A Data-Geek's Perspective on iPres 2014

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When I was asked by the programme committee to summarise the conference, my first reaction was to ask "are you sure?". My second reaction was to accept with gratitude!

The reason for my initial reticence is that iPres is not my community. You should also be aware that I was only able to attend part of the conference (because of the multiple tracks), although having the proceedings on the lanyard was very useful for the sessions I couldn't attend. Finally, because of my job, I tend to see things through a data lens and this probably coloured some of my reactions.

Let me begin by complimenting the programme committee on the quality of the papers and keynotes that they attracted, and all those who attended on the level of enthusiasm and interaction. It is clear that you all care passionately about preservation, and this showed.

I thought the conference had a great selection of practice papers (particularly in the short papers section). These showed practitioners reflecting thoughtfully and intentionally on what had worked and what hadn't. I also applaud the number of speakers arguing for pragmatic solutions that don't try to be perfect – this is a shift from preservation events I have attended in the past. There was also a recognition (in the data domain at least) that doing it perfectly (or even well?) is impossible – pragmatism is the only appropriate response.

On the subject of data, there were a number of talks (keynote and otherwise) about the importance of data to the scholarly record. These, either implicitly or explicitly, argued for the importance of preserving that data and the processes that produced it. This is, I think, a new frontier for many within the preservation community. There are a whole series of new challenges in the research data space – it is not the same as the existing born-digital challenge, for reasons explored in the paper that Herbert van de Sompel and I presented.

Informed by my experiences in the eresearch infrastructure domain over the last decade, I would encourage those people who are building tools to avoid the temptations of reinventing wheels where perfectly good ones exist already. There is real value in adding effort to an existing community of developers, and it results in more sustainable outcomes.

On the subject of sustainability, I would again commend the poster by Paul Wheatley on lessons learned in developing digital preservation tools.[1] He said everything I was planning on saying on the subject, and said it better:

- engage with the community
- build on existing work
- design for longevity
- ally with a custodian

I would also argue for a stronger focus on user-pull (and development based on well-defined and grounded use cases) over technology push. Having said that, I did seem some encouraging signs at the conference of a desire to build on what is there and meet the needs of real users, as well as some interesting research ideas that may bear fruit in the future.

Let me conclude by reminding of something that I am sure you all know: Digital preservation is too important not to care about it. Much of the work reported at this conference will play a key role in the solutions that need to be developed. Thank you for your commitment and energy in developing those solutions!

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[1] http://www.slideshare.net/prwheatley/ipres2014-poster-02