

Keynote Address: EUROPEANA meeting

Thank you Gordon. Good morning everyone. I am Nick Poole, and it is my happy duty to welcome you to today's event and to say a few words by way of introduction. I am also pleased to do so in my new role as the Chair of the Council of Content Providers and Aggregators for Europeana – a cross-domain body which brings together over 100 commercial and public sector organisations including museums, libraries, archives and broadcasters – and soon-to-be a member of the Board of the Europeana Foundation.

My aim this morning is very simple. I will try and answer the two questions which I am asked most often about Europeana. These are What is it? And Why should I care? Followed most often with a close 3rd – do they have any money they can give me?

The answer to the 3rd question, by the way, is yes and no. But I'll come onto that later.

So...what is Europeana? The chances are that you will be familiar with some aspects of Europeana already – it is a project, it has developed a prototype portal that allows you to search across Cultural collections throughout Europe. But Europeana is much, much more than this, and if you come away from this meeting with one thought, I hope that it will be that you will go and find out about some of the many other aspects of Europeana that we are going to discuss today.

First and foremost, Europeana is a celebration of European culture, in the broadest possible sense. Europe, both as a continent and more recently as an administrative region, has been the crucible within which have been forged some of the greatest advances in the arts and sciences, language and religion.

I know that the events of yesterday afternoon [world cup defeat for England against Germany] may have left some of us feeling less charitable towards our European cousins, but nevertheless the history of English identity is closely intertwined with our role within Europe. The purpose of Europeana is to capture something of the spirit, creativity, innovation and passion of European cultural identity, and to share it with a global audience.

And those principles, of sharing and celebration, go right to the heart of what Europeana is for. In my other role, as Chair of Icom UK, I see all the time the ways in which culture, tourism and the web are helping people to address some of the most challenging issues around democracy, tolerance and conflict, and Europeana has a vital role to play in fostering understanding and dialogue.

What else is Europeana? Well, as you will hear later, it is an aggregator, which draws together information about collections in libraries, archives and museums across Europe. As an aggregator, it does two very important things.

The first is that, in the process of drawing together information about almost 10 million objects, books, records and artefacts, it is also generating a tremendous amount of human capital. It is connecting professional communities in different countries, encouraging people to collaborate, to come together to overcome technical, conceptual and legal challenges. It is, therefore, as much a network with a common aim of celebrating and sharing digital culture as it is a platform or a set of technical standards.

The second is that it is one of the new generation of services which exist to build bridges between the supply of digital cultural content – which is something many of us here have been involved in for more than a decade – and the demand for rich media that is being driven by mainstream services such as Google, Bing and other national and international platforms. The media industry is content-hungry and we are witnessing the maturation of a new role for museums, libraries and archives as generators and providers of digital content. Services like Europeana are providing a shop-window onto the tremendous richness of the digital activity that is going on every day at both a national and an institutional level.

This role is important, because many of the advantages and challenges of the Digital Economy work best at scale. In much the same way as many cultural institutions are exploring shared services, shared storage and shared infrastructure, issues such as digital preservation, contract negotiation, pricing and licensing all benefit from efficiencies of scale. By providing a collective focus for Digital cultural activity within Europe, Europeana is beginning to demonstrate the business case for a more collaborative approach in future.

Nor is Europeana limited to the website. As many of you in this room will know from personal experience, a web-based service is often only the most visible tip of an iceberg of channels, API, feeds, aggregations, applications and relationships. Increasingly, the role of the destination site is coming to be replaced by the flow of content and data, forming and reforming around different user communities and needs. This is also the case for Europeana – yes, there is a website, but at the Board meeting last week, the main focus of our discussion was on how we look at ways of valuing success in terms of downstream, distributed re-use. Again, in addressing the transition from web statistics to measuring audience reach and satisfaction, recording API calls and clickthrough rates, Europeana is helping to build the knowledge and skills we all need to demonstrate a new form of success for a new generation of services.

Because this isn't just a numbers game. Many have questioned how useful Europeana will be if it cannot attract a critical mass of audiences to its site. I have voiced this concern myself on many occasions, and we know only too well the importance of demonstrating a calculable return on our digital investment.

But the closer you get to Europeana, and the more you work with it, the more you see that unique hits are only one small part of evaluating the success and impact of the overall programme. Equally important are the human capital I have already mentioned, the technical innovation, the refreshed commitment to more efficient standards for data interchange, the work on unique identification, the strategic profile of Europeana as a large-scale EU-funded project, the research and development going on at a National level, including our own in the UK with the Culture Grid, which is feeding in to Europeana.

Which brings me to the second question – why should I care about Europeana? Whenever I am asked this question, I give the same three answers, which I will offer to you here.

The first is reach. Most of us in this room are in the business of trying to improve the quality and accessibility of the user experience of digital culture. If you limit that experience to your own website, you are disadvantaging many millions of habitual web users who may never find you. If, on the other hand, you continue to deliver your own web publishing, but you also enable your content to be aggregated and shared throughout the web, then you are vastly increasing not only the number of people who can find and enjoy your stuff, but also the proportion of those people that will connect with you and your institution. In that sense, you can think of Europeana as an ad server which, at a minimal cost to you, massively extends your potential audience.

The second is to do with quality – we are still in a transitional process, in which cultural institutions are recognising a fundamental extension of the role of cataloguing to include a much broader range of activities around knowledge management, digital curation and content creation. The process of participating in Europeana does require some input from you as a content contributor, but this input involves tightening up both your practice and systems in ways which will vastly benefit both your organisation and its users. Put simply, participating in Europeana, and preparing your systems for aggregation *per se* can play an important part in driving improvement and justifying investment in your web publishing.

The third, and final, reason is money. Not because Europeana has huge commissioning budgets to throw around – the Europeana Foundation itself has almost no funding other than the contributions of Member State Governments and the European Commission, but because participation in Europeana and national aggregators is increasingly being written into the funding requirements of funders from the Commission to Charitable Foundations and national strategic agencies. Put simply, I and my colleagues are working very hard to ensure that in future, aggregatability of the digital output of projects will be a baseline requirement, and that no further funding will be put into locked-down or single-use content. In the UK, this means that funders are increasingly asking people to ensure that their metadata is available to services such as Culture Grid and Europeana.

There are many other reasons, and I hope we will have an opportunity to explore many of them today. I hope you will come away from today with a clear understanding of what Europeana is, and how it works, and with a real enthusiasm to get your organisation involved. It is a tremendous opportunity, and one which I hope you will all take full advantage of.

It is a great pleasure now to introduce Jonathan Purday, of the Europeana Foundation, who is going to talk to us about the strategic development of Europeana.

Thank you.