



Unlocking PHAIDRAcon'25

Exploring Themes, Aims, and Pathways of the Day

Gianluca Drago - University of Padua

When we first began to imagine this conference, our aim wasn't simply to organise another technical event or a routine platform update.

What we really wanted was to create a moment for collective reflection – a time for the PHAIDRA community to think together about the changing role of repositories in the wider landscape of public knowledge.

The theme "*Connecting Scholar and Citizen: The Emerging Social and Cultural Role of the Repository*" reflects that ambition.

It comes from a growing awareness that institutional repositories are no longer just spaces for academic storage or sharing – they are active participants in the dialogue between universities and society.

Three ideas, in particular, guided our thinking.

First, the evolving mission of universities.

Across Europe, universities are now embracing what we call the Third Mission, or Public Engagement, or Knowledge Valorization, as a key pillar alongside Teaching and Research.

Second, the expectations of society are changing.

Citizens today don't want to remain passive recipients of academic knowledge – they want to take part, to contribute, to be recognised as partners in dialogue.

And third, the question of technological maturity.

After years of development and consolidation, the PHAIDRA platform is ready to move beyond the purely technical dimension, enabling new forms of collaboration, participation, and shared value creation.

From these ideas, the structure of PHAIDRAcon'25 naturally took shape.

We designed the programme as a kind of progressive journey: the morning devoted to theory and institutional foundations, the afternoon to concrete practices and case studies.

We also aimed for a balance of voices – from local to global, from universities to extra-academic initiatives, and from established institutions to emerging communities in regions without universities at all.

Of course, special attention was given to PHAIDRA's partner institutions, which today form a vibrant, international network – increasingly open to perspectives beyond Europe.

When defining the core themes, we began by revisiting the very idea of the Third Mission.

It's a concept that feels familiar now, yet it's actually the result of a long process of redefining the university's social role.

Understanding how repositories fit into this mission means rethinking policies, governance, responsibilities, and strategic objectives.

Repositories are no longer simply archives – they are active agents of social impact.

A second theme concerns the assessment of this impact.

How do we measure the social value of a repository?

Traditional metrics like downloads, citations, or access numbers are no longer enough.

We need indicators that capture the public dimension of shared knowledge – how a digital collection contributes to common goods, to scientific citizenship, to cultural participation.

And that means developing new tools and criteria, in dialogue with national and international frameworks for evaluating the Third Mission.

A third area of reflection is the international dimension.

Digital cultural heritage crosses all boundaries – institutional and national alike.

That's why shared standards, interoperability, and cross-border collaboration are essential.

The experiences presented here show how repositories can become nodes in global communities of practice, connecting with European infrastructures and helping to build a common space for knowledge.

A fourth theme is citizen participation.

More and more, repositories are turning into open platforms where researchers and citizens work together – through citizen science, crowdsourcing, and co-production of data and content.

These experiments challenge traditional models of scientific validation, but they also open new paths of dialogue and mutual trust.

And finally, there's a theme that runs through everything: innovation in cultural mediation. Connecting scholar and citizen also means rethinking how we present knowledge – how we narrate, translate, and make it understandable and meaningful to different audiences. From storytelling and interactive formats to immersive experiences and participatory education, repositories are evolving into spaces of mediation rather than simple preservation.

As we reviewed the programme as a whole, an unplanned yet striking thematic convergence appeared: more than few of this afternoon's projects deal with memory, conflict, and democracy. Oral testimonies from the First World War, collections on the Italian Resistance, photographic archives of Nazi propaganda, and projects on migration (often connected to regional or inter-regional conflicts).

These works were started long before the current geopolitical tensions – and yet, today, they speak with renewed urgency.

They remind us that repositories are never neutral.

They preserve and reinterpret collective memory – and in doing so, they carry ethical and civic responsibility.

So how do we deal with sensitive or controversial materials?

How do we preserve memory without reproducing trauma, document without legitimising violence or hatred?

These are questions that touch the very democratic maturity of our digital infrastructures – and they deserve a place in the PHAIDRA community's reflection.

Of course, not everything can fit into a single day.

Several questions remain open.

One of them is about designing user experiences for non-academic audiences.

Traditional repositories were built for researchers – their interfaces assume disciplinary familiarity. But if we truly want to engage citizens, we must rethink navigation, semantics (information architecture), and storytelling, so that even first-time visitors can find their way into this academic knowledge.

It may be a simple observation, but another area worth exploring is how archives can connect with other forms of dissemination—projects that move beyond mere lists of digital objects, no matter how rich their metadata may be. This could include digital exhibitions, educational games (gamification), the enrichment of Wikipedia entries or contributions to the Internet Archive big digital library, as well as more direct engagement with social media platforms that shape public knowledge today.

And then, of course, there's artificial intelligence.

Today, or perhaps tomorrow, we have tools that can generate accessible descriptions, enrich metadata automatically, translate into multiple languages, transcribe manuscripts, and semantically link digital objects.

But with these opportunities come new responsibilities: ensuring transparency, fairness, and respect for the people and the histories our data represent.

So, in the end, PHAIDRAcon'25 is not just a meeting or a technical update.

It is, above all, a laboratory for the future of repositories – a place where we can imagine how knowledge infrastructures can become instruments of active citizenship, cultural democracy, and the creation of the common good.

The success of this conference will not be measured only in numbers or projects presented, but in our ability to shape a shared vision of the role repositories can and should play in the knowledge society: a role that is open, inclusive, participatory – and fully aware of its public responsibility.