SPARKLE
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D□□RS Digital Incubator for Museums

Who | Institutional Profile

Institution	Museum of Literature Ireland
Location	Dublin, Ireland
Short Description	A collaborative partnership between University College Dublin and the National Library of Ireland, the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI) opened in 2019 as a landmark cultural institution in the heart of Ireland's capital city. Picturesquely located on the southside of St Stephen's Green in some of Dublin's finest historic houses (and the original home of UCD), MoLI's cutting-edge exhibitions and programmes explore Ireland's incredible literary heritage. Set amidst beautiful gardens, the museum has quickly become an inspirational oasis for locals and visitors to the city centre.
	The museum celebrates Ireland's internationally-renowned literary culture and heritage from the past to the present, inspiring the next generation to create, read and write. Immersive multimedia exhibitions, precious artefacts, lectures, performances, free-to-access children's education programmes, historic house tours, digital broadcasting, research facilities and a courtyard café set in one of the city's most tranquil gardens make the Museum of Literature Ireland a major contribution to the local and international literary landscape.
	Irish literature has been hugely influential the world over, and dedicating such a significant historic site to telling the stories of our writers has attracted attention from across the globe.
	MoLI has won numerous awards since opening, including the Business to Arts Best Philanthropic Support of the Arts award 2021, Red Dot Best Exhibition Design 2020, IDEA Exhibition Design Gold Award 2021 and Europa Nostra 2023, and was shortlisted for the European Mies Van Der Rohe Architecture Award 2022, and the European Museum of the Year Awards 2022.
Ownership	MoLI is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee and is a subsidiary of University College Dublin.
Size	27 FTEs

Approach to Digital	*Input by Benedict Schlepper-Connolly*
	Our vision for digital activity at MoLI is to create a truly boundary-pushing and digitally native team within the museum, inculcating an institutional "digital mindset", exploring new technologies, developing new audiences, and further realising the artistic and literary potential of the digital space in a manner that is both exciting, open, iconoclastic, accessible and democratic.
	MoLI's digital programme was the museum's first publicly visible activity – we launched RadioMoLI several months before the museum opened its doors to visitors for the first time. Creating a museum of literature was always going to come with challenges to access: there is so much potential for the public to feel that this place is not for them, or that the literary artform is only for the initiated and highly educated. The guiding ethos behind both our exhibition design and digital programming is to strip away those barriers, and to create a space where people can engage with the artform without fear and with an incentive to explore. We want to meet people where they are, both literally, in terms of reaching people across the globe or simply in their homes, and metaphorically, presenting people with the artform in a medium that works best for them.

What | Case

Project Title	An inclusive digital transformation of the museum experience
Timeframe	2022-2023

Concept & Approach	When we first launched RadioMoLI as a 24/7 live audio stream in February 2019, it was a way to first engage with our audience, while also build relationships within the Irish literature community. While we gradually started making our own recordings (for example by recording events, making audio for exhibitions) there was a large focus in the beginning on recordings contributed by partners in the community: literature podcasts, festivals with stockpiled recordings of events, other literature organisations with digital collections. As such, RadioMoLI became a vehicle to embed the museum into the cultural scene very quickly – before we had even opened the physical museum.
	The following year, when we launched an on-demand player, hosted within the moli.ie website, the public engagement with RadioMoLI took on a new dimension. Though the functionality and design of this platform was quite basis, with quite limited curatorial or editorial features, it became clear to us that there was a strong demand from both listeners and producers for a service like RadioMoLI. Moreover, we realised that we were effectively building a substantial digital archive for Irish literature, and that RadioMoLI was a very effective first step in MoLI's digital collecting activity.
	As traffic to RadioMoLI grew (to about 90,000 per year), and the number of recordings from both MoLI's own productions and partner contributions increased, it became time to plan a new phase for the project. As with anything that starts small and grows quickly in scale, there are some challenges: on a public-facing level, we recognised the need to develop an interface that was much more engaging, which could give us curatorial and editorial tools to present media in more interesting ways, and which could cope with a much larger scale of material.
	We also knew that the systems and structures behind RadioMoLI – from technical infrastructure and build through to workflows and archival practices – needed improving to be able to operate at a much more ambitious scale, and to ensure that both the archive was safely preserved, while mitigating risks such as copyright claims and inefficient working practices. With a greater ambition for RadioMoLI's public engagement, we also recognised that the marketing and communications of the project would need to be streamlined.
	At the same time, since the museum's inception, MoLI had been creating many other digital projects: commissioned literature-inspired films, digital materials for special exhibitions, digital-only exhibitions, and video documentation of events at the museum. All of this material was crying out for a centralised home, and we came to realise that RadioMoLI was best served as a multimedia platform to incorporate video, still imagery and digital exhibitions in addition to audio. This naturally meant that any reconsideration of RadioMoLI's design and infrastructure would need to be quite radical.
	Joining the Ars Electronica's DOORS Digital Incubator for Museums project was a catalyst for action and brought RadioMoLI 2.0 from an idea into reality. Funding from the project enabled us to commission a complete redesign and rebuild of RadioMoLI, to expand the capabilities of our on-site studio, and to invest in infrastructural necessities like better contracts and digital preservation systems. But beyond the funding, the programme also helped us to shape and challenge our idea of what RadioMoLI could and should be: through engagement with our mentors and partners on the programme, we were able to distil our concepts and find better ways of communicating them.
	We began by analysing the material that we had – hundreds of items of media – and considering how they might guide us to a new information architecture. We also carried out research on our audiences and the broader cultural context for RadioMoLI, through analytics

and softer data like surveys conducted with our audiences and stakeholders. Our research taught us that, while there was a strong interest in and demand for RadioMoLI, it would always be competing with a crowded entertainment space. We drew the conclusion that the new RadioMoLI would need to do everything possible to approach audiences in the language of contemporary media to have any chance of interrupting that cultural space; the phrase "a Netflix for literature" was used many times.

In the background we began building up our infrastructure. We redesigned our digital preservation strategy and workflows around file processing and storage – and invested in hardware to support this. We bought additional equipment for the museum's studio, and developed a commercialisation plan, with a view to expanding the commercial possibilities for the studio such that the operation could become more financially self-sufficient in the future. And we developed new legal agreements that would make the producing of recording and receiving digital materials more straightforward and limiting any legal risks.

The task of redesigning and rebuilding the site was considerable, but we began by looking at the content and how we would best encourage engagement and re-engagement with it through a new-look RadioMoLI. Our new information architecture, developed through internal workshopping, was simple enough to be able to adapt to multiple forms and sources of content, but we added some additional attributes that would help us to serve up media in more interesting ways. For example, in addition to being able to group and display media by project or series, we are also organising media by themes, categories and people. We designed the whole site as lo-fi wireframes, before passing it over to our designer – a useful creative technique that emerged from a mentoring session.

We also spent considerable time considering and workshopping the project's name and tagline. There was a certain warmth towards and brand recognition of the title, RadioMoLI, so that was retained, but we needed to add something that would capture the transition to multiple forms of media as well as the projects cultural ambition. Beginning with "archive of tomorrow" we transitioned to "an archive for Irish literature", before eventually arriving at "Ireland's literature channel". To us, this encapsulates the breadth of the collection, while communicating how centrally we see the project sitting within the Irish and international literature community.

Working closely with our graphic designer and developer, the new-look RadioMoLI began to emerge. Our designer, David Donoghoe, created a beautiful and distinctive visual system which remains highly functional, unashamedly borrowing elements from popular entertainment platforms that so successfully engage their audiences. Our developer, Stuart Cusack, build a whole new CMS and front end, with extensive custom code to realise the design approach. We're particularly fond of the shape and rounded edges of images on the site – a not to an old television, and a potent visual currency that says "watch me" to a contemporary visitor.

One of the benefits of the DOORS programme was to consider the project in phases, and to never consider the project finished. This dynamic approach has benefited RadioMoLI 2.0; rather than limit our ambition, it has helped us to prioritise and visualise a longer-term approach to the development of the project. We're delighted with what we have achieved with the help of DOORS, and excited about the future possibilities unleashed by the project.

Benefits & Impact

It's curious to think of what might have happened to RadioMoLI if we hadn't been able to focus resource on it through the DOORS programme. There is every possibility that we would have arrived at an unwieldy collection that visitors could no longer navigate in a useful way, and something that would have become structurally quite unstable. As such we can consider the programme to have been something of a lifesaver for the project, and it couldn't have happened at a better time.

The obvious, immediate, benefit, is that we have rebuilt RadioMoLI from occupying a small, technically limited section of our website, to a standalone media platform with much more potential to engage audiences as well as attract contributions from our literature community. The new RadioMoLI is so much more visually appealing, and offers more avenues for editorial

and curatorial presentation of the collection that it promised to create much greater access to the literary artform quite aside from the benefits it provides for the literature community.

Less visible are the structural improvements. Nobody sees the whole new CMS built for the platform, the much more efficient codebase, the new legal agreements, the digital preservation systems, the new workflows for our team and the incremental improvements to our studio – but they are there, and without them the platform couldn't function. In short, we couldn't have updated the façade without making stronger foundations, and the DOORS programme has supported this holistic investment in the project.

Our strong sense is that the relaunch of RadioMoLI will have an immediate positive impact on our existing audience, stakeholders, and partners in the literature community (festivals, writers, producers, publishers, literary organisations) – the visual rebrand and the statement of intent as "Ireland's literature channel" alone will create excitement and momentum among those already invested in the project. Of course, our ambition is to go beyond that group and create lasting impact with the public. Every curatorial and design decision we have made has been with that public engagement in mind, and with the right approach to curation and communications, we believe the project will achieve very significant audiences in the near future.

Limits & Drawbacks

Our greatest limitation throughout the project was our own time: the team leading the project is very small, and runs a large amount of activity at the museum, including exhibitions, all of MoLI's programming and digital work. This, combined with the ambition and scale of work demanded by RadioMoLI 2.0, meant that we were often working under significant pressure and we had to revise the timeline many times. That said, we are very happy with what we have achieved in the context of the programme, and realise that the infrastructural work completed with support the efficient management of the platform in the future.

We enjoyed and benefited from the workshops provided – and this was a lovely way to meet colleagues from around Europe, but at times found it challenging to commit the time required to attend – again, because we are a small team with many projects and responsibilities in the organisation. Perhaps a future version of the programme could look at reducing the time commitment to a degree.

Future Prospects

The more we have worked on RadioMoLI 2.0, the more we have realised that it has potential beyond our original expectations. As we launch RadioMoLI: Ireland's literature channel, we anticipate that interest in the platform from potential partners and new audiences will grow rapidly. This, we expect, will open up new possibilities for the collection, while potentially supporting new funding opportunities from both state grants and corporate sponsorship.

Funding allowing, we would hope to continue investing in the platform. Key areas where we would hope to focus investment would include: technical improvements to the site such as auto-transcription and additional modules to represent content; investment in the curatorial and production team to ensure that the platform is sustainably managed; and investment in marketing to bring new audiences in contact with RadioMoLI.

We're also excited by the prospect that the museum's digital work – in any context – will find a home in RadioMoLI, from materials produced for exhibitions to commissioned films to documentation of events. With the addition of more live audio streams from events, RadioMoLI should feel closer to the activity and mission of the museum than ever before.

Key Take-Aways

While the size of our team and the resource we could commit to the project presented a challenge, a key take-away is also how much could be achieved within a small team with the right support. The programme certainly promotes leaving one's hermetic working practices behind, engaging with like-minded partners and communicating consistently about your work – all of these things helped to drive RadioMoLI 2.0 forward.

Engaging with the funding and reporting structure was challenging at times, largely because there was a steep learning curve – this being one of our first EU-funded projects. However, the support of the DOORS team made this easier, and we do feel much better prepared to operate within a similar funding context in the future as a result.

Finally, we're proud of the result. We believe RadioMoLI: Ireland's literature channel has a very significant role to play in the world of Irish and international literature – as well as more broadly in the cultural life of our audiences. As the project develops and becomes both more visible and more integrated in cultural life, we hope that the platform will provide inspiration to cultural organisations and museums seeking new ways to engage the public in their digital collections.

Involved Parties	• National Library of Ireland • Ebow (the digital agency) • David Donohoe (design) • Stuart Cusack (development)
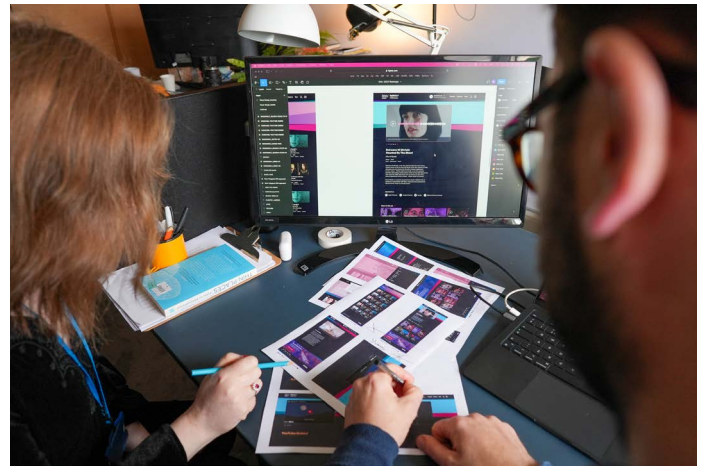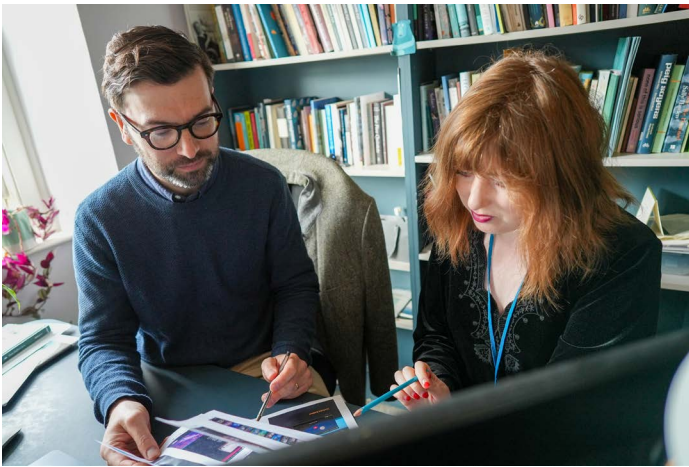
RadioMoLI, Team at work, Museum of Literature Ireland, photo by Ian Dunphy
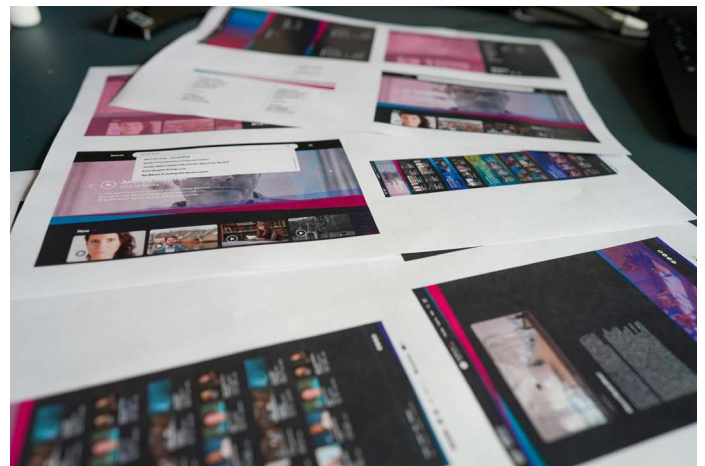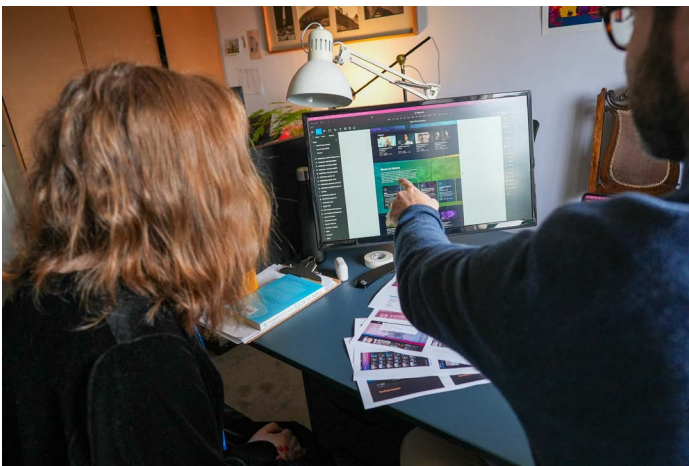
RadioMoLI, Team at work, Museum of Literature Ireland, photo by Ian Dunphy

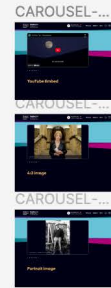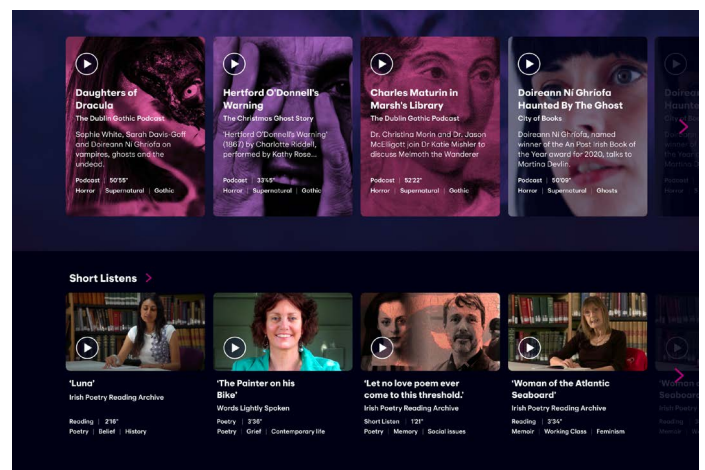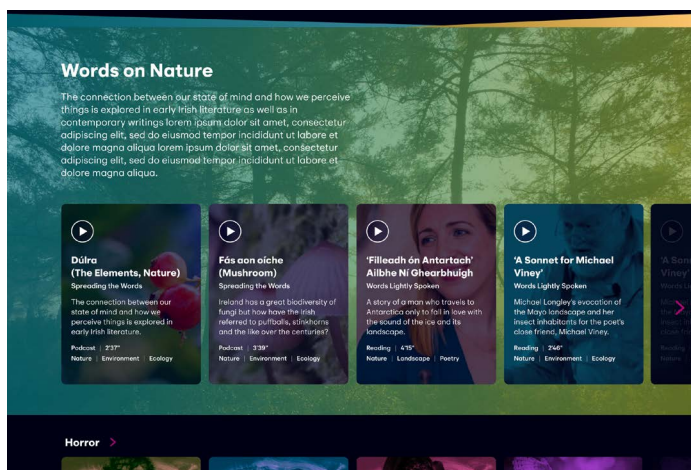SEARCH   MENU   HOME   CURATED LANDING   SEARCH RESULTS   INDIVIDUAL ENTRY   BASIC PAGE   CAROUSEL Media

RadioMoLI, Design, Museum of Literature Ireland

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