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Revision History

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→ **European Cultural Commons:**
Supporting the new Europeana Strategy 2015-2020

Louise Edwards, The European Library

1. Executive summary

This white paper has been written as *Milestone 20* of the *Europeana Version 3 Thematic Network*, which aims to “*realize a European Cultural Commons, transforming the commons concept into a set of practical actions that focus on the development of Europeana and its ecosystem*”.

A commons is a set of resources, collectively shared by a defined community. The community enjoys mutual goals, interests and values, and establishes the rules and norms by which the community and its resources are managed.

Over the past five years, Europeana has built an infrastructure that connects over 40 million objects from more than 2,700 cultural institutions, making the metadata interoperable and the content as freely available as possible for creative re-use.

In delivering its new strategy (2015-2020), Europeana will grow into a digital services platform, bringing together people, institutions and businesses from a variety of sectors, contributing a blend of skills and interests. Their shared vision is to **transform the world with culture**.



The idea of Europeana as a cultural commons began as a grassroots initiative in 2011 and has been developed through the Europeana Network. This work comes to fruition in the *Europeana Strategy 2015-2020*, where commons principles are being applied to a reformed governance structure, a cloud-based infrastructure and end-user community-based channels.

2. Setting the scene

Catalysing the idea of the commons

The Commons as an [idea](#) that could be meaningful to Europeana's future sprang from the work of a Europeana employee, Georgia Angelaki¹, in 2011. Her initiative was seized on by the Europeana Network Officers, who appointed a Cultural Commons Advisory Board² to explore the concept and its relevance to Europeana.

The [goals](#) of the Advisory Board were:

1. To develop discussion on the Cultural Commons within the Europeana Network, by introducing the concept and exploring its application within the context of Europeana;
2. To address specific topics, such as funding and sustainability of the Commons, governance and outreach;
3. To produce a set of recommendations about the future of the Commons within Europeana and to define areas of application of the concept.

Developing the concept

Over a two-year period, we developed the idea, consulting widely with our Network and stakeholders.

We first presented the concept at a one-day commons strategy meeting (Warsaw, October 2011), attended by members of the Europeana Network. Together, we explored the idea of a shared cultural commons for Europe, addressing it from a range of perspectives – [governance](#), [legal](#), [end-user outreach](#) and [impact](#). We then presented the meeting outcomes to the Europeana Board in October and to the Europeana Network in December. A tangible result was to introduce the commons into the *Europeana Business Plan 2012*, which stated that Europeana would foster

'...a reinforced feeling of Europeana as a movement, a platform that represents participating cultural institutions, think-tanks and governments'.

¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=19175711>

² See Appendix 1 for a list of Cultural Commons Advisory Board Members



In 2012, we held a Strategic Briefing (Copenhagen, March 2012), attended by senior practitioners in the cultural sector, principally members of the Member States Expert Group (MSEG), and addressed by an eminent commons expert, Charlotte Hess³.



Charlotte Hess, First Strategic Briefing on the Commons, Copenhagen, March 2012

The meeting was informed by a discussion paper, *A cultural commons for Europe*⁴, authored by the Network Officers. This paper outlined the concept of the commons and posed a number of challenges, including:

- The **opportunities** and **risks** of adopting a commons approach;
- The tensions between **revenue generation** and **open reuse** of content;
- The use of the commons to improve **collaboration** and to **reduce costs** across the network; and
- The **role** of cultural institutions and of Europeana within a Cultural Commons.

At this First Strategic Meeting, we established a strong need for the cultural heritage sector to investigate **new ways of collaboration** and to make our **shared cultural heritage widely available**. We followed up with a report and a workshop at the Europeana Network Plenary (Leuven, June 2012).

At a Second Strategic Meeting (Limassol, October 2012), we gathered evidence and feedback into a new paper, *The Commons: from concept to action*⁵, which moved us on from **theory into practice**, and proposed a set of **use cases**. The last meeting of the Commons Advisory Board immediately preceded the Europeana Network AGM (Berlin, December 2012), where the final recommendations of the Advisory Board were presented, debated and adopted⁶. From 2013 onwards, the recommendations have been put into practice, as set out in Section 5.

3. Defining the commons

³ <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/charlotte-hess/13/29b/a00>

⁴ Europeana Network Officers. *A cultural commons for Europe: discussion paper*. March 2012

⁵ Edwards, Louise. *The commons: from concept to action: discussion paper*. October 2012

⁶ See Section 4 below



We start with a simple definition:

“The commons is a general concept that refers to a resource shared by a group of people”⁷

However, the commons is a **complex entity**, an **inter-disciplinary field** that has attracted political scientists, economists, computer scientists, lawyers, sociologists, librarians and others, and involves issues such as governance, sustainability, rules and norms.

People are usually motivated to share resources through a commons because there is a threat of enclosure or restriction:

“Abstractly, [a commons] is a set of resources maintained in the public sphere for the use and benefit of everyone. Usually, commons are created because a property owner decides that a given set of resources—grass for grazing sheep, forests for parkland, software code, or intellectual property—will be more valuable if freely shared than if restricted. In the law, and in our understanding of the way the world works, we recognize that no idea stands alone, and that all innovation is built on the ideas and innovations of others. When creators are allowed free and unrestricted access to the work of others, through the public domain, fair use, a commons, or other means, innovation flourishes⁸.”

Types of commons: traditional and new

The earliest, more traditional commons focus on the sharing of **natural** resources – forestry, fishing, irrigation, grazing, for example. They are typically a response to enclosure or privatisation.

Newer forms of commons include both physical and virtual communities, ranging from **neighbourhood** commons, such as community parks; **knowledge or information** commons, such as libraries, open access repositories; **social commons**, like blogs and virtual communities; **infrastructure** commons, for example, the Internet, public radio and TV; and **cultural commons**, which can include aspects of eco-tourism, shared music etc⁹.

There are several types of new commons that are useful to us in the cultural heritage sector. They include:

⁷ *Understanding knowledge as a commons: from theory to practice*. Edited by Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom. Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2006

⁸ <http://www.slideshare.net/edsonm/cil-2009-michael-edson-text-version>

⁹Note that the terms for different types of commons are often used interchangeably, for example, ‘knowledge commons’ and ‘cultural commons’ may sometimes refer to the same thing; ‘knowledge commons’ and ‘research commons’ may also be synonymous.



- **Cultural commons** – this may refer to cultures shared by socially cohesive communities, such as a district in a city, a local language, the creativity of a design community or traditional knowledge of indigenous communities;
- **Research or scholar commons** – usually supporting academic communities, the movement to establish open access repositories is a good example. Some academic libraries have established research commons, shared spaces (both physical and online), where communities of experts (researchers, librarians, computer scientists) come together to advance digital scholarship.
- **Education or learning commons** – similar to a research commons but focused on undergraduate students or school pupils.

Examining the literature and consulting with experts: grounding our work on a strong evidence base

We undertook an extensive **literature review** and attended **conferences** such as the Economies of the Commons¹⁰, and the Thematic Conference on the Knowledge Commons¹¹. This enabled us to develop our knowledge and understanding on key questions of governance, community building, collective action, ownership and control.

Two acknowledged **experts** on the commons supported our work.

Charlotte Hess

Charlotte Hess was a member of our Advisory Board. Over many years, she worked with Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize for her work on the commons as an alternative approach to market economics and government intervention. Her view was that people could be trusted to act as a collective and to devise means of sharing resources equitably, outside of government and market systems. Ostrom's early work was based on traditional commons but, in 2006, Hess and Ostrom co-edited a book on the 'knowledge commons'. In her work with Europeana, Hess referred to Ostrom's eight design principles. These informed the principles subsequently put forward by the Advisory Board and adopted by the Europeana Network (see Section 4):

1. **Define the group** (community) and its boundaries
2. Match the group's collective goods to **local needs**
3. Let the group define **the rules of use**
4. The right to **modify rules** should be respected by the authorities
5. The group should **monitor the behaviours** of its members
6. **Graduated sanctions** should be imposed on members who do not comply with the rules
7. **Conflict resolution** should be easily available
8. Multiple layers of **nested enterprises** should ensure effective governance

¹⁰ <http://ecommons.eu/>

¹¹ <http://biogov.uclouvain.be/iasc/>



Michael Edson

Michael Edson of the Smithsonian Institute shared his key ingredients for a cultural commons with us. These also fed into the work done by the Advisory Board and have become core to Europeana's mission:

1. **Federate** and bring content together
2. Design around the **individual user**
3. Make **content findable, shareable and reusable**; provide **high resolution**
4. Make content **free** where possible and promote the **public domain**
5. Allow **bulk download** and **machine-reading of data**
6. **Collaborate** without control
7. Build **trust**
8. Take advantage of **network effects**

Important conclusions can be derived from their expert work with us. A commons follows certain design principles that govern the collective and sharable goods. It is a social system for the long-term stewardship of resources that preserves shared values and community identity. Therefore, the commons is not merely a resource. It is a **resource *plus* a defined community** with a set of **protocols, values and norms** devised by the community to manage its resources¹².



Left to right: Elinor Ostrom, Charlotte Hess, Michael Edson

Summary of the literature and expert views

Based on our literature review and consultation with experts, we summarise the evidence as follows:

1. A commons movement stresses **collectivism** over individualism
2. Governance structures favour a set of **nested enterprises** within an ecosystem
3. **Community** is at the core of building a commons
4. There are community **rules** that are well understood and enforced

¹² <http://bollier.org/commons-short-and-sweet>



5. The emphasis is on **small groups** that can work out ways of working effectively towards a **shared goal** and have **specialist knowledge**, **shared values** and **interests**.
6. The **language** of the commons is a way for people to assert a **personal connection** to a set of resources and a **social solidarity** with each other. A commons therefore builds **social capital**.
7. In collective action and commons-like thinking, there is a belief in the **common good** and working towards **shared outcomes**, based on voluntary **participation** and **reciprocity**
8. A system of centralised production and one-to-many distribution is being replaced by a **network of decentralised production** and **many-to-many distribution**. This is leading to **new online social structures** and the growth of **collaborative platforms**
9. The relationship between the commons and the **market** should be **synergistic**. The commons can provide infrastructure on which value-added services and products can be built.
10. This innovation provides an opportunity for cultural institutions to act as **collaborators** or **catalysts** for **interest-based communities**, in which they can **co-create** the production of new content, building new **cultural capital**.

4. Europeana commons principles

The outcome of the work done by the Cultural Commons Advisory Board was a set of commons principles, which were adopted by the Europeana Network at the AGM at the end of 2012:

Europeana Commons Principles

Mutuality - Create a community of organizations and individuals, based on the principle of achieving mutual benefit, acting in good faith and presuming it on behalf of others

Access - Provide a set of high-quality re-usable content, tools and services to enable creativity and innovation

Attribution - Commit to the principle of respecting rights through acknowledgement and attribution

Consistency - Build on the existing values and principles of our sector

Engagement - Commit, as members of the community, proactively to use the commons and to contribute to it

5. The commons in action



Europeana's mission is to unlock Europe's cultural heritage. By exploiting new technology, it enables citizens to create new objects and pass them on to current and future generations. Europeana is a network of connected organisations, working towards common goals and mutual benefit.

Over the two years, 2013 and 2014, commons principles have heavily influenced work done on the new governance structure and in the projects Europeana Cloud and Europeana Creative.

Commons principles underpin much of the work to be done in the new *Strategy 2015-2020*. Europeana's partners will become its co-owners. We are extending work on open licensing, establishing a cloud-based infrastructure for the sharing of data and content, developing 'laboratories' for experimentation and co-creation. Within the end-user community, groups are springing up around subject themes, such as World War One Centenary, fashion and food.

Governance and the network

Europeana is a complex ecosystem, ranging from the local (such as a small public library or museum), to national gateways and international services. Each has its niche within this ecosystem, serving and working with its specific community of stakeholders. Each node in the network offers the rest of the ecosystem a unique set of skills, resources and know-how.

The new Europeana Association represents the Europeana Network. Its role is to democratically represent the breadth and diversity of the Network. This will support commons principles of *polycentricity*, with layers of activity clusters and distributed rule and decision-making.

Infrastructure commons

Europeana is becoming a Digital Services Infrastructure under the Connecting Europe Facility. This will lay the foundations for a '*CERN for Culture*', a shared facility for all its Network members.

On a technical level, Europeana Cloud is establishing a cloud-based infrastructure that will deliver cost-efficient storage and delivery of metadata, tools and content to the Network. A set of commons-based principles for the development of Europeana Cloud was a major piece of work in the project in 2013.

High-level principles for Europeana Cloud

The new infrastructure, Europeana Cloud, has been designed around a set of high-level principles that accord with the Europeana Commons Principles. Published in June 2013, they cover technological, strategic, legal, economic and governance aspects. They establish that Europeana Cloud:



1. Primarily serves Europe's cultural heritage institutions, enabling them to provide audiences with [access](#) to their Digital Objects
2. Promotes [openness](#)
3. Delivers a [more efficient solution](#) to the current methods of storing, sharing and providing access to digital cultural heritage objects
4. Operates under a [sustainable](#) business model
5. Provides the [infrastructure](#) to access metadata and content
6. Is accessible through [standardised data models](#)
7. Supports a [legal framework](#) to govern access and re-use
8. Is [governed and led by the community](#)

Innovation commons

Europeana Creative has established Europeana Labs as a way to experiment and develop new products and services, based on the re-use of metadata and content from Europeana. It brings together an exciting mix of stakeholders involved in the European creative economy, from technical developers to business planning experts. With a defined community and a commitment to openness and innovation, it can be run on commons principles.

Research commons

Under the *Europeana Cloud* project, a new set of services, *Europeana Research*, establishes a shared environment for content, tools and services to support the digital humanities. This will be a shared environment, based on commons principles.

Thematic commons

A successful approach over the past few years has been to identify themes where Europeana network partners work together to create interest-based communities. This has been a feature of the *Europeana Creative* project, but also encompasses initiatives such as Europeana Fashion and Europeana 1914-18 through Europeana Collections 1914-1918 and the EFG1914 portal. Such groups can be defined as new type of commons.

6. Conclusions

Culture is a shared resource of a community or group, which grows in value as people adopt it. In the cultural heritage sector, we are evolving from an analogue world, where the production of works is highly centralised, to a digital world of constantly changing output that can be reproduced and distributed easily. This has led to the growth of online collaborative platforms, where people gather around shared values and interests, and physical distance is no longer a barrier. It is no longer traditionally top-down, but rather a bottom-up, freer movement that is non-hierarchical and de-centralised. Cultural heritage institutions can facilitate and be part of this process.



However, the challenge is to build bridges with these new and dynamic communities, establishing trust and being part of the co-creation process.

At the same time, we need to be aware that new technologies can pose a risk to the commons, through the imposition of intellectual property controls. Even a cloud-based infrastructure can be a form of anti-commons if ownership of its design and management is highly centralized.

We should think instead of a broad-based movement of user-innovator communities, with cultural institutions and Europeana acting as catalysts. The Europeana Network can help to build commons-like thinking through trust, reciprocity, voluntary collective action, and commitment.

The result is a culturally-connected Europe. A cultural commons.

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Appendix 1: Member of the Commons Advisory Board

Ann Bergman-Tahon, Federation of European Publishers
Erik Buelinckx, Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage
Mikkel Christoffersen, Danish Agency for Culture
Stuart Dempster, Strategic Content Alliance JISC
Louise Edwards, The European Library
Pascal Ennaert, Vlaamse Kunstcollectie
Charlotte Hess, Syracuse University Library
Max Kaiser, National Library Austria
Hans van der Linden, Vlaamse Overheid
Nick Poole, Collections Trust
Merete Sanderhoff, Statens Museum for Kunst
Henning Scholz, Europeana
Gunnar Urtergaard, Kulturrad
Werner Weber, Federal Government Germany
Bengt Wittgren, Murberget Länsmuseum Västernorrland
Uldis Zarins, National Library Latvia