

Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Heritage in Practice: exploring approaches to operationalising values, law, and responsible openness

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Abstract

This panel explores the intersection of Artificial Intelligence and cultural heritage, drawing on interdisciplinary insights from legal experts, digital humanists, and cultural professionals. Framed around values-based practice, legal compliance, and responsible openness, it addresses urgent questions around AI policy, regulatory uncertainty, ethical data reuse, and sector-specific strategies. Grounded in current research and practice, the session seeks to foster critical, cross-sector dialogue and inform responsible AI adoption in the cultural heritage field.

CCS Concepts

• Computing methodologies → Artificial intelligence; •Social and professional topics → Computing / technology policy

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) holds immense promise for the cultural heritage sector, yet its rapid development has outpaced the sector's ability to respond with care and responsibility. Pressures to adopt AI swiftly risk overlooking existing commitments to ethical practice, legal compliance, and values-based decision-making. Amid unclear legislation—particularly around copyright—and limited sector-specific guidance and skills, heritage organisations face mounting challenges. This panel explores how cultural institutions and professionals can act not just as adopters, but as leaders in shaping responsible, values-driven approaches to AI.

This panel aims to bring together cultural heritage professionals, Digital Humanities researchers, legal experts and policy stakeholders to discuss the current developments around the Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Heritage sector. It stems from the speakers' AHRC funded Bridging Responsible AI Divides (BRAID) Fellowship projects, all of which explore the challenges and opportunities presented by AI in the cultural heritage sector.

Bridging Responsible AI Divides (BRAID) is a six-year UK-wide programme dedicated to integrating Arts and Humanities research more fully into the Responsible AI ecosystem, as well as bridging the divides between academic, industry, policy and regulatory work on responsible AI. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and part of the BRAID programme, the BRAID Fellowships are awarded to researchers from universities across the UK, working in partnership with industry, public organisations, and the third sector. Fellows apply expertise from the humanities and

arts—such as data ethics, copyright law, digital design, and qualitative analysis—to tackle a range of challenges related to the responsible use of AI.

The panel will be chaired and moderated by **Anna Foka**, Professor of Digital Cultural Heritage at Uppsala University, who will also offer framing commentary on the gap between AI policies and on-the-ground practice in the cultural heritage sector. The session is structured around three interrelated themes—**values-based practice, legal compliance, and responsible openness**—each explored by a dedicated speaker. Following the presentations, the session will conclude with an open discussion and ample time for audience engagement, allowing for deeper reflection and exchange on these pressing topics.

2. Cultural Heritage in Practice

2.1. Values based practice

Dr Oonagh Murphy, BRAID Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Digital Culture and Society at Goldsmiths, University of London, with a background in helping cultural organisations develop strategic, data-driven approaches and strategies, will speak on values-based practice in digital cultural innovation.

Heritage organisations are at the service of society, they operate in a complex, non profit context, with both political and financial drivers shaping their approach to digital transformation. It is this complex operating environment that serves as a unique space to explore what values based practice might look like in terms of digital adoption, and delivery. Digital strategy for heritage organisations must be built on two founding principles 1. Regulatory Compliance 2. Values Alignment. Artificial intelligence technologies have created new challenges for

heritage organisations, but by recognising their domain expertise, and aligning their practice to legal compliance, and organisational values they can also serve as an important beacon for responsible AI adoption. Digital transformation that is driven by purpose, not profit.

The role of heritage leaders has always been to be critical and curious, and these skills are more important today than ever. Technology and its application must change and respond to society in the way the culture we manage does, but for technology to be responsive heritage leaders need to be critical and creative adopters rather than passive enablers. What is the motivation for using this technology? What impact will it have? How can we refine our adoption of this technology? These are the questions that leaders need to ask themselves and their colleagues as a matter of routine. By asking these questions we create a culture of critical technology discourse that benefits visitor experience, sales, collections and artists.

2.2. Legal compliance

Dr Paula Westenerger, BRAID Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in IP Law at Brunel University, will explore the legal complexities of AI, focusing on unclear licensing and regulatory compliance challenges for cultural heritage institutions, drawing on human and cultural rights to support responsible, rights-respecting AI in cultural heritage.

What does legal compliance for heritage organisations adopting AI look like? This is an area of much uncertainty, as legislations are currently unclear and in flux, and discussions are being held on whether current laws are fit for purpose. A particular area of uncertainty is the field of copyright law. Should heritage organisations opt-out from AI uses by commercial third-parties? Is AI-based heritage research and management possible on the basis of current legislation? What is the influence of copyright law in AI bias? What are the key legal considerations in developing AI policies for the heritage sector? How has the sector been responding to current copyright and AI consultations? These are all topics that will be addressed in this panel, together with a discussion on the need to expand the role and influence of heritage organisations in legal policy making. We will link up the discussion on legal compliance with values based practice, in that good and sustainable legislation and policies are those that are aligned with the motivations and desired impacts for the adoption of technologies. As such, heritage leaders have an important role in also steering the legal debates towards these critical questions, so that AI regulation can be fit for heritage purposes (not only for profit making). It will be argued that the human rights discipline, and in particular cultural rights, offer important mechanisms for the recalibration of legislations such as copyright, helping achieve the appropriate balance between the values at stake i.e. protecting core interests of creators and communities, while addressing bias and decolonial concerns, and promoting openness and access to culture.

2.3. Responsible Openness

Dr Anna-Maria Sichani, BRAID Fellow and Research Associate in Digital Humanities at the University of London, will examine the complex ecosystem of systems, actors and frameworks that (re)shape openness in the context of AI adoption in cultural heritage, advocating for a responsible and ethical approach to open practices.

Over the past decade, the digital cultural heritage sector has embraced Open Access as a cornerstone, reshaping how cultural data is created, shared, and reused. From OpenGLAM to Collections-as-data, and from open licensing to APIs and FAIR/CARE principles, a range of technical solutions, legal frameworks, operational procedures, and community-driven mechanisms have been developed to support the creation and sharing of open digital cultural heritage and research data for advanced computational use, as well as applications in the creative and commercial sectors. Central to this openness is a commitment to legal and ethical reuse, supported by licensing frameworks, rights statements, interoperability documentation, and technical standards. These mechanisms help ensure that cultural heritage collections and research outputs remain accessible and reusable, while also protecting the rights and interests of creators, custodians, and users—fostering innovation and collaboration across the sector. As AI becomes more embedded in cultural heritage practices, open datasets—multilingual, diverse, and well-curated—have become valuable training resources. Yet, their use in opaque AI systems, especially for commercial purposes, raises serious operational and ethical concerns for cultural heritage institutions and the wider Open movement.

Responsible openness in the context of AI adoption highlights the growing role of open cultural data in the age of AI and the responsibilities associated with it. Openness should be understood not only as technological transparency or unrestricted access, but as a socially accountable practice that acknowledges and addresses power asymmetries, historical inequities, and ethical challenges in digital cultural work and research. How can cultural heritage institutions incorporate care, transparency, and trust into AI-driven projects? How can they address issues such as algorithmic bias and metadata ethics through responsible documentation and publication strategies? How should the community prioritize people-centered, cross-sector skill-building to ensure inclusive and responsible practices?

3. References

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