Evaluation of inequalities of access in UK online digital collections: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a systematic literature review into how UK Cultural Heritage Institutions (CHIs) deal with issues of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). In recent years, researchers have addressed the fragmented nature of Cultural Heritage impact evaluation (e.g. Tanner, 2012; Verwayen, Wilms & Fallon, 2016), leading to the generation of impact evaluation models that attempt to standardise assessment across the entire digital resource lifecycle. However, the Covid-19 pandemic saw an almost overnight shift to digital delivery of collections and services (Greenhall, 2020), and outreach and engagement activities. CHIs are identifying inadequacies in their understanding of remote, excluded, and under-represented communities, as demonstrated by the National Library of Scotland's (2020) 2020-25 Library Strategy.

This paper therefore sets out to address two overlapping questions:

- 　　　To what extent does the current literature on CHI impact evaluation address EDI?
- 　　　To what extent are the outcomes of impact evaluation reported in the scholarly literature?

A systematic review was undertaken, investigating 6 concepts: CHIs and collection locations (55 terms); online provision/access and outreach (6 terms); change and evaluation/assessment thereof (10 terms); coronavirus, lockdown, and synonyms (8 terms); audiences and inequalities (18 terms); impact and value (8 terms). Searches were made across Web of Science, ProQuest, SpringerLink and Scopus, thus largely excluding grey literature and reports from private CHIs.

An initial pool of 86,608 articles was identified. Several filtering steps (e.g. date (1990-2021) and keyword filtering) reduced this pool (n=36). Following a further citation review of prominent evaluation frameworks, a final pool of literature was identified (n=60). These final items' titles and abstracts were analysed to ascertain whether they were likely to discuss one or more CHIs, refer to the UK, discuss digital technology or the digitising process, discuss impact and/or discuss online access.

Our findings indicate that there is a significant gap in academic research on the topic of inequalities of access in relation to the digitalisation of online collections in CHI. While there were some articles discussing CHI's where lessons are there to support future digitalisation efforts or evaluation of access and impact (n=18). There were only a select number of articles in a UK context (n=14), that discuss lessons to support digital technology or digitalisation efforts (n=4), impact (n = 7), or online access (n=6). There was only one article which discussed all criteria (n=1). While this work had a UK focus, several non-UK based articles present lessons to support

efforts (n=4), discuss impact (n=1) or online access (n=1). It is also worth noting that very few articles from the initial pool were also articles that cited the evaluation frameworks, indicating distinctive communities within academia.

Our findings suggest that EDI is, at most, implicitly addressed in literature on CHI impact evaluation. We therefore recommend that further work is required to centre and amplify previously excluded voices within impact evaluation frameworks. Furthermore, the relative lack of impact evaluation cases studies in the scholarly literature suggests greater transparency is required in reporting on the impact and value of digital collections.

KEYWORDS

inclusion, access, digitalisation, evaluation, cultural heritage institution.

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