Review of the Digital Preservation Coalition

Though the Digital Preservation Coalition was established in December 2001, its origins actually occurred over a span of two years. In January 2001, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the British Library hosted the first summit on digital preservation in the United Kingdom. Participants included individual archivists and preservationists as well as members of various collecting institutions. They recognized that digital historical information was vanishing at an alarming rate while a formalized method of dealing with this loss had not been established. It was agreed upon that a coalition was necessary not only to coordinate such a large technical issue but also to make the issue understandable to hesitant funders and institutional directors. The Digital Preservation Coalition was officially launched at the House of Commons in February 2002 and has been influential in the field ever since.

One unique factor of the Coalition is that it includes a wide range of collections and communities. For example, full members include several university libraries, national archives, public record offices, museums, and computer centers. Associate members are even more diverse; included are broadcasting companies and data services. Such a large number of prominent communities, with such disparate collections, could be a potential problem. This is tempered, however, by the Coalition's four-level operational approach. Two of these levels are Coalition-wide. Specifically, there are a core set of Coalition activities funded by all sponsoring bodies, and there are plans to implement a national infrastructure of services and training for digital preservation. However, two of the levels do not require all bodies to participate. These levels include activities undertaken by certain institutions as well as collaborative projects whose funding comes from a variety of sources. This split between Coalition-wide and exclusive projects allows a diverse community to come together when necessary, but this split also allows for participants to seek solutions that may not always affect all members. The split creates a balance of resources and a unified voice. It does not, however, drown out the less-overwhelming needs of particular members, which is often a problem with large-scale preservation projects.

The Coalition sets out its projects in stages of three years. Strategic plans are agreed upon and publically available on its website. There are also long-term plans for future projects, but these are only available to the member institutions. At this point in time, the Coalition is working under Strategic Plan for 2012 – 2015.

It should be noted that the Digital Preservation Coalition does not, in and of itself, preserve data. It makes no distinctions on whether its member institutions include digitized, born-digital, or mixed materials. Instead, it primarily functions by raising awareness of the multitude of technical and strategic issues that often impede digital preservation through advocacy and reports. As such, their basic handbooks and training do not advocate specific technical requirements such as file formats, selection criteria, metadata, etc. This is left up to the member institutions. Instead, its plan creates a set of guidelines institutions should consider when deciding upon the technical requirements of their own

digital preservation strategies. It is particularly aimed at those institutions that may have no knowledge of digital preservation and require beginner-level introductions into the topic. The Coalition also periodically issues reports that survey current practices so that organizations may see what are the commonly used methods and compare between them. In this way, the Coalition functions more as a central information point rather than setting new standards or advocating specific methodologies.

One major sub-project that highlights the Coalition's strategies would be the influential publication "Mind the Gap," released in 2008. This project came about as a response to a lack of data on how the United Kingdom, on average, stood in regards to digital preservation. It was meant to communicate this status to those institutions that perhaps never considered digital preservation might be important; it was also designed to help those institutions recognize the advancements in preserving digital assets. The report demonstrated that while traditional collecting institutions were behind on digital preservation due to funding, methodologies had been established in less traditional repositories such as in the financial and pharmaceutical sectors. By balancing the needs of a tech-savvy audience with the bewilderment of a tech-phobic audience, "Mind the Gap" became an important advocacy tool that led to further discussions on standards and models for preservation. "Mind the Gap" is a typical publication of the Coalition and serves to highlight the particular scope of their projects and work.

From time to time, the Coalition will partner with outside digital preservation projects to further the joint goals of advocacy and research. Four projects are currently underway: Timeless Business (TIMBUS), Sustainable Preservation Using Community Engagement (SPRUCE), Alliance for Permanent Access to the Records of Science in Europe Network (APARSEN), and the Collaboration to Clarify the Costs of Curation (4C). These all exemplify the unique approach of the Digital Preservation Coalition to use public engagement to ensure continued access to digital assets rather than to create standards and methodologies of its own.

Co-funded by the European Commission, TIMBUS addresses the issue of digital preservation of business processes and how businesses preserve their associated software and hardware. By focusing on business strategies and costs, TIMBUS explains digital preservation in a way that is mindful of traditional business practices and communities, making this issue accessible to a community that does not associate with traditional collecting institutions.

Nearly the opposite of this first project is SPRUCE, funded by the JISC. It is a series of free events sponsored throughout the United Kingdom that focuses on community solutions to digital preservation. The target audiences are those institutions too small or lacking in resources to be reached by larger and more costly preservation projects. This more unconventional, social project teaches the community low-cost or open source methods of dealing with digital content in archival, library, and museum settings. It also aids such institutions in coming up with realistic business scenarios for preservation.

The last two projects focus, APARSEN and 4C, branch out to the rest of Europe. They both emphasize creating cost-effective digital preservation

solutions. By participating in these groups, the Digital Preservation Coalition can meet its project goal of framing digital preservation in the United Kingdom in a more international setting. It also allows for the sharing of knowledge with an even greater variety of like-minded institutions and partners. Creating a network of projects focused on similar goals increases the likelihood that different yet complimentary solutions can be discussed.

All of these projects, as per their own publications, demonstrate a consistent approach to digital preservation. There is a concerted effort to frame all projects, all preservation, within the realm of cost. It is a pragmatic approach, but it is possible that this might sacrifice the quality of preservation for cheaper solutions. However, it is unfortunately also quite necessary in today's economic climate. No countries, no institutions, want to invest their limited funds in projects that do not make sense to the funders. It is to the Coalition's credit that it has understood the need to argue from a financial perspective first and a preservation perspective second. This in no way demonstrates that the Coalition does not care about its assets. Instead, the Coalition has a secure understanding of how to reach those that may not care about long-term preservation but do care about cutting costs. The Coalition employs an effective and little used method of reaching a wider audience that should be considered by any institution with digital content attempting to convince the public why digital preservation is important.

While perhaps not the most technically detailed project, the Digital Preservation Coalition has been instrumental in aiding strapped institutions with their own projects. By giving a multitude of tools to a wide range of organizations, rather than focusing on a single type of data, the Coalition has attempted to maintain a far-reaching affect on digital preservation as a whole in the United Kingdom. It could be argued that the Coalition stretches itself thin, but the overwhelming amount of digital data at risk validates such a wide-reaching approach.

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