

Digitalization as De-Elitization?

The Impacts of Digital Innovation on the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation.

Elena Missaggia

Venice School of Management, Italy

elena.missaggia@unive.it

Monica Calcagno

Venice School of Management, Italy

calc@unive.it

Andrea Carlo Lo Verso

Venice School of Management, Italy

andreacarlo.loverso@unive.it

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of digital transformation within cultural institutions, analysing how digitization practices serve as a strategic lever, capable of driving innovation, enhancing accessibility and fostering engagement. Our empirical setting is the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation, a historically elite-oriented institution dedicated to the study and promotion of music and musicology. In 2023, the Foundation launched its digitization laboratory, the LeviDigiLab, as a driver for reputational renewal and audience engagement. Adopting an action research approach combined with qualitative and quantitative data analysis, we examine how the initiatives and partnerships developed within the digital laboratory enabled the Foundation to preserve its cultural heritage while reaching new audiences. However, a critical question arises: does this represent a sustained process of organizational democratization or a transient adaptation? The study contributes to current debates on the democratizing potential of digital innovation in the cultural sector.

Keywords:

Digital Transformation, Cultural Innovation, Audience Engagement, Cultural Preservation, Digital Heritage.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, digitalization has emerged as a fundamental driver of renewal for cultural institutions. It is no longer merely a technological opportunity linked to heritage preservation, but rather a structural transformation capable of reshaping access methods, forms of participation, and organizational sustainability (Marras, 2019). According to data from the Digital Innovation Observatories (2023), more than 80% of Italian cultural institutions surveyed in 2023 had developed digital content accessible either partially or exclusively online. Additionally, over 70% had integrated digital tools - such as QR codes, audio guides, and interactive touchscreens - to enhance visitor experiences. These figures clearly indicated that digital innovation is no longer an optional accessory, but a functional necessity for institutional relevance and contemporary cultural engagement.

Platforms such as Europeana and Google Arts & Culture further demonstrate the potential of digital infrastructures to foster inclusivity, broaden access, and democratize cultural heritage (Sood, 2021; EPRS, 2020). However, this necessary digital transformation remains uneven (Borin & Donato, 2023): small and medium sized cultural institutions frequently face systemic challenges, such as limited funding and human resources, which hinder their ability to plan and implement a coherent digitization strategy.

This paper investigates how smaller cultural institutions can strategically leverage digital transformation to redefine their institutional identity, expand accessibility and initiate a process of “de-elitization” - namely, rethinking its mission as a cultural organization at the service of a broader public than a specialistic niche audience. Our empirical setting is the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation in Venice, an institution historically dedicated to music and musicology and deeply rooted in the intellectual and cultural traditions of twentieth century Venice. Founded in 1962 in accordance with the testamentary wishes of Ugo Levi and Olga Brunner,

the Foundation is housed in Palazzo Giustinian Lolin. The building had already become a vibrant cultural salon by the 1930s, frequented by the Venetian bourgeoisie and notable figures from the international literary and musical scenes (Busetto, 2013; Milner, 2003). Despite preserving a valuable cultural heritage - including an important musicological library and an archival collection of musical manuscripts - the Foundation has long remained a niche institution, accessible primarily to scholars and specialists. It is within this context that the LeviDigiLab was launched in 2023, a laboratory for the digitalization of the Foundation's cultural heritage. The project not only generated new digital content but also initiated a comprehensive organizational rethinking, with tangible impacts on internal structure, communication, staff competencies, and the institution's external image. This transformation unfolded in a context in which, as Garlandini (2021) emphasizes, cultural and creative industries must respond swiftly to social and technological changes in order to remain relevant in today's cultural landscape. In this sense, digitalization is not merely a functional tool but a catalyst for cultural innovation, capable of redefining missions, languages, and ways of engaging with the public.

The objective of this research is to analyze how the introduction of digital technologies has transformed the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation in terms of content accessibility, audience composition and engagement, and institutional identity. The study adopts an action research approach combined with qualitative and descriptive quantitative analysis. The quantitative data regarding in person visitors and events has been collected by the Foundation's personnel throughout the years; whereas data associated with digital activities has been gathered by early analytics related to the LEVIData, the digital archive of the Levi Foundation (<https://levidata.fondazionelevi.it/>). While these data remain limited and not yet systematically gathered by the Foundation, they provide an indicative snapshot of the initial outcomes of the digitization process. The qualitative analysis is based on over five hours of semi-structured interviews with Foundation staff, focused on three key themes: organizational change, the internal perceptions of the institution's strengths and challenges, and the impact of the digitization laboratory. Ultimately, the action research approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) allowed for a dynamic interplay between theoretical reflection and practical implementation. Within this framework, two strategic interventions were developed collaboratively with the Foundation: a public workshop regarding the identity of the Levi Foundation and the future implications of digital transformation in the cultural sector, organized at the end of March 2025; and a participatory educational program which involved university students in the creation of new communication artifacts reflecting the Foundation's evolving identity. These initiatives share a common goal: to leverage digitalization as a strategic tool for opening up, narrating, and transforming institutional identity, while reaffirming the Levi Foundation's role within the cultural landscape of Venice and beyond.

This research was part of a broader 18 month FSE funded project on archival digitization, coordinated by IUAV University of Venice and Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which aimed to develop and assess methods and tools for improving cultural valorization strategies. Within this framework, the present study offers a reflective contribution on the impact of digitization initiatives on audience growth and diversification. More broadly, it interrogates the role of digital technologies not only as internal catalysts for institutional renewal, but as external instruments for reshaping relationships with communities, audiences, and contemporary cultural landscape.

2. Case study: The Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation towards a cultural democratization of its legacy

The Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation is an internationally renowned cultural institution in the Venetian panorama that, since 1962, has been devoted to the study and promotion of music and musicology. Founded following the testamentary wishes of the Levi couple (Milner, 2008), the Foundation embodies the legacy of a Jewish bourgeois family, influential for the economic and cultural growth of the city of Venice, and deeply passionate about music and culture. Without heirs, Ugo and Olga Levi dedicated their entire lives to music, collecting manuscripts, books and scores and creating in their residence, Palazzo Giustinian Lolin, a musical and literary salon. Between the Tens and the Forties of the XX century (Zorzi, 1994), the building became a vital point for Italian and international culture, gathering in one place prominent and influential figures of the time, discussing music, art and culture, and developing cultural projects (Busetto, 2013; Milner, 2003).

In the Sixties, Palazzo Giustinian Lolin became the official residence of the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation, reinforcing the strong bond with the Venetian musical heritage thanks to its proximity to other prestigious cultural institutions such as the Benedetto Marcello Conservatory, La Fenice theatre, the Marciana Library, and the Luigi Nono Archive. In 1986, in memory of the first Foundation's presidents, the Gianni Milner Library opened its doors to the public with 40.000 volumes and numerous personal collections (Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation). This marked a step towards a great public accessibility, though it remained primarily targeted at scholars and professionals in the field. In 1992, the current president, Giorgio Busetto, assumed his presidency at the Levi Foundation, consolidating the economic sustainability of the institution and developing a strategy which combined the valorization of the past, the strengthening of the present, and a forward-looking vision for the future (Busetto, 2018).

However, over the past decade the Levi Foundation faced significant challenges. As gathered from the interviews, the primary challenge of the Foundation concerns its economic sustainability. Currently, the main source of revenue comes from renting out its property spaces. The Levi Foundation thus uses the remaining space to host the library and the offices, while the great majority of public events, concerts and talks are hosted by other partners both in Venice and abroad. However, such revenues are no longer sufficient to sustain the institution's cultural activities. Due to the depletion of rentable spaces, the limited access to public and private fundings, and the inability to transform cultural initiatives into additional sources of incomes, the Levi Foundation is now confronted with an economical crisis. This situation is further compounded by a cultural offering that is tailored to musicology scholars. This enables the Foundation to serve as a prestigious center for these topics at an international level but also limits its audience to experts in the field and academics. Despite recent efforts to broaden its offerings, including initiatives related to film music, the focus on musicology contributes to maintaining the Foundation at a certain distance from the interests of a larger audience. Consequently, as stated by the Foundation's staff, the public often hesitates to engage with the institution's events, perceiving it as an elitist and niche institution.

Recently, the Foundation addressed these issues through a process of strategic repositioning, focusing on digital innovation as a leverage for cultural democratization. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the access to physical spaces was limited, a new digital strategy was implemented to adapt to the evolving

demands of cultural communication and engagement. This process started with the establishment of official social media accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. This marked a shift from traditional press-based communication systems towards digital platforms, promoting initiatives and projects more dynamically. According to the communication staff, the Instagram account underwent a strategic plan aimed at enhancing the Foundation's institutional reputation, resulting in a follower base predominantly composed of cultural and academic institutions. Conversely, Facebook has attracted a more diverse audience, reflecting the platform's broader demographic reach. To further connect with the public, the Foundation launched a YouTube series titled "*Levi recounts itself*" ("*La Levi si racconta*"). This series, comprising 28 videos features experts and Foundation personnel sharing insights into their work and research, highlighting key projects, and exploring the Foundation's library. These initiatives played a pivotal role in demystifying the Foundation's digital offering, while fostering engagement with a broader public. In addition to its social media activities, in more recent years, the Levi Foundation official website was completely redesigned. Now, it is possible for users to access new digital initiatives, while navigating through a more visually appealing and user-friendly platform. Foremost among these initiatives, there is the LEVIData, an institutional database launched in 2015 to provide digital access to portions of the Foundation's extensive archival collection. Since 2022, the LEVIData project has undergone a substantial transformation, catalyzed by the establishment of the LeviDigiLab. This state-of-the-art digitization laboratory was developed following a proposal by the archivist Giulia Clera and became operational in 2023. The laboratory is equipped with three custom-designed scanners developed in collaboration with the Made in Heritage, a network of Italian enterprises which works on digitizing cultural heritage, representing a key milestone in the Foundation's digital transformation journey. The LeviDigiLab's objectives are multifaceted, encompassing the preservation, accessibility and valorization of cultural assets, while improving its visibility and institutional reputation, to foster new audiences and strengthen its network of collaborations. By integrating digital innovation into its core processes, the Levi Foundation seeks to redefine its role as a contemporary cultural institution while maintaining its commitments to its historical legacy.

3. Research results

The digitization process initiated in 2023 through the implementation of the LeviDigiLab has led to significant transformations within the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation. Foremost among these is the digital production of archival content, now hosted on a dedicated digital repository: the LEVIData. Originally conceived in 2015, this platform has recently been restructured to become more accessible and functional - not only for scholars conducting musicological research, but also for broader audiences interested in related cultural, historical, and artistic themes. To date, LEVIData contains 5.541 digitized items, with over 250.000 individual digital scans produced. This initiative has resulted in the creation of a hybrid archive - no longer accessible exclusively to on-site visitors, but available to a global digital audience, anytime and from anywhere.

Quantitative data retrieved from Google Analytics for the period July 2024 to July 2025 offer insights into digital user behavior and engagement with the platform (<https://levidata.fondazionelevi.it/>). Of particular note is the number of new users recorded over the past year: 14.556, a promising figure considering the archive's size

and the project's early development stage. While most users are based in Italy, the platform also attracts international visitors, particularly from the United States, Singapore, and Germany.

The average session duration is 1 minute and 18 seconds, a number that should not be interpreted negatively. When compared with Europeana's 2024 report on digital users, which recorded almost 4 million visitors and an average session duration of 1 minute and 51 seconds (Europeana, 2024). The relatively short session time may also indicate that users are efficiently locating the resources they need, as the most frequently accessed pages are individual digital records. This suggests a high degree of navigational clarity and usability of the platform. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that available data covered only the past 12 months. Given the recent establishment of the LeviDigiLab, ongoing monitoring of these metrics will be essential to develop a more longitudinal understanding of the laboratory's impact on digital engagement and institutional outreach. While the digital dimension is already yielding meaningful results, the most transformative effects of digitalization have been observed in the Foundation's on-site activities. Here, digitalization has acted as a catalyst for redefining the institution's identity: from a traditional academic center to a hybrid cultural hub, capable of attracting new audiences and forging collaborations with both local and international partners. In the first year of the LeviDigiLab's full operation, the Foundation's library recorded 260 in person visitors, compared to 153 the previous year. While it cannot be conclusively stated that digitalization alone generated this increase, according to interviews with Foundation staff, the laboratory has significantly enhanced the institution's visibility and reputation, becoming a recognized center for innovation and cultural exchange. Moreover, initiatives related to digitalization began being organized as part of the Foundation cultural programming. This is the case of a series of professional workshops co-organized with Made in Heritage and Lyra srl during the 2023-2024 period. These workshops focused on the tools and best practices of digitalization and were aimed at training cultural sector professionals. The program reached almost 300 participants, both in person and online. Additionally, workshops recordings published on the Foundation's YouTube channel garnered more than one thousand views from all the recordings (Data retrieved from the Levi Foundation YouTube Channel, on 07/07/2025).

Moreover, as part of this research project, and following an action research approach, two initiatives were co-developed between the participating universities and the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation. These projects were designed to increase the Foundation's visibility, diversify its audience base, and experiment with new practices and content production methods.

The first initiative was the research dissemination event "*New Digital Skills for the Cultural Heritage of Archives*" ("*Nuove competenze digitali per il patrimonio culturale degli archivi*"), held on March 28, 2025, at the Levi Foundation and organized by IUAV University of Venice in collaboration with Ca' Foscari University. This event provided a platform to present the results of the FSE research project, focusing on the work carried out within the Foundation's digitization laboratory. Additionally, it served as a reflective space to discuss with other institutions about the potentials and implications of cultural digitization. The workshop featured 25 speakers from 10 different cultural and academic institutions, including the National Central Library of Rome, the National Central Library of Florence, the Ricordi Historical Archive, and the M9 Museum. This gathering contributed to strengthening a critical cultural network, essential for the long-term sustainability of the sector. Participants engaged in discussions on the current challenges facing archives and libraries, and on the promises and

limitations of digital technologies in cultural heritage management. The event attracted an in-person audience of 44 attendees, while the video recordings published on the Levi Foundation's YouTube channel surpassed 100 views (Data retrieved from the Levi Foundation YouTube Channel, on 07/07/2025). Although the direct impact on audience engagement was limited - primarily attracting experts and academics from diverse fields of research such as archival design, digitization, and cultural management - the initiative had a more substantial effect on institutional visibility. This enhanced visibility can itself be considered a strategic asset, contributing positively to the broader process of audience engagement and institutional renewal.

The second initiative involved the participation of the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation as a case study for the 2025 edition of the Minor in Artistic Management, a program organized by Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Each year, the course guides university students through a process of cultural design focused on a specific institution, encouraging them to propose changes to its organizational culture through the languages of storytelling, video, and theatre. The Levi Foundation was selected due to its strategic need to engage a younger audience segment, while simultaneously offering students a unique opportunity to explore and reinterpret a historic cultural institution in Venice during its critical phase of transformation. The program engaged 15 university students from the age of 20 to 23 and with different academic backgrounds, supported by six faculty members and professionals specializing in the three selected languages. Over the course of 75 hours of training, students not only delve into the case of the Levi Foundation but also developed skills in organizational models, co-design methodologies, and cultural storytelling. The outcome of the program included: 15 written essays interpreting the identity and mission of the Foundation; 11 pitch presentations envisioning its potential as an innovative cultural hub; 3 videos portraying the Foundation's heritage - interweaving the silence of Venetian alleyways, the music flowing from manuscripts, and the noise of digital commodification; and a final live performance narrating the story of the Levi couple and their bond with the city of Venice. These creative outputs were showcased during a closing event, "*To Levi's rhythm*" ("*A ritmo di Levi*"), held at the Levi Foundation on April 30, 2025. The event attracted 47 participants, including many young attendees and international tourists. In addition, the video produced by the students to promote the event and published on the Instagram account of the Artistic Management Minor reached 5.622 views - an important milestone for the Foundation's visibility. Thus, this initiative had a particularly strong impact on the Foundation's audience engagement strategy, successfully reaching a previously untapped demographic through practices of cultural co-production and experimentation with contemporary artistic languages.

Collectively, these findings suggest that digitalization is not merely a technical or archival upgrade, but a strategic and cultural shift. It requires how institutional is perceived, both internally and externally, and broadens its capacity to engage diverse publics. At the same time, the experience of the Levi Foundation underlines a crucial challenge: the need to transform short term digital innovation projects into long-term organizational practices, supported by strategic planning, continuous training, and sustainable funding models. In this context, digital becomes not just a tool, but a space of institutional reinvention.

6. Discussion

This research sets out to demonstrate how digitalization processes can expand the user base of cultural institutions, contributing to the de-elitization of culture. The findings suggest that the digital transformation initiated through the implementation of the LeviDigiLab not only increased access to the Levi Foundation's cultural heritage - making it globally available - but also succeeded in reaching previously untapped audiences. As previously mentioned, Palazzo Giustinian Lolin, even before becoming the official seat of the Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation, was an important meeting place for the Venetian bourgeoisie and national and international intellectuals and artists. This historical role created a clear separation from a more popular and less culturally privileged Venice. Over the decades, this elitist character remained embedded in the Foundation's spaces, particularly within the library, which was frequented exclusively by musicology experts and academic researchers. This further narrowed the Foundation's audience base. By the turn of the new millennium, this highly specialized public began to shrink, leaving the Foundation's spaces increasingly empty. This trend reflected the broader marginalization of narrowly focused disciplines such as musicology and the insufficient diversification of audience engagement strategies.

Today, however, the digitalization laboratory seems to offer a potential response to this decline. The LeviDigiLab has significantly enhanced the Foundation's visibility and reputation through collaborative initiatives with other national and international cultural and academic institutions. These efforts have repositioned the Foundation within the local and national cultural ecosystem. This renewed presence has had a favorable impact on audience engagement by attracting a more diverse public - not only musicologists, but also experts from other disciplines who now approach archival materials with new questions and tools. The most significant result has been the creation of entirely new audiences. First, a digital public, able to access the Foundation's heritage at any time and from anywhere; and second, a younger audience, reached through the Minor in Artistic Management, which introduced new perspectives and ideas into the Foundation's ecosystem. These developments have contributed to increasing visibility, improve reputation, and revitalize the Foundation's public image.

Therefore, in response to the question of whether the digitalization of cultural heritage can contribute to the de-elitization of culture, the answer appears to be positive. Digitalization has indeed lowered some of the traditional barriers to access - geographical, institutional, and disciplinary - thereby enabling a more inclusive model of cultural participation. The digitized collections and hybrid programming have begun to foster encounters between diverse publics and a more inclusive model of cultural participation. The digitized collections and hybrid programming have begun to foster encounters between diverse publics and cultural assets once reserved for a restricted circle of specialists.

However, digital engagement alone is not sufficient to lasting transformation. One of the major limitations that emerged from the study concerns the fragmented and often short-term nature of digital initiatives currently in place. The workshops, projects, and events described in the previous section, while valuable and impactful, lack a broader strategic continuity. There is no guarantee that the new audiences reached through these efforts will remain engaged with the Foundation in the long term. This reflects a broader risk associated with many

digital cultural projects: the superficiality of digital interactions, which may spark initial interest but fail to cultivate deeper, lasting relationships.

Digitalization, in this sense, can be understood as a spark for institutional innovation - but not the flame itself. To sustain the momentum generated by digital projects, cultural institutions must develop a clear, integrated strategic vision that positions digitalization not merely as a technical solution or temporary enhancement, but as a core asset within a broader mission of accessibility, engagement, and sustainability. Without such vision, the innovations introduced by the LeviDigiLab risk dissipating once project funding ends, and the audience it attracts may revert to more mainstream cultural institutions with more consolidated outreach infrastructures.

The Ugo and Olga Levi Foundation now stands at a critical crossroads. The conditions for long-term success are in place: a valuable and unique cultural heritage, a renewed public interest, and promising collaborations. What remains is the institutional will to translate these elements into a sustainable, coherent strategy - one that embraces digitalization not as an isolated experiment, but also as a transformative framework for the Foundation's future. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the potential for true de-elitization of culture - one that is participatory, accessible, and enduring - be fully realized.

7. Conclusions

The study aimed to explore the potential of digital tools as a catalyst for audience engagement within cultural institutions, contributing to the broader debate on methodologies for the democratization of culture. The use of digital technologies appears to align with this perspective, offering not only tools for the preservation of cultural heritage but also opportunities to reimagine it through innovative frameworks that involve new audiences in cultural practices. The Levi Foundation's digitalization laboratory is still in its second year of activity, and while this limits the scope of long-term evolution, the results already provide preliminary insight into the impact of digitalization on cultural institutions. These findings contribute to ongoing reflection on the benefits and challenges of digital practices, particularly in terms of their long-term sustainability and integration within broader institutional strategies.

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