

Digital Preservation is People

DPIP Mission Statement

2024

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Introduction

It is the year 2024 and digital preservation remains the purview of the institution. To be practicing, one has to be within, or working for hire¹ for an organization that recognizes the needs of digital preservation, This is commonly known as the GLAM sector: memory institutions, universities and colleges, and corporations with historical archives.

Digital preservation is considered by some to be an “art” or a craft². It is a skill that is developed, acquired, and transferred without a rulebook. This is complicated by the sheer amount of digital material to preserve, which is as wide and varied as all the digital material ever created, and all the software applications used to create them.

Initiatives toward digital preservation capability happen at the institutional level, but the unique skills are brought in by people with vastly different training, including but not limited to:

- Activists
- Archaeologists
- Archivists,
- Architects,
- Librarians,
- Curators,
- Information management professionals,
- Humanists,
- Software developers³,
- Historians,
- Scientists,
- Maintainers

If there is a single discipline called “digital preservation” then it would have to be defined broadly enough to include all of these people and their interests and specializations. However, the field is defined narrowly as to be unnecessarily and detrimentally exclusive. This affects those within these niche boundaries, essentially creating too tiny an ecosystem.

If instead we can see digital preservation as a hybrid discipline that takes a village⁴ we can emerge as a discipline with limitless opportunities for its practitioners.

But what is a village?

¹ E.g. as a vendor or consultant, or freelance.

² Trevor Owns, “Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation”:
<https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title/11947/theory-and-craft-digital-preservation>

³ And connected disciplines, information security, hackers, enterprise architecture, storage experts, and so on.

⁴ E.g. Lyrasis’ “It Takes a Village” (Open Source Sustainability): <https://itav.lyrasis.org/>

It is a distributed set of individuals with roles and responsibilities that complement the function of digital preservation. The key is that it is decentralized both within and outside of institutions and not necessarily just within the “digital preservation” sector.

Preservation is only one priority of the field of ‘digital preservation. Outreach to demonstrate its need in the very same organizations we work within is a constant fight. Beyond piecemeal efforts to do this, digital preservation principles must eventually be recognized strategically. . Equally important to digital preservation are continuity, sustainability, and maintenance. These are the values that need to steer the field to ensure we meet our legislative, historical, technological, and ecological goals as the 21st century advances.

With individuals attached to the initiatives that are going to make this possible, it is the social goals we must advance first, and recognize digital preservation is people.

Problem

Digital preservation is people and the professionals that make up this field should be valued as individuals and not individuals attached to a single organization.

Institutions require individuals from various fields to undertake digital preservation activities. Some organizations, i.e. those with mature record keeping and archival capability, may find it easier to connect groups with different skill sets from within the organization; but others, still finding their footing across the GLAM sector, have fewer people building capability and need to access resources outside of their place of work.

“Professional” digital preservation training options are limited. People often need to build their own knowledge and tooling over the course of a single role. Roles are still potentially solitary⁵⁶ and not always communicated across the organization as a whole⁷. Individuals don’t simply practice digital preservation; they can mature as leaders and strategic thinkers but they’re also subject matter experts fighting the march of time. There is only so much responsibility that can be shouldered before trade-offs occur. In an ideal world, practitioners should be able to focus on the jobs they find fulfilling, they shouldn’t have to fight internal politics.

What do individuals do if the strategic direction of an organization or role changes? What does an individual do if an organization violates their ethical beliefs⁸⁹? What if an

⁵ Make the case for digital preservation (DPC): <https://www.dpconline.org/digipres/make-the-case>

⁶ Building the case for digital preservation (Arkivum/EBSCO): <https://www.ebsco.com/sites/g/files/nabnos191/files/acquiadam-assets/Arkivum-Digital%20Preservation-Compliance-eBrochure.pdf>

⁷ Talking to IT about digital preservation (Prater): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15332748.2018.1528827>

⁸ Notably today as we fight the climate crisis: <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/40741399>

⁹ AWS and Amazon, selling data to police departments <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-rekognition-police-use-unknown-2020-2>; workers deaths in warehouses: <https://futurism.com/deaths-amazon-list-most-dangerous-employers>

organization doesn't provide their skilled subject matter experts the support for building the tooling¹⁰ that they need to support and grow their programmes? What does career development look like for a subject matter expert? What do individuals do when they leave and where do they go?

On the flip-side, are organizations aware of the negative impact of brain drain? How does the digital preservation community as a whole react to their brightest leaving for actual living wages and roles in support of their own career development?

Outside of the institution there are individuals capable of creating alternative systems of memory¹¹, and indeed preservation¹². How can the field be, as Findlay asks, re-calibrated, so as to decentralize it, and from DPIP's perspective, move it beyond just the institution to a wider group of participation, with much needed support.

Those reading this paper know one thing: digital preservation is a necessity. We know that, independently of the collections or record series we steward, digital preservation is a subject that is treated seriously by people with strong moral compasses and principled positions. For someone who wants to make a difference in the field, the institution is the only place where they have any power to affect change. Vocational awe¹³ means that they sacrifice career development or remuneration in exchange for influence and prestige. The organization and the field as a whole will lose long lasting network effects when individuals are necessarily forced to move into other lines of work when these effects are finally felt.

If professional associations exist they need to be more than support groups. They need to be "de-vendored"¹⁴ and de-institutionalised; they need to be more than special interest clubs for organizations and institutional leadership (even if the leadership is also pointing toward a goal of "digital preservation") and they need to platform and support the individual and make clear individual impact on the field. They need to be accessible to practitioners at every stage in their professional journey, and the group needs to be accountable to and reflect the priorities of individuals.open to outside input. The performance of a professional organization must be measured on an individual level.

¹⁰ Strategy, policy, software.

¹¹ Cassie Findlay on Archival Activism at the ASA conference 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKMHAREcqmM>

¹² Aaron Schwartz on digital preservation, <http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/preservation>

¹³ Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves (Ettarh): <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>

¹⁴ Professional organizations cannot be competing for the same market-share as practitioners.

Impact

Bias for institutions in professional organizations

Professional organizations that are propped up by institutions create an illusion of harmony.¹⁵ They simply cannot affect change in the institutions that support them by either paying for membership, or contributing to or paying for content.

This partisanship at the professional level conflicts with the needs of the individual professionals; and counter-intuitively may be at odds with the overall missions of the supporting institutions who would benefit from radical candor¹⁶.

It is our view that existing models for professional organizations in digital preservation cannot effectively advocate for individuals within the field. Current issues include:

- Being unable to surface truly critical viewpoints of the existing status quo¹⁷,
- Silencing marginal individuals within the field,
- The enabling of institutions to control the narrative of the field¹⁸,
- Leaving institutions with burgeoning capacity on the outside waiting for lobbying initiatives to be successful before having a voice in the broader picture.

Institutional bias locks down messaging that should be more broadly sourced across a community and reduces individuals to mere cogs in a corporate message - a corporate message that best serves the interests of the originating organization and the professional organization being supported by them.

Individuals must be free to express the full range of their workplace satisfaction¹⁹, not purely the aspects that make their institutions look good.

Individuals must be free to leave their organizations with the confidence and security that they can take their unique skills and capabilities to another organization and continue with equal or better remuneration.

Institutions should recognize that the value of their digital preservation programs is in the skilled individuals working within them, and figure out how to offer individuals what they need to thrive; focus on growing generation spanning teams who are content in their work, and effectively able to apply their skills to digital content, rather than creating an environment susceptible to brain drain and “churn” and simply “holding on to people”, or worse, requiring the need for short-term appointments for long-term preservation goals.

¹⁵ False harmony.

¹⁶ Caring personally while challenging directly.

¹⁷ A continuing and evolving reality, not simply sets of problems to be solved once.

¹⁸ The individual is only able to do so much to manage corporate responsibility and professional needs.

¹⁹ Pay, politics, ethics, training opportunities, skills development, career progression.

Outside the digital preservation sector

Digital preservation tilts heavily toward the capture and saving of digital content with an emphasis on how to develop skills for collecting and preserving, but this perspective is almost entirely inward facing. The digital preservation community could be so much more involved in the conversation around selection and consent²⁰ from the outset, including in the development of best practices for building technology that promotes ethical preservation of records.

Digital preservation can be more inclusive of those outside of the memory sector. Out of the list of professions cited at the beginning of this paper, several are not directly involved in collecting the digital record, including: curators, humanists, information managers, software developers, historians, scientists, and maintainers.

We must reach out to those working in other fields to advocate for better support for archiving in academic programs, applications software, enterprise platforms, and so on with the goal of helping those not working in memory institutions to be proactive in their efforts.

We must also not be surprised, or scoff, when we see folks attempt to capture their only memory footprint. Sometimes, it is easy to look at another entity's efforts from a high stool of experience and insular community groupthink and question why they are following a course that has proven to be a fruitless folly, or are reconstructing earlier efforts. However, if a discipline does not know that the (digital preservation) wheel exists, how could they not go through the difficult work of re-inventing it?

The reactionary approach of current digital preservation institutions and the professional organizations that depend on them does not draw the attention of those outside of the field, and therefore cannot deliver a wide-reaching and effective message about what it takes to preserve. This passivity means that important information about digital preservation goes unshared with those that are embarking on their preservation journey, and those outside of the GLAM sector.

Cause

Digital preservation as a field of study and practice should be necessarily distributed, yet, the field tends towards a model of centralization. There are few outlets:

- One lightly peer-reviewed international journal specifically tied to digital preservation, requiring in-person attendance at its annual conference²¹.

²⁰ Archive Team's approach to NSFW content on Tumblr for example might have been an important lesson in accepting loss and understanding how to approach individuals, communities, (and the Tumblr organization) with suggestions for how to better look after and provide archival outlets for content. See also Everything on the Internet can be saved (Ogden): https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/files/310782086/Full_text_PDF_final_published_version_.pdf

²¹ iPRES

- Two international professional organizations, neither with individual membership options²².
- Two international professional conferences²³.
- Four digital preservation system “vendors”²⁴.

Centralization toward a single dominant professional body is in conflict with the development of the professional standards of a field for the following reasons:

- Institutions pay a lot of money to be part of the organization, and institutions will not be part of a professional body that criticizes them.²⁵
- Organizations that monetize fundamental needs of digital preservationists cannot by definition work for the greater good, they can only work for the greater good of their members.
- Institutions pay a lot of money to be part of an organization and more likely than not management level individuals are going to lead how that organization participates in the organization.
- Organizations that generate revenue from job advertisements and provide them as member benefits, or to other external organizations as incentives, are not in a position to criticize the quality of the job offer they advertise²⁶.
- A central organization with consistently mono-directional messaging cannot encapsulate complexity (or reality).
- Organizations that emphasize essentialism as a strategy fail to amplify the voices and requirements of the other fields contributing to the success of the industry; and they indulge digital preservation’s worst instinct: the feeling that ‘we’ have to solve it all.

One goal of digital preservation is that the memory of the institution, if not the institution itself, will always outlive the individual. That can make it seem like individuals themselves are not important but the complete opposite is the case, individuals are the most important part of the entire system. A supportive professional body needs to exist without institutions and companies listed on its masthead taking credit for the field’s communal successes. A professional body that acknowledges the individuals that continue to make digital preservation work possible would be one that is more welcoming, more humane, and inclusive of a wider spectrum of the collective digital preservation field.

²² DPC, OPF

²³ iPRES, PASIG

²⁴ Artefactual, Ex-Libris, Libnova, Preservica

²⁵ Chatham-House Rules: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>, events perpetuates the shame, fear, stigma, and isolation associated with making mistakes or missteps, and yet these are vital learning opportunities for the community; for individuals and for organizations to see. Members only Chatham House Rules uses failure as a driving force for subscription and limits the potential of failing better to a privileged few, see also: <https://www.failure-lab.com/>

²⁶ How many amazing opportunities to live below living wages for the benefits of reputation and skills development do mid-career individuals need to be told about before actual opportunities are developed and fought for?

Solution

We want to recalibrate digital preservation by putting people front and center. We want to generate opportunities for individuals to promote themselves both as part of their day to day work and beyond their current organization. We want individuals to feel more secure because they know that they have opportunities at the end of their current role. Decentralization works to level the playing field so individuals are in control of their development and empowered to push their professional goals further.

What is “Digital Preservation is People?”

Digital Preservation is People (DPIP) puts itself forward as a professional association that sets itself apart from other professional organizations that cater to institutional voices. For DPIP, the people that do digital preservation should all be afforded the opportunity to contribute to and take something away from their own professional field.

We have four aims:

- Amplify the voices of individuals.
- Remove pay-to-play barriers.
- Enable radical openness and democracy.
- Be actively inclusive of, and enabling of other sectors.

Digital Preservation is People aims to provide a forum modeled on those such as The Information Maintainers²⁷, and Empathy in Tech²⁸ and Australasia Preserves²⁹³⁰ for all participants in digital preservation to share the work they’re investing time and energy in; or to share didactic learnings from their time in the industry that will help others prosper; Extending that invite to individuals outside of the field so that they can bring into the fold and make folks aware of the work they are doing that is not necessarily labeled digital preservation by those holding the keys to the gate. Further, seeking ways to reach out to marginalized sections of the community or individuals to ask that they share their viewpoint and leadership.

We will enable sharing through quarterly seminars by individuals. We will also provide a forum for others to connect. We will write regularly, taking inspiration from the likes of the Open Preservation Foundation (OPF) to ask others to contribute their calls for help in an open way without barriers or judgment³¹.

²⁷ <https://themaintainers.org/information-maintainers/>

²⁸ <https://empathyintech.com/>

²⁹ <https://australasiapreserves.blogspot.com/p/australasia-preserves.html>

³⁰ A group that began, at least, as a grassroots attempt to bring together the digital preservation community across Australasia.

³¹ You will not need to be a leader in your own organization to contribute.

We want to positively impact work-life balance³². Individuals should not need to take time out of their personal lives to develop professionally especially as learning, and developing new skills and connections benefits organizations in the long run. We want to promote the acceptance of more regular participation in DPIP during work-hours as professional development³³.

Our aim is to become a community-led organization taking inspiration from the likes of the Wikibase stakeholder group³⁴ and to continue to develop other objectives in collaboration with the needs of the group.

We are an entirely not-for-profit, community-led organization. We have outlined some initial goals and milestones to help direct this work.

Goals

- Create an open access blog for people to share their unique needs and seek barrier-free collaboration.
- Tackle digital preservation essentialism by being radically open in the sharing and publication of information.
- Challenge institution- and vendor-led bias in the objectives of the digital preservation community.
- Promote grassroots and informal community digital preservation meet-ups and information sharing.
- Engage with ethical and political conversations needed in the industry, for example, the environment, or the treatment of people on a macro scale.
- Monitor salaries, promote well-paid jobs, and question the publication of poorly paid roles.

Milestones

We are only beginning our work and so our milestones can only reflect initial steps: For the first year:

- Provide an open blog for individuals to talk about the problems preventing them from achieving their goals; their stories, criticisms; and skills.
- Quarterly video presentations, starting in 2024, to provide a platform for individuals' work, free from institutional representation.
- A Discord server for DPIP communication, collaboration, and connections.
- Initiate a dialogue about the potential to become a community-led decentralized organization.

³² Not bias it further towards work.

³³ If there are other ways to remuneration and reward individuals for their time, e.g. those outside of the field, then they will be sought by DPIP and tried.

³⁴ <https://wbstakeholder.group/>

Digital preservation IS people

Digital preservation is a distributed community of individuals with roles and responsibilities that compliment the function of digital preservation. DPIIP intentionally includes a distributed set of individuals who belong to manifold disciplines outside of the digital preservation sector.

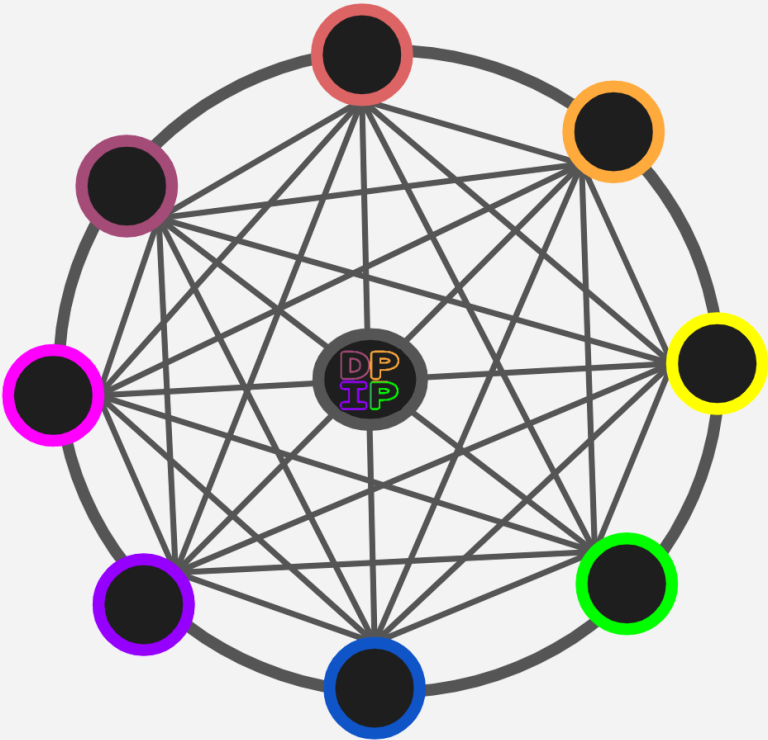
Digital preservation is also a discipline in its own right and should be recognized as such, but it needs a professional body that represents the *individuals* participating in and building this discipline. A digital preservation community that connects with outside disciplines and highlights visible and invisible efforts, rather than just the loudest voices, the most connected sources, or the sources who generate the most revenue, and can engender a field that is stronger, more humanistic, and more sustainable for the individual at its core.

Digital Preservation is People means that individuals are not defined by their institutions or the positions they hold – the professionals that make up this field should be valued as individuals and supported on their journeys beyond specific institutions and institutional prestige. Digital Preservation is People is about broadening the circle and reaching other voices. It's about looking around and lifting each other up. Digital preservation IS people; we hope that we will see the field eventually grow to reflect this fundamental truth.

Getting involved

Ways that you can get involved:

- Discord: <https://discord.gg/bUKqgsMA>
- Blog: <https://dpiip.writeas.com>
- Github: <https://github.com/digital-preservation-is-people>



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