



F oreword

Culture and Open Data: How Can Museums Get the Best from their Digital Assets?



The development of **Europeana**, Europe's digital library, archive and museum, and the promotion of digitisation to make our cultural heritage better accessible, are key parts of the Digital Agenda for Europe (www.bit.ly/digital_agenda). I want to make the best use of the tools of the information society for economic growth and improving the quality of life of all Europeans. Today Europeana is one of the most visible expressions of Europe's rich and diverse heritage online. The range and number of texts, images, videos and sounds accessible through it are constantly growing, and our targets are becoming more and more ambitious.

Combining the content available through the platform with quality metadata (rich descriptions of the objects and accurate catalogue information), as well as a multi-lingual and user-friendly interface, will make Europeana a successful service widely used by European citizens and a hub for creative industries.

It is reaching out to users (almost 2 million visits in the first quarter of 2011), through initiatives such as the First World War project, which helps to enrich the content of Europeana through crowdsourcing.

More than 1500 European libraries, museums, archives and audiovisual archives are currently providing content to Europeana. This is an unprecedented collaboration among cultural institutions within the European Union. The European Commission is strongly supporting this initiative, both politically and financially.

Another important strand of our Digital Agenda for Europe is our work on **open data**. The public sector, when carrying out its public tasks, produces huge quantities of data and this data can be re-used in all kinds of innovative ways. This could be apps for your mobile phone giving you information on the weather at your destination or on the nearest parking space. In June of this year, I was thrilled by the creativity displayed in the Open Data Challenge competitions (www.opendatachallenge.org/). Designers, developers, journalists, researchers and the general public were challenged to come up

with useful, valuable or interesting uses for open public data. By way of example, the winners included a [mobile application](http://be-part.info/) (<http://be-part.info/>) which can help citizens learn more about urban planning in their area and an [app](http://bikes.oobrien.com/) (<http://bikes.oobrien.com/>) to visualise the current state of bike-share systems in over 30 cities around the world.

The principles of open data are gaining momentum in the USA and in several countries in Europe. This has led to the creation of data portals, which aggregate data from different types of public bodies, such as national, regional and local administrations, international organisations and agencies. Despite this, the potential of open data for innovative applications, including cross-border services, is still largely untapped. A recent study estimates that the aggregate economic impact from opening up public sector information resources across the whole EU economy is in the order of 140 billion Euros.

This autumn the Commission will make a proposal for adapting the EU laws and rules in this area, the **Public Sector Information Directive**, adopted by the Council and the European Parliament in 2003. We aim to stimulate new services and innovation by making more public sector information available on transparent, effective, and non-discriminatory terms. The Commission will also practise what it preaches. The Decision on the re-use of Commission information of 2006 ensures that all data produced by the Commission (for example the statistics of Eurostat or the translation memories of our translation service) can be re-used for commercial and non-commercial purposes. These changes to the EU's rules will be complemented by our initiatives to set up an **EU Open Data infrastructure** through which citizens can easily search, access, download and re-use machine-readable data sets. As first step, we will launch a Commission data portal in 2012.

I am aware that cultural institutions in Europe are debating the re-use of their digital assets, such as digital copies of public domain works and metadata created by the institution. I urge cultural institutions to open up control of their data, and to make digital copies of public domain works easily accessible and re-usable. This is what is needed today to take full advantage of the new possibilities offered by digital technologies. Giving access to our common heritage, ensuring that it is preserved, but also that it is used and benefits society, is at the very heart of cultural institutions' *raison d'être*. Cultural institutions must stay close to this mandate, in 'real life' and in the digital, online world. There is a wonderful opportunity to show how cultural material can contribute to innovation, and how it can become a driver of new developments. Museums, archives and libraries should not miss it.

Metadata is a key example. The "hackathons" recently organised by Europeana show the enormous potential of the use of cultural metadata for new applications. The price-winning ideas included a 'time-book', which allows the user to make social network profiles for historical figures, including images, quotes etc (www.group.europeana.eu/web/api/hack4europe). Open metadata is also essential



for linking the content that you can find through Europeana with material from other sites, such as Wikipedia.

Easier access to and re-use of information paid for by citizens through their taxes has the potential to deliver efficiency, transparency, innovation and economic growth. The cultural sector can be and should be at the forefront of experiments in this area. Its institutions have fantastic assets that represent centuries of intellectual and artistic creativity and ingenuity, and high quality descriptions of these assets. Giving this material the highest visibility and use in the digital age is essential.

