

# Digital Exhibitions, a Powerful Tool for Cultural Institutions Audience Development

The international working group on digital exhibitions

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**Abstract**— An international expert group is studying digital exhibitions from the perspective of cultural institutions, as means to reach out to virtual audiences through quality and attractive cultural content. The group's work is based on the state-of-art of research in the field and aims at providing cultural institutions with guidance, sets of resources and other practical tools.

**Index Terms**— Digital exhibitions, Audience development

## I. INTRODUCTION

Digital exhibitions are a powerful tool at the disposal of cultural institutions in order to communicate their collections, reach out to new audiences and involve them in a fruitful interaction. If well- conceived and developed, digital exhibitions put cultural objects, including items that would be impossible to bring together in the physical reality, into context and communicate them through target group-tailored digital storytelling. Moreover, they allow cultural institutions of different types to cooperate based on a common objective or shared concept.

However, there is not yet a sound competence in the outline and design of digital exhibitions within the cultural institutions, research in the field is still limited and not systematic and guidelines and best practices are not available.

For this reason, a group of experts from different EU countries, and beyond, established in 2011 an international working group dealing with research and practice in the area of digital exhibitions, from a cultural institutions perspective. Aim of the group was identifying good practices, provide guidance, achieve a common understanding of the success criteria for a cultural digital exhibition.

The working group started as self-organised and was later supported by EU-funded projects for digital technologies for the access to cultural heritage, such as Linked heritage [1] and, currently, Athenaplus [2].

The materials and reflections developed by the working group and the ongoing discussions are documented at the website [www.digitalexhibitions.org](http://www.digitalexhibitions.org).

## II. WORKING DEFINITION OF DIGITAL EXHIBITION

Based on the collection of examples from all over the world and on their thorough analysis, the working group agreed that the first condition for achieving quality is adopting a strictly curatorial approach when conceiving and realizing a digital exhibition. Another important element is the engagement of the target public.

The working group drafted consequently the following working definition of digital exhibition, from the perspective of cultural institutions: "*A digital exhibition is based on a clear concept and is well curated. It assembles, interlinks and disseminates digital multimedia objects in order to deliver innovative presentations of a theme, or series of themes, allowing user interaction to a great extent.*"

This definition defines the area of work of the Working Group, but is at the same time under discussion within the group and across the professional community.

## III. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In order to establish a sound scientific basis for their project, the working group collected a variety of resources that are documented in a database made available to the

professional community and other users. The database provides access to print and online resources organised according to various categories: literature, tools, guidelines, trainings, examples and projects. This collection is work in progress, and the group actively invites contributions from external experts.

#### IV. GUIDANCE

A first attempt to provide cultural institutions with guidance on the design and implementation of digital exhibitions is represented by the checklist *Things to consider before creating a digital exhibition*. A draft version of the checklist is already online, and comments by the professional community and the users are invited and welcome. The checklist is structured as a list of questions guiding the planning and realisation of digital exhibitions. Not all questions and statements necessarily apply to each and any project, but they all raise relevant issues and provide explanatory statements helping potential users to get an orientation about the topic.

in order to attract potentially interested public. Lists, catalogues or inventories exist at local, national and international level, but the descriptions are mostly provided free-text or using non-structured formats. The group was aware of the crucial role of a well-defined structured description in order to facilitate the discoverability of digital exhibitions, support the identification by the interested target public, improve the current descriptive practice through standardization, facilitate data sharing and exchange of information and have the descriptions of digital exhibitions included in local, regional, national, European portals for public access, alongside with any other type of digital cultural content.

For this reason, the working group embarked in the identification and development of a metadata set for digital exhibitions based on available standards for the collection description (given that the digital exhibition is a specific type of grouping of objects). Aiming at the widest possible diffusion across the same cultural institutions that develop and publish digital exhibitions, the structure of the metadata set was kept quite simple. The selected elements are for the most part already widely used in the descriptive practice (e.g. cataloguing) of cultural organisations. The metadata set currently includes seven sections (identification, description, subject, responsibility, access, rights, relations) and 30 elements, that are individually described, including hints for the practical use.

The metadata set was tested by the working group members through the description of real digital exhibitions. A first draft is going to be publicly released soon.

Based on the requirements identified for the description, an internal database was developed for the description of digital exhibitions examined by the working group members. Once considered mature, the database will as well be made available to the public.

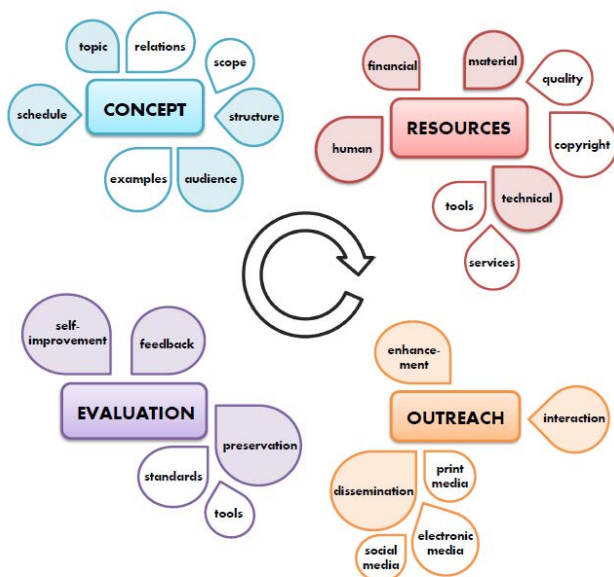
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#### REFERENCES

- [1] Linked heritage: coordination of standards and technologies for the Enrichment of Europeana, <http://www.linkedheritage.org>.
- [2] Athenaplus: access to cultural heritage networks for Europeana <http://www.athenaplus.eu/>. Athenaplus further develops the network and activities established by the previous project Athena: Access to cultural heritage networks across Europe, <http://www.athenaeurope.org>.

### Things to consider before creating a DIGITAL EXHIBITION



www.digitalexhibitions.org  
by an international working  
group in cooperation with  
ATHENA PLUS  
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Fig. 1 A visual rendering of the current draft version of the Checklist

#### V. METADATA FOR THE DESCRIPTION OF DIGITAL EXHIBITIONS

The working group was aware that exhibitions, both physical and digital, are usually described by cultural institutions, for information and communication purposes and