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Networks of Care. Types, Challenges and Potentialities[1]

In the past two decades, several solutions to preserve digital heritage have emerged [1] (Dekker and Falcão 2017, Engel and Wharton 2014, Rechert et al. 2013). While some of them work well, in many cases the content and information changes, as most hardware and software follows the economic model of planned obsolescence (Pope 2017, Fitzpatrick 2011). Consequently, endless migration, emulation, virtualization and documentation tools, and projects are being set up to prolong the functioning of digital heritage. However, a focus on high-end technical preservation methods for maintaining digital heritage is revealed to be unsustainable and questionable. This happens at the level of the method—preservation approaches such as migration, emulation or virtualization risk changing the form and content of projects, and similarly, with every software upgrade the media environment in which these projects exist can further change their aesthetics and functioning (Dekker 2018, Rinehart and Ippolito 2014). Consequently, specialist knowledge and expertise are also continually required to solve new technical challenges, and at the same time, non-professionals who are engaged in preservation efforts will need specific guidance, both of which are a burden to most organizations (Summers 2020). Finally, the enduring technical rat-race comes at a high energy cost, which results in significant carbon footprints for digital heritage projects, and thus digital preservation presents a challenge to the ecological environment (Bhowmik 2018, Cubitt 2016, Gabrys 2013). Taken together, a tension emerges between the need to keep digital heritage safe for future research, cultural memory or evidence, and the continuing need to update technical tools and methods to enable these art projects to survive. But this poses an increasing burden on organizational infrastructures and methods as well as on the ecological environment. In other words, digital sustainability is a preservation dilemma, or even a paradox.

One of the ways to tackle the technical dependency and restructure the organizational burden could be by considering the concept of networks of care as a model to rethink preservation practice. A network of care is based on a transdisciplinary attitude and a combination of professionals and non-experts who manage or work on a shared project (Dekker 2018). More specifically, for a network of care to succeed outside of an institutional framework, it ideally has to consist of several characteristics. To summarize, ideally a network of care adheres to a transdisciplinary attitude consisting of a non-hierarchical or informal structure with different levels of expertise. To enable the creation and administration of a project, the transmission of information is facilitated by a common mode of sharing in which everyone in the group has access to all the documents or archives. Ideally this is an open system or a dynamic set of tools that is used, and also cared for, where users can add, edit, and manage information, and track changes. Such a system can also be monitored by the network, potentially both by the users and the machine itself. An added bonus is that, if someone leaves, the project can continue because the

content and information is always accessible and embedded in a larger network. This allows users to take control of a shared project, thus obtaining meaning from their 'investments'. To be able to share information and benefit from experience and insights gained elsewhere (for example, in other networks dealing with similar issues), a network should be dynamic, so that individuals can move easily between roles and projects, which can also be merged or divided among smaller or more specialized groups. [2]

While investigating the social sustainability efforts of several art projects, I noticed different types of networks of care. While most emerge from urgent issues, or are formed around an emotional connection, they often develop and are organized in different ways. Here I make a distinction between how a network of care can be: 1. (part of) the art project; 2. an artistic preservation approach; and 3. a proposition as part of a pilot study. Analyzing these different approaches will highlight the challenges and potentials of a network of care for digital preservation. One of the main insights from these case studies is that, as a model of shared knowledge, a network of care means that not one person has all the information, nor all the power, since the different elements and expertise are distributed. In other words, everyone may own part of a project, but the network governs the whole.

The technical platform that is used to collaborate with and share findings functions as a binding element, keeping social relations and potential technical elements together, for example, when a project (or parts of it) is also archived on the platform. Moreover, such a technical construction informs the specific information exchange and the ability to follow historical changes. As a consequence, it will co-determine the success of a network, and as such, it could be argued that technology also cares. Instead of focusing on the specific material elements of a project or on a particular outcome, such an approach regards digital preservation as an ongoing cyclical and evolving process in which various carers come together, share their ideas, but also disperse, reconvene, and change, potentially ad infinitum. This includes acknowledging that, in addition to the actions of humans, materials and technology intrinsically affect the art project as well as the preservation method. Taken together they can offer new perspectives on preservation thinking and doing. Digital preservation as a relational network of humans, materials and technology is executed, reacted upon, and it consequently evolves or mutates, making it a complex process riddled with kinks, folds, hiccups and slippages, which twist and bend in various directions, creating uncertainty, unpredictable behavior and surprising results.

In this sense, digital preservation can be understood as a speculative practice where knowledge unfolds between subjects (human and non-human) whose ability to know is mediated by how they reach out, and by the receptivity of the other. Digital preservation then becomes an intriguing combination of adaptability and perseverance, and is formed and developed by the network, in which social, political, economic, and technical relations overlap in various ways. In the process, the project as well as the network will likely change and can produce new forms of care. While this proposition has the potential — or may seem—to disrupt the status quo, it is not merely about changing or choosing one or the other option; rather, what the conceptual framework of a network of care proposes is developing a process of relation-making and supporting shared-learning.

2   In Dekker (2018): 88-92, I describe the context of networks of care in more detail, in particular, by building on Hui and Halpin (2013).

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Networks of Care

Politiken des
(Er)haltens und
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