OPEN SOURCE SW AND PUBLIC DOMAIN SYMPOSIUM
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Introducing Successful Case Studies of Building Public Domain Platform - Building an open culture with open data in three cultural institutions

Hello

My name is seb

Thank you to the organisers for the invitation to speak to you today

I've been working in museums and the cultural sector for 25 years - first in technical roles, then as senior executive, now as a director and CEO - and so the work I am speaking about is also the product of many teams I've managed and worked with.

Working in design, media, technology and art i have come to understand that all contemporary creative work is collective. Especially in a networked environment.

I was asked to talk about my experiences and strategies in building a robust culture around open access and public domain.

So let's start at the beginning.

The journey begins in Sydney on Gadigal County at the Powerhouse Museum. Back then the Powerhouse was a large science and design museum with a very large collection of artefacts. Some of these were out of copyright. It was the early 2000s and the digitisation process of these objects had just begun.

The early online collection of the Powerhouse showed that making available images and metadata - descriptive data about the objects as well as stories about why they were important turned out to be fascinating to many online searchers. The visitation to the museums collection on the web far exceeded the numbers we got through the doors to exhibits. This was around 2005-2008.

The first big experiment in open access and public domain was when we worked with the curator of fashion and textiles to make a series of old 19th century fabric swatchbooks searchable.

Young textile designers wanted to use and repurpose these old out of copyright designs. But because the individual books were catalogued by the museum single objects but used by the students as swatches on specific pages, searching for a specific pattern was impossible.

Moreover the physical books were being damaged by overuse.

So we digitized them and this did two things.

First we opened them up for user generated metadata. This allowed students, users, to 'tag' the swatches by mood and patern.

Second we let them download the high resolution TIFFs. For free. This was new idea in the museum world - which usually licensed images for a fee - even if they were out of Copyright.

They needed to discover them and then in order to use them in new designs they needed to be able to download them.

People loved this.

But we also learned that having users tag the swatches was not very effective. There simply weren't enough people and the more popular designs got the bulk of the user tags.

Back then there was Chris Anderson's popular idea of the 'long tail'. The problem with the 'long tail' is that in some fields, the tail becomes too thin too quickly. It is helpful to remember that about half of all the songs on Spotify have never been listened to. A number of projects have sprung up to draw attention this. Forgotify can surface some of those, PetitTube does the same for unwatched YouTube videos. Million Short briefly did this for Google searches too.

So we built a simple color browsing tool. If we had Generative AI tools as we would now, we would have automated the pattern descriptions too.

Next we applied a similar logic to the whole of the museum collection. While we didn't let people download images, we did a lot of work on discovery interfaces.

And in 2008 we also launched an open API along with a Creative Commons Zero release of descriptive data from the collection.

This allowed anyone to build apps using the museum's data without first having to ask permission.

Not many new things were made - but it did make it easier for the museum itself to build new products. And it also meant that the museum's collection data was ingested into government open data catalogues and into museum and library aggregators more easily.

LEARNING - ensuring that the organisation used its open data was key to ensuring the commitment to the platform and its ethos were maintained even if people and management changed.

In 2011 I got hired by the Smithsonian and moved to New York to rebuild the Cooper Hewitt design museum.

This museum was doing a major redevelopment and rebrand. They wanted to use the opportunity to make the museum - located in New York - truly national, and international in its reach.

It was a lot smaller than the Powerhouse with about 1/3 the staff. And it was also part of the gigantic Smithsonian, governed by the US Government and by Federal regulations.

To make change in a short period of time, it would need both practical and philosophical transformation.

My team built open into the fabric and ethos of the new museum.

We released the collection data - the first for a Smithsonian - under CC0 licensing.

Cooper Hewitt even commissioned a new font for the museum's brand and released that under an open license.

We did a LIDAR scan of the museum's mansion and released that too.

And we released a lot of the code we wrote for the digital experiences and open sourced that too.

The Smithsonian was a huge government museum and it made sense to do this. But it was hard to be 'first'.

The US legal system is so combative that it reduces tolerance for risk in large organisations.

But by connecting 'open' to the new institutional purpose - and the brand for the museum we were able to do a lot.

And in a very short time period.

LEARNING - when adopting open source and public domain, make the commitment as wide as possible and across the mission & brand.

The highly interactive nature of the new Cooper Hewitt was built on a presumption of openness. And by ensuring the visitors to the new museum were able to make use of this openness - we were able to create a lasting paradigm shift.

One of the best examples is the Wallpaper Room. This interactive room was one of the first concepts developed in 2012 which took the digitized wallpaper of the collection and used it to allow visitors to the museum to 'experience' how it would feel to live in a room surrounded by particular wallpaper patterns. This was an example of using the digitized collection to recreate realities - and something only possible with an open approach.

At the base of the stack for a lot of the work at Cooper Hewitt was the idea of open access. It made a small museum a lot more visible and also a lot more structurally resilient.

LEARNING - build open into the technical and the organisational stack, from the bottom up.

At the end of 2015 I moved to Melbourne to do another major redevelopment.

This time for the ACMI - film and screen museum.

Very little at ACMI is out of copyright. Films, TV shows, videogames - only the government made films in our collection have a less restrictive IP framework applied to them.

But the philosophy of open informed the work that underpinned the redevelopment and expansion.

Again, by focusing on what the public value of providing access - and importantly - showing and revealing new ways for the public value to be created - we were able to embed openness as a philosophy underpinning the new museum.

Undertaking a major expansion between 2019-2021 again we were able to shift the institution to one in which we use openness as a key part of leveraging our medium size to enable new forms of innovation and creative practice.

This continued strategic focus on open data has allowed ACMI to be able to experiment rapidly with generative AI as well as being aware of the potential risks and unexpected consequences of GenAI.

Here are a couple of our GenAi integrations that have been launched publicly.

Well before the latest AI hype wave we were experimenting with how we could use AI to navigate the large moving image collection by generating a level of metadata simply unable to be manually created.

LEARNING - a commitment to open access will make experimentation easier.

Early experiments with computer vision tools showed some promise but the level of errors was too high to be useful.

It took until 2022 for that to yield better results. Now in 2024 you can search ACMI's digitized collection by using AI generated descriptions of each 30th frame. Or by transcribed audio. Or by sound effect. This is a level of detail simply unable to be generated by hand.

One of the very early open access dilemmas we faced was whether we could also make the transcripts of content available - or only utilize them for search.

The degree at which digitized materials could be atomized, data mined, and recombined with AI tools far outstripped the expectations of many rights holders.

So whilst the transcripts of a video could be thought of as 'metadata' and potentially be opened up, the risk of doing this and what it might signal was an issue.

LEARNING - GenAI has changed the public attitude towards open access.

As ACMI works through the complexities of open access in our new environment, it has been critical that we have had in-house software development expertise, as well as a wide range of views on the positives and negatives.

The presence of an internal team has allowed us to experiment, to test, and then to evaluate how we might expand or extend our platform with level of responsiveness, nuance and care that would have been impossible with an external or outsourced team.

Having the ability for senior staff, managers and even board members ask questions and have answers from the staff designing and making the tools and platforms has returned a lot of benefits.

LEARNING - inhouse experimentation allows for more nuanced and, in our case, better and faster outcomes.

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So lets summarise, over the last 20 years, what open is, what open means, and its benefits have changed.

LEARNING - ensuring that the organisation used its open data was key to ensuring the commitment to the platform and its ethos were maintained even if people and management changed

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