

European academic heritage online. An exploratory look at the current state of digital academic and cultural heritage

Short description:

Academic heritage is preserved, cared for, studied, used for teaching and displayed mainly within local university museums, collections and related institutions. At the same time, all of this heritage is part of the global history – or histories – of knowledge production and transfer. The web is a place where we not only are able to draw attention to academic heritage, it also can help us to connect and relate objects and collections in order to gain a sense of their broader significance.

There are already many university collections and museums online, and we have a number of online portals which aggregate data on the national, discipline or object genre level. Should we, as a network, do more? Should we connect portals and databases at an European level? Or build something entirely new? Which infrastructures should we build or use for such an undertaking?

To support this discussion, this presentation will have a close look at various online examples from the domains of academic and cultural heritage. What kind of information and user experience do they facilitate? What kind of standards and data workflows do they require? How are they organized, and who is responsible for them? Are they sustainable? Subsequently, the talk will try to develop and evaluate options for a possible future project.

About Martin Stricker:

Since 2003 development of online databases and portals for university collections at Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik (Humboldt-University of Berlin). Since 2012 research associate at the Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany, responsible for digitisation of academic collections. Master of Arts (Magister Artium) of Humboldt-University in cultural and social anthropology.

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<p>European academic heritage online An exploratory look at the current state of digital academic and cultural heritage</p> <p>Martin Stricker Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany</p>	<p>We are meeting today to discuss about working together on a European level. Delphine and Esther suggested to discuss various issues about building a portal and asked specifically (I quote): „ working together in presenting our collections on a European level: what are the possibilities?“</p> <p>My talk is about these possibilities.</p> <p>For this, I thought it would be a good idea to look at existing online resources and projects in the domain of cultural heritage and academic heritage.</p> <p>What type of user experience do they enable? Do they, or parts of them, represent models for a possible project for European academic heritage online?</p> <p>I will look at these online resources like a project developer who builds an app or a website and „checks out the competition“: what works, which patterns and elements are worth reusing and worth further improvement?</p>

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<p>Types of online resources and projects</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. aggregators 2. scoped portals 3. topical presentations 4. higher-level portals (collection description) 5. incubator and support projects 	<p>As time is limited, I have tried to classify the many resources we can find online and concentrate on one typical or significant instance of each type.</p> <p>There are 5 of these types, both from the domains of cultural heritage and academic heritage (the latter, of course, is a part of the former). By describing the examples, I am trying to highlight the characteristics of each type, its advantages and possible problems.</p> <p>I certainly don't want to introduce a principal type vocabulary.</p> <p>Also, real world examples usually do realize traits and properties from more than one type.</p> <p>And, of course, the presented instances have many more features and properties than I will have time to discuss here today.</p>

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<p>1: aggregators – Europeana</p> <p>[Screen europeana home]</p>	<p>My first type are „data aggregators“ and the example is something we all know well: Europeana.</p> <p>Europeana is not only <i>*an*</i> aggregator (of which there are others, like the German Digital Library, or the Digital Public Library of America).</p> <p>Europeana is <i>*the*</i> aggregator for us: academic heritage data belongs into Europeana (at least in the opinion of Europeana and many others), and it therefore presents a viable option to gather and connect European academic heritage data.</p> <p>Europeana also offers tools and services for re-use of its data for applications and online resources.</p>

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<p>1: aggregators – Europeana</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • search engine (like Google), but with differences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scope • more data • structured data • structured retrieval • active participation by data providers necessary 	<p>How can we best characterize the central feature of Europeana and similar cultural heritage aggregators?</p> <p>I think, historically and principally speaking, we can characterize Europeana at its core as a search engine, like Google or Yahoo Search.</p> <p>We go to Europeana to search for things, get a selection of results with some information, and a link to the online presence of the data provider. There, with some luck, we may access the full object information and a satisfactory digital representation.</p> <p>Europeana covers a narrower scope than a general search engine – cultural heritage objects – and much more data for an object than a common search engine. It also provides data in structured form, thus enabling Europeana to offer faceted search and browsing, and to connect and link objects with each other based on shared properties.</p> <p>On the backend, for practical and legal reasons, the data acquisition model of Europeana requires active and quite elaborate participation by data providers.</p>

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<p>Issues with aggregators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presentation • quality of search results (precision and relevance) • data extent • data quality • missing high quality digital representations 	<p>How successful is Europeana? How can it be evaluated?</p> <p>In my experience it depends on who you ask and how are expectations met.</p> <p>Presentation layout and style has been criticized as well as search results precision and relevance.</p> <p>Data providers are not always happy about the way „their“ data are presented.</p> <p>An I have heard from many users that they don't understand why they have to „click through“ to databases of participating institutions: they would like to get data and digital representations like images, video and sound directly from Europeana itself.</p> <p>In my opinion, a lot of these perceived issues are related to the rather peculiar situation Europeana is in: It should be an attractive and highly usable online tool, but at the same time it shouldn't replace the online resources of participating institutions.</p> <p>A problem facing everyone who aggregates data which are already available on the web.</p>

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<p>Europeana as gateway for academic heritage</p> <p>[Screen europeana hunterian]</p>	<p>Despite all these issues, I think Europeana is a valuable option as a gateway to European academic heritage objects and information</p> <p>In fact Europeana already references many objects from quite a number of academic heritage collections.</p> <p>There are advantages to this solution: The infrastructure is already available and running, ingest paths have been laid, standards developed, funding can be probably more easily acquired, support is available, and Europeana seems to be in active development.</p> <p>But nonetheless, I think there are some areas where further discussion with Europeana and within the network is needed.</p> <p>Among them are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the question of multilinguality, • metadata standards and joint used vocabularies for academic heritage objects in Europeana, • quality standards for metadata and digital representations in respect to local online databases <p>We also probably would have to accept that within Europeana there is no special branding or perception of academic heritage as a special type of cultural heritage – all objects are part of the huge collection of European cultural heritage.</p>

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<p>Europeana data services (API)</p> <p>[Screen europeana api]</p>	<p>There are additional ways of using Europeana. Via so called application programming interfaces, or APIs, it is possible to retrieve data in structured and machine readable form.</p> <p>This enables the re-use of Europeana data for specific presentations and online applications, either standalone or addition to data from other sources.</p> <p>Of course, you get the same data which is available on Europeanas website – data extent and quality is the same.</p>
<p>2: scoped portals</p> <p>[Screen mimo search]</p>	<p>I don't think there is a common accepted description of the distinct properties of a „portal“. For the purpose of this talk, a portal represents an online resource, which makes available a collection of data in a self-contained presentation – you may click through to the online database of a data provider, but it is not necessary.</p> <p>Portals usually have a discrete scope. They present for example data about a specific domain in a certain region, like the Dutch academic collections portal, or a specific object type, like MIMO - musical instrument museums online (seen here on screen).</p>
<p>2: scoped portals</p> <p>[Screen mimo facet maker]</p> <p>[Screen mimo facet type]</p>	<p>The narrower scope of portals enables the development of much more precise and targeted data models.</p> <p>This can be used for optimized categories for faceted search. MIMO for example offers browsing by instrument maker and type of instrument.</p>

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<p>2: scoped portals</p> <p>[Screen mimo details]</p>	<p>Scoped portals can also harness their knowledge about their „object type“ to generate much more adequate and informing data representations. With the additional presentation of images in better resolution (or even high or best available resolution), I think we see a significantly improved user experience.</p> <p>Of course, the better the portal, the less users are likely to click through to the data providing museums database.</p>
<p>3: topical presentations</p> <p>[Screen 1914-18 home]</p>	<p>In the last years, an increasing number of refined heritage presentations have hit the web, which don't present collections and can't be described as databases, but they concentrate on a specific topic and inform about or discuss this topic from multiple perspectives and in various forms.</p> <p>For example, I think the „Stories“ of the Dutch national academic collections portal are instances of topical presentation. Here, we see the International Encyclopedia of the First World War.</p>
<p>3: topical presentations</p> <p>[Screen 1914-18 themes]</p>	<p>The Encyclopedia has a variety of content formats – longer articles, encyclopedic entries and images – and we can access the contents via themes and other kind of entry points, for example ...</p>
<p>3: topical presentations</p> <p>[Screen 1914-18 maps]</p>	<p>... maps, and a ...</p>
<p>3: topical presentations</p> <p>[Screen 1914-18 timeline]</p>	<p>... a timeline.</p>

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<p>3: topical presentations</p> <p>[Screen 1914-18 themes]</p>	<p>I suggest that a topical presentation could be a good alternative to a pure database of objects. One could show European academic heritage from a broader perspective, tell its history or histories of knowledge production and reproduction, include portraits and biographies of important collectors and academics, reference the different regional developments and relationships.</p> <p>It would also be possible to link to the various national, regional and local online resources and integrate exemplary objects.</p>
<p>4: higher-level portals (collection description)</p> <p>[Screen isus botanical gardens]</p>	<p>Another way to tackle the task of representing academic heritage without having to aggregate millions of objects is to climb one level higher and document not the objects themselves, but collections and museums.</p> <p>We have been using collections description in Germany quite successfully in recent years. It is much more effective to get an comprehensive overview of academic heritage, and it has the added advantage that you can also document collections and museums which aren't available any more.</p> <p>As the number of database entries is manageable, you can concentrate on an enhanced data model, and you may document and link collectors, scholars, instrument makers etc. as well as documents about universities and other relevant entities.</p> <p>Also, the option to add object records remains.</p>

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<p>5: incubator and support projects</p> <p>[Screen athena plus home]</p>	<p>My last example isn't an online resource at all – it is AthenaPlus, a best practice network, a project to support and facilitate increased and higher quality contributions to Europeana and to improve Europeana itself.</p> <p>There are a number of similar support projects and infrastructures in the domain of cultural heritage. One of them is the Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany (of which I am a team member).</p> <p>In the area of digitisation, our primary goal at the coordination centre is to develop local digital projects, enabling university collections and museums to digitise, index, publish, share and network their objects on the web.</p> <p>We consult, connect to partners, host workshops, work on standards and their adaptation and represent the interests of university collections in cultural heritage institutions like the German Digital Library.</p> <p>As local digitisation projects and locally managed online projects are the key to further dissemination and sharing, I think it would be a worthwhile option to concentrate on activities for the improvement of local and decentral digital development in our network.</p>
<p>[Screen dont-reinvent-the-wheel]</p>	<p>That's all, thank you very much!</p>