectual Property Office Praising National Portrait Gallery’s Copyfraud Claims Over Public Domain Images?’ *Techdirt website*. Available at: <https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20160713/00172934955/why-is-uks-intellectual-property-office-praising-national-portrait-galleries-copyfraud-claims-over-public-domain-images.shtml> Accessed 30 July 2021.

⁶⁷ Wallace, A. and Deazley, R. (2016) ‘Display at Your Own Risk An experimental exhibition of digital cultural heritage’ *Display at Your Own Risk website*. Available at: <https://displayatyourownrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Display-At-Your-Own-Risk-Publication.pdf> Accessed 30 July 2021. P1

in surrogate images were discovered in the metadata of some of its digital images, despite the accompanying text describing the image, and original work, as in the public domain. Although the authors acknowledge that metadata can be tricky to manage and that the Rijksmuseum examples may be explained as an “institutional disconnect”, the research reveals the complexity of copyright law pertaining to digital surrogates of out-of-copyright works, even among those institutions that have done extensive work to share their collections openly. Because there is a lack of clarity, copyright policies are a matter for each institution to decide for themselves and, as such, can be seen as positions taken by institutions that reflect their attitude towards openness and sharing. The *Display at Your Own Risk* project labelled its artworks according to the risk of breaching the licence agreement, based on an examination of the policies displayed on the institution’s website. Works marked as *no risk*, those where “even if copyright applies the institution has made the digital surrogate available for all types of use, including commercial use” included those from the British Library, the National Library of Wales, and the Rijksmuseum. Those considered *low risk*, designated as those where “the institution’s terms and conditions appear to permit use of the digital surrogate for personal, noncommercial, and educational purposes” included the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Tate and the National Gallery of Scotland. Medium risk institutions, where “the institution’s terms and conditions indicate limited forms of copying may be permitted, such as downloading for personal use. It is not always clear whether other types of use are permitted” included the British Library (interesting, since another work selected for the project had been given *no risk* status), the National Archives, the National Galleries of Scotland and the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁶⁸ There were no *high risk* works identified from the UK’s collections. The research reveals that the largest institutions with the greatest resources seem to have done more work to make their digitised collections accessible for those wanting to use them. The designation of the National

⁶⁸ Wallace, A. and Deazley, R. (2016) ‘Display at Your Own Risk An experimental exhibition of digital cultural heritage’ *Display at Your Own Risk website*. p. xix Available at: <https://displayatyourownrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Display-At-Your-Own-Risk-Publication.pdf> Accessed 30 July 2021.

Archives as medium risk may reflect the fact that it is strongly focused on the monetisation of its collection and is therefore likely to protect the copyright in anything it can sell:

My role, as Business Development, now, is to basically find the next thing that's going to give us more money. What we identified, is that a lot of our records have commercial viability ... commercially, digitisation is significant for us, and drives quite a lot of the decisions about what we might digitise. (Chris Mumby, National Archives)

The addition of complicated policies and legal positions on the websites of heritage organisations are described as potentially having a “chilling effect on engagement and use,”⁶⁹ while the Rijksmuseum is praised by Wallace and Deazley for having “in many ways set a global standard for open digital heritage.”⁷⁰ The authors conclude that heritage organisations could make their usage rules easier to understand if they so chose:

The project attempts to reduce the gap between a user's understanding of the public domain and a cultural institution's approach to making digital surrogates available online. Whether this gap can ever be meaningfully closed will always depend on the matrix of legal and institutional norms and practices ... and – more importantly – on how cultural institutions choose to interpret, translate and explain those norms and practices to their users.⁷¹

Although the Rijksmuseum was included in this project due to conflicting copyright statements on its digitised objects, it was designated *low risk* for users because elsewhere, it had made clear that it considers images of its out-of-copyright works to be in the public domain. This is perhaps something that more UK organisations could do to encourage engagement with their collections.

7.8 Rijksstudio: Analysis

My interviewees indicated that time, cost, copyright restrictions and to a lesser extent, a lack of IT skills have hindered digitisation. The challenges of expense and the size of collections, along with a lack of measurable benefits or the ability to monetise online collections mean that digitisation has not proved a useful tool with which to reach new audiences or raise much needed funds. But the Rijksmuseum has benefited from much more time and space to consider the value and purpose of its

⁶⁹ Wallace, A. and Deazley, R. (2016) p5

⁷⁰ Wallace, A. and Deazley, R. (2016) p22

⁷¹ Wallace, A. and Deazley, R. (2016) p7

online collections. It has been consistently well funded and has been able to re-examine its management structure, communication skills and overall vision due to its long closure, as well as this closure allowing access to its collection. It was assisted through the difficulties of copyright restrictions and IT skills by a lobbying group with the relevant expertise and benefited from a strong senior management team that was prepared to make bold changes. It appears to have not only overcome the many challenges of digitisation, but also claims to have received real and measurable benefits: a boost to its financial income from new grants and sponsorship, an increase in its brand value and a rise in visitor numbers, both online and to the bricks-and-mortar museum. But has this success come at the expense of sharing and collaborating with other organisations? The museum is accused by Rühse of having a “VOC mentality”, a reference to the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, better known in the UK as the East India Company.⁷² By this, she explains, she means a ‘pioneering spirit’, but also a cut-throat competitiveness that has seen the Rijksmuseum take a large share of the available funding but fail to acknowledge its supporters or share its innovations with others:

In the context of Open Data and open culture, it would be in general preferable to develop more comprehensive solutions on a national level than to have one museum putting itself in the limelight. Collaboration, not competition appears to be more important for improving the situation.⁷³

The Dutch government has been accused of favouring the Rijksmuseum whilst making cuts to the cultural sector that negatively affect institutions that have tried to reflect the use of slavery and violence, thereby airbrushing out its colonial past. Dutch art historian Mirjam Kooiman suggests that:

The stringent cutbacks, in part masked by urgent calls for cultural entrepreneurship and financial independence, appear to be linked to a renewed insistence on defining Dutch identity and betray a wilful national loss of memory, or at the very least, a disquieting indifference towards some of the darker moments in the country's history... It simply seems that there is no room for the colonial past in Dutch public discourse.⁷⁴

⁷² Rühse, V. (2017) ‘The Digital Collection of the Rijksmuseum: Open content and the commercialization of a National Museum’ in Grau, O, Coones, W and Rühse, V. (eds). *Museum and Archive on the Move: Changing Cultural Institutions in the Digital Era*. De Gruyter, Berlin. P41

⁷³ Rühse, V. (2017) p42

⁷⁴ Kooiman, M. (2015) ‘The Dutch VOC mentality. Cultural Policy as a Business Model’ In *Decolonising Museums*. L’Internationale Online (ed). Available at:

Kooiman claims the Rijksmuseum continues to receive generous funding partly because its narrative is “heavily based on the more glorious aspects of the country’s history.”⁷⁵ In 2017 Rühse also accused the Rijksmuseum of ignoring the VOC’s dark side, saying “historical associations with violence, slavery and colonialism of the so-called ‘Dutch Golden Age’ are often not mentioned.”⁷⁶ The debate over the way the stories of the colonial past are being told is reflected in the UK, where there is a corresponding movement to *decolonise* museums, supported by the Museums Association. It has produced guidance to support organisations that are undertaking projects to reassess their collections in a way that acknowledges their links to slavery and violence, but admits that such work can be difficult and provoke controversy:

The instinct to protect the organisation from negative press or feedback is natural but pushing through those hesitations is essential. Remember, we must be brave in this work... be prepared to work through some discomfort but do it knowing that this work is vital. That said, we recognise that some organisations will be limited due to governance and organisational censorship.⁷⁷

The British government has not responded positively to projects like these. In 2020, the then Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden strongly criticised the National Trust’s decision to add details of links to slavery to the information about 93 of its properties.⁷⁸ The following year he called a meeting of England’s heritage bodies to remind them they had a duty to remain impartial and that contested history should not be removed, but must be dealt with according to the UK government’s “retain and explain” policy.⁷⁹

https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/39_the_dutch_voc_mentality_cultural_policy_as_a_business_model/ Accessed 9 March 2023.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Rühse, V. (2017) p41

⁷⁷ Museums Association (nd) ‘Communicating decolonisation guidance.’ p4 *Museums Association website*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/communicating-decolonisation/> Accessed 12 March 2023.

⁷⁸ Mills, E. (2022) ‘Profile: ‘We must be careful not to unconsciously add to the toxicity’ *Museums Association website*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/people/2022/11/profile-we-must-be-careful-not-to-unconsciously-add-to-the-toxicity/> Accessed 12 March 2023.

⁷⁹ Kendall Adams, G. (2021) ‘‘Polite but managed’ summit fails to allay concerns about government overreach’ *Museums Association website*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/02/polite-but-managed-summit-fails-to-allay-concerns-about-government-overreach/> Accessed 12 March 2023.

Could the Rijksmuseum's success be due to its willingness to follow its government's stance on controversial issues such as colonialism, thereby retaining its funding and support? In fact, the Rijksmuseum responded rapidly to the decolonisation debate with an extensive and collaborative exhibition on slavery, a digital version of which still exists on its website and is accessible via the Rijksstudio.⁸⁰ Its partnership with other Dutch and international museums in an effort improve its inclusivity, plus the diversity of its curation team are indications that it has acknowledged previous criticisms, and the four years it took to develop the exhibition suggest that it took the project seriously and was not simply paying lip service to a trending topic.⁸¹ But it is telling that most of the exhibits themselves were borrowed, thereby giving some weight to Rühse's criticism that it had previously ignored aspects of the Netherlands' colonial past.

The Rijksmuseum has shown an entrepreneurial approach to its collection: willing to take risks, to work with commercial partners, adapt fast to changing themes in the heritage discourse and to embrace every PR opportunity. In fact, it appears to act like a private business, exactly the sort of organisation described as the aspiration for heritage in the UK government's 2018 *Culture is Digital* report. But the UK government's approach to heritage policy has stifled rather than encouraged creativity, by forcing it to align with government policy and requiring it to prove value for money for its funding, both of which encourage a risk-averse approach. UK heritage has not benefited from the same type of sustained and no-strings-attached funding that has allowed the Rijksmuseum to experiment, innovate and make bold decisions. Instead, it has been forced to adopt a project-led approach requiring the input of local communities, and this has not allowed the staff time or funds to embed the processes of continuous work needed for mass digitisation, a funding requirement anticipated by Keene in 1999:

Just as the maintenance of museum collections themselves is funded as ongoing

⁸⁰ Rijksmuseum (nd) 'Slavery'. *Rijksmuseum website*. Available at: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/rijksmuseum-and-slavery> Accessed 30 July 2021.

⁸¹ Rijksmuseum (nd) 'Curators of the slavery exhibition'. *Rijksmuseum website*. Available at: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/past/slavery/curators> Accessed 12 March 2023.

investment in a permanent national asset, so the ongoing maintenance of digital collections and services, as a permanent national asset for the future, needs to be assured.⁸²

In the next chapter, I suggest that the UK's heritage organisations might do well to examine and learn from the example of the Rijksmuseum, because it appears to have brought together the two competing strands of UK heritage policy: it has shared almost its entire collection online without restrictions whilst at the same time forging valuable corporate partnerships and enjoying financial success from the boost to its brand value.

⁸² Keene et al (1999) p21

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 The Purpose and Value of Digitisation

This research began with an analysis of the *2000 literature*, a corpus of six years of debate within the heritage discourse (1997-2003) about the opportunities and challenges of the internet, with the aim of discovering what the heritage sector believed was the *purpose* and *value* of digitisation. The idea that online collections could *democratise* heritage by attracting a wider and previously unserved audience was a popular theme that emerged. This was strongly linked to the UK government of the day's *social inclusion* agenda, which instructed heritage organisations to work harder to attract visitors from diverse or low socio-economic backgrounds who might not feel that heritage collections reflected their interests or cultural histories. Cultural institutions were to become: "agents of social change in the community, improving the quality of people's lives through their outreach activities."¹ This agenda was reflected in the government's funding policy: the National Lottery Heritage Fund adopted advice from a 1998 consultation suggesting that funding should not be offered for projects that were solely for digitisation of existing collections.² Instead, each project had to demonstrate community engagement, something that is hard to measure online, with the resulting effect that projects were more likely to be designed to take place in the real world and involve the creation of new heritage assets rather than involve in-house collections digitisation. Digitisation is expensive, and in the late 2000s budgets came under increasing pressure due to the 2008 financial crash and the government's resulting austerity measures, which the Museums Association reported was affected operating budgets years later: "Museums have been obliged to reduce opening hours and access, introduce charges, cut exhibitions and free events, and curtail

¹ DCMS (2000) Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All. Available at: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100113222743/http://www.cep.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/centers_social_change.pdf Accessed 24 March 2020 p3

² Ross, S., Economou, M. Anderson, J. (1998). *Funding ICT in the Heritage Sector: HLF Report*. University of Glasgow. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263768046_Funding_Information_and_Communications_Technology_in_the_Heritage_Sector_HLF_report Accessed 7 July 2021. p19

school visits and outreach work. Some well loved institutions have closed to the public.³ The problem was not so much the expense, but the lack of cost-benefit, as 2009 research by the Arts Council revealed: “the market for charging for arts content online appears challenging. For research participants the point of the internet is that it is free.”⁴

Monetising collections was proving to be difficult, but value can be measured in other ways, and the Arts Council did extensive research to articulate where this value lay after it took responsibility for museums when the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council was abolished in 2010. Although it set out a range of suggested methods that cultural institutions could use to put a monetary value on their work, it did not consider how this could be applied to digitisation. It did, however, conclude that digitisation was not improving social inclusion by attracting new and previously unserved audiences: “There is no evidence that digital technology in and of itself offers a way to engage people with little or no current interest in arts and culture”⁵ Although this was reiterated in the DCMS’s 2018 *Culture is Digital* report which found that rather than new audiences being attracted: “some parts of the population are being ‘double served’ by physical and digital cultural offerings,” the same document also reasserted the social inclusion agenda, claiming that digital heritage had: “the potential to reach out to new as well as existing audiences, including those who may have been previously disengaged or uninterested.”⁶ The aspiration for mass digitisation was repeated, with the report stating the ambition: “to make the UK one of the world’s leading countries for digitised public collections.”⁷ Successive changes of government in 2010, 2015 and 2017 saw the perceived value and purpose of digitisation shift towards a more corporate agenda, the clue being in the words

³ Museums Association. (2014) ‘Cuts Survey 2014’. *Museums Association*. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1123548> p3

⁴ Keaney. E. (2009) *Digital opportunities research programme: findings from phase 1*. Arts Council England. Available at: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/4795764/> Accessed on 7 July 2021.

⁵ MTM London (2010) ‘Digital audiences: Engagement with arts and culture online’ *Arts Council* p37

⁶ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p9

⁷ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p21/p11

‘world’s leading countries’ in the above quote. The 2016 Brexit vote had created the need for the government to demonstrate the UK’s success in a global market and this was reflected in cultural policy and evidenced in *Culture is Digital*: “The UK’s future will be built at the nexus of our artistic and cultural creativity and our technical brilliance... this Digital Culture Report focuses on the use of digital technology to drive our cultural sector’s global status.”⁸

The heritage sector had been under pressure to generate more of its own income since Margaret Thatcher, described by Kendall Adams as “no friend of museums,” had curtailed government spending in the 1980s.⁹ Although heritage funding was later increased extensively under Tony Blair’s New Labour government of 1997, it was accompanied by a demand for more accountability and a continuing need for heritage organisations to behave in a more corporate way by demonstrating value for money; as Hewison describes it: Having made its way to the front door of the Treasury, ‘Creativity’ had to wear a business suit – or at least carry a clipboard.”¹⁰ This accountability also tied heritage organisations much more closely to government policy; under Tony Blair’s government this meant demonstrating social inclusion and community engagement, but under the Conservative governments of 2015 and 2017, and particularly following the Brexit vote in 2016, the language used became much more corporate in nature, with digitisation being described as a tool to help the UK to prove its worth economically in a global market. One of the ways it now plans to do this is by creating a database of digitised heritage, with the stated aim (my italics): “to create a unified national collection of the UK’s museums, libraries, galleries and archives *to maintain global*

⁸ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p5

⁹ Kendall Adams, G. (2013a) ‘Assessing the Thatcher legacy’ Museums Association website. Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2013/04/01052013-assessing-the-thatcher-legacy/> Accessed 12 July 2021.

¹⁰ Hewison, R. (2011) “‘Creative Britain’: myth or monument?’ *Cultural Trends* Vol. 20, Nos. 3–4, September–December 2011 pp235–242. p239

leadership in digital humanities and arts research.”¹¹ A unified national collection will require UK heritage organisations to digitise a critical mass of their collections. But I have identified that this may be a bigger task than the government has anticipated.

8.2 The Extent of the UK’s Digitisation

The DCMS’s *Culture is Digital* report cited a headline figure that made it appear on a first reading that the UK’s heritage organisations were close to halfway through digitising their collections: “61% of our cultural institutions have digitised up to half of their collection. Half of those with a digitised collection have made some of it available online.”¹² But an analysis of the data underlying this claim in Chapter One (p8) revealed that it could just as easily be said that 51% - more than half of museums surveyed – had digitised *up to* a quarter of their collections, a much less impressive-sounding claim. Further analysis of the data available, particularly from European sources, led to the conclusion that 8.5% was a much more realistic estimate of the amount of UK heritage collections that had been digitised and made available to the public. This is far short of the critical mass the government will require to claim a *unified national collection* and, I suggest, is one of the ways in which the government’s understanding of the digitisation of the UK’s heritage differs to that of the sector itself. Another is the way it has framed the problem of a lack of digitisation: *Culture is Digital* made twelve policy commitments aimed at improving digital literacy and copyright expertise, creating common standards to allow interoperability and developing better data collection and integration. While the fulfilment of these commitments in 2019 and 2020 means there is now an unprecedented level of support for organisations wishing to digitise, there is an assumption underlying the *Culture is Digital* strategy. It assumes that with guidance, advice and assistance, organisations will rapidly begin to digitise their collections and add them to a national database. But

¹¹ UKRI (2022) ‘Towards a national collection – opening UK heritage to the world’. *UK Research and Innovation website*. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/towards-a-national-collection-opening-uk-heritage-to-the-world/> Accessed 15 March 2023.

¹² DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital*. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, London. p45. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital> Accessed 12 July 2021.

my interviewees have indicated that there is still hesitation about sharing collections across organisational boundaries. Only one of my interviewees reported undertaking a joint project, and several reported that sharing was hampered by an unwillingness within management to relinquish income gained through image sales, even when that income was outweighed by the cost of digitisation: “public institutions, and particularly Local Authorities ... are terrible for ... understanding the difference ... between turnover and profit” (Kevin Bacon, Brighton Pavilion and Museums). This was supported by a 2018 research project exploring the limits of open and shared access to collections at National Galleries Scotland which found that “commercial considerations were a barrier to openness, and that more open access would be possible but was hampered by priorities around income generation.”¹³ By framing the problems as technical, and the solutions as strategic and corporate, the *Culture is Digital* report sees government heritage policy diverge from the research that underpins it.

8.3 Digitisation and government policy

While phases one and two of the *One by One* project agreed that the heritage sector suffered from a lack of digital literacy, its third phase describes itself as leading “an emotional turn in museum computing and digital heritage” focused on people instead of technology and concentrating on the social purpose of change, with the themes of “‘empathy’, ‘precarity’, ‘equity’”.¹⁴ Many of the responses of the heritage sector to the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 could also be described as *person-centred*, with the International Council of Museums suggesting that museums should “use

¹³ Ross, J. (2018) *Digital Collections, Open Data And The Boundaries Of Openness: A Case Study From The National Galleries Of Scotland*. Paper given at the Museums and the Web Conference 2018, Vancouver, available here: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/proposal/digital-collections-open-data-and-the-boundaries-of-openness-a-case-study-from-the-national-galleries-of-scotland/> Accessed 7 July 2021.

¹⁴ One by One (nd) *About* page. Available at: <https://one-by-one.uk/whats-it-about/> Accessed 3 July 2022.

every means at your disposal to identify the needs of your community.”¹⁵ Research on the UK and US heritage sectors’ digital provision during this time found that:

Through the COVID-19 pandemic the sector has identified audiences and needs with which memory institutions want to engage through digital resources and mechanisms: these include anti-racism activists, audiences characterised through their social condition (lonely, bored) rather than their identity or interests.¹⁶

Writing in the Journal *Museums and Social Issues*, Nuala Morse from the Leicester University School of Museum Studies reported that while buildings were closed to the public, museum and gallery social engagement teams had provided emotional and practical support for people to engage with culture: “Through small acts of care, the museum world would continue to provide joyful distraction and creative engagement in the darker moments of the lockdown.”¹⁷ During the pandemic, organisations’ support for social justice campaigns such as *Black Lives Matter* led to them being given a stern warning from the government that their funding was in jeopardy if they did not act *impartially*,¹⁸ which Janes and Sandell argued has come to mean ‘in line with government policy’, or the: “unspoken argument... that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate government and private funders.”¹⁹ Social justice campaigns such as *Museums Are Not Neutral* and associated campaigns to *decolonise* collections have led many in the heritage sector to re-examine their collections with the aim of acknowledging their sometimes controversial past; notable examples including the National Trust and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.²⁰ Here, too, they have

¹⁵ ICOM (2020) ‘Museums and COVID-19: 8 steps to support community resilience’. Available at: <https://icom.museum/en/news/museums-and-covid-19-8-steps-to-support-community-resilience/> Accessed 12 March 2023.

¹⁶ Samaroudi, M. et al (2020) p358

¹⁷ Morse, N. (2022) ‘Care, repair, and the future social relevance of museums’. *Museums & Social Issues: A Journal of Reflective Discourse*. Volume 15, 2021 - Issue 1-2: Special Volume: Repair p32

¹⁸ Dowden, O. (2020) Letter to Arms Length Bodies

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/922293/22-09-20_Letter_to_DCMS_ALBs.docx Accessed 17 July 2020.

¹⁹ Janes, R.R. and Sandell, R. (eds) (2019) *Museum Activism*. Routledge: Abingdon and New York. P8

²⁰ National Trust (nd) ‘Addressing our histories of colonialism and historic slavery’

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/addressing-our-histories-of-colonialism-and-historic-slavery> Pitt Rivers Museum (nd) ‘Critical changes to displays as part of the decolonisation process’ <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/critical-changes> Accessed 15 March 2023.

found themselves at odds with the official policy of *retain and explain*, which has seen the government going to the extent of introducing legislation to prevent the removal of statues of controversial historical figures.²¹ In Chapter Five I described how government policy has consistently demanded digitisation from the heritage sector since 2000. But, at the same time, funding requirements that tie projects to policy priorities, and the requirement that projects should demonstrate value for money have made organisations risk-averse when planning digitisation projects. The drive to professionalise the sector, requiring it to raise more of its own income and suggesting that it makes corporate partnerships to fund digital projects has had the result of preventing a culture of open sharing. The effect of such restrictive government policies, I argue, has had the effect of subduing the creative freedom of the heritage sector and has created a major barrier to digitisation.

8.4 The barriers to digitisation

This research began with the theory that Parry's practical difficulties: "resource, priority, structures, skills, time and money" which he had discounted as symptoms rather than causes of a lack of digital success in museums, were sufficient to constitute barriers to digitisation and therefore merited further investigation.²² My respondents identified cost, time and copyright as their main barriers. I would argue that copyright could be argued to fall under Parry's category *skills*, since a lack of specific legal knowledge has been identified as something that can be taught; in fact it is one of the policy commitments set out in *Culture is Digital*, which instructs the Intellectual Property Office "to develop guidance and training so that cultural organisations can better understand the Intellectual Property framework and its relevance to them."²³ A lack of digital skills, more specifically described as *digital literacy*, has been named by Price and James and the *One by One* project as the main

²¹ Gov.uk (2021) 'New legal protection for England's heritage' *Gov.uk website*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage> Accessed 12 March 2023.

²² Parry, R. (2007) *Recoding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. Routledge: Abingdon. p2

²³ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p16

barrier to digitisation, and is also the focus of *Culture is Digital*, which has created tools and guidance to help organisations improve the skills of their staff.²⁴ Time and cost, I would argue, would be less of a barrier if digitisation could be shown to provide some measurable *value* for heritage organisations, whether that be in explicitly financial terms through monetisation, or, in a similar way to the Rijksmuseum, in terms of brand value that could be leveraged through merchandise sales or provide visitor engagement data to justify funding requirements. The difficulty of proving the value of digitisation can be partly explained by a lack of clarity about what *purpose* digitisation serves. Research has shown that providing access to digitised collections alone does not *democratise* heritage or improve social inclusion,²⁵ and it is far from clear that it can fulfil the ambitions of *Culture is Digital* and “drive our cultural sector’s global status” in post-Brexit Britain, particularly when so much digitisation remains to be done.²⁶

While time, cost and skills have all proved to be significant barriers to digitisation, I would point to the fact that none of these appear to have troubled the Rijksmuseum, which has overcome all the identified barriers to successfully digitise a critical mass of its collection and make it available to the public with no restrictions, claiming significant financial success as a result. In terms of UK heritage, I would argue that the barriers created by time, cost and skills are all linked to a fourth practicality from Parry’s list: priority, and specifically, government policy priorities. The requirement placed on heritage organisations that digitisation be aligned with government policy since 2000 has pushed digitisation decisions down the list of heritage organisations’ own priorities, as they have attempted to fulfil two distinct and often opposing requirements: firstly, to improve social inclusion by

²⁴ Price, K. and James, D. (2018) ‘Structuring For Digital Success: A Global Survey Of How Museums And Other Cultural Organizations Resource, Fund, And Structure Their Digital Teams And Activity’ Paper given at *Museums and the Web*, Vancouver 2018. Available at: <https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/structuring-for-digital-success-a-global-survey-of-how-museums-and-other-cultural-organisations-resource-fund-and-structure-their-digital-teams-and-activity/>

²⁵ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p5

²⁶ King et al (2016) and Taylor and Gibson (2016)

attracting new and previously unserved audiences and secondly, to professionalise by demonstrating value for money in return for funding, seeking commercial partners and making more of their own income, none of which has been successfully achieved through digitisation. Additionally, heritage organisations have faced external challenges which have proved to be problems that digitisation has been unable to solve: for example, the 2008 global banking crash put pressure on every aspect of heritage practice and made large-scale digitisation a luxury few could afford. Ethically, many organisations have responded to the emergence of social justice campaigns such as *Museums Are Not Neutral* and *Black Lives Matter* by re-considering their collections' connections to slavery and violence, and this internal assessment must have affected digitisation decisions. But, one external event that refocused attention on the needs of online visitors may yet be the catalyst for a breakthrough. The 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns gave many heritage professionals the *organisational slack* needed to rethink how they communicate with their audiences when they have no access to physical collections. The need for organisations to create thinking space for innovation is therefore one of my recommendations.

8.5 Recommendations

This research has found that the UK heritage sector has struggled to find the purpose and value of digitisation, and that as a result, has not made it a priority. Progress has been hampered by restrictive government policies and additionally, by external events that have created problems that digitisation has not been able to solve. Prioritising digitisation can have positive results, as shown by the example of the Rijksmuseum, but this requires sustained funding, time and the creative freedom to take risks. My first recommendation, therefore, is that if the government wants heritage organisations to digitise a critical mass of collections, then funding for UK heritage should not be tied to the government's policy priorities of the day. The 2000 literature suggested that digitisation could serve the Blair government's social inclusion agenda by attracting new, diverse and previously unserved audiences, but this has been challenged by subsequent research that has found digitised

collections have not *democratised* heritage because digitisation tends to double serve existing audiences rather than creating new ones. The associated requirement that HLF funding must include a community engagement element meant that projects tended to take place in the real world since digital engagement is hard to measure. The decision by the HLF not to fund purely digital projects meant that the simple digitisation of existing collections was ineligible. The result of tying funding to government policy priorities created a system that actively worked against the government's policy to encourage digitisation. My second recommendation follows on from this and is that funding should not be contingent on difficult-to-prove concepts such as increased visitor engagement, inclusion or value for money. Making success a condition of funding creates a risk-averse approach to project design, and, as Sara Selwood has argued: "Attempting to measure the impact of museums through outcomes is tantamount to measuring what modernism always cast as unmeasurable... producing evidence of social impact remains essentially aspirational."²⁷ This requirement to prove success has persisted beyond Blair's Labour government; more recently, having established that a lack of digital literacy was behind a failure to digitise, the 2018 *Culture is Digital* report ordered digital content consultants The Space to create "a Digital Maturity Index for the cultural sector."²⁸ The name suggested that the tool would be a measure of digital literacy against which organisations could be judged and expected to show progress, but, as Chief Operating Officer John White explained, it was changed during development to the *Digital Culture Compass*, because in order to be genuinely useful to a wide range of different types of heritage organisations with different needs it had to become a more general business maturity tool that allowed organisations to self-assess their competencies, rather than a metric which could be expressed numerically:

I think the DCMS wanted to be able to say 'currently the heritage sector or the cultural sector is scoring 65 percent in digital maturity. I'm going to come back in two years' time and then we'll be scoring 75 percent. Isn't that marvellous?' And we're like, no, that's completely

²⁷ Selwood, S. (2002) 'What difference do museums make? Producing evidence on the impact of museums' *The Critical quarterly*, 12/2002, Volume 44, Issue 4 p75

²⁸ DCMS (2018) *Culture is Digital* p15

the wrong approach to understanding the problem. The problem is not about completion. It's actually about focus. (John White, The Space)

The change from an *index* to a *compass* indicates that what the heritage sector needs is the freedom to act more like a business and learn how to work in its own best interests. As the Rijksmuseum example has shown, innovation requires agile thinking, creative freedom and bold decision-making, and therefore, my third recommendation is that funding should not be project-based, because this results in organisations, as Lesley Miller puts it: “basically always chasing pots of funding” (Lesley Miller, V&A). The Rijksmuseum benefits from sustained and guaranteed funding which means it can plan ahead, make confident investments in technology knowing that money for updates and maintenance will be available and can formulate a longer-term digital strategy, something that has been shown to be an indication of digital success.²⁹

It may seem naïve to suggest that the UK government should reduce the amount of accountability it expects for its funding, and therefore, considering that this is unlikely to happen, the remainder of my recommendations are for the heritage sector. The first is that research has indicated that organisations can benefit from becoming *post-digital*, in Parry’s sense of the phrase. This means that digital literacy is embedded across an organisation, rather than digital skills being confined to a digital team, or within communications or PR departments. One interviewee, Christopher Streek from York Museums Trust, described how his department had, as he described it, successfully *democratised* digitisation by creating a scheme in which the digital department provided equipment and training for digitisation projects, but did not undertake them:

We give staff and volunteers the tools, the training, and the know-how ... we try to make the processes as quick and easy as possible, and we digitally up-skill people to image stuff themselves. Doesn’t mean that there isn’t a place for ... that premium, high-end photography ... But it just gives collections staff, and volunteers, and the teams of

²⁹ Borowiecki, K. and Navarrete, T. (2017) ‘Digitization of heritage collections as indicator of innovation’, *Economics of Innovation and New Technology*, 26:3, p243

collections, the ability to image things to a professional standard themselves. (Christopher Streek, York Museums Trust)

Mass digitisation can be a considerable undertaking due to the size of collections. Restricting this work to a small digital team exacerbates the problem, so upskilling staff across the organisation should have the effect of increasing digital activity. Therefore, the second recommendation is that heritage organisations take advantage of the free advice, training and assessment tools created by *Culture is Digital*. These were not widely promoted because of the Covid-19 outbreak, but they were designed and written by practitioners and include the *Digital Culture Compass* assessment tool and an online resource bank called *Digital Pathways* created by Culture24. Perhaps most importantly, considering the complexity of copyright law and what has been described as its “chilling effect on creativity,” there is also a training presentation on Intellectual Property.³⁰ Thirdly, UK heritage organisations may be able to benefit from some of the insights provided by the Rijksmuseum case study; in particular, the concept of *organisational slack*. Research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has recommended that organisations should take time to reflect on what the experience of lockdown has taught them about the value of digital heritage: “Whilst the content produced had great value in its time and place, this is now an opportunity, with a great sense of change emerging in the sector, to step back, reflect on, and take stock of online practices.”³¹ The example of the Rijksmuseum has shown that digitisation is simply the first step, providing the raw materials on which any number of digital projects can be based. As Adam Koszary from the MERL pointed out:

Digitisation is the bedrock of how we interact with the public ... Without digitised collections, there is literally nothing to talk about ... But .. the institution really needs to look at itself, and what it's trying to communicate ... it's more than just a technical issue. It's more of a cultural issue. (Adam Koszary, the MERL)

³⁰ Aufderheide, P. et al. (2016) ‘The impact of copyright permissions culture on the US visual arts community: The consequences of fear of fair use’. *New Media & Society* Vol. 18(9) p2020.
UK Intellectual Property Office (2019) ‘Understanding the IP framework’ *Digital Pathways website*. Available at: <https://digipathways.co.uk/resources/understanding-the-ip-framework/> Accessed 12 March 2023.

³¹ King, E., Paul Smith, M., Wilson, P.F., and Williams, M.A. (2021) ‘Digital Responses of UK Museum Exhibitions to the COVID-19 Crisis, March – June 2020’. *Curator: The Museum Journal*. 64.3 p14
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cura.12413> Accessed 1 August 2021.

This is the final recommendation, that heritage organisations should think about digitisation not as a technical issue, but as a cultural position on openness. The Rijksmuseum has proved that financial success is possible when collections are shared without restrictions, by creating a “love brand” that attracts major sponsors.³² Helena Barranha’s suggestion that organisations should engage with the creative and artistic use of their collections to bring in new audiences who may not be aware of the original work is one useful suggestion of how to do this: “Museums can bring the cultural diversity of networked cultures into their official digital platforms in a consequent and meaningful way.”³³ Andrea Wallace’s work on copyright has found that it is incumbent on heritage organisations to interpret complex copyright law, but has recommended as open approach as possible for the benefit of users.³⁴ Putting energy into clearing copyright can be worthwhile, according to one organisation which used project funding specifically to test copyright procedures “I think we cleared 3,000 copyrights, and 99.95% of those were positive” (Adrian Glew, Tate Archive). Creating a culture of openness may finally go some way towards *democratising* heritage, allowing the creation of the *museum without hierarchies* dreamed of by V&A director Martin Roth in 2014: “the potential to reinvent museums from the ground up, to reorder the way we structure our organisations, and to revolutionise the way we relate to our visitors.”

³² Gorgels, P. (2018) p200

³³ Barranha, H. (2018) ‘Derivative Narratives: The Multiple Lives of a Masterpiece on the Internet’ *Museum International* Volume 70, Issue 1-2 P32

³⁴ Wallace, A. (2022) *A Culture of Copyright: a scoping study on open access to digital cultural heritage collections in the UK*. Arts and Humanities Research Council. Available at: https://www.nationalcollection.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-03/A%20Culture%20of%20Copyright%20-%20A.%20Wallace_compressed.pdf Accessed 4 March 2023.

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List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview question list

Appendix 2: Interview transcripts in order of date