Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Insufficient Understanding of User Benefits Impedes Open Data Initiatives at Museums

Booth, P., Navarrete, T., & Ogundipe, A. (2022). Museum open data ecosystems: A comparative study. Journal of Documentation 78(4), 761-779. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-05-2021-0102

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Article abstract

Objective – Using Nardi and O'Day's (1999) definition of ecosystem as "a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment," to understand how art museums form their policy to interact with and respond to the various open data (OD) ecosystems in which they operate.

Design – Multiple case study consisting of interviews and subsequent qualitative analysis, as well as document analysis.

Setting – European art museum OD ecosystems.

Subjects – Subjects included 7 management staff members at 3 separate mid-size, art-based museums located in Norway, the Netherlands, and Spain; an unspecified number of representatives from a cultural-policy agency in each of those countries; an unspecified number of government, museum, and research documents from within each museum's OD ecosystem.

Methods – The researchers identified 3 museums with OD initiatives and conducted in-depth interviews with relevant staff members at each institution. The researchers also interviewed representatives from relevant national OD policy-related agencies. The researchers coded their data and developed a list of five key OD "ecosystem components," which they used to analyze the 3 specific museum ecosystems under consideration.

Main Results – Open data initiatives at cultural heritage institutions are subject to a number of internal and external pressures. Museums are typically responsive to their environments, and top-down policy requirements appear to be an effective means of advancing open data initiatives. Nevertheless, the value proposition of open data appears to be insufficiently understood by museum staff and other stakeholders. As a result, museums participate in OD initiatives even when the benefit remains undemonstrated and the use of OD—how and by whom—remains unclear.

Conclusion – The needs and wants of OD end-users remain ill-defined and poorly understood. As a result, museums expend resources and effort to supply OD, while remaining uncertain about the return on their investment. Attention to users could result in "more robust information flows between ecosystem components."

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Evidence Summary

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Abstract

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Commentary

"If you build it, they will come." It is easy to invoke this inspirational slogan to supply an impetus for an open data project before a real use case has been established. But is it true? Despite widespread adoption of OD practices and policies, it appears that without a proper understanding of the end-user's role in the OD ecosystem, the benefits of OD are often more theoretical than actual, more pie-in-the-sky than a real return on investment. The experiences—and the challenges—documented in this study will likely sound familiar to anyone who has invested significant time and energy in an open data project at a cultural heritage institution. In this paper, the researchers bring into focus a common problem for museums and libraries.

Assessed with Perryman and Rathbun-Grubb's "The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool" (2014), this research meets a strong standard of validity. Recognizing that their work is among the first to study museum OD ecosystems qualitatively, the researchers clearly state a number of limits to their paper. In particular, they note concerns about the case study method's adequacy vis-à-vis the complex ecosystem paradigm, the lack of methodological rigour in ecosystems analysis, and a certain arbitrariness in the definition of ecosystem. With these cautions in mind, and still perceiving the academic value of inquiry into OD ecosystems, the researchers rightly frame the study as exploratory and suitable for the development of theoretical propositions, if not hard and quantified conclusions. The researchers also include a word of caution about the generalizability of the study, given that it only considers three cases sharing the same general characteristics.

Nevertheless, the exploratory nature of the study should not dissuade readers from taking its findings seriously. The extensive literature review demonstrates how the work builds on established concepts, and the researchers' discussion ties their analysis back into and confirms findings from other research. For instance, though the case studies focus on medium-sized institutions, by relating the present study to previous research, the authors make informed judgments about OD activity at smaller and larger institutions, and therefore gesture toward a fuller conception of OD initiatives at museums, whatever the size. This study probes the world of museum OD ecosystems, and future researchers will find herein a useful model for further study of this area.

The emphatic takeaway from this study, however, is a point the researchers are at pains to repeat throughout: museums lack a clear knowledge of user OD needs. The directness of this statement is an open invitation to further research. It is also an invitation to professionals at cultural heritage institutions to revise and rethink their OD practices. If museums sense their data has tremendous

potential, yet remain underwhelmed with its use once it is made open (i.e., their return on investment), they should actively pursue an understanding of the data's ultimate users and demonstrate the successful reuse of their data. If museums do not take this step, they will not see the maturation of OD ecosystems, and their projects will fail to justify further investment.

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