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Digital heritage infrastructures as cultural policy instruments: Europeana and the enactment of European citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Europeana is a digital infrastructure aggregating the most extensive collection of cultural heritage data in Europe. Launched in 2008, it has enjoyed the political and financial support of the European Union and its member states, becoming the most ambitious and financed digital cultural project to date. For this reason, Europeana is an outstanding example of how the European Commission has used digital heritage platforms to pursue its cultural agenda. Nevertheless, the social and cultural implications of this digital infrastructure are still understudied. Following Europeana's evolution, this article explores Europeana's role in transforming the cultural sector and defining a European digital cultural policy. Analysing how the goals of the EU cultural policy have been implemented in the development of Europeana, this article reveals how Europeana has been instrumental in steering the digitisation of the European cultural sector through the development of standards and best practices. Furthermore, through digital heritage curation, Europeana plays a critical role in producing the narrative of a European past, promoting the construction of European citizenship.

Introduction: digital infrastructures as governance devices

Europeana is the most ambitious digital cultural project financed by the European Commission (EC). Launched in 2008, it was the response to the call by six heads of state to create a unified European online collection 'to preserve and share Europe's cultural and linguistic identities and give them a more prominent place on the Internet' (Chirac et al. 2005). Since then, the *europeana.eu* platform has become the largest aggregator of cultural heritage data in Europe, counting over 60 million digital objects provided by over 4,000 cultural heritage institutions, including libraries, archives, museums, and audio-visual collections (Europeana 2021). But Europeana's tasks include the support of European cultural heritage institutions' digital transformation (EC 2010a). Between 2006 and 2020, the EC invested about €62 million to develop and run the service.[1]

Europeana is an outstanding example of how EC has used the digital medium to pursue its cultural agenda. Since the 1970s, the Commissioners have realised that the European project would not become an entangled union through economic and technocratic policies alone (Haas 2004). It was necessary to stimulate the emotional participation of people, gaining their active support for the common cause. Therefore, several initiatives were implemented to build European citizenship, with the dual intent to make Europe's presence visible in citizens' lives and bring to light the common

values shared by all the member states (Shore 2000). The definition of cultural and identity politics became instrumental in the success of the European political project.

With these initiatives, the EC consciously began to engineer the European identity of its citizens. Next to the introduction of symbolic elements such as the anthem and the flag, or tangible assets like the common currency and the format of passports (Fontaine 1994; Bee 2008), EC promoted the narration of European identity as a collective identity (Swedberg 1994; Bruter 2005; Eder 2009). In this design, culture became instrumental in *imagining* a European community, following a strategy similar to how nation-states in the nineteenth century tried to encode the nation in their inhabitants' hearts and minds (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2010). Anderson's concept works particularly well to describe the process of cultural *Europeanisation* advocated by European institutions. It refers to a community in which members are bound by the very idea – or image – of the community they share. Gellner (1990) noted that in modern societies, citizens' political loyalty is attracted by the culture they feel they belong. Therefore, the EU encouraged subjects to *imagine* Europe as a place of shared traditions and heritage.

Previous studies have extensively investigated the dynamics and the impact of EC cultural policies and their effects on cultural heritage institutions (e.g. Henrichs 2007; Macdonald 2013; Lähdesmäki et al. 2020). However, the cultural implications of EC's digital agenda have largely remained unexplored. Over the past two decades, the EU has encouraged the digitisation of almost every aspect of the cultural sector in the member states through copious financing. This process brought about a transformation in the governance and access to cultural heritage (Thylstrup 2018). In charge of preserving local and national heritage, cultural institutions became instrumental in this process. Due to the significant investments of time and money necessary to digitise, order, and curate vast digital collections, institutions have played a central role in mediating the cultural sector's digital turn (Flinn 2012). By overseeing *what* to digitise and *how* to present it (Cameron and Robinson 2007), they are the gatekeepers of heritage digitisation and how people discover their past.

As a digital cultural project, Europeana is more than a data aggregator, serving the EC agenda in promoting the digitisation of the cultural sector. To coordinate the work of cultural heritage institutions and member states, a complex infrastructure was created (EF 2020d). Named Europeana Initiative, it comprises digital components – the platform and the actions to implement and maintain it – and the institutional infrastructure to operate it. The Europeana Foundation (EF) occupies a central management role, running the digital infrastructure and coordinating the work of the Europeana Network Association (ENA) and the Europeana Aggregators' Forum (EAF). These organisations gather practitioners (ENA) and institutions (EAF), bridging Europeana with the cultural sector. Therefore, Europeana combines political, cultural, economic, and technological forces.

Europeana is a critical node in the digital ecology structuring the European heritage sector. By aggregating data from cultural heritage institutions and imposing standards and best practices, Europeana represents an overarching European actor with the capacity to influence the development of the cultural sector digitisation. Therefore, this article explores Europeana's role in defining and implementing a European digital cultural policy. Through data governance, Europeana attempts to enact a European historical consciousness. Describing the history and the work of Europeana, this paper showcases the role of the digital infrastructure in constructing the European identity of cultural heritage institutions and citizens.

In the digital era, when our lives are interconnected with our online experiences, the politics of digital infrastructures like Europeana substantially affect our social reality. The cultural assumptions imbued in digital heritage reflect and influence how we define our identity (Capurro and Plets 2020). The decisions taken during *collecting*, *ordering*, and *curating* digital heritage are strictly interconnected (Bennett et al. 2017): how data is collected and ordered impacts how content is curated (Bowker and Star 2000). These decisions influence how the past is represented and, consequently, how the discourse about the past is formed. Therefore, the politics of digital heritage can be interpreted as an instrument of governmentality (Foucault et al. 1991). From this perspective, Europeana infrastructure is conceptualised as a form of institutional power designed to 'conduct'

the population towards creating a shared sense of European belonging. As Bowker et al. (2010) acknowledged, we can think about infrastructures 'not only in terms of human versus technological components but in terms of a set of interrelated social, organisational, and technical components or systems', therefore this work analyses Europeana within its social and organisational dimensions.

Methodology

Even if Europeana is the most extensive and significant digital cultural initiative and driver of digitisation in Europe, its impact remains understudied. During the first ten years of its life, Europeana has been the object of many publications addressing its technical features or projects developed around the collection (Petras and Stiller 2017). Only some exceptions analysed it from a societal or institutional perspective. In her work on mass digitisation, Thylstrup's (2018) conceptualises Europeana as a digital heritage aggregator that aligns heritage to neoliberal values by advocating for content harmonisation and interoperability. Investigating digital cultural policy, Valtysson (2012) focuses on *europeana.eu* concluding that it fails to be a place of co-creation. His work relies on the assumption that 'when archives are digitised, they "meet" users on different interfaces [...] designed to prioritise certain aspects and certain materials' of the digitised archive (Valtysson 2020). From a different perspective, Almási's (2014) analyses the idea of Europe inferred from browsing *europeana.eu*. He reckons that Europeana embodies the EU motto 'Unity in Diversity' by being a unique entry point that manages collections preserved on the various institutions' websites and promotes them through multiple social media platforms. Finally, Stainforth (2016) analyses Europeana as a digital repository of European cultural memory, emphasising its role in promoting a redefinition of GLAMs as *memory institutions*.

Despite their critical approach, these works limit their analysis to a single element of Europeana's activity. They fail to approach it holistically, understanding the cultural and social implications of all of the Europeana Initiative's components. Furthermore, they do not comprehensively analyse how Europeana impacts the European cultural ecosystem. To understand the role of the digital cultural policy operationalised by Europeana, this article considers the complex nature of the initiative. As an assemblage of several heterogeneous elements, the cultural implications of its digital infrastructure and its political role are analysed as the two inseparable dimensions Europeana operates on.

This complexity requires the use of an ad-hoc methodology which combines discourse analysis and ethnography. Each method offers a vantage point on a specific aspect of the issue at stake. Combined, they provide a holistic understanding of Europeana's activity, benefitting from the complementarity of their derived information.

The data used in this study include European policy documents on culture and digitality, recommendations and reports,[2] deliverables and websites of projects financed through EU actions,[3] the internal documentation produced by Europeana,[4] and the testimonies of Europeana employees and representatives of cultural heritage institutions.[5] The analysis of the discourse, conceived as the way social and political agendas are reproduced through text and talks, is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis proposed by Fairclough (1995, 2014). It allows us to understand the social phenomena that discourse describes or, in the case of policy documents, the reality it aims at creating.

An institutional ethnography was carried out by working in the offices of the Europeana Foundation in The Hague between May and August 2019 and participating in several meetings and events organised by Europeana between 2017 and 2020. During this period, several people involved in the different activities of Europeana were interviewed, offering insight into their work and motivations.[6] This participatory observation revealed the everyday practices of the organisation, studying how the European policy discourse takes shape through them.

This contribution aims to bring digitality and digital cultural platforms into the discussion of EU cultural politics. By closely analysing their structure and modus operandi, it illustrates how Europeana impacts its partner cultural heritage institutions. The rest of the article is organised as

follows. Section two contextualises how policymakers have shaped the European digital cultural policy. Section three traces the implementation of the digital cultural policy into creating a unified digital collection of European heritage. Section four analyses the Europeana infrastructure and how its action is contemporarily formed by and informed EU policy. Section five analyses how Europeana's digital content curation is instrumental in creating European narratives. Finally, section six offers a critical reflection on the role of Europeana infrastructure in EU cultural policy.

The digitisation of the cultural sector: the evolution of EU policies

In 2014, EC recognised Europeana as a strategic Digital Service Infrastructure (DSI) to develop the EU digital agenda. This action marked the practical alignment between the Commission's cultural and digital policies while sanctioning the central role attributed to Europeana in digitising the European cultural sector. The coincidence of cultural policy's goals with those of more economy-oriented ones did not represent a novelty since the EC has used culture to reinforce a sentiment of collective belonging, consolidating the social consensus towards the EU's political and economic project (Shore 2007). As such, Tretter (2011) argues that the development of European cultural policy can be compared with other industrial policies designed to boost European competitiveness in the global market. This approach is instrumental in understanding digitisation's integration into the Commission's cultural aims.

The concepts of culture and cultural heritage emerging from EU policy documents have been widely debated among scholars. Epitomised by the motto *Unity in Diversity*, the European idea of culture acknowledges and respects the variety of national and local expressions while emphasising a common background based on the acceptance of a set of founding values promoted as European: respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law (Macdonald 1997; Gowland, Dunphy, and Lythe 2005). Shore (2000) reveals how the Commission perceives European culture as more than a mosaic of each national cultural background: any local or national manifestation of culture represents a declination of a more comprehensive European history and identity. This *Europeanisation* process is a strategy of self-representation and a device of power wielded by the European institutions (Borneman and Fowler 1997). In creating a European cultural identity, Europe becomes itself a symbol (Swedberg 1994) in which the ambiguity among local, national, and European levels reinforces the possibility for citizens to identify with it (Sassatelli 2002).

Cultural heritage was used in the cultural policy discourse to create a sense of community and belonging among European citizens (Lähdesmäki 2014). Nevertheless, the concept of *common European heritage* is ambiguously defined, leaving room for multiple and ad-hoc interpretations (Craith 2012). In this sense, Europe actively creates its heritage by constructing a historical narrative that materialises its founding principles in selected heritage sites (Lähdesmäki 2016, 2018). At the same time, European heritage is also constructed through the appropriation and transnational reinterpretation of national cultural icons. Objects become 'an integral part of a common cultural heritage and [. . .] regarded as common property by the citizens of Europe' (Borchardt 1995, 73). To this end, the cultural heritage initiatives promoted by the EC (e.g. the European Heritage Days, the European Heritage Label, the House of European History and the Museum of Europe) have been interpreted as implicit instruments of European cultural policy, aiming to actively produce a narrative of *Europeanness* (Cadot 2010; Lähdesmäki 2014; Mork 2016; De Cesari 2017; Jaeger 2020; Lähdesmäki et al. 2020).

If culture gradually became a central preoccupation for the EC, digitality attracted as much attention. In this paper, digitality is conceived as digital technologies and their 'suffusion' within society, which has provoked a radical transformation of policy and social structures (Hassan and Sutherland 2017, 125–43; Hassan 2020). During the 1990s, Europe faced the challenge of governing the exponential growth of digital technologies by designing and implementing a European *information society* (EC 1994). Data gained a central economic, political, and cultural

role. Working towards a common regulatory framework became instrumental in enabling internal interoperability among the member states while influencing the global market. The critical areas of intervention were: the protection of intellectual property rights, privacy and security of information (EU Publications Office 1995, 17). Policymakers increasingly focused on the social issues connected with the implementation of the information society, well aware that not only the success of digital policies but of Europe itself depended on citizens' support (Kofler 1998). By designing policies, standards and business models enabling the interoperability of services and applications, the EU aimed at increasing the connectivity between 'people, data, and diverse systems' (Tsilas 2011).

The EC clearly saw the cultural implications of digital policy. The Action Plan approved in 1994 stated that

> the information society provides the opportunity to facilitate the dissemination of European cultural values and the valorisation of a common heritage. Cultural goods [...] cannot be treated like other products: they are the privileged mediums of identity, pluralism and integration (EC 1994, 14).

The Commission was aware that new technologies would play a central role in European cultural policy, facilitating the process of Europeanisation. As much as cultural heritage, digital culture was understood as a prominent cultural statecraft instrument.

In 2000, the EC promoted a ten-year development plan for Europe called the Lisbon Strategy that aimed at making Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (EC 2000). An integral part of the strategy was the eEurope Action Plan promoting the development and use of the internet and internet-related technologies and improving the digital skills of European citizens (Liikanen 2001). In this framework, the EC actively encouraged the digitisation of cultural heritage, stimulating member states to promote and support digitisation initiatives.

EC political endorsement facilitated the discussion on methodologies and knowledge exchange among member states. A study published by the EC's Directorate-General for the Information Society individuated 'cooperation and coordination' as crucial elements for heritage institutions to operate in 'a networked environment' and remain relevant in the information society where they were increasingly expected to become interoperable with users and partners (Geser and Mulrenin 2002, 36). In the report, *interoperability* is not conceived as a purely technology-related issue. It represents an ontological necessity for institutions, connected with their duty to provide content both on their premises and online. To secure their relevance, the member states had to support cultural institutions' digitisation to achieve transnational and cross-domain interoperability. The consequences on their identity and mission were significant (Vial 2019). They were urged to adopt new standards for the documentation and the conservation of their collections, adapting their work to the requirements of a digital environment. Such a transformation impacted the internal organisation of cultural institutions and their ability to reach their audiences.

In 2010, with the inauguration of the Europe 2020 Strategy – the successor of the Lisbon Strategy – the Commission promoted the Digital Agenda for Europe, which aimed to maximise the social and economic potential of ICT, supporting the member states in further implementing shared norms to equalise access to services and content (Mansell 2014). The plan identified digital heritage as a critical element in addressing societal challenges in the digital era. The digital medium was described as an instrument to grant democratic access to culture, facilitating the pluralism of information and the diffusion of cultural and creative resources (EC 2010b, 30).

Over the last thirty years, EC has increasingly assumed a central position in shaping a *European digital cultural policy*, a term here used to describe the policy aimed at reaching cultural goals using digital means. By assuming a coordination role, EC sought to lead the digitisation efforts, steering the gradual harmonisation of the different procedures. The following section illustrates how conspicuous funding was used to implement these policy aims and how Europeana became a crucial asset in this process.

Implementing the European digital cultural policy

In the 1990s, libraries were among the first cultural institutions to see the potential of digital technologies to share information about their collections on the Web (Hakala 1999). National libraries throughout Europe initiated the digitisation of their catalogues and the creation of digital infrastructures to manage their data. As a result, under the guidance of the Conference of European National Librarians (CENL) and with the financial support of the EC, in 2005 was released *TheEuropeanLibrary.org* (TEL) portal, the first unified access point to the collection of all the European National Libraries (Figure 1).

Between 2001 and 2009, EC invested more than €6.6 million in projects addressing TEL development, supporting the creation of shared policies and standards for digitising national libraries. TEL represented a collaborative effort: institutions with different cultural backgrounds and missions, at different stages of their digital transformation, and with different budgets had to agree on a joint strategic plan for their development (Collier 2005). The creation of a pan-European service led to the harmonisation of several aspects of the internal workflows, the general objectives and the business plans of the institutions involved. In other words, creating a shared service meant a first step towards standardising content and procedures and opened the way for establishing *European* digital development in the cultural sector. The competencies gained during TEL project were taken as a starting point for creating the digital repository for all the cultural heritage data of the member states.

In 2004, Google announced its Google Books project, inducing an acceleration in the Commission's plans for digitising the cultural sector. Google's bold determination to become a large-scale provider of cultural sources sparked a transatlantic competition for supremacy in the information economy (Band 2006). Several European countries reacted with alarm, and the EC acknowledged that the 'initiative [...] raised a series of issues related to the presence of Europe's cultural heritage on the Internet' (EC 2005). They concerned the appropriation of a shared cultural heritage by a private (American) actor, the respect of copyright, and the dominance of English-language cultural resources. In response, Google (2004) extended its services to six non-English-speaking European countries, but public scepticism about the project remained (Travis 2006).
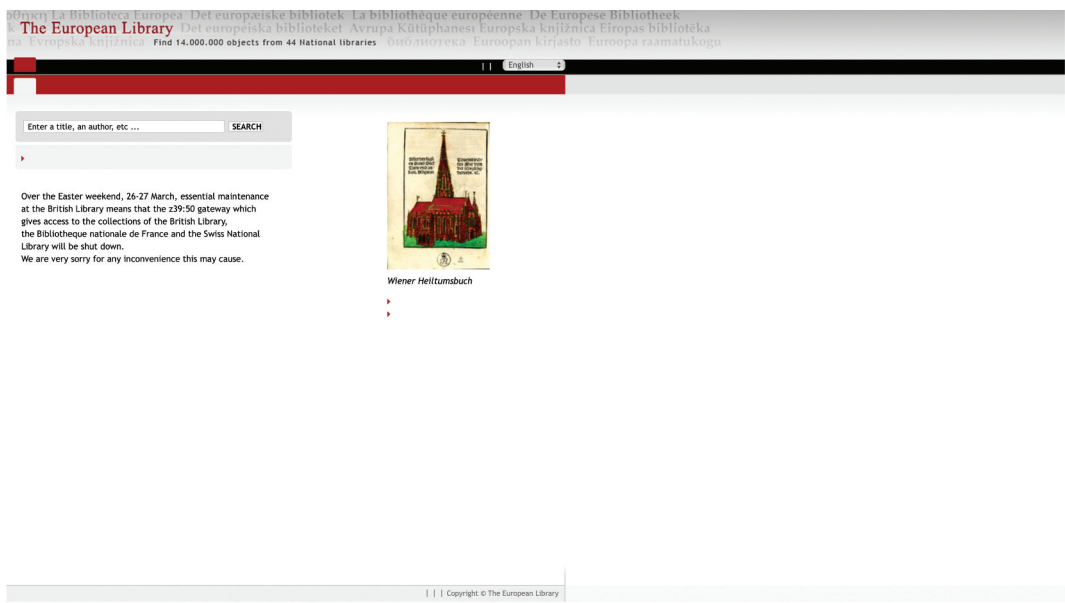

Figure 1. The European library (https://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org). Homepage of the website, on 26 march 2005. Screenshot. Archived at WayBack machine (https://web.Archive.org).

On 28 April 2005, the heads of six member states signed a joint letter calling for creating a *bibliothèque numérique européenne*, an online library of all European bibliographic collections (Chirac et al. 2005). The letter described the cultural heritage as a treasure of diversity and a testimony of the universality of the continent in relationship with the rest of the world. To preserve the cultural position of Europe in the future 'geographies of knowledge', they called for joint action of digitisation and publication of this material online.

The EC swiftly responded to this call. In September 2005, the *i2010: Digital Libraries* strategic plan was inaugurated, with a budget of 'at least 36 million Euros for co-funding research' in the development of search engines and digital preservation under the Information Society Technologies Programme and '60 million Euros [. . .] for access to digital cultural content [. . .] until 2008 within the eContentplus programme', including the possibility of financing other actions under the FP7 (Reding 2005). In this way, the creation of the European digital library became the largest funded cultural action in Europe.

On 20 November 2008, was inaugurated the portal *europeana.eu*, offering about two million digital heritage objects from member states (Figure 2). In Latin, the name signifies 'European things', making the platform's purpose and content immediately evident. The EC celebrated its launch, and President Barroso welcomed Europeana as a new 'free and fast' way to explore European heritage (EC 2008). In his words, Europeana inaugurated a European *digital Renaissance* by offering content that stimulates users' creativity bringing together the potential of new technologies and cultural heritage (Ibid.) Presenting Europeana as a 'digital doorway' to European culture 'in all its glorious diversity', Barroso (2008) was well aware of the role of the portal both in the construction of a European identity and in an international environment, as a statement of the value created by European culture worldwide.

Europeana's evolution can be subdivided into three phases, highly interlocked with EU policy discourse. Between 2008 and 2010, EC financed a series of projects aiming to increase the collection and transform Europeana into a stable service, defining its structure and governance (Purday 2012). Europeana's success depended on its capability of mobilising as many cultural
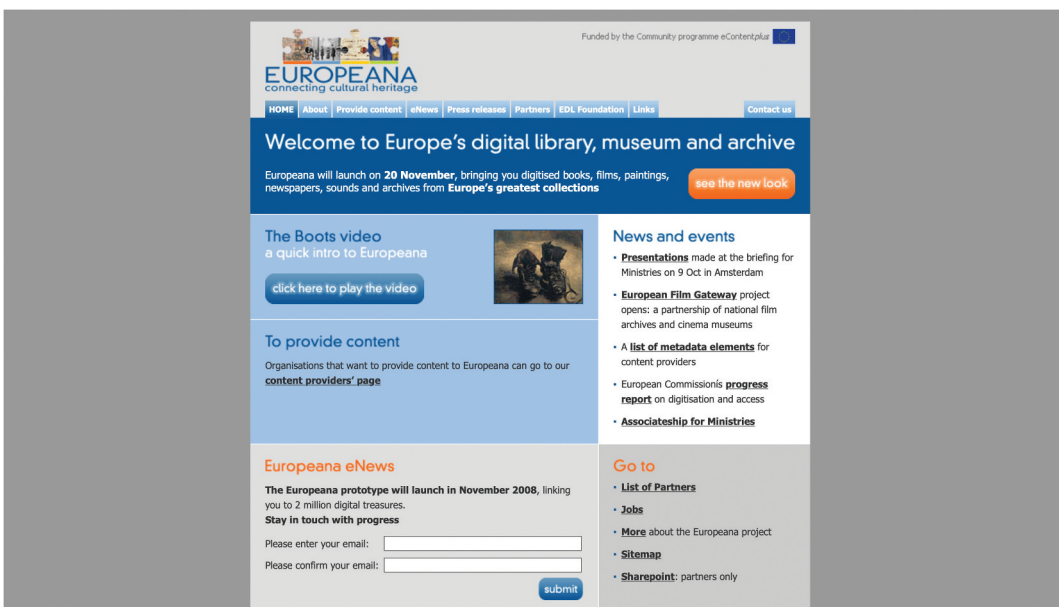

Figure 2. Europeana (https://europeana.eu). Homepage of the website, on 11 November 2008. Screenshot. Archived at WayBack machine (https://web.Archive.org).

institutions as possible through their participation in EU-financed projects. In 2010, the EU Council (2010) praised Europeana's work in encouraging content providers to adopt higher documentation standards while digitising their collections. By setting minimum interoperability standards among its partners, Europeana gained a crucial role in the sector's digital transformation.

Between 2011 and 2014, Europeana's service evolved to respond to the recommendations formulated in the Digital Agenda for Europe and the Workplan for Culture that EC issued in 2010. The Agenda mentioned Europeana as a central instrument for promoting cultural diversity and stimulating creativity. A *Comité des Sages* – among which was EF's chair Elisabeth Niggemann – was created 'to come up with recommendations on how best to speed up the digitisation, online accessibility and preservation of cultural works across Europe' (EC 2010a). The resulting report indicated each member state's minimum content contribution to Europeana required by 2015 (EC 2011). States were formally responsible for digitising their heritage. Still, their freedom was de-facto limited to the selection of which objects to prioritise rather than to the decision to invest in digitisation at all. Moreover, the document exhorted member states to make available on Europeana all the 'masterpieces' in the public domain. The vagueness of what constitutes a masterpiece leads towards 'being in public domain' as the preferential requirement for digitisation, supporting Europeana's (2010) Public Domain Charter. At this stage, Europeana appeared to be not a simple instrument in the EC's hands but a central actor in guiding the Europeanisation of the digitisation workflow.

Between 2015 and 2019, Europeana focussed on its outreach and creating a significant impact on society under the motto 'we transform the world with culture' (Europeana 2015b). It aligned with the objectives of EC's (2014) strategic plan that chiefly focused on the economic value of heritage and the expected spillover effects on adjacent sectors. The impact of this document on Europeana is revealed by a transformation in the terminology used in the 2015–2020 strategic plan, which described a new *business model* meeting the needs of Europeana's *stakeholders*: professionals, creatives, and end-users (EF 2014). For them, emphasis was given to the curation of digital collections.

Since its creation, Europeana has been shaped by EC policies and, at the same time, materialised them through its action. The following section reflects on the role of Europeana's infrastructure in this process.

The digital service infrastructure for European cultural heritage: Europeana

Europeana is a strategic DSI controlled by EC and the member states to facilitate the cultural sector's digital transformation (EF 2013, 6). To succeed, the EF has devised a complex infrastructure, referred to as the *Europeana Initiative*, in which the digital and the physical world are tightly entangled. According to Bowker et al. (2010, 99), infrastructures are 'interrelated social, organisational, and technical components or systems'. As such, Europeana is composed of 'techno-cultural' components, such as coding technologies, content and search algorithms, and of 'socio-economic' elements, such as its governance and operative infrastructure, business model, and users (Van Dijck 2013).

The governing power of the Initiative becomes evident only when looking down at the role of each of its components and adopting a holistic approach that considers its impact as an ecosystem. That is, to understand the extent of Europeana's effective impact on the cultural sector, it is essential to consider conjunctly the role of the EF, ENA, the EAF, and the *europeana.eu* platform as different parts of the whole infrastructure. Through their actions, Europeana works to implement successfully the digital cultural policy designed by the EU. This section describes how, through the synergic work of these components, Europeana operates to transform the cultural sector gaining a social, cultural, economic, and political impact.

Institutional structure and governance model of the Europeana initiative

The Europeana Initiative relies on an operative infrastructure composed of three bodies: the EF, ENA and EAF (Europeana 2019a). The EF coordinates the initiative on the EC's mandate. It is an independent non-profit organisation created under Dutch law entrusted with operating the Europeana DSI and managing the *europeana.eu* platform and the projects to extend its collection. It is composed of a management board in charge of the actual administration of the Foundation, taking decisions on the budget and the development strategies of the Initiative, and personnel dedicated to operating the service and managing the digital collection. The EF's management includes representatives of the cultural sector (among which one representative of ENA and one of EAF) and two representatives of the EC chosen according to the presidency of the Council of the EU (EF 2020a). Although Europeana is not an official governmental body, national and European politics have an official place in the decision-making room of the Foundation. As recognised by a Europeana employee, 'this is one channel [for policy actors] of influencing the Foundation, and for us to keep them informed' (Interview EF-SL-1905-01 2019). This organigram is designed to make Europeana an instrument for enacting European digital cultural policy focused explicitly on (national) heritage institutions and practitioners. Through the open participation of institutions and their representatives in Europeana's work and decision-making organs, EF aimed to facilitate the 'convergence of practice and the implementation of standards' in line with the EC's policy guidelines (EF 2010).

The second body operating within the Europeana Initiative is a network of experts from different cultural and technical fields acting within the ENA (2020). Its members had the right to elect a Management Board representing the ENA's interests to the EF. ENA had a predominant role in the functioning of Europeana by bringing cultural and digital practitioners into a 'community that shapes Europeana' (ENA 2018). From statute, ENA members participated as individuals, but they often acted representing their institutions (Fieldnotes, 2020). They were organised into working groups dedicated to the main urgent issues in the digital heritage field (Europeana 2020b). As explained by one of its members, ENA represents a place where practitioners can exchange their interests and experiences in dealing with digital heritage with someone that has dealt with the same problems and find solutions to their issues (Fieldnotes, 06–2020). Working in an international and cross-domain environment, ENA members contributed to the creation of Europeana's best practices.

Therefore, ENA represents a *community of practice* operating around the digital heritage (Lave and Wenger 1991). It is an international meeting point for the practitioners working with digital cultural heritage that 'are often quite isolated within their institutions' (Fieldnotes, 06–2020). Through ENA, and in line with the general technocratic approach of EU institutions (Radaelli 2008), Europeana has mobilised practitioners to create a European mindset grounded on shared digital competencies. ENA is publicised as a resource of know-how and a driver for the cultural heritage sector's standardisation (Figure 3). At the same time, ENA's competence and its international extension represent the basis for the political strength of Europeana. Thanks to its members' know-how, the Network allows Europeana to be at the cutting edge of technological development in the cultural sector, making it a resource for the EC when designing its digital cultural policy. In this way, Europeana represents, at the same time, a top-down and bottom-up policy project. From a cultural policy product, Europeana is also a digital cultural policy actor capable of influencing and addressing the development of the European cultural sector.

EAF is the third body of the Europeana Initiative, crucial for managing the whole infrastructure. It is the backbone of Europeana's operative data supply chain, coordinating the work of content aggregators. These are cultural institutions designated by governments in the capacity of national aggregators or networks of institutions working at the thematic or domain level to facilitate the injection of new content in the Europeana database (Purday 2009). Aggregators work as intermediaries between Europeana and cultural heritage institutions, supporting them in preparing their data for the Europeana database (EAF 2020). By delegating to aggregators the support of cultural heritage institutions, Europeana transformed them into intermediaries sharing digital competencies.
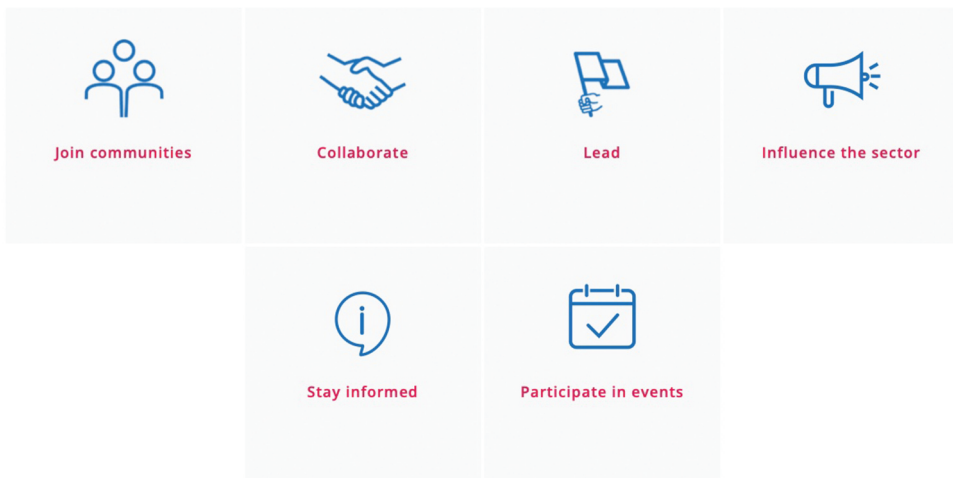
WHY JOIN?

Figure 3. ENA membership benefits. Screenshot (https://pro.europeana.eu).

Therefore, aggregators actively influence cultural heritage institutions' digital behaviour by enforcing the standardised digital practice developed by ENA and promoted by Europeana. Thanks to the aggregators' work, Europeana is positioned at the centre of a Europe-wide network, setting the rules for the participation of cultural heritage institutions in the digital transformation of the cultural sector.

The digital service

Through data aggregation, Europeana's main governing instruments are the promotion of technical standards and their implementation by practitioners in the cultural sector. Central Europeana's action is advocating for open access and clear licensing statements and imposing the Europeana Data Model (EDM) to document the digital resources (Doerr et al. 2010; Dulong de Rosnay 2012). All institutions must comply with these technical requirements when sharing their collection on the portal, mapping their metadata into EDM and establishing their copyright status (Charles and Olensky 2014). As Thylstrup (2018, 132) observes, EC strategically used Europeana as a 'rhetoric lever' to increase the harmonisation of copyright legislations among the member states, simplifying sharing cultural content on the Web. The metadata model EDM was created to accommodate GLAM's needs (Peroni, Tomasi, and Vitali 2013). Its overarching nature allows for documenting any digital heritage object. Despite cultural institutions lamenting EDM's lack of granularity, they accept to sacrifice part of the accuracy of their documentation to have their data represented in a Europe-wide collection and benefit from Europeana's online visibility (Fieldnote, 2020). By complying with these requirements, institutions accept adapting their digital policy to Europe-wide requirements (Capurro and Plets 2020).

The Europeana Publishing Framework is the instrument for implementing these two standards. Through this document, cultural heritage institutions can estimate the impact of their resources on the web according to their quality, calculated based on the metadata richness and copyright licence. With the slogan 'the more you give, the more you get', Europeana (2015a) encouraged institutions to provide their resources using open license copyright and detailed metadata documentation to facilitate their reuse and circulation on the internet (EF 2015). Following Yúdice (2003), the open circulation of digital heritage corresponds to the neoliberal commodification of cultural data.

Figure 4. Europeana Collections (https://europeana.eu). Home page of the website, March 2020.

Therefore, the Publishing Framework aligns cultural and economic policies, aligning EU cultural policy with the aims of the digital agenda.

In 2015, EF (2016) implemented a new search algorithm that prioritised the findability of better-quality resources. Although this was presented as a service for *europeana.eu* users (Fieldnotes, 05–2019), this decision implicitly addressed GLAMs, inducing them to raise the quality of their data. This arbitrary hierarchisation of resources according to data quality tended to penalise institutions with limited digitisation budgets or less engaged with Europeana, guaranteeing better visibility to those capable of regularly improving their digital collections. As a result, data quality may become a discriminatory element reiterating the structural inequalities between the member states, and the algorithm may be a means to punish institutions less efficient in aligning with EU requirements.

Each element of the Europeana Initiative has a role in governing the digital transformation of the cultural sector according to the Commission's agenda. Furthermore, with the production and promotion of standardised practices, the initiative actively produces *European heritage institutions* united by a common modus operandi. At the same time, by bringing together a community of practitioners, creatives and end-users around its collection, Europeana creates a *European (cultural) audience*. Therefore, as a digital cultural infrastructure, Europeana positions the cultural sector at the core of the European digital economy and acquires a central role in influencing the cultural community's development.

The digital curation of European narratives

Central to Europeana's work is the collection and curation of digital cultural heritage. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of curated thematic collections grew from three to twelve (Interview EF-CT-1905-01 2019). In 2021, Europeana counted 53 exhibitions, 327 galleries, and 550 blogs (EF 2021), giving a clear idea of the curatorial effort in 'showing and telling' the collections (Bennett 1995). Nevertheless, the number of visitors exploring the website remained substantially low, with a total of 4.7 million in 2019 (EF 2020b), which is still far from the 6 million registered the same year by the websites of the Rijksmuseum (2019) or the over 10 million of The National Gallery (2021). Through curated collections, Europeana shifted from being a digital heritage aggregator towards becoming a centre for content curation and the production of historical narratives (Figure 4).

Cultural heritage institutions provide and update resources during thematic projects (EF 2020c). Interviews with Europeana's Programme and Network and Collections Teams revealed strong cooperation between Europeana, its partner institutions, and the EC in preparing project proposals (Fieldnote, 05–2019). The Collections Team, already familiar with the database, proposes topics aligned with the Commission's agenda. Then, Europeana relies on its partners to acquire new content and update the relevant pieces already in the collection (Interview EF-PN-1905-01 2019). In this sense, collecting and curating digital heritage are informed by and functional in governing the creation of European narratives. Moreover, by managing the projects' preparatory phases, Europeana could align the project's aims with the Foundation's internal agenda and the Commission's external guidelines. At the same time, it acquired a gatekeeping role, dictating the parameters for cultural institutions to access EC funding.

The Collections Team curates the enormous corpus stored in the database, valorising the best-quality objects – according to the Europeana Publishing Framework parameters – and the most relevant stories to highlight the *European value* of the resources in the collection. When interrogated on what constitutes this European value, some employees stated that it is not for Europeana to establish what European heritage is. Aligning with the rhetoric of policy documents, they affirmed that cultural heritage institutions are entrusted by national governments to protect and preserve heritage. Therefore, it is up to them to decide which objects to share with Europeana and what constitutes Europeanness (Interview EF-CT-1905-02 2019). On the other hand, other employees responded that the European value of the resources emerges from their stories (Fieldnotes, 05–2019). Browsing on the portal, next to generic collections, is editorial content focused on topics

central to EC's political agenda. Emblematic of this narrative alignment is the *Pioneers* exhibition, which outlines the life of eight 'remarkable European women' seeking to 'raise awareness of women's historical contributions to society' (Europeana 2019b). The exhibition was launched under the patronage of Commissioner Mariya Gabriel as part of her campaign for gender equality. By selecting topics that reveal the commonalities between the member states and the EU constitutional values, digital heritage is intentionally used to create linkages among different realities and enforce a feeling of unity and shared identity.

To fit national identities into a transnational European narration, the past has been used to narrate Europe as a successful peace project overcoming nationalistic histories (Lagrou 2000; Rigney 2014). The *1914–1918* project, collecting memories from WWI (Lemmers 2011), is an example of how, by accommodating within the same collection opposite and potentially conflicting perspectives on the same historical events, Europeana uses them to construct narratives of shared European experiences (Assmann 2007). With the construction of transnational narratives, Europeana uses digital heritage to actively produce a *European past*. Therefore, through content curation, Europeana shapes historical narratives that govern the general approach to the past (Bennett 1995), actively producing a *European (digital) cultural heritage*.

In its attempts to construct a transnational narrative of the past, Europeana aligns with the goal of brick-and-mortar museums on European culture, such as the House of European History in Brussels. This continuity also emerges from partnerships in content curation: the *When Walls Talk!* exhibition was a selection from the homonymous exhibition held at the House of European History in 2022 (Europeana 2022), while The Jean Monnet House exhibition was curated in collaboration with the EU Parliament (Europeana n.d.b.).

Therefore, Europeana can be considered a digital museum of the European culture (Capurro 2021). It mobilises digital heritage to construct a shared European narrative, a process strongly criticised as authoritative (De Cesari and Rigney 2014). By mimicking nineteenth-century nation-building strategies, imposing a single narrative to foster identity creation produces mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Settele 2015). By ordering and curating digital collections, Europeana occupies a prominent gatekeeping role in creating and distributing European meanings and values online.

Literature is increasingly focussing on the politics of the digital heritage collections (e.g. Valtysson 2020; Dahlgren et al. 2021), investigating the selection criteria (Thylstrup 2018; Prescott and Hughes 2019; Tessa et al. 2020) and uses of resources (Pickover 2014; Geismar 2018; Zaagsma 2022). In collecting data from European GLAMs, entrusted as the most authoritative heritage sources, Europeana 'reiterates a traditional, top-down, and authority-led relation with the past, exemplifying what Smith (2006) defines as authorised heritage discourse' (Capurro and Plets 2020). Moreover, in privileging a thematic approach when collecting data, Europeana implements a selective process mimicking cultural institutions' that follow their internal agendas when selecting which objects to prioritise for the digitisation (Cameron 2007). Thus, the collection represents a complex interplay of local, national, and transnational digital cultural politics.

Governing the cultural sector

This analysis reveals that Europeana has outgrown the aims of a digital archive of European heritage. As a technological product, its development was not neutral. As underlined by Feenberg (2003), it embodied the values of the social groups that contributed to its creation, namely the civil servants working for the EC and the experts from the cultural sector. In Foucault's terms, Europeana can be conceptualised as an instrument of European *governmentality*, acting upon multiple levels of the construction of *Europeanness* (Dean 2010). Firstly, it facilitates the collaboration of international partners within the framework of EU-financed projects. Through the work of the EAF, these institutions are called to adhere to the standards devised by the initiative, uniforming their internal procedures on a common European model. In this way, Europeana has constructed a network of

European institutions (Capurro and Plets 2020). Secondly, it brings together a community of practitioners and users around its collection through the ENA and the online portal, creating a *European (cultural) audience*. And lastly, it discursively produces *European heritage* by curating a transnational collection of digital resources. All these aspects are made possible by Europeana's governance and infrastructure.

As a digital heritage aggregator, Europeana integrates two contrasting elements: the sovereign aims of national brick-and-mortar cultural heritage institutions (Macdonald 2001) and the neoliberal drives of digital platforms (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). Europeana moves into the realm of the data economy the traditional operations of collecting, curating and displaying heritage and the governance mechanisms that they implicitly produce (Bennett et al. 2017). As a policy actor, it relies on promoting technical standards and their implementation by practitioners in the cultural sector. When considering each component within the Europeana Initiative and then holistically evaluating its impact as an ecosystem, Europeana's governing power becomes visible. Through its infrastructure, Europeana implements the EU digital cultural policy.

As a product of European digital cultural policy, Europeana resulted from a *late sovereign* political design where national and European identity discourses are brought together through the digitised cultural heritage (Thylstrup 2018). As Cameron and Kenderdine (2007) argue, cultural institutions exercise a precise form of power when selecting which objects are valuable to digitise, imposing their authority on the audience. Through documentation, institutions determine the current understanding of the objects in their collections (Bowker and Star 2000). Using descriptive metadata, they *generate* interpretations of heritage subjected to cultural, social, and political biases (Manovich 2001, 224; Hall 2001; Cameron and Robinson 2003, 2007). The same is true for Europeana: aggregating digital heritage from European institutions, it governs cultural meanings through content collection and curation. With the creation of curated collections that promote European themes and by promoting technical standardisation for the sake of interoperability, Europeana creates an infrastructure for the Europeanisation of culture and cultural actors.

In producing *European cultural heritage institutions*, Europeana works toward the 'spatialisation' of Europe in each member state. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) describe spatialisations of states as consisting of both enacting *verticality* (hierarchical ordering that the state is above the subject) and *encompassment* (all subjects fall under the state and have a shared fate). Europeana takes up states' prerogative role by collaborating with European political institutions to produce a European space. With the creation of a hierarchical infrastructure in which it is positioned at the centre of a network composed of aggregators and national institutions, Europeana is at the same time *verticalising* and *encompassing* its European role in all its partner institutions. Following the same rules and procedures established by Europeana, these institutions acknowledge their belonging to the system, simultaneously legitimising it.

Within Europeana's infrastructure, ENA is the instrument with the power to enforce the penetration of standardised procedures within cultural institutions. Composed of practitioners from different backgrounds, it is a pool of competencies and an informal network for exchanging best practices and know-how (ENA 2020). This know-how, collectively built through sharing experiences and information, is a form of *Europeanisation* of the cultural sector for two main reasons. Firstly, it is assembled through cross-national collaboration, as advocated by the inspiring principles of European projects (EU 2012, art. 167). Secondly, it circulates as a new normative form of *European* best practice that becomes available for any institution, despite the country of provenance. Therefore, through ENA, Europeana mobilises practitioners in the cultural sector to create a European mindset grounded on shared digital competencies.

As an association of practitioners, ENA is also a political resource for Europeana. The competencies it assembles allow Europeana to remain at the cutting edge of the heritage sector, making it a meaningful voice in developing new policies. Sitting on the Board of the EF, ENA's members have their voices heard by the EC representatives (Management Board n.d.). In this context, their opinions

and needs inform Europeana's development, the direction of new European cultural policy, and the digital transformation of the cultural sector.

Therefore, in managing the DSI, Europeana performs the functions of an intermediary non-governmental institution acting as a semi-public administrative body, similar to a quango, a quasi-non-governmental organisation (Pifer 1967). Although not a governing body, Europeana has been given the budgetary power to address the digital development of the cultural sector, directing EU funding. In exchange, Europeana has admitted political representatives onto its governing board and accepted stricter supervision by EC. As such, Europeana is a hybrid institution comparable to the many agencies that, as separate legal entities, perform specific tasks under EU sovereignty (Ongaro et al. 2012) and to the sectorial organisations that informally apply EU policy through their actions (Lähdesmäki 2014). Like these organisations, such as Europa Nostra and the European Cultural Foundation, Europeana implements European top-down policies, making them look like bottom-up attempts by adopting and normalising the EU rhetorical discourse on European heritage.

Conclusion

This article shows that in creating Europeana, the repository of European digital cultural heritage, EC aimed at implementing its digital cultural policy, accelerating GLAMs digitisation and reaching interoperability across cultural domains and between member states. In this framework, EC instrumentalises digital heritage with two main *objectives*: first, it is conceived as a tool for promoting European identity and a sense of belonging to a joint European culture (De Witte 1987; Delanty 1995; Shore 2000; Sassatelli 2006, 2009; Bee 2008; Calligaro 2013); second, as a resource for the EU, since digital cultural infrastructures are a social and economic asset. Visibly, the EU has used digitality instrumentally to reach its cultural and economic goals.

Europeana has been instrumental in designing and implementing EU digital cultural policy. Europeana resulted from the political will of the EU and the member states. It received substantial funding to implement the Commission's cultural agenda, to become a showcase of European know-how and a manifest of the shared European history and identity. At the same time, Europeana has actively steered the evolution of the European digital cultural policy by collecting the cultural sector's know-how and using it to inform the work of the EC. In this way, Europeana is the product of the top-down digital cultural policy that the EU has imposed on the cultural sector and a laboratory for bottom-up digital cultural policymaking.

The Europeana infrastructure made this possible. Europeana has been shaped through the participation of the cultural sector, thanks to the collaboration and the competence-sharing of experts and cultural institutions. Under EF's coordination, ENA has shaped the technical solutions promoted to the European cultural sector through EAF's work. Grounding its authority on this participatory infrastructure, Europeana has positioned itself as a policymaker to design best practices and policy guidelines for European cultural institutions (Europeana 2020a). Imposing to its data providers the use of EDM and open copyright statements on metadata, they adopt a common modus operandi. In this way, the Europeana infrastructure subtly produces the Europeanisation of national cultural heritage institutions by introducing standardised technical practices.

It is possible to conclude that Europeana has played a crucial role in the governance of the cultural sector. Its infrastructure has designed and implemented a digital cultural policy capable of regulating cultural heritage institutions' digital behaviour by supporting Europe-wide collaboration and the adoption of common digital practices. By analysing Europeana's social and cultural implications, this analysis demonstrated that digital infrastructures need to be approached as non-neutral policy elements.

Notes

1. Data were aggregated from information available on CORDIS.
2. These documents are available online in the official EU archives: EUR-Lex, CORDIS, TED, and the Publication Office of the European Union.
3. Websites were traced using the WayBack Machine. It is an archive of web content that allows browsing different versions of a web page through time.
4. These documents are available on the website *pro.europeana.eu*, which represents an archive of Europeana's activity.
5. Data collected through interviews and ethnographic work have been anonymised to protect participants' identity.
6. The author performed semi-structured interviews, where questions depended on the role of the interviewee.

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