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Curated by Agiatis Benardou,
Vicky Dritsou and Maria Ilvanidou

dh goes viral

DARIAH THEME 2020

DH GOES VIRAL

CURATED BY

Agiatis Benardou
Vicky Dritsou
Maria Ilvanidou

"DH IN THE TIME OF VIRUS" 2020 TWITTER CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Sara Di Giorgio
Quinn Dombrowski
Katerina Gardikas
George Mikros
Sofia Papastamkou
Lorna Richardson
Melissa Terras
Giannis Tsakonas

Infrastructures
ARIADNE Plus
Europeana Research
DARIAH-EU
#dariahTeach
Pelagios Network

"DH GOES VIRAL" 2021 DIGITAL WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Elton Barker
Sara Di Giorgio
Quinn Dombrowski
Katerina Gardikas
Vicky Garnett
Alba Irollo
Justine Le Floch
Carlo Meghini
George Mikros
Sofia Papastamkou
Lorna Richardson
Melissa Terras

REVIEW OF THE INTRODUCTION

Vicky Garnett

EDITORIAL DESIGN & TYPESETTING

Maria Ilvanidou

PROOFREADING

Vicky Dritsou, Maria Ilvanidou

ORGANIZERS

Digital Curation Unit, Information Management Systems Institute, Athena RC

FUNDING

DARIAH Theme 2020

LICENCE

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DIGITAL CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC – REFLECTIONS UPON A YEAR OF LOCKDOWN

By Melissa Terras

The global COVID-19 pandemic has shown that digital content and infrastructures are increasingly essential, at a time when routine business and commercial frameworks have been disrupted or permanently destroyed, particularly in the cultural and heritage sectors (Arts Council 2020; Bakhshi 2020; Creative Scotland 2020). Yet it has also been a time of digital opportunity for Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums: when digital representations of culture and heritage is all that is accessible, digitised versions of artefacts and objects have shown both how essential digitisation now is, and the versatility of digitisation. Cultural Heritage is important for wellbeing (Power and Smyth 2016), and although many institutions worldwide had to restrict physical access, 86% of museums increased their online presence and/or the amount of content they were placing online (ArtFund 2020), online searches for aggregated cultural content "quadrupled" (Gaskin 2020), with emerging opportunities regarding the reframing of digitised content as an essential part of cultural memory (Kahn 2020).

In the first wave of the pandemic, we saw many institutions that "excelled at sweating assets and squeezing value" out of their previously digitised content, building upon prior labour and infrastructure (Gregory and Sadowski 2021), in the provision of online tours, the development of jigsaws, and curating different slices of their collections (Terras 2021). Crowdsourcing, such as tagging and transcription, was promoted: "If you're cooped-up and curious, use your free time to decipher handwriting, tag images, and more" (Hester 2020). Unplanned viral activities, such as recreating famous artworks at home, were encouraged by institutions (Twisted Sifter 2020). This revealed a new, complex relationship between individuals and institutions, which was often bridged by cultural heritage institution's social media provision and engagement (Burke et al 2020), which as well as providing uplifting content online, had to navigate complexities of challenging histories and contemporary social debates (Kist 2020). The increase in online activity saw many working hard behind the scenes to keep infrastructures online, at a time of great personal stress for everyone (Scott 2020). The affordances of online digital delivery make it easy to forget that digitisation of cultural heritage depends on people, and a physical relationship with an object: the restriction of access to cultural spaces brought that into focus (CamDigLib 2021). However, the resources to support digital and digitisation are not equally provided for across the heritage sector, with many smaller institutions unable to respond, reinforcing inequalities in delivery and access to opportunities. There was also a certain passivity to this provision of digital,

encouraging users to consume (rather than create or research) and, in the sudden pivot to digital, there were opportunities for the Digital Humanities community to engage with this sudden rush of digital activity, to ensure that it met the needs of the research community, rather than only being a way to keep us engaged with the content of institutions that had their doors closed.

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, we saw the closing, and reopening, and closing, and reopening of cultural heritage organisation doors, as waves of the pandemic hit. The toll that this took on both the mental and physical health of individuals (both users and providers) cannot be underestimated, and it will be a while until we understand the economic, social, physical, and psychological ramifications of the pandemic fully. It will also be a while until we understand how this changes the delivery mechanisms of cultural heritage institutions, and the relationship of the physical to the digital in these spaces (Galani and Kidd 2020). It is understood from word-of-mouth reports that usage statistics of digital resources remain high, and perhaps reflect a permanent change in the way people navigate and access heritage content (particularly in relations to library materials). However, given this is still a current issue, it will be some time before the published record (and researchers) can fully evaluate this digital shift, and plan forward to address skills gaps, provide infrastructure, and obtain and deploy resources (RLUK 2020). In addition, the GLAM sector has been hit by staffing and resourcing issues, including furloughs and layoffs (Machovec 2020). In the UK, the Museums Association has been tracking Covid-19 related redundancies in the museum sector alone: by May 2021 there had been 4,126 redundancies "directly or indirectly attributed to the pandemic" (Museums Association 2021a), suggesting that "this loss of jobs accounts for approximately 8% of all employment in museums across the UK" (Museums Association 2021b). This means that GLAM institution's ability to produce new, and also maintain existing digital content has been curtailed, and morale is low.

Individuals throughout society are exhausted. It can be noted that there hasn't been a huge response from the Digital Humanities community to the COVID-19 "digital shift" across the GLAM sector. Many researchers are, of course, themselves battling huge workloads, with four in five university and college staff struggling because of the pandemic (Hall 2021), with many initial responses to the pandemic concentrating on labour and digital pedagogy rather than research activities (Digital Humanities Now 2020). There is, however, a body of growing research into the effects the pandemic has had on the GLAM sector, and how cultural institutions can be better prepared for digital service provision for crisis situations such as COVID-19, for example the Digital Footprints and Search Pathways project as part of the UK's Towards a National Collection project (TaNC 2020). There is much ongoing work to be done in DH classes and research projects around the intersection of digitised heritage and ever-changing data and infrastructure of online platforms, particularly in regard to post- COVID-19 operationalisation. We have perhaps demonstrated a lack of capacity to respond to an innovation moment, over the past year – but that has to be ok, given the trials we have all been facing. What is clear, as we move forward to another round of societal reopening at time of writing, that the Digital Humanities community should centre aspects of digitisation, "to engage with, feedback to, and improve" the provision of digitised content which forms the bedrock of so much research in DH (Terras, Forthcoming). Those in the Digital Humanities must do what they can to support professional service colleagues across the GLAM sector who are doing their very best to provide and support online and digital audiences, and to encourage access to machine-processable versions of those collections, to facilitate our long-term research and teaching aims.

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