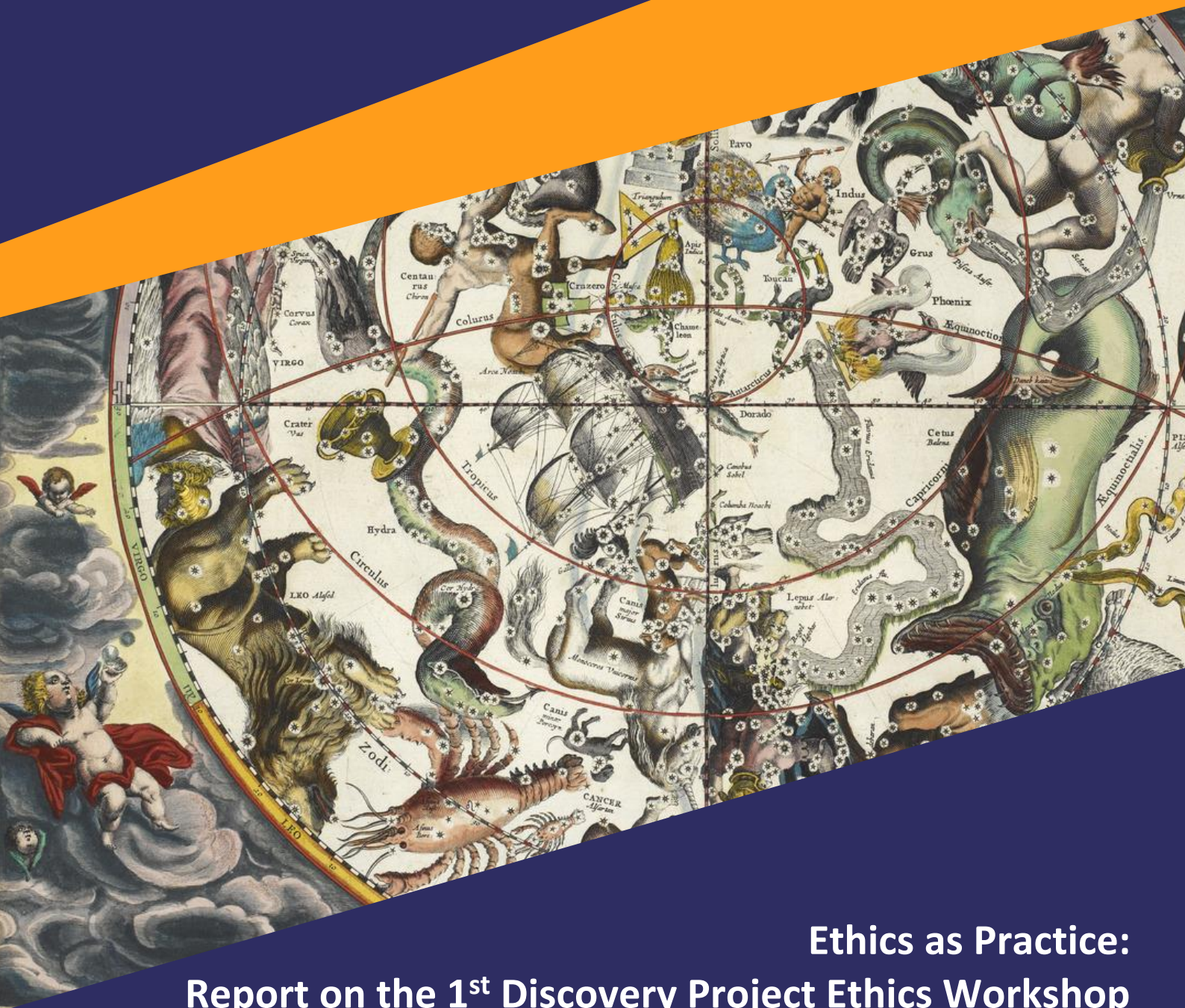


# COMMISSIONED REPORT



## Ethics as Practice: Report on the 1<sup>st</sup> Discovery Project Ethics Workshop

Ananda Rutherford, University of the Arts London

Anna-Maria Sichani, University of London

Katrina Foxton, MOLA

Sara Perry, University College London

September 2024

# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>                         | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>1. Introduction</b>                           | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>2. Ethics as Practice across Projects</b>     | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>3. Cross-Project Concerns</b>                 | <b>10</b> |
| <b>4. Challenges, Values and Recommendations</b> | <b>13</b> |
| <b>5. Limitations</b>                            | <b>16</b> |
| <b>6. Acknowledgements</b>                       | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Appendix A</b>                                | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Appendix B</b>                                | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Resources</b>                                 | <b>21</b> |

## Executive Summary

---

The Towards a National Collection (TaNC) initiative seeks to unite cultural heritage collections across the UK through an ambitious programme of work that aims for transformative effects on digital humanities research and innovation, and on the UK heritage sector in particular. Within the programme, five Discovery Projects have been funded, each responding uniquely to TaNC's bold aim to "empower and diversify audiences by involving them in the research and creating new ways for them to access and interact with collections." (n.d.)

Early in the life of the Discovery Projects, a gap was identified in programme-level support around research and data ethics practices. The authors of this report recognised that TaNC-funded research projects have the potential to significantly impact on the adoption and application of a variety of digital technologies in cultural heritage in challenging ways, yet were without explicit means to navigate these matters together.

This report presents an account and the outcomes of a workshop convened within the TaNC programme by the authors as an attempt to achieve this work collectively. It is aimed at addressing current ethical considerations at the intersection of technology and cultural heritage research.

The workshop, held on 23 January 2024, brought together representatives from the five Discovery Projects and the TaNC programme directorate to explore ethical concerns and develop recommendations for policy and practice. This report outlines the workshop methodology, our objectives, and provides a synthesis of group discussions to inform values and recommendations for interdisciplinary and cross-sector research programmes such as TaNC. In the report we emphasise the importance of values-based frameworks in order to foster more ethical and equitable approaches. It concludes by strongly advocating for ethics in and as practice. We call for the integration, from the outset, of reflexive scrutiny, equitable treatment of all stakeholders, subjects and participants, and critical consideration of the harms and impacts of new technologies on people and planet, as fundamental requirements of funded research and practice.

The ethics workshop highlighted the importance of systematic and comprehensive ethical scrutiny and values-based working across TaNC Discovery Projects, as well as the need for guidance and support in navigating through these matters at a programme level. While the workshop focused primarily on mapping the ethical underpinnings of our projects, what has emerged is the possibility for a values-based approach to future decision-making on this topic, alongside a set of practical recommendations.

The proposed values and our recommendations centre on four recurring key areas of challenge:

1. **Collection and use of data**, including collection/capture, processing, repurposing, exploitation of 'subjects', inadvertent misuse, legacy, access, retention and preservation.
2. **Use of technology**, including its impacts and harms, and investments in computational methods and emerging technologies (e.g. Large Language Models) that have been created in problematic ways and continue to perpetrate and perpetuate bias.
3. **Concern for people**, including treatment of people as source and subject, ownership, relationship management, expectation management, (un)fair terms of employment and recompense.
4. **Climate impacts**, including lack of clarity about digital carbon footprints and other impacts on the ecology of the world.

We propose a series of five values which are fundamental to ethical practice in programmes such as TaNC and its projects. These values emerge directly from the conversations and priorities articulated at the workshop:

1. **Put people first:** promote people-centred approaches which drive forward all aspects of digital research and development projects.
2. **Be transparent:** be open and honest regarding how and where a project and its affiliates consider or apply ethical frameworks, as well their ethical approach to underlying data, technology, tools and models.
3. **Consider context:** consider ethical frameworks and approaches that are appropriate to project settings, taking into account the variety of institutions, stakeholders involved, resources, and data affordances, and technological choices.
4. **Invest in legacy:** focus on nuance, sustainable relationships and interconnected service infrastructure to ensure project outputs and outcomes live on in the long term.
5. **Care for climate:** assess and address the multiple environmental impacts of projects and their wider funding programmes.

Finally, the report puts forward three recommendations that we see as workable actions:

1. **Establish values** at the earliest stages in programme and project design.
2. **Embed ethics** (and capacity to engage with ethics) in funding application and selection processes.
3. **Define and monitor redistribution of research funding** to ensure equitable resourcing of partner organisations and people.

These recommendations are intended to support TaNC itself in adhering to the five values laid out above, and to support others in developing their own values and wider ethical frames of practice in future research. We see each recommendation as equally important, although we note that, without establishing an overarching ethical framework, the others may be difficult or impossible to achieve.



# 1. Introduction

---

The Towards a National Collection (TaNC) initiative seeks to unite cultural heritage collections across the UK through an ambitious programme of work that aims for transformative effects on digital humanities research and innovation, and on the UK heritage sector in particular. Within the programme, five Discovery Projects have been funded, each responding uniquely to TaNC's (n.d) bold aim to "empower and diversify audiences by involving them in the research and creating new ways for them to access and interact with collections."

Early in the life of the Discovery Projects, a gap was identified in programme-level support around research and data ethics practices. The authors of this report recognised TaNC-funded research projects could have significant human and environmental impacts on the adoption and application of a variety of digital technologies in cultural heritage, yet we were without explicit means to navigate these matters collectively.

In order to address this gap, the authors approached the TaNC programme directorate to propose a workshop and associated report to bring together representatives from the five projects. The intention was to better understand what common concerns were arising across projects within programmes such as TaNC and to consider how to address ethical challenges and enact change sensitively, specifically and collaboratively.

On 23 January 2024, hosted by the Wellcome Collection at the Wellcome Trust, London, the authors united 22 participants for a four-hour workshop. In our initial communications to Discovery Projects, we shared our intent and asked for three people to be nominated from each team to join the workshop. In line with our commitment to equity, we suggested inviting an academic researcher, an early career researcher and a researcher/practitioner based outside of the academy. Ultimately, all projects were represented, as was the TaNC programme directorate.

The following document represents a summary of the outcomes from the workshop, including values and recommendations to structure future ethical policy and practice in TaNC and comparable initiatives. It is comprised of six sections, plus two appendices. After briefly outlining the methodology behind the workshop and report (Section 1.1), we describe key considerations raised by each of the Discovery Projects in their individual reflections on ethics as practice, as well as overarching ethical questions that arise across projects (Section 2.0). In Section 3.0, we synthesise responses to two critical considerations posed at the workshop: What do we want to address together? What can we do better? From these responses (Section 4.0), we were able to collate five key values and three recommendations. We conclude in Section 5.0 by reflecting on the limitations in our approach. Here we acknowledge several areas where we feel we can 'do better' going forward in our ethical work on TaNC.

The goal of this report is to raise the profile of ethics in our projects and practice, and to advocate for better ethical scrutiny across TaNC and similar future programmes. We hope that the proposed values and collective recommendations might be woven into future research involving data and technologies, partnerships with galleries, libraries, archives, museums and heritage organisations, and activities intended to work with and for different publics, especially those who are historically and continuingly marginalised.

## 1.1 Method and Objectives

The cross-TaNC ethics workshop took place on 23 January 2024, as a half-day session, comprising presentations from all five Discovery Projects, a question and answer session, and group-based discussion designed to generate further response and reflection (see Appendix A for the agenda).

We sought to achieve some consensus and articulation of common ethical concerns across projects, combining and intersecting four areas:

- Technology and data (data ethics).
- Collections, museums, archives, libraries and heritage as workplaces (professional ethics).
- Publics, audiences and stakeholders (community and audience ethics).
- Academia and research (research ethics).



The workshop objectives were to:

- Gain a better understanding of what ethical practice might look like across TaNC and its Discovery Projects.
- Identify common ethical concerns and barriers, as well as those unique to different contexts.
- Raise the profile of ethics in our projects and practice, recognising that to date it has been difficult to engage across projects around questions and concerns about what a ‘humane’ infrastructure for the UK’s national collections could look like, and how ethical scrutiny is being foregrounded in such infrastructure development.
- Make recommendations to TaNC and the AHRC for the future.

The authors of this report chaired the workshop, led discussion sessions, and supported all participants in taking real-time notes and recording responses (primarily using Google Jamboard). These notes and the collective reflections on the event were subjected to content analysis, coding the discussions in Jamboard under common themes. Four key themes emerged (see Section 4.0), which directly inform our values and recommendations. Wider observations and synthesis of findings from the workshop presentations and discussion session form the content of Sections 2.0 and 3.0.

## 2. Ethics as Practice across Projects

---

Each TaNC project presented their specific ethical concerns, typically born of the type of data they were working with, different audiences they sought to collaborate with, or organisational dynamics. During the presentations, participants were invited to contribute to a set of collaborative notes and provocations sparking from each project's presentation using Jamboard. Below, taking each project in turn, we introduce the presenters at the workshop, the key questions or challenges they raised in their talks, and their attempts to address – or observations around addressing – such questions and challenges. Abstracts for each presentation, where provided, are available in Appendix B.

### 2.1 The Congruence Engine

Reflecting on the topic of 'Ethics and responsible research in digital cultural heritage: the case of the Congruence Engine project', presenter Anna-Maria Sichani broached a series of points which later came to inform the workshop's discussions and findings. These points are listed in turn.

#### **Accountability: to whom and when?**

How (and when) do teams keep themselves accountable to achieve project aspirations and visions? The question of *who* should be accountable for responsible research was also raised and whether points of ethical reckoning or governance could be housed within the TaNC infrastructure. How this could operate was touched upon particularly surrounding the question of *when* a project needs to account for ethical issues: co-production work is complex and working together towards a vision can get messy. If there is a 'governing' function around ethics (whether this takes place within or beyond projects), when is it important to touch base with those in governance roles to ensure accountability for project aspirations?

#### **A dynamic, responsible research and ethics framework**

A key aspiration informing the Congruence Engine's team is that the project and its various collaborators/partners form a 'Social Machine'. The project team has identified that an ethical, transparent, and sustainable practice is required and that this practice should form as a dynamic and reflective ethics and responsible research framework. This framework should reflect on, anticipate, and deliberate about the ethical, social, and legal questions that arise from collections-as-data, technological choices/pipelines, copyright issues, and participatory aspects of the project. The team voiced questions around what a dynamic framework looks like in practice, and how the project's systemic action research was enabling the team to reflect on how different conceptions of participatory, research and data-related ethical practice could harmonise with GLAM and heritage organisational ethics frameworks. How would it deal with potential tensions? Indeed, the team landed on the fact that tensions were in fact inevitable but that "struggle and dynamic processes are key" for collaborative discussions and for the need to be able to move away from partner-led projects once funding has ended.

#### **Project legacy**

The discussion led to consideration of ethics around the legacy of TaNC projects and collections infrastructure at large. The importance of introducing the values of respect and care into infrastructure for digital cultural heritage was discussed, as well as the need to ensure fair, accessible and creative reusability of cultural heritage data in the long-term. The question of governance, sustained technical expertise and

democratisation of access to digital cultural heritage data on an infrastructural level was also raised in relation to legacy concerns.

## 2.2 Our Heritage, Our Stories

Rhiannon Lewis, Stefan Ramsden and Ashleigh Hawkins presented on 'Linking and searching community-generated digital content to develop the people's national collection'. They identified important challenges specifically connected to the type of data they were working with, as outlined below.

### **Risky data/data risks identified**

Community Generated Digital Content (CGDC) is currently critically endangered and at risk of being lost. It is also subject to data ethics: much of this data is Personal Data and its subjects are likely to still be alive, highlighting serious potential considerations around General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and how these conflict with an ethical framework of inclusivity, openness and reuse. The project team deemed it unethical to engage with CGDC without engaging with the people who create and are represented in it. This issue represents a tension between researchers' perceived rights to make data accessible in the so-called 'public interest', the rights for individuals to query the use of the data and consequently the capacity to cater for these queries.

### **Research ethics in conflict with community/individual ethics**

As highlighted by an example provided in a paper on rural racism, in which the communities who collected the original data were not happy with its reuse for research purposes, the team noted the fact that sometimes research ethics will inevitably sit in tension with community ethics. Of importance, then, is the need to understand what guidelines and principles are already articulated by community groups themselves, and to seek to communicate more clearly with these groups where guidelines are not clear. Is it possible to navigate and negotiate our practice with these local ethics in mind?

### **Practices to address GDPR and ethics concerns**

In working directly with community contributors, the team devised interview questions which aimed to address the issues outlined above and centre individual preferences. Moreover, an informed consent process became an instrumental step in agreements on use of data. However, the team questioned whether a single 'informed consent' declaration is enough versus an 'ongoing' informed consent (i.e. multiple conversations and check-ins). They posed the question "How much involvement is necessary to be deemed 'ethical'?" They also wondered whether data curation could be rendered 'reversible' or if a system of 'versioning' could be put in place to give others opportunities to decide how the data gets transformed or interpreted.

### **Towards values-led and ethical ecosystems**

Guidelines on ethical navigations through the tensions outlined above would be of great benefit to different focus groups/audiences (researchers, heritage professionals, community groups) who may subsequently use and curate CGDC-generated data. Whilst Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs), take down processes, and other data management protocols have enabled the project to develop an approach to work with CGDC in compliance with the GDPR, the team suggested that a values-led approach is required to establish respectful agreements with individuals. They spoke of an 'ecosystem' which could enable values-led conversations, and touched on the idea that understanding this ecosystem would provide a legacy outcome for the project.



## 2.3 The Sloane Lab

Andrew Flinn, speaking on the research and data ethics of the Sloane Lab, addressed ethical participatory design and the difficulties of researching contested collections with harmful histories.

### Research ethics frameworks: addressing issues of challenging histories and collections

As with *Our Heritage Our Stories*, early in the project the Sloane Lab team identified a clear ethical concern with potential conflicts between academic research frameworks and practices and ethical and equitable engagement with communities of interest or origin outside of the project and the academy. While the university's research ethics process was and is important – focussing as it does on questions of ethical recruitment, informed consent, data privacy and security, and the conduct of the research, the project team found that such frameworks do not address questions of how to approach this type of research in the first place: how to talk about contested collections and how to give space to concerned and historically affected communities to react and talk.

Eleven Community Research Fellow posts were created as an integral part of the project. The Sloane Lab project welcomed applications from people of the Global Majority and other groups who are underrepresented in the Heritage and Academic sectors, and had the aspiration that at least 50% of the fellowships should be awarded to these applicants. In the event five of the eleven fellowships were taken up by members of Global Majority populations. Whilst the team did not seek to define what topics or areas these researchers should focus upon, they were keen to support critical uses and questions. Pursuing stories and research that were potentially difficult for partner institutions was problematic, but the Fellowships also highlighted the fact that when involving people from communities impacted by the violence of colonialism and slavery, their interests and needs might not easily accord with the research ethics frameworks researchers were used to working with.

### Participatory practices, co-design and community focused activities - opening up spaces and avoiding hurt

Participatory practice was a central strand in the original application for the project because of the contentious nature of the collections. The team was keen that participatory design should be more than public engagement or extraction, instead based on a reflective and ethical design. The team made a commitment to opening-up discussion spaces democratically to try to minimise the harm of their actions and to loosen the control over the framing of the questions and study. Based on their experiences, they recommended identifying and collaborating with participants early on in projects concerning data accessibility to identify potential ethical conflicts. The team also posed a question to TaNC cross-project partners: "What support is given to encourage non-academic/community engagement at the beginning of projects?"

## 2.4 Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage

Ananda Rutherford from the Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage project, reflected on navigating the ethical considerations necessary to achieve the project's aims.

### Ethics commitments

The Transforming Collections team identified three key areas that required a distinct ethical approach within the project: when we work with data, when we produce knowledge using collections, and our overall

approach to working on structural racism. Initially we set out to collectively develop an internal ethics policy that could be referred to throughout the project. The notion of a policy evolved into a series of less prescriptive common commitments, designed to act as reflective prompts to aid in navigating ethical issues.

### **Critical Concerns/Critical Optimism**

Through open discussion sessions and reflective activities, a number of practical concerns were expressed within the team about how these commitments might work in practice. As with the Sloane Lab, the Transforming Collections team intended to move beyond ‘compliance ethics’ and ‘tick box’ legalities into humane, human-centred practices. Through this process, they identified several questions including: How do we determine that ethical approaches are working? Are ethical approaches always applicable throughout the project? This strand of research resulted in a more developed and reflective understanding of ethics as part of research practice within the team, the specific ethical concerns around data and technology, and navigating ethical issues with people and institutions.

The work involved more time and capacity than the researchers expected. Data agreements surfaced unease from partners, demonstrating that ethical conflict may be inevitable. The team highlighted the need to regularly assess data ethics policies and commitments in practice. They also recommended the need to reflect on the importance of positionality when working with partners (whether community or institutionally based) to centre humans and to encourage working practices that cultivate empathy: all of which takes time.

## **2.5 Unpath’d Waters**

Unlike the other four projects, Unpath’d Waters had a values-led methodology designed into the project from its outset to guide ethical practice. Sara Perry and Katrina Foxton’s presentation ‘The value of values’ considered the pitfalls and benefits of this approach, where six values were used to navigate (ethical) working practices.

### **Reviewing the value of values-led approaches**

Looking at how useful values are in practice, the team reflected that its six values were embedded into relevant university ethics applications for all project activities with external participants. Project codesign sessions with key target audiences were similarly reactive to the values. They were also being used to evaluate the project as a whole via a number of collaboratively-determined measures. However, despite these promising steps, certain challenges emerged, for example: the maritime heritage datasets (and bias therein) often sit in direct contradiction to the values; values setting did not align with all outputs, and in some cases, adhering to the measures was considered overly bureaucratic, time consuming or lacking support; professional/institutional operations often conflict with the values; and several barriers were identified across infrastructural frameworks.

### **Ensuring values advocacy**

The team put forward a ‘living’ values framework at the start of the project, with the view that values are determined in practice and hence evolve over time. However, there was insufficient capacity in Unpath’d Waters to track such evolution and update the values in turn. As such, a kind of ‘false’ rigidity in values may have impacted the wider team, including a sense that they were yet more bureaucracy to deal with. More investment in values advocacy across the project, as part of an empathetic approach to practice, is important. Such advocacy could be achieved through embedding value advocates across the work packages, as opposed to in one alone, and in ensuring diversity of advocates themselves (e.g. so that the role is not

relegated entirely to junior or peripheral team members). Importantly, through studying the role of key 'emergent' value advocates in the project, it was identified that promoting values-rich conversations (born via talking through challenges and navigated by leaders) could be a promising pathway for furthering values-led practices.

## 2.6 Reflections and responses to projects' ethics work

Taken together, the project presentations described above broached a variety of problems and ideas which structured our subsequent discussions, and which form the basis for recommendations and values to guide future practice (see Section 4.0). In particular, a series of questions were highlighted as crucial in ongoing conversations within (and between) projects and also for consideration by funders:

- Who should be responsible for ethical aspects of the projects? Who are the ethical advocates in the projects? Should they be positioned with a distinct role and set of tasks, or organically emerge? How can these roles be supported?
- What does a 'successful' ethical approach look like? Who decides?
- How do we develop a baseline of professional ethics? How can we prioritise a dynamic, responsive environment of transparency and support?
- Is there a way to introduce care within the frameworks, while highlighting endemic concerns around socioeconomic and gender inequities?
- How do we prioritise and respond to conflicting ethical priorities and needs with various partners/participants?
- Can we co-produce non-institutionalised projects? What would our roles look like?
- Should all projects build in a legacy model that considers ethical frameworks?
- How can we foreground inevitable biases in datasets and still use these data?
- How can we assess and update terms and conditions statements, data policies and other technical and legal documents in relation to technological infrastructure in knowledgeable and iterative ways?

## 3. Cross-Project Concerns

---

Participants in the ethics workshop were spread into four groups (each representing a mix of projects and TaNC officials) to consider three main topics stemming from the presentations outlined above.

1. What do we want to address?
2. What do we want to do better?
3. What do we want to take forward to TaNC?

Key findings in relation to topics 1 and 2 are reviewed in turn below. Considerations for TaNC and next steps in ethical practice for major national research and innovation programmes are described in Section 4.0: Values and Recommendations.

### 3.1 What do we want to address?

Issues arising from TaNC Discovery Projects which demand programme-level attention are many, and yet tend to centre on four major concerns detailed below.

#### **From ethical behaviour to ethical frameworks**

It is time to move away from the performance of ethical behaviours towards a more transparent set of ethical frameworks and practices that genuinely seek to address the issues inherent in our research. The work of TaNC and its researchers is sweeping in reach, unusual and unconventional in parts, and intersects with many people and their moral standpoints. Yet ethical frameworks have been overlooked within the TaNC programme, with an implicit expectation that projects follow little more than the compliance policies of their institutions.

A variety of key concerns were highlighted by participants at the workshop, including:

- Ethical procedures have grown in an ad-hoc way for most TaNC projects. They should have been established at the earliest stages of the programme. An overarching ethical framework could have supported teams and individuals in handling sensitive and controversial situations as they arose. Projects have had to produce bespoke approaches without the benefit of wider support or expectations around ethical practices for TaNC.
- Institutions themselves play a problematic role in ethical action. How can we avoid 'assessment' of ethics being made according to the normative frameworks of these institutions? In general, we are reliant on university ethics systems which are premised upon risk aversion and reputation management, neither of which are appropriate for a programme that seeks a transformative impact on the entirety of the heritage sector.
- Roles and responsibilities around ethics need deeper consideration, as they can often be unfairly distributed or concentrated solely in single posts. What would it look like to have a central role in TaNC working at the programme level on ethics? Should there be a dedicated ethical commitment in each application developed by every project, and in each strand/pathway within each project? What ethical positions are taken by grant peer reviewers, or those deciding on funding allocations?
- Drawing from lessons from Unpath'd Waters, an ethical framework headed by an ethics 'lead' within the team is productive. However, the framework must be applied dynamically and embedded across the whole team to ensure it is not reduced to a tick box exercise or treated as an 'add-on' that is peripheral to the project.

### Avoiding the impetus to overpromise / gesturing towards complexity

Expectations and outcomes can be better managed by reigning in the rhetoric and solutionism that tend to define digital initiatives. TaNC's projects do not neatly solve and deliver digital accessibility but rather bring into the spotlight new barriers and challenges around their main goals. In so doing, they further the wider research endeavour and create a more generative and diverse landscape for innovation. Ethical journeys – and research programmes overall – can be better acknowledged with honesty towards the issues that are being uncovered. They open a space for conversation around critical concerns, for example, how do we make it clear to publics that we cannot always meet ethical aspirations? What do we do when this happens? How do we communicate ethical conflict or decisions to pursue one ethical pathway at the expense of another? Who do we communicate this information to?

### Paving the way for legacy

Ethical frameworks may have added value in supporting the life of projects beyond their discrete funding periods. A wide and recurring concern with typical approaches to research and innovation is the potential for learnings to be lost, and collaborations and partnerships to fade - replicating extractive models of participation - as projects have not been funded (and hence not designed) to last. We observe struggles to deliver high stakes outcomes and outputs in brief three-year funding periods. The sustainability and healthiness of such short-term research cycles is dubious, and a more ethically-conscious strategy for programmes like TaNC could help to centre legacy and support rethinking of funding models.

### Acknowledging climate impact

We must move beyond a 'privilege of obliviousness' (an attitude which was highlighted by one workshop participant to mean harmful inconsideration of the negative impact of our projects in a cross-societal, global context). In short, we need to address that our projects, focused as they are on the digital, have considerable carbon footprints and environmental impacts. We need to unpick the barriers to understanding the climate effects of our work, in order to understand what can be realistically mitigated and how.

## 3.2 What do we want to do better?

Each of the concerns outlined above can be addressed through shared methods that foreground criticality, specificity, and liveliness, including the importance of actively and flexibly responding to emergent and potential harms. Four particular areas of practice need attention.

### Upholding dynamic ethical frameworks with ongoing reflection

Although it might be debated whether ethical frameworks should be conceived at the earliest stages of project design (e.g. pre-funding) or should emerge in practice, it is possible to do both. In other words, an initial ethical framework can (and should) be set at the conceptual stage of projects, which then undergoes dynamic review in order to serve emergent challenges, working practices, and collaborations. A combined approach might see an initial **values statement** articulated, which is reactive and changeable, and around which challenges and conflicts are documented in order to heighten transparency. This matter of **transparency** was repeatedly highlighted in the workshop discussions as crucial to accounting for emergent considerations and compromise. Herein, transparency may enable:



- Knowledge sharing across projects - i.e. what can be learnt from the ethical negotiations arising in other projects?
- Rigorous documentation - e.g. to enable audiences/individuals to make active choices in relation to ethical decisions that have (or have not) been taken.
- External accountability - i.e. to TaNC, other funders and organisational stakeholders, and to wider society.

### **Distributing labour**

Ethics work is work. It requires committed financial investment, time and revision, particularly because, as described above, it is provisional and emergent. At present, adequate resource has not been dedicated to ethics, in part because it was not explicitly earmarked as central to the TaNC programme from the outset. The scale of this matter of the ethics of labour within projects is vast, spanning everything from offering credit where credit is due (including in relation to ‘hidden’ roles/tasks and volunteering/community participation) to specific frameworks for enabling flexible working within fixed-term contracts, especially for early career researchers.

### **Recognising and responding to environmental impacts**

The need to assess various aspects of the environmental impact of our work and to consider the very real effects of technology choices on the climate was raised as a shared concern among all teams. Different levels of awareness are evident across projects, but overall, the TaNC programme appears to be failing to mitigate negative climate impacts. At minimum, it was observed that in the future resources could be dedicated to offsetting carbon emissions at a programme level, e.g. through the introduction of shared technical infrastructure. Here again, ethical frameworks introduced from the project conceptualisation phase may be used to assess the likely environmental effects of projects and to hold them to account in their approaches over time. Wider programme-level standards and guidance would enable more systemic commitments to reducing the climate effects of projects.

### **Engaging critically and ethically with each of our varied data, technology, tools and models**

The ethics of technology has also been raised as a crucial area of concern: technological tools used to manage data have an impact upon the data’s interpretation which can have ethical consequences. Several points for consideration include:

- Thinking critically about the technology (including standards, platforms, systems, software, etc.) we are using, why we are using them, and what impact they have in wider information and knowledge infrastructure systems.
- Challenging the concept of cultural heritage information as ‘datasets’, as this gives the false impression that it is ‘fixed’ in time.
- Specificity and context around understandings of artificial intelligence systems and the impact they have in gathering and using cultural heritage data (as training datasets) and subsequent interpretations.
- The development of a list of open-source tools and platforms or options to help assess technical choices. A consideration of the ethical implications of using different technologies would be especially meaningful.

## 4. Challenges, Values and Recommendations

---

The ethics workshop highlighted the importance of systematic and comprehensive ethical scrutiny and values-based working across TaNC Discovery Projects, as well as the need for guidance and support in navigating through these matters at a programme level. While the workshop focused primarily on mapping the ethical underpinnings of our projects, what has emerged is the possibility for a values-based approach to future decision-making on this topic, alongside a set of practical recommendations.

In this section, we outline a series of five values that are fundamental to ethical practice in TaNC. These values emerge directly from the conversations and priorities articulated at the workshop. From there, we offer three specific recommendations as TaNC prepares for beyond the current funding programme. Both our proposed values and our recommendations are born of and seek to address four recurring key challenges that are evident in Section 3.0. These challenges can be summarised as follows:

- **Collection and use of data**, including collection/capture, processing, repurposing, exploitation of 'subjects', inadvertent misuse, legacy, access, retention and preservation.
- **Use of technology**, including its impacts, harms, and investments in methods and models (e.g. Large Language Models) that have been created in problematic ways and continue to perpetrate and perpetuate bias.
- **Concern for people**, including treatment of people as source and subject, relationship management, expectation management, (un)fair employment and recompense terms.
- **Climate impacts**, including lack of clarity about digital carbon footprints and other impacts on the ecology of the world.

### 4.1 Proposed TaNC values

**Put people first:** Promote people-centred approaches which drive forward all aspects of digital research and development projects.

At the programme level, basic expectations or equitable, flexible and careful practices for working with stakeholders, as well as fair and transparent employment procedures, should guide future projects. Adequate compensation (financial and otherwise) must be made available for affiliates, especially those based outside of Higher Education Institutions and Independent Research Organisations.

**Be transparent:** Be open and honest regarding how and where a project (and the programme from whence it is derived) and its affiliates consider or apply ethical frameworks, as well as their ethical approach to underlying data, technology, tools and models.

Projects should be assessed on their ethical positioning and scrutinised in terms of their claims around environmental sustainability, abilities to address (and not shy away from) ethical challenges, impacts on communities, and effects on partner organisations. This is equally important for Independent Research Organisations, which often do not have comprehensive ethical approval practices and tend to rely on the ethical protocols of academic partner institutions. The same holds true for consultancies and work commissioned by TaNC itself (at the programme level).

**Consider context:** Consider ethical frameworks and approaches that are appropriate to project settings, taking into account the variety of institutions and stakeholders involved, and their data and technological choices.

Ethical statements must involve more than academic institutions and funders: community stakeholders must be part of the process too. Equally, the tools, technologies and models applied in projects need to be assessed on individual terms, with evidence that their various risks and potential harms are understood and that demonstrable levers are in place to mitigate them. The datasets themselves must also be considered within context and based on their specific formats. The impact of interpretation should be offered in a way that is open to scrutiny and allows for multiple voices to be heard, included and added to over time.

**Invest in legacy:** Focus on nuance, sustainable relationships and interconnected service infrastructure to ensure project outputs and outcomes live on in the long term.

Centring ethics at the programme level, with a commitment to bringing together projects over ethical matters throughout their lifetimes, should allow us to move beyond solutions-based rhetoric towards more sensitive, aware, and connected practices and partnerships. Equally, such legacy depends on access to stable centralised data services and infrastructure – i.e. servers, basic computing support, etc. We advocate for greater encouragement and support both in using open-source tools (including providing guidance around open-source options that could replace common commercial services) and in critically assessing increasingly ubiquitous tools and methods (especially as they relate to artificial intelligence).

**Care for climate:** Assess and address the multiple environmental impacts of projects and their wider funding programmes.

The climate and ecological effects of our projects need to be acknowledged at the programme level and measures put in place to guide future practice, to minimise impacts, and to hold all parties to account.

## 4.2 Recommendations

We put forward three recommendations that we see as workable actions, firstly, to support TaNC itself in staying true to the five values laid out above, and secondly, to support others in developing their own values and wider ethical frames of practice in future research. We see each recommendation as equally important, although we note that without the first (i.e. overarching ethical frameworks), the others may be difficult or impossible to achieve.

**Expect values to be established – and ‘ethics as practice’ embedded – at the earliest stages in programme and project design.**

Threaded through the workshop was a strong sentiment that values and ethics should be considered from the outset of research and innovation activities, but simultaneously given ‘room to grow’ and change. We recommend that the values described above be used in the future to guide TaNC itself, and we suggest they can offer points of reflection (or contrast) for new projects and initiatives to deploy in thinking through their own values-based approaches. Ultimately, bespoke ethical frameworks (or processes) must be established – then reviewed or assessed – in relation to each individual project to allow for adaptability of practices within specific contexts. Such frameworks must be supported by TaNC infrastructure (see recommendations below) and consider their positionality amongst other ethical frameworks – such as university, organisational, and those of different communities.

### **Embed ethics (and ethical capacity) in funding application and selection processes.**

We cannot expect ethical frameworks to get enacted at the conceptual phase of research without requiring those applying for and adjudicating funding applications to similarly engage with ethics from the outset. Resources to support the development and critical review of such frameworks (which necessarily go beyond mere 'compliance ethics') should accompany such expectations. Among other points, these resources should provide guidance around potential roles and responsibilities both for values advocates within teams, and for groups and individuals governing and accountable at the programme level.

### **Define and monitor redistribution of research funding to ensure equitable resourcing of partner organisations and people.**

At the core of Discovery Projects is a concern for people - and for equitable relations with people - which can only be realised through concerted investment in them. In fact, embedding ethics at the conceptual stages of research also demands that mutually beneficial relationships with partners and wider publics are accounted for at the outset, so that they can inform ethical frameworks themselves. Steps need to be taken to address the barriers in employment, payment, time, capacity and other forms of support that prevent people with lived experience, and purported beneficiaries of projects, to engage with and gain from the research. Such steps must be enacted at the programme-level, then ingrained in associated projects, activities and outputs.

## 5. Limitations

---

The above report represents the best efforts of our small team to present and draw insight from the TaNC cross-project ethics workshop held on 23 January 2024. We believe the workshop uncovered a wealth of ideas and identified challenges which can be utilised towards further embedding of ethical practices in future TaNC initiatives. However, we would also like to highlight the following limitations in the format of the workshop (and, consequently, this report) in order to model good practice.

- The workshop was delayed a number of times due to diary clashes and industrial action, which resulted in the workshop being less instrumental in or prefigurative of ethical practice, and more reflective. By the time the workshop was delivered, projects were three quarters of the way through their funding and unable to make meaningful changes to their ethical approaches, which had been our earlier aspiration. In future, values advocates and TaNC should campaign for prompt and timely discussions around ethics, with mitigation plans (e.g. to host conversations online), so that windows of opportunity are not missed.
- The collection of data for this report was achieved through the use of a digital note-taking platform. This enabled quick capture of thoughts and opinions discussed, but in future (with more support), other methodologies could be applied to capture reflections (e.g. audio recordings, co-production techniques etc.) Establishing a methodology to document different discussions and opinions will be helpful not only to reconstruct the development of ethical frameworks, but also to critically assess them.
- The Discovery Project practitioners who took part in the workshop, contributing their ideas and insights, were not involved in the writing of this report. All interpretations of their discussions are the responsibility of the four authors named above. We are aware of various limitations, as described here, and we appreciate that the input of others may expose other issues. In the future, more support (e.g. in terms of funding, time etc.) is required to enable all participants to contribute to the preparation of similar reports or ethical reviews.
- At the workshop there was good representation of all TaNC projects, as well as career levels and educational or professional backgrounds. But the demographic, in terms of ethnicity, was predominantly white. There is a serious issue with the lack of racialised and minoritised people across the TaNC directorate and projects, the staffing of the museum sector and cultural heritage in general and in relation to digital design and technology and the academy. This should be better considered as part of the requisite next steps in embedding ethics and values-based practices across funded projects.



## 6. Acknowledgements

---

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their support, participation and invaluable contributions to the workshop and this report.

### **The Congruence Engine**

Alexandra Fitzpatrick, National Science and Media Museum

Arran Rees, Centre for Critical Studies in Museums, Galleries and Heritage, University of Leeds

### **Our Heritage, Our Stories**

Hannah Barker, John Rylands Research Institute, University of Manchester

Ashleigh Hawkins, The National Archives

Rhiannon Lewis, Archives Lab, University of Glasgow

Stefan Ramsden, University of Manchester

### **Transforming Collections**

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, Decolonising Arts Institute, University of the Arts London

Jon Gillick, Creative Computing Institute, University of the Arts London

Tehmina Goskar, Decolonising Arts Institute, University of the Arts London

Christopher Griffin, Tate

### **The Sloane Lab**

Andrew Flinn, Information Studies, University College London

Alicia Hughes, Directorate, British Museum

Marco Humbel, Information Studies, University College London

Alda Terracciano, Participatory Design Consultant, University College London

### **Unpath'd Waters**

Claire Bailey-Ross, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Portsmouth

Stuart Jeffrey, School of Simulation and Visualisation, The Glasgow School of Art

Jack Pink, Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Southampton

### **TaNC directorate team**

Rebecca Bailey

Sophie Dietrich

Michelle Forster-Davies

Javier Pereda

### **Wellcome Trust Team**

Hannah Brown

Abby Gyamerah

Christy Henshaw

# Appendix A

---

## Cross-Project Ethics Workshop Agenda

Date: 23 January 2024

Location: Wellcome Collection, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE

### Workshop facilitators

Ananda Rutherford (Post-doctoral Research Fellow UAL - Transforming Collections)

Sara Perry (Senior Research Fellow MOLA - Unpath'd Waters)

Anna-Maria Sichani (Post-doctoral Research Associate SAS - Congruence Engine)

Katrina Foxton (Research Assistant MOLA - Unpath'd Waters)

Tehmina Goskar (Research Fellow, Transforming Collections)

### SCHEDULE

**Welcome refreshments** 11:00 – 11:30

**Introduction** 11:30 – 11:40 – by Ananda and Sara

**Five short presentations from projects** (10 minutes max) 11:40 – 1:00

Congruence Engine: - Anna-Maria Sichani (University of London)

Our Heritage, Our Stories: - Rhiannon Lewis (University of Glasgow), Stefan Ramsden and Ashleigh Hawkins (University of Liverpool)

The Sloane Lab: - Andrew Flinn (University of London)

Transforming Collections: Ananda Rutherford (University of the Arts London)

Unpath'd Waters: - Sara Perry and Katrina Foxton (MOLA)

**Reflection & Responses** 1:00 – 1:30 facilitated by Tehmina Goskar

**Break for Lunch** 1:30 – 2:00

**Break Out Discussions on 'Principles and Recommendations'** 2:00 – 2:35

**Group Feedback** 2:35 - 2:50

**Wrap up** 2:50 - 3:00

## Appendix B

---

### Ethics Workshop Presentations

#### Congruence Engine

Speaker: Anna-Maria Sichani

Title: Ethics and responsible research in digital cultural heritage: the case of the Congruence Engine project

Abstract: As the Congruence Engine project seeks to develop a design specification for how a digitally-connected national collection might operate as a social machine, we are using our action research methodology to attempt to understand a multiplicity of ethical concerns from a variety of different perspectives. We reflect on ethics in different domains of our project; from AI and data ethics to ethics of care and recognition in participatory work, and our own approach to research ethics and informed consent.

#### Our Heritage, Our Stories

Speakers: Rhiannon Lewis, Stefan Ramsden and Ashleigh Hawkins

Title: Linking and searching community-generated digital content to develop the people's national collection

Abstract: In the past two decades communities have adopted digital technologies to gather and record 'citizen history' collections. Our project responds to the urgent challenges of discovery and sustainability that such Community-Generated Digital Content presents, bringing cutting-edge post-custodial and artificial intelligence solutions to dissolve barriers and link community collections to The National Archives and to local and national heritage organisations. Rhiannon Lewis will discuss the ethical framework for our interviews and data gathering, Stefan Ramsden will describe ethics in community/oral history, and Ashleigh Hawkins will consider the overall ethical data framework for the project.

#### Sloane Lab

Speaker: Andrew Flinn

Title: Sloane Lab - research and data ethics

Abstract: The main aim of the Sloane Lab project is to explore and model the facilitation of digital access to unified historical and present-day information that describes Sir Hans Sloane's collection. The project recognises that Sir Hans Sloane, the collections, how they were collected and funded, and where these collections currently reside is extremely contentious and disputed. This presentation will reflect on the frameworks offered by university research ethics in contrast to participatory practice, co-design and community focused activities guided by ethical considerations of care and reparative possibilities. It explores how within the project the ethics and risks of reinforcing past damage and exclusion or disadvantage in digital spaces in relation to collections data has been considered, and also where ethical priorities should lie with regard to contested collections and potential audiences.

## **Transforming Collections**

Speaker: Ananda Rutherford

Title: Transforming Collections - Developing ethical commitments

Abstract: The Transforming Collections team developed a cross-project programme to explore and address ethical issues that initially emerged out of data capture, processing and sharing practices, but quickly expanded to include both academic research behaviours and the conventions of GLAM information and collections management. This presentation aims to detail our approach to ethics at the intersection of these three areas. We share our experience and findings in the hope of stimulating similar reflection and discussion amongst colleagues, organisations and funders navigating research that engages across these fields.

## **Unpath'd Waters**

Speakers: Sara Perry and Katrina Foxton

Title: The value of values: navigating ethics on Unpath'd Waters

Abstract: At the core of the Towards a National Collection project Unpath'd Waters (UNPATH) are six values that were defined in the early months of the project through an extensive collaborative process involving all of UNPATH's leads, and refined by the majority of the wider UNPATH team. These values are meant to guide all aspects of our research and practice, from how we engage with our audiences and collaborators, to how we design search functionality in the UNPATH Virtual Reality Navigator and UNPATH Web Portal, to how we comply with university ethics requirements and attend to broader project challenges. In this presentation, we reflect critically on the value of our values for navigating ethical matters, sharing our perspectives as representatives of diverse work packages related to co-design, virtual reality development, evaluation with audiences, artificial intelligence and data discovery. We flag where UNPATH's values have supported or hindered ethical practice, where they have proven irrelevant or burdensome, and how we have attempted to stay accountable to them whilst also monitoring their utility.

## Resources

---

### **Zotero Group Library: Ethics as Practice: People, Data and Research**

[https://www.zotero.org/groups/5491373/ethics\\_as\\_practice\\_people\\_data\\_and\\_research/](https://www.zotero.org/groups/5491373/ethics_as_practice_people_data_and_research/)