

Case Study: British Library, The UK in 2024 Phase Three “Open Source and Market Shaping”



Neil Fitzgerald, Head of
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Library

Neil Fitzgerald leads the Digital Research Team that works across the organisation to ensure the Library’s collections, systems, policies, and processes meet the emerging needs of those who want to deeply integrate digital content, data, and methods, into their work. He is a digital cultural heritage professional with extensive practical and management experience across the international cultural heritage and higher education sectors. A member of a number of advisory boards in the fields of digital humanities and digital cultural heritage. He has also been accountable for the successful delivery of a number of major digital initiatives in the UK and internationally. Before joining the Library, he worked in the commercial sector..

Case Study: British Library

Open source software is playing a critical role in enhancing market share, driving innovation, and fostering collaboration in the evolving digital landscape of the GLAM sector (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums). A prominent case in point is the British Library, which is embracing open standards and open source software as core components of its mission to make collections increasingly accessible to others. Their work highlights how engagement with open approaches is helping to expand their influence and relevance in the digital age, solidifying their role as leaders in the digital knowledge economy. Neil Fitzgerald, Head of Digital Research, explains the role of open approaches at the British Library.

Expanding Market Reach Through Open Source

Libraries are tasked with not only preserving knowledge but also making it accessible to diverse audiences and in recent years, digital collections have become a key part of this mission. The British Library’s corporate strategy focuses on this goal, aiming to make their own digital collections more accessible for research, creativity and public engagement. Open approaches form a key aspect of this strategy, enabling the library to use, develop, and most importantly, share tools that cater to a broad user base.

The digital collections, available in an impressive range of languages and formats, are an example of how the library uses open platforms to support international collaboration, thereby reaching a broader market. The ability to work with collections in different languages and formats across borders has





enabled the library to engage with a global community. These collections, licensed openly where possible, attract not only researchers but also professionals in the creative industries who reuse and remix the content for new outputs. This accessibility widens the library's appeal and attracts diverse users, thereby enhancing its market share.

Fostering Innovation and Reducing Costs

Previously, tools that libraries needed were either unavailable or not domain specific, so organisations like the British Library turned to open source alternatives which allowed them to create tools that addressed specific research and business needs. For example, open source optical character recognition software to enhance the understanding of historical texts, making previously inaccessible content available for study and reuse. This flexibility gives the library a competitive edge, offering services that appeal to a wider audience.

As a publicly funded organisation, the library operates under strict budget constraints. Open source solutions are an important tool in obtaining value for money, thereby allowing the library to direct funds to other critical areas.

Collaboration as a Market Advantage

Libraries are part of a larger collaborative ecosystem of cultural heritage, including, galleries, archives and museums (GLAM Sector), where sharing knowledge and resources is essential for success. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of open approaches is the fostering of international collaboration, which helps organisations within the GLAM Sector solve common challenges more effectively. An example of this is the library's involvement with the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF). This initiative highlights how open source tools based on open standards enable efficient sharing and utilisation of digital collections across various organisations. IIIF is built on open standards, with an accompanying ecosystem of open source software that facilitates key abilities such as deep zoom, image comparison, and virtual reunification of digital items, and annotations. By adopting such an approach, libraries can contribute to and benefit from a global community that supports innovation and resource sharing, thus increasing their market share and making the most of tight budgets.

Long Term Sustainability

A unique challenge faced by memory organisations such as the British Library is that they have to plan for the preservation and accessibility of their collections not just for years but for centuries. Thinking long-term often presents various challenges, but open solutions are inherently flexible, enabling them to adapt to evolving needs and keep up with continuous technological changes.





Conclusion

The British Library's engagement with open approaches has provided numerous advantages that enhance their market share, offering a flexible, cost-effective, and collaborative approach to digital innovation. By contributing to the open source community, the GLAM sector can not only benefit from shared resources but also position themselves as leaders in innovation. In a world where access to knowledge is increasingly digital, open approaches allow cultural heritage organisations to stay competitive and continue serving diverse, global audiences.

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