

Recommendations for a European Member States and Commission supported digital aggregation strategy

Problem statement

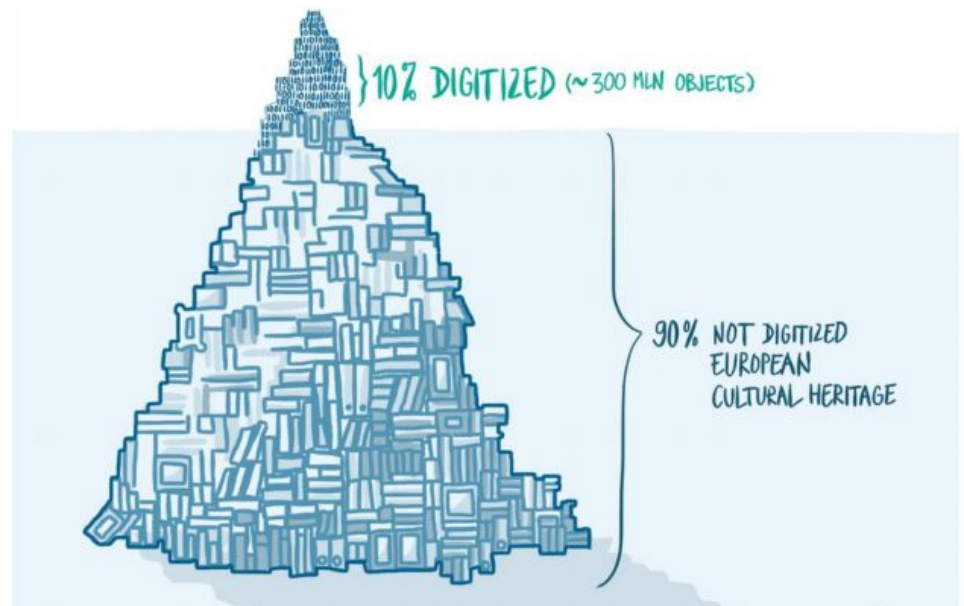
The aim of this document is to demonstrate the necessity of deploying and supporting a digital aggregation strategy both at the European Commission level and in each of the member states.

Since its inception in 2008, the Europeana Initiative has undergone a far-reaching transformation, culminating in the redefinition of its mission in the [2020-2025 strategy](#) to accelerate and support innovation in the GLAM/CHI sector. Built on three pillars, the [Europeana Foundation](#), the [Europeana Aggregators' Forum](#) (EAF) and the [Europeana Network Association](#) (ENA), Europeana is now in a strong position to herald digital transformation in the sector by setting and promoting standards, aligning infrastructures, and offering training and capacity building for all actors in the CH field.

Yet as a network of national, domain and thematic aggregators, we strongly believe that the work is far from done. As highlighted in the [joint position paper](#) of the Europeana Initiative in the context of the current EC consultation on the “Opportunities Offered By Digital Technologies For The Cultural Heritage Sector Recommendation”, several issues remain:

- The core issue is the **lack of national and/or regional digital strategies**, without which the aggregation effort is not sustainable.
- The **digitisation targets** set by the Commission recommendation on the digitisation and online accessibility of cultural material and digital preservation ([2011/711/EU](#)) have not been reached by all member states.
- Only about 10-20% of the estimated heritage holdings ([see “Transforming the world with culture”](#)) have in fact been digitised, and only a fraction of this material is available in usable quality through the

Europeana portal (2015 statistics)



90% of our heritage has not yet been digitized. This digitally available 10% represents 300 million objects, only one third of which (34%) is currently available online, with barely 3% of that works suitable for real creative re-use. Visual: Elco van Staveneren, www.denkschets.nl, CC BY-SA.

- There is a huge imbalance in the representativity of the Europeana collections: not all member states have reached the same level of digitisation and, for some countries, only a limited amount of objects is accessible. A full report on the status of national aggregation can be found in [this analysis](#) made in the scope of the Europeana Common Culture project.
- There is a growing demand to better represent the diversity of European citizens, their communities and their intangible heritage. This poses new challenges in terms of content selection, curation, metadata actualisation and the search for inspiring narratives.

The Europeana Initiative cannot address these issues alone. The digitisation work resides also in the Cultural Heritage Institutions. For a true digital transformation to happen, **a substantial investment therefore needs to be made at the member state, regional and community levels** as well. To cope with the growing demands for inclusive heritage representation in the digital realm, it is essential that policy makers at different levels make a coordinated effort to help build capacity, set up infrastructures, and implement standard frameworks.

National and domain/thematic aggregators play a key role in this effort. While Europeana is the platform and network that supports digital transformation in the cultural heritage sector in Europe, aggregators are the sine-qua-non intermediaries between Europeana and the vast and diverse network of

European cultural institutions that implement this transformation. They possess the indispensable country-, language- and domain/thematic- specific knowledge and expertise and are uniquely positioned to translate European practices and standards to instruments supporting the needs of local institutions. Their position allows them to navigate the complex national stakeholder environment and to build bridges between culture, educational authorities, innovation, research and creative industries, also reaching out to vocational education and professional associations. In doing so, aggregators have an amplifying effect on the digital transition. Furthermore, they aggregate and enrich content for Europeana in a way that reflects national, domain-specific and cultural idiosyncrasies, improving the level of quality and granularity of the digital collections through curation. As their remit is often wider than aggregation, they are able to pool additional resources as knowledge and capacity building hubs, as digitisation competence centers, as benchmark and standards developers, advisory bodies assisting in matters such as rights clearance, etc. They provide services to institutions at an individual level catering to the needs of the whole long tail of the CHI sector, including the less digitally adapted. The two-way collaboration between Europeana and national, domain, and thematic aggregators helps to achieve the level of mutuality that is enshrined in Europeana's mission statement: it connects the local and individual to the European, cross-domain and cross-country levels, maximising the full value potential of open access to cultural heritage.

Due to the **COVID 19-crisis** many institutions scrambled to get digital collections online, as a means to stay relevant and reach out to audiences from behind closed doors. Rather than obstructing the digital transformation, the pandemic helped to highlight the need for digitisation efforts and digital competencies. However, many institutions do not yet possess the adequate infrastructure , facilities or qualified personnel to make this transition under pressure. Now is the time to make the sector more resilient, improve its capacity and increase its capability of operating and delivering in a primarily digital context.

We propose the following actions:

- Development of a **public and funded *digitisation strategy*** in each member state, including:
 - Possible setup of pooled digital infrastructures that go beyond strict digitisation and include the whole workflow including aggregation: individual institutions often lack the means to cover all the investments necessary to fulfil their digital needs and ambitions. Pooling of resources can offer the advantage of scale.

- Capacity building and training: from our [aggregation landscape report](#) we learned that a lack of expertise and knowledge continues to exist, and a high demand remains for training in digital competencies.
- Adoption of digitisation standards and interoperability: Europeana's publishing framework and metadata standards have proven beneficial for interoperability of data between institutions. Enforcing standards will facilitate collaboration and data exchange between institutions, and form the basis for expertise sharing. The translation of resources and documentation could heighten the engagement of local communities and further the adoption of such standards.
- Data quality control: a substantial part of the digitisation work in the last 10 years is no longer useful and needs to be redone - an example is the tier 0 content in Europeana. To avoid waste of resources and efforts, quality control should be part of any sustainable digitisation strategy.
- Open access policies and mandatory adoption of open licenses for publicly funded digitization: the management of copyrights still weighs heavily on institutions hoping to open up their collections to the public. Efforts to modernize European copyright rules, e.g. the Directive on Orphan Works, have not substantially facilitated the effort involved in clearing rights, and in many cases even works in the public domain are shielded by copyright limitations.
- Issue national (or regional) *mandates* for aggregation to Europeana. One third of the national aggregators for Europeana currently have no legal mandate to do so from their government. **We are convinced that it would be beneficial for at least one institution in each member state/region to be endowed with the explicit mission to aggregate to Europeana.**
- Make explicit the role of this aggregation landscape in the Digital Europe Programme. It is vital that adequate funding for core services and activities currently funded under CEF generic services has a place in the Digital Europe Programme, in order to arrive at a balanced and proportionate support for aggregators from both the European Commission as well as the member states.
- Set clear targets for digitisation in terms of quantity as well as quality. As previous targets have not been met, preventing the potential of digitised collections for reuse by researchers, educators, creative industries and citizens to be fully realized, it is important to keep the momentum going and ensure the commitment to digitisation targets. In terms of quality, it is important that metadata also correctly take into account cultural diversity.

- Encourage Member States to ensure that all material digitised with public funding is made available through accredited aggregators and Europeana.

For aggregators, collaboration at the Europeana level offers the following benefits:

- This offers coordination benefits, helps to align objectives, grants minimum levels of standardisation and fosters adherence to best practices.
- Sharing knowledge and expertise: as has been proven by the very active tech, copyright and impact communities, Europeana is the place where people come together to share knowledge and expertise on digitisation in all its aspects.
- Collaboration with domain and thematic aggregators to develop and refine specialized metadata. Domain and thematic aggregators and their networks have been contributing to Europeana from the beginning. Not only do they bring specialized content and the metadata expertise that goes with it. They also stimulate innovation - such as 3D, AI, media viewers - and share their knowledge with national aggregators. In some cases, they deliver content to Europeana which is not covered by national aggregation, e.g. audiovisual collections.
- Joint training and capacity building, as witnessed by the success of Europeana, EAF and ENA workshops and webinars in providing knowledge, skills and expertise at the European level complementary to what is available in the national context.
- Collaboration at the European level would also benefit the much needed efforts to support multilingualism in accessing and presenting cultural heritage content.
- Wide and open access to collections at the European level so as to better represent dispersed communities and minorities as well as a shared European identity embedded in our common history. This is an important and often underestimated advantage of Europeana. From its very beginnings, Europe has been a story of unity in diversity. Reflecting a history of shifting borders, waves of migration and cross-cultural exchange, heritage collections can be experienced in a broader and more representative panorama when presented through a common access point that allows for contextualisation and comparative study while keeping the link to the source object and its provider intact.

In conclusion

We encourage member states to define a public, funded digital strategy that enables aggregation at the national and regional level. This is also a precondition for the Europeana Initiative to take up its role as sector innovator and accelerator in the digital transformation process. For this to happen, it is essential that member states develop a strong and committed digitization and aggregation strategy with a strong mandate. This goes beyond the context of the Europeana Initiative: for member states, it is crucial to build a capable digital infrastructure to safeguard their heritage and share it with the world. The aggregators network (composed by national, domain and thematic aggregators) that has been established in the past years can play a contributive role in this, and aspire to be recognized and endorsed *both* at the national and EU level. This will reinforce and lend visibility to the efforts of the member states to preserve and promote their heritage by going digital and will ensure EC investments in Europeana to reach the desired impact.