

EUROPEANA TAKES ON DIGITAL SOBRIETY AT A TIME OF CLIMATE EMERGENCY

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Abstract

As cultural heritage institutions reflect on how to adopt principles of digital sobriety by using the Internet and technology in more mindful and responsible ways, the Europeana Climate Heritage Community focuses on digital collections, electronic communications and how we communicate our climate action messages. The Community promotes green decision-making processes and eco-friendly practices in our digital transformation to create sustainable, climate friendly cultural practice. Europeana represents over 4,000 museums libraries and archives across Europe and has a responsibility to act as an agent of change to encourage environmental sustainability at a time of climate emergency.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies are essential for economic and social development. The digital transition appears to be critical for countries and companies with digital objects and interfaces gradually becoming part of every aspect of our social life. The digital transition is also considered to be a key tool to reduce energy consumption in many sector (“IT for Green”), to such an extent that it now hardly seems possible to address climate change without the large-scale incorporation of digital technologies.

(The Shift Project, Report, Towards Digital Sobriety, 2019¹)

At a tumultuous time of change and challenge, when museums and other cultural heritage institutions reflect on how to adapt and evolve to environmental sustainability there are many critical issues to consider concerning our daily practice. Focusing on digital collections, electronic communications and how we communicate our climate action messages The Europeana Climate Action Community brings together a group of dedicated climate action specialists to discuss how the digital transformation works to create a sustainable, climate friendly cultural practice. Speaking from the perspective of Europeana as an initiative that represents over 4,000 museums libraries and archives across Europe, managing the digital collections in a central portal of more than 80 million objects, at a time of climate emergency, Europeana has a responsibility to act as an agent of change to encourage best practice and digital sobriety in confronting the climate challenge taking place across our sector.

Europeana imagines a cultural heritage sector powered by digital and a Europe powered by culture, giving it a resilient, growing economy, increased employment, improved well-being, and a sense of European identity. To enhance the process of digital transformation, Europeana develops expertise, tools, and policies to embrace digital change and encourage partnerships that foster innovation. This makes it easier for people to use cultural heritage for education, research, creation, and recreation towards an open, knowledgeable, and creative society. In this way, digital

transformation enables both the process and the result of using digital technology to transform how an organization operates and delivers value which in turn, supports them to thrive, fulfil their mission and meet the needs of its stakeholders. At a time of climate emergency, we believe that cultural heritage has a critical role to play and a responsibility to revise strategies and actions towards instituting sustainable eco-thinking in all we do.

We believe that fostering and sharing knowledge to inform and support environmentally sustainable digital information management and preservation is critical to the development of our sector. In Europeana's lead in the deployment of the common European Data Space for cultural heritage the Europeana Climate Community has currently undertaken to launch a survey to evaluate sustainable digital information management practices in the cultural heritage sector. In the context of the current EU digital transformation and the data space, aligned with the aims of the EU Green Deal (EU Commission, 2020), Europeana is investigating environmental sustainability of the digital information management and digital preservation practices by the cultural heritage institutions in order to mitigate the broader sector's environmental impact. We look forward to reporting the results of the survey and believe that through sharing these kinds of tools and case studies we can make a difference as we ask one and another - what can you do for your planet?

EUROPEANA AND THE DATA SPACE

Europeana imagines a cultural heritage sector powered by digital and a Europe powered by culture, giving it a resilient, growing economy, increased employment, improved well-being, and a sense of European identity. To enhance the process of digital transformation, we develop expertise, tools, and policies to embrace digital change and encourage partnerships that foster innovation. We make it easier for people to use cultural heritage for education, research, creation, and recreation towards an open, knowledgeable, and creative society. We see digital transformation as both the process and the result of using digital technology which transforms how an organization operates and delivers value which in turn, supports them to thrive, fulfil their mission and meet the needs of its stakeholders. The common European data space for cultural heritage accelerates the digital transformation of Europe's cultural sector and fosters the creation and reuse of content in the cultural and creative sectors.

The Europeana Foundation with some 60+ staff, the Europeana Network Association with over 3,300 members from Europe and beyond, and the Europeana Aggregators' Forum with 40 regional, national, domain and thematic aggregators and representing 4,000 archives, libraries, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions are collectively referred to as the Europeana initiative. For more than two years all parts of Europeana came together and agreed to advocate for and embed working practices that minimize the digital cultural heritage sector's impact on the climate and environment, resulting in the Climate Action Manifesto², launched at the Europeana 2021 conference. Informed by the Green Team, Europeana continually develops eco-thinking and green practices, to build capabilities to maintain a sustainable workplace. The Green Team acts as focal point for the initiative to frame questions, investigate processes and raise awareness around the impacts of digital AND green transformation; for example, how to investigate and help reduce our carbon footprint. In the blog, *researching our carbon footprint - findings and tips from the Europeana Foundation*³, Patrick Ehlert, Shadi Ardalan explain how developing solutions to the

climate emergency and environmental challenges is not an easy journey, but starts with understanding our impact and our footprint. The Green Team shared the results of their 2020 carbon footprint investigation to inspire and help other organisations. *To gain an overview of the Europeana Foundation's carbon use in 2020, we investigated our footprint from our entire value chain* they explained. *This included our digital services and our corporate operations: working from home and at the office, and our business travel. In cases where that data wasn't available, we relied on secondary sources, including industry averages. Some exclusions due to lack of data included staff's daily commutes, manufacturing or disposal of computer devices, and overnight stays during business trips.* From their work, they estimated that the Europeana Foundation's carbon footprint in 2020 was 87,300 kg CO₂e. In everyday terms, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency calculator⁴, this total 2020 carbon footprint is equivalent to the energy use of 11 homes for one year, the consumption of 202 barrels of oil, or charging 10,619,403 smartphones. Switching to a green hosted server additionally decreased the carbon footprint and once measures were adopted, such as how to host a sustainable event⁵ things improved even further. Events were hosted through a strategic choice of venue and the catering – local, seasonal, vegan, and vegetarian were taken up with obvious enthusiasm by all stakeholders concerned. Once the events were announced as 'Green' this encouraged others to follow suit and the ripple effect did the rest. Raising awareness, sharing what they learn along the way, promoting sustainable, environment, and climate friendly practices across the Europeana networks became the norm. Europeana staff chose to travel by train, bike or walk to work after becoming aware of their air travel footprint, and the entire initiative adopted a holistic green approach in a surprisingly short time.

Digital sobriety is all about reducing the ecological footprint of our daily digital lifestyles, and in the workspace. In an interesting call to action concerning *Digital health at the age of the Anthropocene*⁶, the mental health sector called for digital temperance instead of overconsumption and overpromotion. Recognizing that while most data flows are attributable to services from the GAFAM/BATX group (ie, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft; Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Xiaomi) (P. 2) professionals from the mental health sector declared that they had a responsibility to make their own green choices. *Digital health technologies have revolutionised medical practice, they argued, and could feasibly reduce carbon emissions via strategies such as telemedicine.* They were not arguing to stop scientific and medical progress, rather to raise awareness and offer possible actions towards a more sustainable digital health system. We too need to consider our actions and how we manage our digital resources and practices in the cultural heritage sector. We turn for inspiration here to the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative directed by the European Commission to think green, sustainable and affordable, alongside accessible, inclusive, and beautiful and impacting all aspects of how we live.

THE NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS



New European Bauhaus

beautiful | sustainable | together



What does it mean when the NEB initiative wants to put beauty, inclusivity, and sustainability at the heart of how we live? These are all admirable qualities but demands fresh perspectives and actions think about how we can improve our everyday quality of life. The call essentially asks us to think about bringing design principles together with art and culture to work alongside modern science and technology. The Bauhaus School was founded in 1919 in the city of Weimar by German architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969). Its core objective was a radical concept: to reimagine the material world to reflect the unity of all the arts. We now need to re-imagine the world, based on the same principles,⁷ and as the original Bauhaus School evolved in the wake of the Spanish flu, we too need to think about the new challenges we are facing. Marcel Breuer helped to create designs that would fight future outbreaks. After a significant outbreak of tuberculosis in 1882, and after the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, there was need for new furnishing that could be easily cleaned from lurking flu germs. With these goals in mind, Breuer helped create minimalist pieces using hygienic wood and tubular steel. Before this period, overstuffed furniture was popular, but it was found to hold bacteria. To combat that problem, these new styles used aimed to use less fabrics.

In the same way we need to rethink our approach to our daily lives in a multifaceted approach that considers the complexity of what is at stake. We need to take care of our planet, our natural resources, our climate, and our way of living. In the same way that the famous Bauhaus chairs were reimaged, we need to think about all our actions and how can contribute to mitigating climate damage. The New European Bauhaus called for inspiring examples of how our cultural institutions and heritage contribute to sustainable and inclusive practices, services, and spaces in our communities. It brings a cultural and creative dimension to the European Green Deal and considers green transition and digital challenges as an opportunity to improve lives of citizens to create beautiful, sustainable, and inclusive places, products, and ways of living. The Bauhaus principles invite us to come together to learn, discuss and co-create the newest data-driven methods used in architecture, design, and art. They spotlight the kinds of societal and cultural changes we are facing as we witness the accelerating systemic change in the field of design and architecture and the integration of user-oriented thinking more than ever before. This is a sea-change for the

cultural heritage community who can take the up the opportunities that are made possible by the various digital tools now available to us which can at the same time be disruptive but also game changers.

THE EUROPEANA CLIMATE ACTION MANIFESTO

Inspired by the NEB, the Europeana Foundation, the Europeana Network Association, and the Europeana Aggregators' Forum have agreed to advocate for and embed working practices that minimize the digital cultural heritage sector's impact on the climate and environment. To declare our intentions, we launched Europeana Climate Action Manifesto at the Europeana 2021 conference. The Manifesto sets out four guiding principles that will inform the concrete actions the Europeana Initiative have promised to undertake to mitigate climate change through the way we plan, collaborate, operate, and advocate. This declaration shows that we believe that collective action is essential, and that acknowledging climate impact should inform all stages and elements of our work, where both and large, personal, and systemic changes can all make a difference.

The graphic features a white box on the left containing four blue checkmarks in circles, each followed by a principle: 'Plan', 'Collaborate', 'Operate', and 'Advocate'. Below these is the text 'for #ClimateAction' in blue, followed by the Europeana logo (a stylized 'e' with a magnifying glass) and the word 'europeana'. To the right is a blue-tinted photograph of a snowy mountain range with a few small figures in the distance. At the bottom right of the graphic is the European Union flag logo and the text 'Co-financed by the Connecting Europe Facility of the European Union'.

Europeana Climate Action Manifesto

These four guiding principles will shape how we work towards a sustainable digital transformation throughout the Europeana Initiative where each body incorporates these principles into its strategies and working practices. In our planning we will embed eco-thinking and 'think climate' from high-level strategy settings to yearly roadmaps and individual planning cycles. This will include setting standards for managing resources and will ensure our supply chains are as ecologically responsible as possible. Through benchmarking our progress by carrying out sustainability audits and impact assessments we will continue to find ways to reduce our carbon footprint in targeted areas.

Collaborating with our partners and networks has always been embedded in all that Europeana does because we believe that we progress faster when we work together. Collaborating with experts, organisations and networks who are similarly committed and who may be further along this journey than we are all in all serve to strengthen the sector when we harness the expertise and experience of the professionals and organisations in our networks all integral to our ability to address the complexities of climate change in our sector. Together, we will work towards common solutions, standards and frameworks for climate-responsible practices for digital culture. Sharing good practices and the challenges we encounter can empower further change at professional and organisational level. We want our learnings to be helpful for others to use or adapt for their own settings. In this way Europeana's climate actions will be transparent and made available through, for example, easy-to-access guides, Impact Playbook, or ongoing working documents.

We are making systematic changes in the way we operate. We believe that small changes contribute to a big impact and recognise how the development of a climate action strategy will be an important tool to help us to exercise material and digital minimalism in all our operations. As we convene meetings, either physically or digitally, we will minimise the damage we do, from considering the impacts of travel and catering, to the green credentials of the conferencing software we use. One of the personal and institutional principals is reflected in our clean-up of our digital practice where every individual can make a difference once we follow the principles of digital sobriety in all we do.

We know that change doesn't end with us, and we believe that by leading by example raises awareness of climate issues related to digital cultural heritage and highlight environmentally friendly practices on both individual and organisation levels. It is not only about advocating for climate action it is also about providing support to our members and peers, partner and contributing organisations. When everyone works together to develops their own capacity for making sustainable change, through sharing tools and case studies and providing opportunities for learning and discussion we know that we can make a real difference.

THE CLIMATE ACTION COMMUNITY

Established and supported by the Europeana Network Association (ENA), the seven Communities represent like-minded group of people who work together on a voluntary basis to cultivate and share knowledge, expertise and best practices on a specific topic or area of common interest. As the youngest of the seven communities that empower Europeana to act across the Network, the Europeana Climate Community seeks to drive impactful, cooperative, and sustainable action to address the climate emergency and consider the environmental impact of our digital life both at home and at work. Building on the Europeana Climate Action Manifesto declared last November, the Steering Group that drives the Climate Action Community aims for wider systemic and lasting change within our organisations and networks. We believe it's crucial to act now to find new ways to work without compromising our environment. We believe with the right support, guidance and collaboration we can turn our climate action aspirations into reality. As agents of change, we want to promote and enable change to happen within our communities and networks.

The Climate Action Community (CAC) is the youngest of the seven distinct communities and was formed by a dedicated group of like-minded professionals in the cultural heritage sector who acknowledge that climate change is an emergency and believe that cooperative action is required to confront the climate emergency. CAC is devoted to the development of environmentally sustainable internet and digital technologies, and all actions that can contribute to mitigating the climate crisis. In addition to our measures, towards limiting the footprint of digital assets and services by making sensible choices made during the development of a digital system the community believes in raising awareness, sharing what we learn along the way, and promoting sustainable, environment and climate friendly practices in our networks. We are determined to find the vernacular, the vocabulary that empowers our messages and to showcase best practices and inspirational curatorial and editorial activities across the sector to amplify this urgent message.

In a short span of 15 months, we have already come together as team to plan our action and activities together. While have consolidated our work plan, and have already made impressive impact at the annual Europeana annual conference. Climate action was given front stage in the two-days of sessions and workshops including a passionate panel discussion on the first day that was devoted to environmental impact emphasized the importance of climate action in creating the data space for culture, the keynote presentation by Caitlin Southwick *Heritage for Future*, Evangelia Paschalidou's insightful research, *Environmental sustainability of Digital Preservation of Cultural Heritage: is Eco-sufficiency answering the pressing question?* and the Community session *How cultural institutions tell the story of climate change* with the Communicators Community all strengthened the call to action. Matias Katajavaara, from Khora.com introduced an inspiring underwater state-of-the-art rendered 3D VR that brought into sharp focus how microplastic pollution impacts the seahorse environment. Collectively the Climate Action Community steering group's contributions put climate action firmly on the agenda for Europeana and so much more.

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR YOUR PLANET

The call to action is getting louder all the time. We are often reminded of the seven Rs of the circular economy – rethink, reduce, repair, reuse, refurbish, recycle, and recover – as terms of reference that were re-iterated in a recently European report, *Stormy times. Nature and humans: cultural courage for change*⁸. This publication includes 11 messages from Europe, including the emphatic message that the realization that *harnessing the cultural dimension of sustainable development is also increasingly well understood by governments* (P. 12). This gives cause for optimism as does the idea that included in the six key areas of the sustainability transition with a cultural dimension, global environmental commons are identified as building a new relationship with nature in the Anthropocene. We have also learned that studying cultural heritage and its history and reminding ourselves how previous generations coped with climate change can inform our understanding of our concurrent extreme climate events by marking out the tipping points for cultural heritage that are occurring today as they did in the past. We can learn from our natural heritage about the role of small landscape elements such as verges, dykes, ditches, sunken roads, and thickets and re-learn how to mitigate the impact of climate change that we are facing today. There is much to learn.

There are many steps you can take to mitigate further damage to our planet. We all already know what these steps are. The cultural sector has an important role to play and the digital cultural heritage sector, just as the digital health sector has its own responsibilities to take their own affirmative action. Number 6 of the 11 messages from Europe states *make the cultural carbon footprint lighter*. You can start today by taking this first step and check whether your website is hosted green. Our hope is that one day the Internet will run entirely on renewable energy. The Green Web Foundation⁹ believes that day should be within reach, and works to develop tools to speed up the transition towards a green Internet. Meanwhile, think about climate action and encourage the institution you are working in to join the efforts towards raising awareness and engage with their communities. There is a lot that needs to be doing. Join the green team at work and if there isn't one – you can decide to set one up. It up to every one of us to make that difference.

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