Strength in Numbers

Sharing digital preservation good practice in the United Kingdom through community networks.

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**Abstract – Building a community of practice was a key driver for the establishment and development of the Midlands Digital Preservation Network. This poster outlines how we went from the happy accident of creating an online network and developed a safe space to share problems, successes and failures.**

**Keywords – collaboration, networks, advocacy, education**

**Conference Topics – Community; Resilience**

# Introduction

Making progress in digital preservation is about standing on the shoulders of giants and our network, MidiPres (Midlands Digital Preservation Network) came about directly inspired by hearing the fantastic work already being done by our fellow practitioners in the community, notably Australasia Preserves[1]. After hearing their story at iPres 2019[2] we reflected on our position of privilege in being able to attend an international conference and the irony of traveling abroad to exchange ideas with near neighbors. We decided to establish an informal network of anyone in our geographic region (central England) who had an interest in digital preservation - with an emphasis on reaching out to those who had little or no practical experience in this area. What began as an idea for an in-person meetup was forced by the pandemic to go online which with hindsight was a key to its success. Two years on we have a vibrant and accessible forum where members share questions, problems, successes and failures.

# How we work

A happy accident of being forced online became a key strength. Members no longer needed to give up half or a whole day to travel (even locally) and everyone became accustomed to working collaboratively in this space. A further strength is the diversity in membership and the vendor agnostic nature of the forum. We strive to create a “safe space” where people can ask questions and admit failures that they would not do in a public forum. It also allows for informal benchmarking and comparing progress with others in a similar position. Members can share examples of achievable good practice rather than the more innovative and resource hungry solutions which may be out of reach when taking early steps on the preservation journey.

# Our Strengths

Having a community which is local means that many (although not all) of us knew one another - this made things easier both at the start, particularly when holding an inaugural meeting in an online format, and as we have continued to develop. A relationship was already established to allow a friendly and respectful environment within which to discuss a wide variety of topics. The diversity of experience is important - there are those of us who are able to share expertise and knowledge - but too much expertise can feel intimidating and overwhelming for an individual at an institution that is still at the beginning of its digital preservation journey. Our aim is to build confidence through mutual support and reassurance. For example, we are able to share knowledge and practical demonstrations of new tools and learning opportunities which many members would not otherwise have the time to experiment with themselves. The ability not just to gain subject specific knowledge but to keep it current and relevant is vital in digital preservation, as outlined in the DigiCurv framework[3] but this is time consuming and extremely difficult for those for whom digital preservation is only a part of their overall responsibilities. MidiPres directly promotes knowledge sharing and connecting with the wider digital preservation community.

# Challenges

We want to grow and flourish as a community but how do we do this without losing what we have built?

1) *Sustainability:* The group is heavily reliant on the two founders - if either moves on the group currently risks having the organizational ability to continue. Is it possible to link this network in with other similar existing networks without raising barriers to entry such as membership costs?

2) *Growth:* Membership currently stands at around 30 people and meetings usually attract about two thirds of these. This works well in the format we have - successful recruitment of new members might jeopardize this.

3) *Geographical remit:* This was set originally as we had envisaged an in person local meet up. We have already extended our welcome a little to members outside the region - do we retain the limit to help keep the focus or throw open the doors wider?

# Conclusion

The group arose when the founders perceived a gap for themselves and other isolated digital preservation practitioners for practical experience-based knowledge sharing, and on the ground support at a local level. We recognised that financial and staffing barriers often stood in the way of membership to some of the excellent existing support networks. The ability to share workflow experiences, successes as well as failures and pool our professional knowledge in a world of rapidly changing technologies, platforms, and limited resources has proved extremely beneficial. The diverse membership and wider networks we are linked to means that problems which are beyond our resources to address can be shared out with the wider community linking our little group with the rest of the digital preservation world.

# REFERENCES

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