Beyond Big Tech: Alternative Digital Platforms for Collaborative and Participatory Art Historical Research

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Abstract

The selection of digital collaboration platforms impacts research participation in international digital humanities projects. This study emerged from practical challenges during the "Ted Stamm: *Tags*" project, a multi-institutional art historical research initiative transcribing 63 sketchbooks (1973–81) with 675 documented participant contributions. Initial reliance on Google Sheets was discontinued due to ethical concerns regarding policy changes, while the subsequent transition to Microsoft Excel created barriers for external collaborators across different institutional frameworks.

This paper investigates alternative collaborative platforms that meet European standards for data sovereignty while supporting multi-institutional research collaboration. The research question asks: What European alternative platforms exist that provide institutional compatibility and GDPR compliance without sacrificing collaborative functionality? Through a case study methodology grounded in *Tags* transcription project, this paper proposes an evaluation structure and planned comparative assessment of three European platforms: kSuite, LibreOffice, and Proton Drive.

The evaluation framework assesses platforms across six criteria: (1) institutional compatibility with external collaborators, (2) real-time collaboration capabilities, (3) data sovereignty and GDPR compliance, (4) scalability for research projects, (5) integration with existing academic workflows, and (6) cost sustainability. This research responds to a need identified in Huminfra infrastructure guidance by systematically evaluating EU alternatives to US-based platforms.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 introduces the research context and platforms. Section 2 examines European digital sovereignty. Section 3 reviews Ted Stamm's artistic practice and the *Tags* case study. Section 4 develops the evaluation framework with testing protocol. Section 5 discusses preliminary platform assessment findings. Section 6 concludes recommendations for digital humanities and institutional research.

Keywords

Digital sovereignty, collaborative platforms, participatory design, participatory art, art history, conceptual, European research infrastructure, GDPR, digital humanities, Ted Stamm

1. Introduction

Digital tool selection determines the participants in international research collaborations. The 2025 transition within our *Tags* research team from Google Sheets to Microsoft Excel, initially an ethical response to policy changes, revealed systematic barriers that excluded qualified researchers based on institutional IT configurations rather than scholarly merit [1].

These challenges reflect broader European movements toward data sovereignty, as exemplified by policy shifts across Denmark, Germany, and Sweden [2] [3] [4]. When institutional IT policies create access delays for external collaborators, platform selection becomes a methodological and ethical imperative. The current situation is complicated by heightened dependency on US-owned platforms: specifically, Microsoft and Google, whose recent policy shifts have minimized or ended DEI initiatives and GDPR protections.

This study focuses specifically on institutional compatibility challenges, authentication barriers, and collaborative cross-border workflows. While we acknowledge broader accessibility considerations including assistive technology compatibility and universal design principles, this research prioritizes platform evaluation for multi-institutional research coordination rather than focusing on comprehensive accessibility auditing. Future research should systematically examine the compliance of these platforms

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with WCAG 2.1 standards and compatibility with screen readers, cognitive support tools, and mobile accessibility features.

This research evaluates readymade commercial services rather than self-hosted solutions such as Nextcloud [5]. Offering maximum institutional control, self-hosting nonetheless requires substantial IT infrastructure, specialized technical expertise, and resources for ongoing maintenance that exceed the capacity of most humanities research projects. Commercial EU alternatives provide GDPR compliance and data sovereignty without requiring in-house server administration, making them more feasible for typical digital humanities (DH) collaborations.

2. European Digital Sovereignty and Platform Independence

European governmental and academic stakeholders increasingly recognize that dependence on US-owned proprietary platforms undermines institutional independence and legal compliance under GDPR and the Digital Markets Act [6]. Denmark's Digital Minister Caroline Stage (2025) [7] articulated this concern: "Too much public digital infrastructure is tied up with very few foreign suppliers," creating vulnerabilities extending beyond economics to encompass data security, research autonomy, and democratic governance of academic infrastructure.

Institutional transitions show feasibility at scale. The German state of Schleswig-Holstein's migrated sixty thousand government workers to LibreOffice and Linux-based systems, providing a template with documented benefits including reduced costs, improved security, and GDPR compliance [8]. These developments, however, do not represent coordinated national strategies. While focusing on humanities research infrastructure coordination, Huminfra does not propose specific alternatives to US-based platforms [9], bringing awareness to the need for systematic assessment frameworks.

The EU's Digital Decade strategy emphasizes sovereign digital capabilities that compete with global technology monopolies and maintain European values of privacy, transparency, and social responsibility [10]. For humanities research, this translates to infrastructure supporting diverse methodological approaches, multilingual collaboration, and cross-border participation within regulatory compliance frameworks.

3. Ted Stamm and the Participatory Tags Project: Case Study

3.1 Ted Stamm and the *Tag* Collaborative Sketchbooks

Ted Stamm (1944–1984) was a conceptual artist whose practice emerged from the artistic context of the 1970s SoHo neighborhood in New York. A graduate of Hofstra University (1967), where he studied under the painter Perle Fine, Stamm developed a distinctive artistic methodology centered on relinquishing personal control through strategic use of chance, found materials, and collaborative participatory based processes. His artistic evolution reflects sustained engagement with questions of artistic authorship, democratic participation, and the artist's role in the creative process.

Beginning in 1972, Stamm moved away from lyrical Abstract Expressionism toward a more conceptually rigorous practice. He developed his *Cancel* series by systematically covering existing paintings with dense arrays of marks in varying shades of black, embracing destruction as a form for artistic renewal. He concurrently began to collect tags with paper strings that had been discarded on the streets of SoHo: industrial remnants of the neighborhood's warehouses and manufacturing centers. These found tags became the foundation for a decade-long experimental practice using chance, mark making, and participatory artistic dialogue.

In the *Tag* Collaborative Sketchbooks (1974–81) Stamm explored participatory artistic practice. Rather than presenting himself as the sole artistic authority, he invited studio visitors and individuals he randomly encountered outside his studio to participate in collaborative dialogues of mark making. The format was deceptively simple yet conceptually profound: Stamm created matching pairs of Sennelier French spiral notepads, affixing one found garment tag to each page. In the first notebook, labeled "Executed by Individuals" (Figure 1), participants responded to prompts such as "Price a tag," "Blacken a tag," or "Draw a horizontal line through a tag." In the second notebook, labeled "Artist

Book," Stamm responded to these marks with his own interventions. Both pages were stamped with dates and other documentation to create permanent records of these participatory based works.

Stamm's participatory practice shows deliberate commitment to inclusive practices and democratic artistic engagement. His documented collaborators span diverse constituencies, ranging from prominent art world figures such as William Zimmer (art critic at the *New York Times*) and Heidi Colsman-Freyberger (executive director of Barnett Newman Foundation) to studio visitors and people encountered purely by chance. This inclusive approach questioned traditional hierarchies of artistic authority and authorship, positioning Stamm simultaneously as an artist, a facilitator, and a responsive participant in collective creative processes.

The materiality of Stamm's participatory work merits particular attention. Participants employed graphite pencils, paint, spray paint, markers, rubber stamps, foam brushes, staples, sandpaper, and even their own thumbprints (Figure 2), materials that reflected diverse gestures and mark-making vocabularies. The garment tags themselves became conceptually charged objects, transforming industrial detritus into a site of artistic dialogue. Some collaborators embraced delicate gestures; others made bold, messy or decisive marks. Stamm's responses acknowledged and amplified these varied interventions, creating dialogues in which his artistic judgment served as collaborative exploration rather than hierarchical control.

The *Tag* series achieved international recognition in Documenta 6 (Kassel, Germany, June 24–October 2, 1977) [11], where curator Manfred Schneckenburger featured Stamm's participatory *Tag* notebooks in the exhibition's "Art Books" section. This recognition situated Stamm's participatory methodology within broader international discourse on conceptual and experimental artistic practices, particularly in relation to questions of authorship, process-based art, and audience engagement that dominated the artistic discourse of the 1970s.

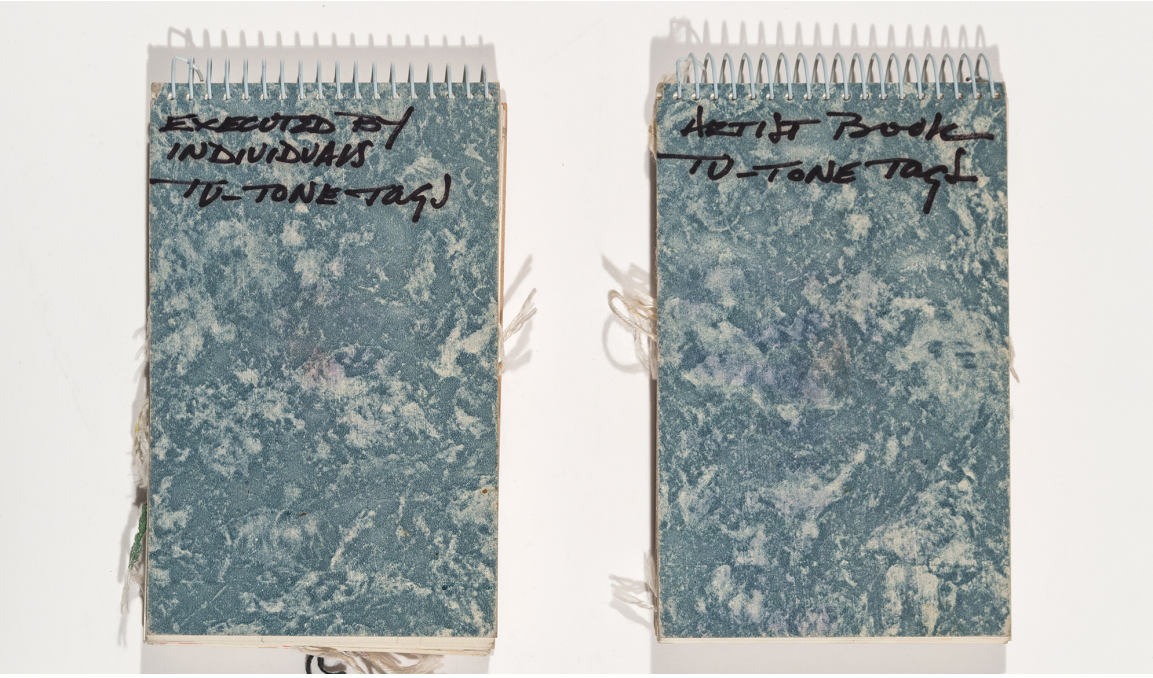

Figure 1. Ted Stamm, *Tags Sketchbook* 61 (1977). Left: "Executed by Individuals Tu-Tone Tags" collaborative works by twenty-five participants, illustrating the project's participatory method. Right: Ted Stamm's original composition, "Artist Book Tu-Tone Tags."

Figure 2. Ink Thumbprint Tags from Ted Stamm, *Tags Sketchbook* 80 (1980). Left: Original page detail. Right: Contribution by Per Haubro Jensen (May 1980), showing individual intervention in the collective process.

3.2 The Tags Transcription Project: Research Context

The Ted Stamm *Tags* transcription project coordinated collaborative research across 63 sketchbooks containing approximately 1,575 pages of artistic documentation that span the eight-year collaborative period (1973–81). This multi-institutional initiative assembled research fellows from Malmö University, the University of Chicago, Yale University, School of Advanced Study (SAS) at the University of London, and Rice University, supported by the Jeff Metcalf Internship Program and Arts and Humanities Bridge initiative at the University of Chicago.

The project's scale and scope, documenting approximately 675 identified contributors to Stamm's participatory practice, required systematic transcription cataloguing of detailed metadata including contributor names, collaboration dates, materials employed (paint, graphite, spray paint, markers, staples, hole punches, stamps), and analytical descriptions of individual contributions within collective processes. This comprehensive documentation created a dataset suitable for multiple analytical approaches including art historical contextualization within 1970s conceptual art practices, urban history analysis examining the SoHo neighborhood as context and medium, and mapping of participatory chronology examining participant backgrounds throughout the collaborative period.

Research fellows conducted intensive transcription work in July–August 2025, developing standardized metadata templates and quality control protocols. The systematic approach ensured scholarly rigor that supported multiple potential research outputs: peer-reviewed publications examining participatory artistic methodologies, art historical essays contextualizing the *Tags* series within broader artistic movements, and digital humanities (DH) projects exploring collaborative practices through archival data visualization.

3.3 Institutional Compatibility Barriers

Challenges emerged at the intersection of technical limitations and institutional security protocols. GDPR-compliant data handling at Malmö University, while legally essential, created unexpected barriers when external collaborators could not access shared Microsoft Excel spreadsheets (Figure 3) through institutional SharePoint, effectively excluding researchers based on institutional affiliation rather than scholarly qualifications [12]. These delays particularly affected international collaborators from institutions with differing IT security protocols.

The solution involved transitioning to School of Advanced Study (SAS) at the University of London's Microsoft SharePoint, configured to facilitate external institutional participation. This work-around succeeded and highlighted systemic dependence on proprietary Microsoft infrastructure with varying institutional configurations.

Beyond policy and access barriers, the research team encountered specific technical limitations. Microsoft Excel's absence of native multiuser real-time editing (without SharePoint integration) required sequential workflow modifications that slowed transcription progress. Google Sheets' formula compatibility issues when exporting to Excel formats required manual data verification that created additional quality control burdens. SharePoint's complex permission hierarchies required IT administrator intervention for each new external collaborator, creating one-to-two-week delays for access provisioning. These technical friction points, combined with ethical and legal concerns, strengthened the imperative for evaluating European alternatives.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	**SK**	**Page**	**A (Stamm)/B (others)**	**Date**	**Image file name**	**Size (in.)**	**Participant**	**Description**	**Check Participant**
1196	80	8	A	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9677	6 x 3.75	Per Haubro Jensen	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner, dark thumbprint placed slightly at a left angle	
1197	80	8	B	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9677	6 x 3.75	Ted Stamm	Tag adhered upside down, narrow/ partial thumbprint in center of tag, signature large in bottom right	
1198	80	9	A	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9678	6 x 3.75	Peter Fend	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner, dark thumbprint over tag	
1199	80	9	B	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9678	6 x 3.75	Ted Stamm	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner, thumbprint applied horizontally over tag and part of string in lower 3/4 of tag	
1200	80	10	A	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9679	6 x 3.75	Geneene Estrada	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner, thumbprint applied horizontally over tag and part of string in lower 3/4 of tag	
1201	80	10	B	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9679	6 x 3.75	Ted Stamm	Tag adhered upside down, two partial separated thumbprints, one darker applied over tag and string arranged over tag. "Maybe May"	
1202	80	11	A	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9680	6 x 3.75	John Ford	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner, this time along vertical edge, dark thumprint applied over string and tag, split into two	
1203	80	11	B	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9680	6 x 3.75	Ted Stamm	Tag adhered upside down, dakr thumbprint applied over tag and part of string and swept upward to the right	
1204	80	12	A	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9681	6 x 3.75	Don Hazlitt	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner along vertical edge, thumbprint applied over top half of tag and spills onto sketchbook	
1205	80	12	B	5/11/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9681	6 x 3.75	Ted Stamm	Tag adhered upside down, lightweight thumbprint over tag	
1206	80	13	A	5/12/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9682	6 x 3.75	J. Handzel	Tag adhered upside down, date in righthand bottom corner along vertical edge, thumbprting applied over tag in lighter ink application	
1207	80	13	B	5/12/1980	TS_Tag-Colab_SK_080_Thumbprint_1980_DSC9682	6 x 3.75	Ted Stamm	Tag adhered upside down, dark thumbprint applied to the left of tag over strings	

Figure 3. Transcription spreadsheet for Ink Thumbprint Tags from *Tags Sketchbook* (80), capturing contributor metadata (e.g., Peter Fend, Geneene Estrade, John Ford, Per Haubro Jensen, Don Hazlitt, and J. Hendzel).

4. Evaluation Framework and Testing Protocol

To address systematic challenges, this research proposes a framework centered on six criteria for collaborative humanities research [13] [14]: (1) Institutional Compatibility, (2) Real-Time Collaboration, (3) Data Sovereignty, (4) Scalability, (5) Integration, and (6) Cost Sustainability.

4.1 Assessment Criteria (1–5 Scale)

Each platform receives a score from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent) based on practical testing:

1. Institutional Compatibility
    - Testing: External collaborator access without institutional accounts; guest protocols
    - Target: Seamless access for researchers from multiple universities
2. Real-Time Collaboration
    - Testing: Multiple simultaneous editors; tracking and version history; synch reliability
    - Target: Google Sheets equivalent functionality without proprietary lock-in
3. Data Sovereignty
    - Testing: Server locations (European-based); GDPR compliance documentation; data export/deletion capabilities; and terms of service review
    - Target: Full compliance with European data protection standards
4. Scalability

- Testing: Performance with increasing users; storage limits; large file handling; and project growth accommodation
- Target: Support for research projects ranging from small teams to large collaborations

5. Integration
   - Testing: Excel/CSV import-export; compatibility with citation managers; API availability
   - Target: Minimal workflow disruption when transitioning from existing platforms
6. Cost Sustainability
   - Testing: Pricing structures for academic projects; long-term affordability; free tier limitations; and institutional licensing options
   - Target: Budget-feasible alternatives to Microsoft 365/Google Workspace

4.2 Platform Selection Rationale

kSuite by Infomaniak [15] (Switzerland): Comprehensive collaboration suite including kDrive (cloud storage), online office tools, and communication features. Swiss GDPR compliance and data sovereignty guarantees. Pricing: €1.76–€6.92 user, month, with free tier available.

LibreOffice [16] (Germany): Open-source office suite offering full Microsoft Office compatibility without vendor lock-in. Cross-platform with strong international community support. Cost: Free. Note: Requires additional cloud storage solution for collaboration (can integrate with Nextcloud, ownCloud, or other platforms).

Proton Drive [17] (Switzerland): End-to-end encrypted cloud storage with emerging collaboration features. Swiss GDPR compliance. Pricing: Free (5GB); €4.99 per month (200GB). Note: Collaboration features are currently limited compared to Google Drive / Microsoft SharePoint.

4.3 Two-Week Testing Protocol

This streamlined approach prioritizes real-world usability testing with researchers facing barriers.

Target Test Groups:

Group 1: External institutional researcher with different IT systems (1 participant)

Group 2: International researcher under different GDPR frameworks (1 participant)

Weeks 1–2: User Testing

Real collaborative tasks: Shared spreadsheet editing, document coauthoring, data entry, and file version management. Feedback collection via surveys and semistructured interviews.

Week 3: Assessment

Score each platform (1–5) across six criteria based on user feedback and technical testing. Cost analysis and institutional IT requirement verification.

Week 4: Analysis and Recommendations

Compile results and develop practical recommendations for conference presentation, focusing on which platforms suit different research collaboration scenarios.

Data Collection: Postsession feedback and interviews with participants

5. Preliminary Platform Assessment

Based on available documentation and initial pilot testing, preliminary findings suggest:

Platform Strengths:

kSuite by Infomaniak:

- Strong institutional compatibility (4/5), familiar interface reduces training, multilingual support, comprehensive collab tools, Swiss data sovereignty (5/5), and competitive pricing

LibreOffice:

- Maximum cost sustainability (free/5), strong offline functionality (5/5), excellent Microsoft compatibility (4/5), no vendor lock-in, and large open-source community support

Proton Drive:

- Maximum data sovereignty and encryption (5/5), Swiss privacy protection, strong security model, emerging collaboration features, and affordability

Identified Challenges:

- Institutional Integration: European platforms currently score 2–4/5 versus US platforms' 3–5/5 for seamless institutional SSO (single sign-on) integration
- Real-Time Collaboration: LibreOffice requires additional cloud infrastructure; Proton Drive's collaboration features are still developing as compared to Google Drive maturity
- Learning Curve: Higher initial training investment required compared to familiar Google / Microsoft interfaces
- Feature Parity: Some European alternatives still developing feature completeness for advanced collaboration workflows

Cost Analysis:

LibreOffice offers unmatched cost sustainability as free open-source software. kSuite by Infomaniak and Proton Drive provide competitive pricing (€1.76–€6.92 per month and €4.99 per month, respectively) compared to Microsoft 365 (€10.50 per month) and Google Workspace (€5.75–€15.60 per month). Analysis of the total cost of ownership should account for institutional IT support requirements, staff training time (estimated 8–16 hours per researcher), and workflow modification investments beyond license costs. Organizations transitioning from established platforms should budget 15–20% additional overhead during migration phases.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Key Findings

European alternative platforms offer viable options for multi-institutional DH collaboration while meeting data sovereignty requirements. Success requires balancing technical functionality, institutional compatibility, and regulatory compliance. No single platform provides perfect feature parity with Google / Microsoft ecosystems, but combinations of these platforms can address specific research needs. The experience with the *Tags* project shows that platform selection impacts research participation equity, with institutional access barriers creating systematic exclusion unrelated to scholarly qualifications.

6.2 Institutional Recommendations

Research Projects

Research teams should implement processes of participatory platform selection that involve all collaborators from project inception. This participatory approach ensures that platform choices such as kSuite by Infomaniak, LibreOffice, or Proton Drive reflect the needs and constraints of all team members rather than institutional convenience or technical preferences. Institutions should allocate resources for training and transition support when moving to new platforms, recognizing that the learning curve for unfamiliar interfaces represents an implementation cost.

Beyond initial transition planning, research projects require clearly established contingency protocols for addressing access barriers as they emerge, ensuring that systematic inequities do not exclude qualified collaborators mid-project. Throughout the implementation process, research teams should systematically document platform limitations and compatibility challenges they encounter, creating documentation that can inform institutional infrastructure advocacy and support broader efforts to develop European digital alternatives.

IT Departments

Institutional IT departments must develop guest access protocols explicitly designed to accommodate European platforms alongside existing proprietary systems. This requires moving beyond security policies designed exclusively for Microsoft and Google ecosystems to create authentication procedures compatible with kSuite by Infomaniak, LibreOffice, and Proton Drive. IT departments should designate technical support personnel with expertise in authentication services and cross-institutional log-in

protocols, recognizing that their support needs differ substantially from conventional enterprise platforms.

Additionally, IT departments should undertake comprehensive security policy reviews to identify unnecessary barriers that prevent the adoption of GDPR-compliant alternatives, distinguishing between security requirements and legacy policies designed around proprietary platform assumptions. Finally, institutions should investigate institutional site licenses and volume pricing arrangements with European collaboration tool providers such as kSuite by Infomaniak, LibreOffice, and Proton Drive, potentially reducing per-user costs and facilitating broader adoption across multiple departments and research initiatives.

Policy Development

Institutional and governmental policy frameworks must establish clear guidelines that balance legitimate security requirements with the collaborative accessibility necessary for inclusive research environments. These guidelines should explicitly recognize that excessive security restrictions can constitute barriers to participation, requiring careful calibration between protection and accessibility. Policy development requires sustained coordination among legal compliance, IT security, and research leadership to guarantee that data protection regulations do not inadvertently exclude collaborators or enable the reproduction of institutionalized big tech inequalities.

National and institutional policies should actively support European digital sovereignty through dedicated infrastructure investment and targeted funding for platforms meeting GDPR and European privacy standards. Finally, policy development should prioritize establishing best practices for multi-institutional cross-border collaboration, documenting effective protocols for external guest access, international researcher participation, and navigation of diverse regulatory frameworks within single research initiatives.

6.3 Future Research

Longitudinal studies tracking platform adoption outcomes, including participation patterns, research productivity, and total cost of ownership across different project scales must be undertaken. Systematic evaluation of emerging European platforms as collaboration features mature. Furthermore, comparative analysis of self-hosted versus commercial European solutions should be framed by institutions with IT infrastructure capacity.

Also, investigation of innovative cross-border collaboration models are needed to show how European platforms facilitate international partnerships under diverse regulatory frameworks. Analysis of legal standards, technical protocols, and cultural practices supporting or hindering inclusive collaboration might be examined.

Exploration of participatory design methodologies for platform selection would help examine the influence of researcher input on institutional technology decisions.

6.4 Broader Implications

Platform selection in humanities research constitutes ethical practice extending beyond technical functionality to questions of institutional autonomy, research independence, and democratic knowledge creation. European alternative platforms show that data sovereignty and collaborative effectiveness represent complementary rather than competing goals. Success requires sustained institutional commitment, meaningful community engagement, systematic resource allocation, and recognition that digital tools inform the knowledge created and communities engaged in its production. Forward-looking research infrastructure must directly embody scholarly values of openness and intellectual freedom within design and implementation processes.

The Ted Stamm *Tags* project exemplifies this principle: Stamm's deliberate choice to include diverse voices in collaborative artistic practice mirrors the needs of research communities for inclusive, equitable digital infrastructure supporting meaningful participation across institutions.

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