10 ideas for purpose-driven digital leadership in museums

By Dr Oonagh Murphy
with the support of the Museum's staff

Introduction

What might purpose-driven digital leadership in museums look like?

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum operates at the intersection of everyday life, humanitarian action and art, focusing on the issues and values of humanitarianism – past, present and future. It lives these values by producing innovative, interdisciplinary content that sparks critical conversations, helps us reconnect with ourselves and others, and inspires us to imagine possible new futures.

For 2023–2024, the Museum selected "digital dilemmas" as the focus of its public engagement efforts, building on the lessons learned from its previous annual themes of feminism and mental health. Through this new theme, we aimed to initiate a discourse on the transformative impact of digital technologies on the human experience.

The Museum used the "digital dilemmas" theme as a platform for interdisciplinary enquiry and public dialogue. That platform served as the foundation of a broad programme of events that included lectures, panel discussions, workshops and late-night opening hours.

Participants from diverse backgrounds – including artists, educators, humanitarian practitioners, museum professionals and members of the public – were invited to debate, discuss, consider and re-think how we might respond to emerging digital challenges in a progressive and civic-minded way.

In the humanitarian field, as in our daily lives, digital transformation has progressed rapidly in recent years, as evidenced by developments such as the technologization of humanitarian hubs, innovations in the delivery of urgent assistance, and the use of biometric data, artificial intelligence (AI) and telemedicine to map and respond effectively to the growing number of crises and disasters in the current era. The wide variety of digital devices available, and the enthusiasm they arouse, must not obscure the ethical and security challenges posed by digital technology, particularly when it comes to protecting vulnerable people.

Introduction

The Museum's 2023–2024 programme of events highlighted a shared commitment to valuing individuals, communities and society at large. In doing so, it drew parallels between humanitarian practice and museum curation – two sectors that prioritize purpose over profit and that are rooted in the exploration of human experience and societal narratives. By facilitating interdisciplinary collaborations and conversations, the programme was designed to encourage innovative thinking about how we might navigate the digital era.

This toolkit seeks to ignite fresh perspectives on the nexus between digital technology, humanitarian principles and cultural institutions. Through ten key insights gleaned from the "digital dilemmas" initiative, we hope that it will serve as both a source of inspiration and a roadmap for re-thinking museum practice.
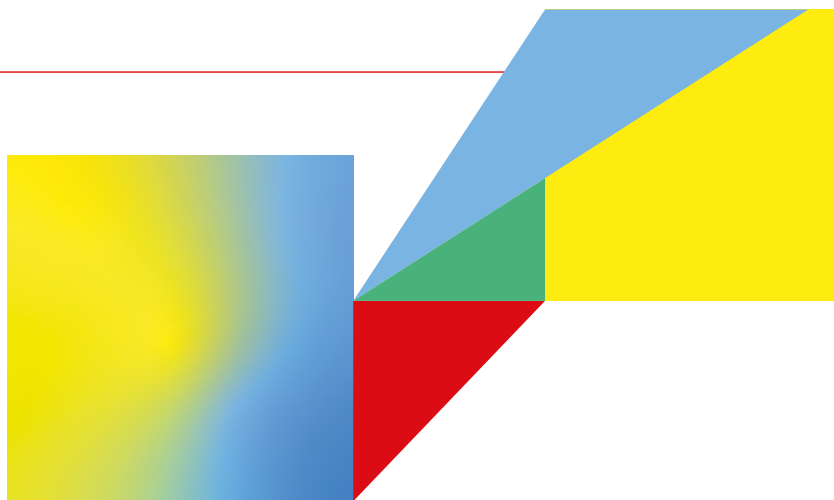
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Idea 1
Digital inclusion begins with access to electricity

FACT / OBSERVATION

Efforts to promote digital inclusion in museums often focus on supporting visitors who have visual, hearing, motor or cognitive impairments, which in itself is a crucial endeavour. But it is important to recognize that barriers to inclusion extend beyond this narrow scope. Adopting a humanitarian perspective on digital inclusion broadens our understanding, emphasizing the importance of addressing foundational factors such as digital access. John Bryant notes as follows: "Inclusion and exclusion can occur for both deliberate and unintended reasons, whether due to the targeting of specific groups, denial of access to needed resources, poor understanding of the particular needs of specific people or…personal biases." In this context, humanitarian organizations prioritize access to electricity as an initial step, followed by hardware and network connectivity. By addressing these fundamental needs, we establish a more robust framework for developing inclusive practices and solutions. A website, application or tool can only be considered inclusive if it is accessible to all. Financial constraints pose a significant barrier to digital access globally, and this disproportionately affects the most vulnerable members of society. Starting our efforts with access to electricity enables us to forge new paths towards equitable digital access.

Idea 1 Digital inclusion begins with access to electricity

IDEA

One potential solution lies in positioning museums as infrastructure hubs. Museums can serve as accessible spaces where diverse communities can access electricity to charge their devices, borrow devices if necessary, and connect to free Wi-Fi. By prioritizing access to electricity and implementing inclusive practices, museums can play a pivotal role in fostering digital inclusion and social equity within their communities. And by cultivating a welcoming and inclusive environment, museums become vital third spaces with a civic purpose.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→   Clearly communicate to visitors that they can use plug sockets to charge their devices.

→   Simplify Wi-Fi access procedures, offering options such as scanning QR codes instead of inputting complex passwords, and ensure staff are adept at helping visitors connect to the network.

→   Create designated "access moments" such as homework or social clubs, which provide opportunities for people to access Wi-Fi and

electricity in a supportive environment. These initiatives can be particularly transformative for marginalized groups, including refugees and children from low-income backgrounds, as well as for remote workers seeking connectivity and community.

→   Collaborate with local organizations addressing digital poverty to leverage museum resources in supporting their initiatives. For instance, museums can facilitate the donation and redistribution of old hardware, serving as drop-off points for companies and individuals to donate unwanted devices.

Idea 2
Empowerment must go hand in hand with delivery

FACT / OBSERVATION

In the humanitarian sector, we are seeing a move away from the distribution of aid in kind and towards the distribution of funds, with the aim of empowering recipients to make their own decisions. Empowerment, rather than delivery, is a powerful prism through which to think about digital transformation in museums. While digital technology may provide opportunities to tell new stories and may serve as a platform for more diverse voices, it can also act as an "exclusion driver" if we approach it from a service-delivery perspective.
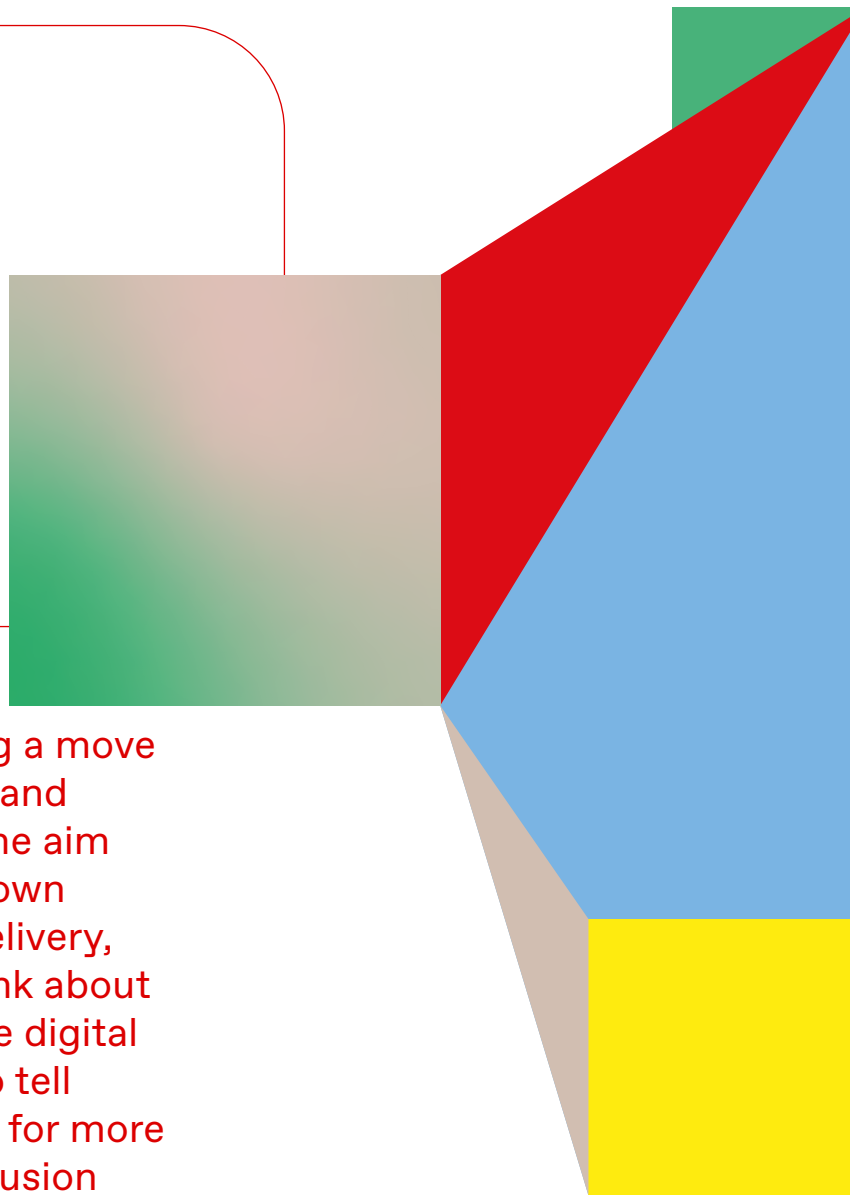
Idea 2 Empowerment must go hand in hand with delivery

IDEA

Museums could think about how they can empower visitors to engage with digital technology in a critical but confident and competent manner. This could be achieved by moving away from a rationale of digital-content creation and service delivery and towards a more instructive and educational model that focuses on digital literacy and/or digital citizenship. The work of Oliver Lough is helpful in thinking about what this might look like. He cautions against a "paternalistic" approach (what we in the museum sector might think of as an "enlightenment" approach), suggesting instead that we should focus on how to augment and support the way users are already "learning and sharing" information. Museums could embed greater criticality into their digital work, unboxing the digital in the same way that they currently unbox the curatorial through critical and public dialogue.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Provide spaces and opportunities for staff to learn beyond the hierarchies of the museum – because in order to empower visitors, you must first empower staff. Your organization could build on existing examples such as the Smithsonian Institution, which has developed an AI community calls initiative, providing an open space for people to discuss and learn about AI. Under this supported peer learning approach, colleagues come together and learn from one another. Another example is the Imperial War Museum which, several years ago, set up a Computer Club for staff. These informal sessions ran at lunchtime and were open to every staff member at the museum. Here, the focus was not solely on "work", but also on developing digital skills and competencies that extended beyond the museum, from a session on computer games to recording and editing short films on a smartphone.

Idea 2 Empowerment must go hand in hand with delivery

→ When designing any digital experience, think about how your organization can support access to, and engagement with, that experience. Also consider your target audience: think about those least likely to engage with the experience and brainstorm ideas and solutions for those audiences. How can you support their engagement?

→ Embed access, inclusion and empowerment as the foundations of any proposed project. This will allow your museum to develop digital solutions with purpose. Digital technology does not have to be for everyone, but it should be available to anyone who is interested.

→ When designing digital solutions, consider how they can empower digital confidence and literacy for an impact that goes beyond the museum experience. Concepts such as digital safety, digital hygiene and data protection can also serve as helpful prisms for discussing your museum's "digital" work.

→ Collaborate with outside experts to support communication on this subject. For example, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum hired the Berlin-based non-profit organization Tactical Tech to install a "Data Detox Bar" that allows visitors to reflect on their own use of digital, and on the data they share, prompting them to rethink their existing digital practices.

Idea 3
Technology has the ability to scale everything – good and bad practices alike
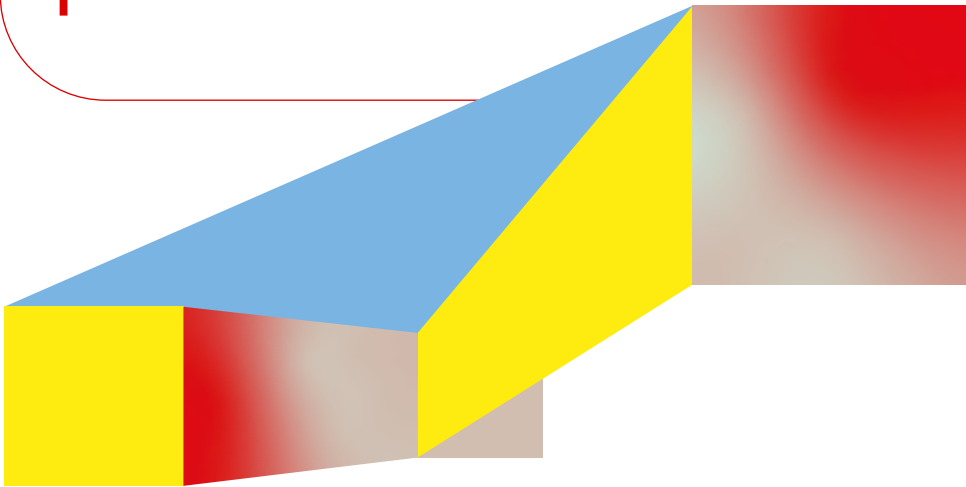
FACT / OBSERVATION

Digital technology possesses a unique ability to amplify existing social norms, both positive and negative. Mirca Madianou describes one aspect of this phenomenon as "technocolonialism", whereby digital technologies replicate and sometimes exacerbate historical colonial power structures. The shift here is that power is increasingly moving from state control to commercial entities. A few large, predominantly US-based tech companies have become essential infrastructure across various domains, including aid distribution, health care, education and law enforcement. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the reliance on Apple and Google for contact tracing. Other recent examples include Elon Musk's provision of satellites to Ukraine, as well as his withdrawal of Starlink from Sudan, which left non-governmental organizations without connectivity. Rather than fostering a progressive new world, these power dynamics suggest a scaling-up of historical injustices, concentrating power in the hands of individual tech leaders.

Idea 3 Technology has the ability to scale everything – good and bad practices alike

IDEA

In order to address these issues, we need to reconceptualize digital technologies as social constructs created by humans. Pascal Hufschmid, Executive Director of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, frames this as "situated knowledge". In an interview for this toolkit, he said: "We wish to empower our visitors to be critical and to question what we do and how we do it. I think museums should be transparent about how they collect, based on which norms, how they tell stories, and so on." This perspective acknowledges that digital technologies mirror the biases present in societies worldwide. But if we view digital technologies not merely as physical objects like smartphones and laptops, but instead as manifestations of emerging social norms, we can foster more critical and empathic engagement with technology. By implementing the measures below, museums can better navigate the complex landscape of digital technology, ensuring that it serves as a tool for positive social change rather than one that perpetuates existing inequalities.

Idea 3 Technology has the ability to scale everything – good and bad practices alike

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→   Thoroughly map existing structural challenges and inequalities within your organization.

→   Use this assessment as a benchmark to develop and implement digital projects.

→   Develop key evaluation questions to guide your digital initiatives. How can your digital systems improve inclusivity and accessibility for all of your visitors? How can you create more equitable practices that address historical wrongs?

→   Foster a culture of critical technology discourse within your organization.

→   Encourage discussions and training that highlight the social implications of digital technologies.

→   Design digital initiatives that prioritize empathy and inclusivity.

→   Ensure that these initiatives are informed by the needs and experiences of diverse communities.

Idea 4
The principles of knowledge, choice and justice should guide data collection and processing
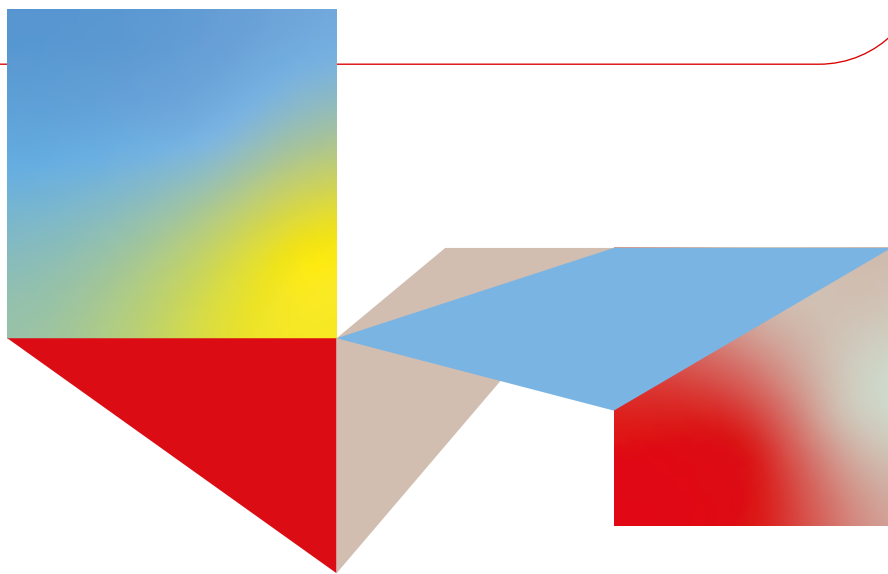
FACT / OBSERVATION

In the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation provides the legal framework for the processing of personal data. This regulation requires that data be freely given by the individual and used for a specific purpose that has been made clear at the point of data collection. The individual must be informed about who will process the data and how to withdraw permission. Consent must be unambiguous, with individuals actively opting in rather than being opted in by default. In the humanitarian sector, the conversation around data collection and processing practices has moved towards bigger questions of what choice and justice look like. For example, biometric data are now used to register refugees and support aid distribution. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) takes a different approach, using biometric data from an exclusively people-centred perspective, and only when this use helps to solve a humanitarian problem, such as reuniting families or identifying bodies. The ICRC explicitly does not use biometric data for relief purposes (food, water and shelter). This highlights how data collection and processing can be a mechanism of power and control.

Idea 4 The principles of knowledge, choice and justice should guide data collection and processing

IDEA

Museums should consider embedding data justice principles in their data-use policies, thus moving beyond mere compliance with legal frameworks. Lina Dencik et al. argue that there is "a need to position data in a way that engages more explicitly with questions of power, politics, inclusion and interests, as well as established notions of ethics, autonomy, trust, accountability, governance and citizenship". The ethical use of data requires that the benefits of data collection extend to the individuals from whom the data are collected. Museums should not use data solely for their own advantage, but instead should do so in a way that promotes justice and equity. Innovation, data and social responsibility should be of equal importance when designing new products and services within museums.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Regularly review what data you collect and why you collect it (for various purposes ranging from operations and marketing to sales and diversity monitoring). Remember that more data does not always mean better insights.

→ Ensure that data-collection practices align with both operational needs and ethical considerations, and avoid unnecessary data accumulation. Routinely consider what data are no longer needed, and ensure that such data are disposed of responsibly.

→ Provide clear, accessible information about data-collection practices, the purposes of data use and the benefits to the data subjects.

→ Consider data within wider conversations about barriers to access, decolonization and the civic responsibility of museums.

Idea 5
The cost-benefit analysis of tech solutions should be tipped towards the user, not the organization

FACT / OBSERVATION

In the early days of the World Wide Web, digital technologies were positioned in a utopian framework, with social media and user-generated content promising a redistribution of power. The reality has, however, been somewhat different. Academic José van Dijck argues that we are seeing a consolidation of power rather than a redistribution. In the free to access, online course EPFLx : Humanitarian Action in the Digital Age, academic, Nathaniel Raymond, suggests that, when it comes to adopting new systems and processes, we need to reframe the conversation away from technology and towards values: "It's more a management challenge than it is a technology challenge. You have to start with values." Taking a values-based approach, rather than a solutionist approach, places the emphasis on the user experience rather than on any efficiency the organization may benefit from, even if that means choosing to opt out of certain technologies. Raymond says: "Be intentional about it. Living our values can also mean ruling out the use of a technology, platform or company. What does it look like when the principles are affirmed through our use of technology?" This is a strategic approach to digital technology that aligns with the organization's broader purpose.

Idée 5 The cost-benefit analysis of tech solutions should be tipped towards the user, not the organization

IDEA

When developing new digital tools or services, museums should be led by their organizational mission. Museums are often short on money and, as a result, staff are also short on time and resources. While digital technologies may provide "solutions" that result in efficiencies, such solutions need to be assessed against the organization's wider values. Digital technology does not exist in isolation; it should be viewed through the same critical lens that we use for curatorial, education and outreach practices.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Involve staff from across your museum in digital steering groups. Insights from curatorial, security, operations and education teams, among others, will provide a robust peer critique for examining the potential challenges – both practical and ideological – in developing and deploying new digital products and services.

→ Consult visitors right from the start of any digital project. Also consult audiences that do not currently engage with your museum, but that you would like to engage with. Developing a robust stakeholder engagement strategy, from concept to operationalization, will ensure that users are embedded in the design and delivery of the project.

Idea 6
The "do no harm" principle should be the founding principle of all digital work


FACT / OBSERVATION

In the 1990s, Mary B. Anderson began to explore how the "do no harm" approach, derived from medical practice, could be used to examine both the intended and unintended consequences of the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. The ICRC is involved in an ongoing dialogue around the application of these seven principles within a digital context. Although harm is rarely intentional, we must examine the difference between managing risk and introducing it – a common challenge when it comes to digital transformation. In *Do no harm: A taxonomy of the challenges of humanitarian experimentation*, Kirstin Bergtora Sandvik *et al.* make the following argument: "More attention must be paid to market dynamics, and how invoking 'innovation' has become a competitive advantage that obviates the scrutiny which would otherwise accompany proposals."

Idea 6 The "do no harm" principle should be the founding principle of all digital work

IDEA

By focusing on potential harms, including unintended ones, we can develop more robust quality-assurance processes. Nathaniel Raymond uggests that harm identification is essential for harm reduction, stating: "The key to doing no harm, is knowing the harms," adding that "before you deploy, your job is to conduct a risk assessment". Conducting a risk assessment before deployment should be viewed not as a barrier to innovation but rather as a mechanism to develop robust digital products and services. This approach supports a functional mindset rather than a purely regulatory one. In the museum sector, the "do no harm" principle can take many shapes and forms: being self-critical about our own narratives and sharing our knowledge as situated, making sure people feel legitimate and empowered to engage, and acknowledging and addressing "threshold fear" as well as wider social challenges such as gender and mental health (both of which have been addressed in previous toolkits in this series: *10 ideas for a caring museum* and *10 ideas for a feminist and inclusive museum*).
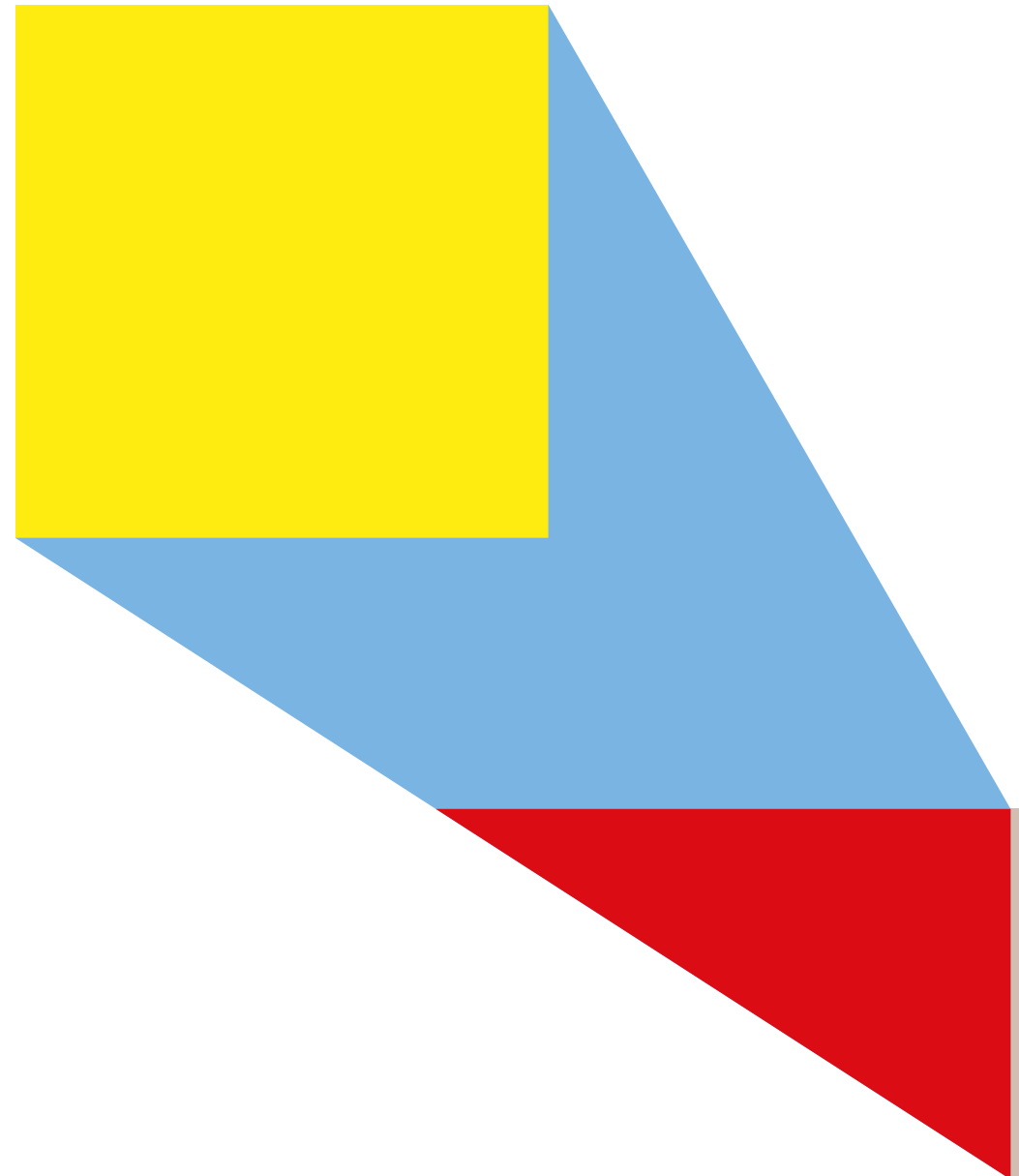
Idea 6 The "do no harm" principle should be the founding principle of all digital work

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Use existing frameworks to help your museum embed risk-assessment practices into a range of digital workflows. Engaging with these tools provides a mechanism for museums to explore what harm might look like and, crucially, offers structured approaches to identifying and mitigating potential harms and risks. Some of these frameworks are listed below:
  – The Open Data Institute's *Data Ethics Canvas* de l'Open Data provides a framework for mapping and analysing data across the data management process, from data collection and processing through to data legacy planning.
  – The *Consequence Scanning* framework, developed by doteveryone, is a facilitation tool centred around scenario-based work, allowing teams to map the intended and unintended consequences of a digital tool or service.

  – *AI: A Museum Planning Toolkit,* developed by The Museums + AI Network, provides a range of use cases, as well as planning frameworks focused on data workflows, AI capabilities and stakeholder mapping.

→ Adopt rigorous ethics approval processes similar to those used in academia. All research – not just medical – requires consideration of ethics and the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the design process. This approach ensures that potential risks are properly evaluated through scrutiny and stakeholder engagement.

→ Include trigger warnings when sensitive content is displayed.

Idea 7
Museums should take steps to combat misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and harmful information

FACT / OBSERVATION

Information is a source of power. But with unprecedented access to vast amounts of information, individuals, societies and governments are struggling to understand it all. The fact that information is readily available at the click of a button on our smartphones compounds this challenge. It is not always clear who creates, collects and curates information, or who tells stories with that information. As a result, it is difficult to discern whom or what to trust. The line between truth and fiction, between fact and lie, is often blurred, with one person's truth being another person's lie.

While some may label information they disagree with as "fake news" in a sensationalist manner, humanitarian organizations and civil society think tanks have shifted the focus to misinformation, disinformation and hate speech – a distinction that emphasizes intent. Misinformation involves accidently sharing incorrect information believed to be true. Disinformation is the deliberate sharing of false information. And hate speech involves the use of information to incite an emotional or physical response against an individual or group of people. The ICRC has moved beyond thinking about intent to thinking about impact, framing the conversation

Idea 7 Museums should take steps to combat misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and harmful information

around information that directly harms individuals, groups or entire societies.

Trusted sources in conflict are a key concern for the ICRC. In times of crisis, who can be trusted? Making a decision based on bad information can lead to direct harm. As such, humanitarian organizations are engaging with news platforms as a means to sustain mechanisms for spreading information during periods of civil unrest, deadly heatwaves and other times of crisis. But if we want these sources to be there for us when we need them the most, we need to invest in them now.

Trusted organizations are at risk of disinformation attacks that seek to undermine their authority. This is a constant risk in the humanitarian sector. But it is also a growing risk for museums. In the UK, the National Trust has been attacked and labelled

"woke" after engaging in a critical conversation about colonialism. Likewise, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution has come under fire because it will help anyone, regardless of their immigration status. Museums and other civil society organizations are not immune to the impact of this new information landscape.

Idea 7 Museums should take steps to combat misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and harmful information

IDEA

By developing relationships with local newspapers, TV channels and radio stations, museums can provide a platform for trustworthy information. When we talk about "trustworthy information", we mean anything from local-interest stories to more challenging narratives that allow visitors to ask questions and raise issues of local, national or international interest – past, present and future. Museums can provide the time and space to address key issues such as colonialism and climate change. Fondation Hirondelle frame this approach as moving away from thinking about audiences to thinking about beneficiaries. In a journalism context, the topic is framed as a move towards solutions journalism – in other words, being as useful as we possibly can be. But what does solutions-based museum practice look like? How does museum practice change if we think about beneficiaries rather than audiences or visitors? How can museums empower storytellers to create trustworthy content?

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Press pause. Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech are built around speed and emotion. If your museum is "attacked", respond in a way that reflects your organization's values. Corinne Fowler from the National Trust, says: "There is a big difference between calling in and calling out. Calling people out triggers feelings of shame and defensiveness which entrench difference and deepen divisions. Calling people in acknowledges somebody's starting point, encourages calmer conversations and potentially provides pathways to more open, evidence-based thinking. After all, changing an opinion is a big ask for all of us. It is a genuine challenge."

→ Explain how stories are created, and offer opportunities for visitors to reinterpret a collection or exhibition. Provide "facts" and ask what story they might tell. Document and share how each visitor crafts a different narrative with the same information. Use this as a

Idea 7 Museums should take steps to combat misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and harmful information

mechanism to think about wider issues such as the concepts of "fact-checking" and "content moderation".

→ Build pathways between education and outreach work and trusted information sources for the visitors you are working with. Consider how museums can support visitors in asking questions and raising issues that affect their everyday lives.

→ Pay for adverts in local media outlets. Local news sources are struggling financially. So when developing marketing campaigns, museums could think about social investment principles. This may feel like an outdated practice, but it can help to maintain crucial trusted information infrastructure in your area. Paying for an advert in a local newspaper funds a journalist's work, whereas paying for an advert on social media simply adds to the pay packet of tech billionaires.

→ Provide opportunities for journalists to tell important stories. Move beyond inviting journalists to a photocall for an exhibition launch. Instead, embed them in the development of new exhibitions, and invite them to spend time in your archives and collection storage.

→ Give local newspapers exposure in your museum as a way to support local journalism. Place copies in staff rooms or cafes and, if feasible, sell them in museum shops.

Idea 8
The past should act as a solid foundation to build new worlds

FACT / OBSERVATION

The humanitarian sector has embraced the idea of innovation, often equating it with necessary risk-taking and rapid response in times of crisis. However, the history of humanitarian work also shows us that, in a drive for new and better ways of working, the founding principles of the sector can become lost. The humanitarian sector's struggle with colonial legacies parallels the challenges museums face in balancing innovation with historical accountability. This can lead to the overlooking of historical misjudgements, such as the looting of cultural heritage and the creation of biased taxonomies.

IDEA

When developing digital tools and services, museums should look at the errors of their history – looting cultural heritage, collecting human remains or creating taxonomies and hierarchies of knowledge that favour one cultural identity, race or ethnicity over another. Focusing on process rather than output, and embedding a slow and robust critical framework around innovation, can help to ensure that institutional memory supports the development of a robust operating context going forward. Embracing a "slow and thorough" ethos over a "quick and chaotic" one better serves museum stakeholders and upholds the civic role of these institutions.

Idea 8 The past should act as a solid foundation to build new worlds

As Tristram Besterman notes, museums have always changed to reflect social norms: "Museum ethics reflects social context and articulates a contract of trust between the public museum and society; and [it] expresses both fundamental principles that stand the test of time and more subtle shifts of emphasis, reflecting social change and the evolving role of museums in society." Trust is more important than innovation. But without both, museums lose their place in society.

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Value institutional memory. Often, innovation sits in a team that does not reflect the diversity of the wider museum workforce or visitor base. Ensure that the longest-serving staff member, and the newest addition to the team, are invited to contribute to development meetings.

→ Engage retired colleagues. Provide annual opportunities for former colleagues to visit the museum and see your latest exhibition, and get their insights into future plans. This helps to maintain a connection to the museum's history and values.

→ Work with professionals from other sectors, as well as with local voluntary and civil society organizations that represent diverse people and experiences.

→ Work with academics and students to learn more about your institution.

→ Strive to build a diverse workforce that reflects your community and your collection.

→ Value foundational work, such as data cleaning and tagging, just as much as the public-facing end-product. Recognizing and appreciating this behind-the-scenes work will ultimately result in better products.

Idea 9
Cyber security is pivotal to digital success
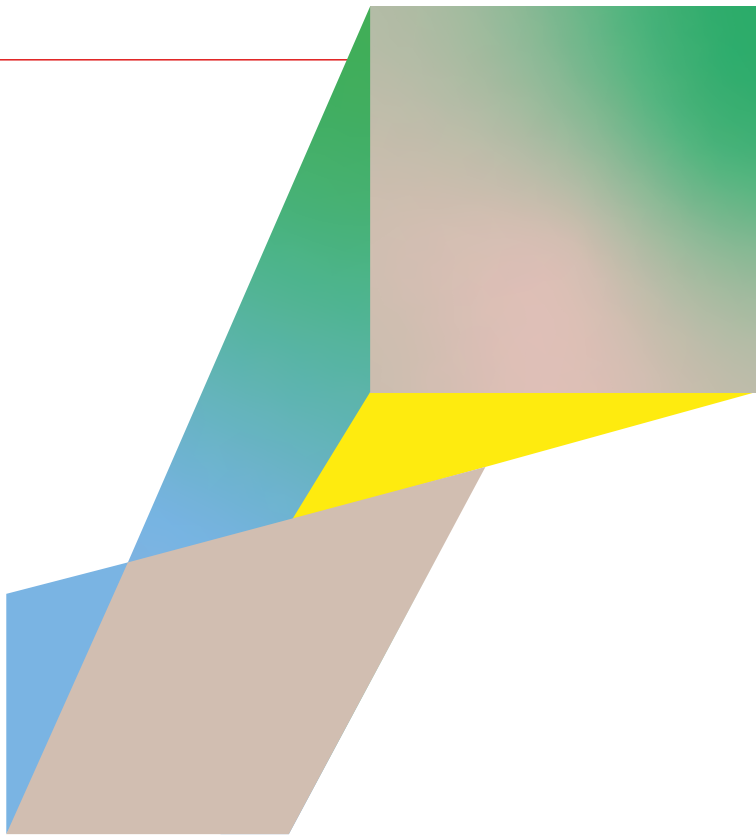
FACT / OBSERVATION

In today's digital age, cyber security is as crucial to the success and integrity of museums as preserving and maintaining the physical security of their collections. Museums, like other civic institutions, rely heavily on digital infrastructure, making them vulnerable to cyber threats. This observation underscores the necessity of cyber security measures to safeguard digital collections and sensitive data.

Just as physical buildings and collections require maintenance, digital infrastructure demands regular upkeep for long-term access and sustainability. More importantly, robust security measures are needed to protect the integrity of digital collections, knowledge and data. Recent high-profile cyber attacks on prominent organizations highlight the growing risk. In 2022, the ICRC was the target of a sophisticated hack that exposed the data of 515,000 individuals worldwide. And in 2023, the British Library experienced a breach that compromised human-resources data and disrupted core services for months. These incidents illustrate that, as dependence on digital technologies increases, so too do cyber threats.

Museums often depend on outside companies for web hosting, content creation and audience

Idea 9 Cyber security is pivotal to digital success

engagement through social media. This reliance introduces additional vulnerabilities, as the security practices of these companies directly impact the museum's cyber security posture. Museums must therefore critically evaluate and monitor these partnerships in order to mitigate risks.

IDEA

Museums can learn valuable lessons from their own histories, which can help them to understand the evolving role of knowledge institutions and the changing standards that apply to data security. Digital collections, just like physical collections, are vulnerable to theft and destruction. Historical examples, such as the destruction of the Public Record Office of Ireland in 1922, which resulted in the loss of 700 years of records during the Irish Civil War, highlight the catastrophic impact of conflicts on knowledge preservation. The 1976 bombing of the Ulster Museum Collection Store, the 2003 looting of Iraqi museums and the 2011 looting of the Egyptian Museum further emphasize that the destruction of cultural heritage is a recurrent issue.

These historical parallels remind us that digital collections must be protected with the same diligence as physical ones. Planning for unforeseen future threats is essential to ensuring the continuity and security of digital assets.

Idea 9 Cyber security is pivotal to digital success

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→   Provide museum staff across all departments
     with training on cyber security and data security.
     The International Red Cross and Red Crescent
     Museum's "data hygiene" course, for instance,
     has enhanced employees' knowledge of data
     security practices.

→   Engage in professional debates and share
     information about cyber security incidents
     and responses in order to strengthen the
     resilience of your museum's community. Being
     transparent about breaches, as demonstrated
     by the British Library and the ICRC, fosters a
     culture of learning and preparedness. Likewise,
     be open to exchanging skills and experiences
     with other museums.

→   Adhere to legal requirements for reporting
     data breaches and collaborate with regulatory
     bodies in order to maintain accountability and
     continuously improve cyber security practices.

→   Treat digital data with the same care as
     physical information, and plan for future
     security needs as a way to protect your
     organization's valuable digital assets.

Idea 10
Museums can serve as safe spaces for critical technology discourse
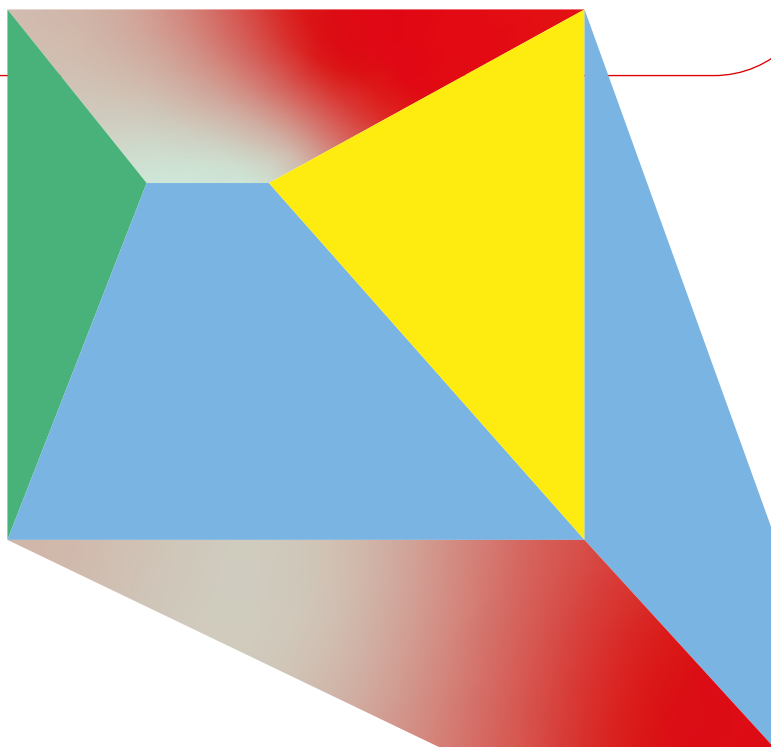
FACT / OBSERVATION

The digital realm is inherently political, influencing societal dynamics through its capacity to connect and divide, aid and harm. While it may make us more connected, it can also sow division. And while it may aid humanitarian rescue efforts, it can also support autonomous or semi-autonomous killing. Digital dilemmas are both physical and ideological, with disinformation being used to influence elections and spark civil disturbances.

IDEA

Despite their historical errors, museums offer a platform for public discourse. They are valued for their factual, research-based and objective presentation of information (although this is not true for all visitors, many of whom find their culture and identities misrepresented). Research by the American Alliance of Museums in 2021 found that museums were considered more trustworthy than local and national news sources and government and social media. The key reasons people gave for trusting museums included that they presented facts, that they were research-oriented, that they offered independent and objective information, and that they allowed people to draw their own conclusions.

Idea 10 Museums can serve as safe spaces for critical technology discourse

Critical technology discourse, a research-related term coined by The Museums + AI Network, refers to the emerging conversation and practices of engaging with the political aspects of technology in museums. By providing space for audiences to engage with technology through a critical lens, museums can demonstrate their contemporary relevance. This approach also allows museums to use their curatorial methods to research, explain, and provide a platform for civic engagement with technologies. By facilitating critical engagement with technology, museums can ultimately contribute to informed public debate. Could museums be a space where artists, academics and humanitarians come together to debate questions around digital technology and humanitarian action, and to re-think the way we live?

PRACTICAL MEASURES

→ Commission artists to develop new approaches to public engagement, and support this development work through the skills and knowledge of museum staff. The ICRC, for instance, commissioned artist Marta Revuelta to deliver a workshop examining synthetic data sets and generative AI in combat zones. This workshop provided an opportunity for a diverse audience to engage with her work _The Logics of Droning_ through a critical technology lens. Participants left the workshop with a better understanding of the artist's work. But they also came away with a working knowledge of the politics and biases inherent in data-set creation and generative AI, as well as a curiosity to learn more about these technologies in conflict zones.

Idea 10 Museums can serve as safe spaces for critical technology discourse

→ Encourage artists to explore new narrative forms and interpretive strategies. The way stories are told and engaged with is changing. Social media provides opportunities for new ways to engage with visitors – but it also provides a space for museums to help visitors better understand how stories are told and how critical thinking is key to "reading" the internet. For example, the ICRC commissioned data journalist Julia Janicki to deliver a workshop on data storytelling and data visualization. Participants had an opportunity to critically engage with the way in which data can be employed to manipulate a story, and the manner in which graphics and images can be used to create a compelling and emotional narrative. By building their own data stories, participants left with a working knowledge of how designers craft narratives, as well as an ability to read the internet in a more critically engaged way.

→ Treat digital technologies as both exhibits and tools. This approach positions museums as active cultural creators rather than mere passive displayers, enhancing their contemporary significance.

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

Bios

Oonagh Murphy

Dr Oonagh Murphy is redefining how cultural organizations navigate the digital age. She works closely with museums, galleries, government bodies and funders to shape digital strategies and policies that make a real difference. As a Senior Lecturer in Digital Culture and Society at Goldsmiths, University of London, she teaches students in the Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, inspiring them to think creatively about the intersection of technology and the arts. Her dual roles as a Research Fellow at Arts Council England and a Fellow at The Alan Turing Institute underscore her deep commitment to advancing the digital landscape within the cultural sector.

In 2019, Dr Murphy's collaboration with the National Gallery and The Metropolitan Museum of Art led to the creation of The Museums + AI Network. This project carved out a whole new discipline where artificial intelligence and museology meet. Her experience stretches back to the early 2010s, during which she has become a trusted advisor and influential voice in conversations about tech policy, data rights and the role of public institutions in our digital world.

An advocate for ethical data use, Dr Murphy is an accredited Data Ethics Facilitator with the Open Data Institute. She also advises the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, contributing to policies that shape the arts, heritage and tourism sectors. She can often be found speaking at key events and leading discussions that push the boundaries of current thinking.

Bios

View of the exhibition "Petrit Halilaj (Unfinished Histories)" © Zoé Aubry

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum asks a central question: how does humanitarian action affect us all, here and now? In order to reflect on this question with its visitors, it invites artists and cultural partners to examine the issues, values and the current situation of humanitarian action. It thus asserts itself, in an open, agile and warm manner, as a place of memory, creation and debate.

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Online resources

Humanitarian Action in the Digital Age
This massive open online course (MOOC) was developed by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), the ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

ICRC Digital Dilemmas
With the increased digitalization of our world, people affected by crises, whether natural or human-caused, are exposed to new types of risks. This interactive website takes you deep into this chaotic adventure. The work is also on display at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum.

Speakers who took part in the "Let's Talk about Digital Dilemmas" talks (2023-2024)

— **Alexander Barclay,** cantonal Delegate for Digital Policy, Geneva, Switzerland

— **John Bryant,** research Fellow, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute

— **Jacqueline Dalton,** head of Editorial Content, Fondation Hirondelle

— **Valérie Gorin,** head of Learning, Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies

— **Dorota Grajewska,** artist

— **Julia Janicki,** data Journalist

— **Cassie Jiun Seo,** digital Transformation and Humanitarian Action Consultant

— **Irvin Loy,** journalist, The New Humanitarian

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