

Preserving Intangible Heritage: Defining a Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

The past decade has seen tremendous progress in the field of preservation, particularly with respect to preservation of digital materials. To date, however, there has been only minimal research activity within North America on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, and its relationship to the preservation of material expressions of culture. Given the importance of intangible heritage to the cultural and scholarly record, we believe that a more significant research program in this area would be of benefit to the scholarly community. This panel will focus on the nature of intangible heritage and the problems in preserving it in a digital age.

Keywords

Intangible cultural heritage, digital preservation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003). Such intangible heritage manifests itself in oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festivals, knowledge and practices regarding the nature of the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. Recognizing both that much intangible cultural heritage was at risk, and that there exists a “deep-

seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage,” the Convention seeks to safeguard and raise awareness regarding intangible heritage, and establishes a committee which maintains lists of representative intangible cultural heritage and intangible heritage in urgent need of safekeeping, as well as what it recognizes as best safeguarding practices.

Much work has been done on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage since the 2003 Convention, and UNESCO maintains a list of “Best Safeguarding Practices” for intangible cultural heritage, along with a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and a list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urgent Need of Safeguard.¹ Closer examination of this list highlights several troubling issues, however. Many of the safeguarding practices identified in UNESCO’s list are highly specific to a particular localized context and are not easily generalized to other situations. Programs developed for safeguarding carillon culture in Belgium, for example, do not provide much guidance for assisting in preserving oral and musical traditions of the Aymara people of Bolivia. While we can and should expect preservation efforts to adapt to local contexts and practices, the practices identified by UNESCO reflect a lack of theoretical understanding of the problems inherent in preserving intangible heritage sufficient to allow development of common solutions.

The UNESCO list also unfortunately demonstrates that there has been remarkably little work conducted on the preservation of intangible heritage within North America. Of the 34 additions to UNESCO’s list of representative intangible cultural heritage in 2014, none were from North America, and only two came from the western hemisphere.

This panel is intended to spark a conversation about defining a research agenda surrounding the preservation of intangible cultural heritage within the North American

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¹ The complete lists may be accessed through UNESCO at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/lists>.

context. To launch this discussion, we have selected panelists with knowledge across the domains of digital preservation and cultural heritage (focusing on the intangible cultural forms of cuisine and performing arts). Panelists for the discussion will be:

- Dr. Perla Innocenti, Department of Mathematics & Information Sciences, Northumbria University Newcastle. Dr. Innocenti brings expertise in the fields of cultural heritage and digital preservation, having served as the Principal Investigator on the EU-funded FP7 SSH collaborative research project *MeLA-Museums in an Age of Migrations*, and a team-leader of the EU FP7-ICT collaborative R&D projects *SHAMAN (Sustaining Heritage Access through Multivalent Archiving)*.
- Scott Barton, Food Studies Program, New York University. Currently a doctoral candidate in the Food Studies Program at NYU, Mr. Barton has 25 years of experience as an executive chef and a culinary school instructor. He has been a fellow of Instituto Sacatar in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil and the Tepoztlán Institute for Transnational History of the Americas in Tepoztlán, Mexico. His current research focuses on the intersection of secular and sacred foodways of Northeastern Brazil as a marker of cultural and ethnic identity.
- Dr. Doug Reside, Curator, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library. Dr. Reside currently manages the Theatre Division's collections and public services at New York Public Library. Prior to joining NYPL, Dr. Reside served on the staff of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities at the University of Maryland. He has published and spoken on topics related to theater history, literature, and digital humanities, and his recent research interests have focused on the use of digital forensic technology to study the creative process.
- Dr. Maria Bonn, Senior Lecturer, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Prior to joining the faculty at the School of Information Sciences at UIUC, Dr. Bonn served as the associate university librarian for publishing at the University of Michigan Library, with responsibility for publishing and scholarly communications initiatives, including the University of Michigan Press and the Scholarly Publishing Office. Her current research interests include scholarly communication and publishing in the networked age, information economics, and preservation of intangible heritage.

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN NORTH AMERICA

Unfortunately, intangible heritage has received little scholarly interest within the United States or Canada. If we examine the last three years of publication for the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, the academic

journal specifically devoted to consideration of intangible heritage, we find only one article discussing intangible heritage within the United States (Hickey, 2012). While intangible cultural heritage permeates our social landscape as much as it does any other society, extraordinarily little scholarly attention has been paid to its preservation within the North American context.

There have been some efforts directed at preserving aspects of intangible heritage within North America to date. Living history museums, such as Mystic Seaport in Connecticut (Bruggerman, 2009) and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia (Carson, 1985), have attempted to preserve aspects of traditional craftwork (e.g., blacksmithing, boat building and design, 19th century cooking techniques). Anthropologists and ethnobotanists have investigated the traditional medicines of Native Americans in the United States and Canada (Moerman, 1979; Anderson, 2005). But these efforts are isolated, and in many cases, as noted by Paul Alan Cox (2000) with respect to ethnobotany, are coming too late to preserve a great deal of cultural knowledge. Researchers in digital curation have noted that preservation of data must often begin at the point of data's creation, and in many ways this appears to be true of intangible heritage as well. By the time a threat to these cultural forms is recognized, it may be too late to save them.

More fundamentally, however, many of the efforts that have aimed to preserve intangible cultural heritage might be more accurately described as documenting intangible heritage, and a significant gap can exist between documenting and preserving. A team of linguists and anthropologists can fully document the grammar and vocabulary of a language such as that of the Mono tribe in California, and such efforts may assist in preserving that heritage, and may in fact be a crucial step in preserving a language, but they are not in and of themselves a preservation program, as the endangered status of the Mono language demonstrates (Kroskrity, 2002).

One of the fundamental truths recognized by the living history centers is that much of what we regard as intangible cultural heritage takes the form of embodied practice, and that preservation of heritage requires sustained and repeated enactment of that practice as part of the means by which it is preserved over time. Documentary practices, while they may contribute to preservation, are not themselves preservation. Preservation of intangible heritage requires establishing the conditions under which cultural knowledge and the embodied practices manifesting that knowledge may continue, and with a very limited number of exceptions, libraries, archives and museums in North America possess little understanding of what this entails or how they might best contribute to supporting this type of activity. By bringing together those who collect and archive tangible artifacts that contribute to sustaining of intangible cultural heritage, scholars who study forms of intangible culture and information use, and representatives of communities which create (and rely on) intangible heritage,

we hope to articulate a research agenda which will help provide cultural heritage institutions with the knowledge they need to better support the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

THE COMPLEX NATURE OF INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

As the UNESCO Convention notes, a “deep-seated interdependence” links intangible and tangible cultural expression, and we believe recent research into digital preservation highlights the necessity for addressing both the intangible and the tangible if we wish to accurately and completely preserve the cultural record. This interdependence may manifest itself in at least two ways:

- A tangible cultural artifact may be so closely implicated with intangible knowledge and practices that to preserve the artifact without preserving the intangible heritage associated with it leaves the artifact without sufficient intellectual context for scholarly interpretation and use; and
- Preservation activities necessary to sustain a tangible artifact may themselves constitute a form of intangible cultural heritage that needs to be preserved for conservation efforts to be feasible.

As an example of the first problem, consider the design and implementation of the Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library (HIDVL), a digital library of performance practices in the Americas, and which seeks “to promote dialogue and a deeper understanding of performance and politics in the Americas.”² The HIDVL describes its mission in part as guaranteeing “historical preservation and free, online access to more than 600 hours of video.” It was recognized by both the Hemispheric Institute and the NYU Libraries in the original development of the HIDVL, however, that preservation of only the videos of performances themselves would not adequately support scholarly engagement with the materials in the HIDVL. The Hemispheric Institute’s leadership in the area of intangible heritage (as manifested by their being given an award by UNESCO to develop standards on preservation of social practices, festival events and rituals as part of the implementation of the UNESCO convention on intangible heritage) led them to understand that the success of the HIDVL was not solely a matter of insuring the technological interpretability of a video bitstream, but also insuring its intellectual interpretability. Insuring that intellectual interpretability required more than merely preserving a documentary video record of a performance. While a performance is a physical manifestation of intangible cultural heritage, as UNESCO’s definition of intangible cultural heritage makes clear, there is a fundamental link between a culture’s intangible knowledge and skills and their physical expression in embodied performance and practice, and if the HIDVL

wished to enable scholars to engage with the performances, the Institute needed to make manifest and record some of the intangible cultural knowledge that informed both the performances’ creation and their interpretation by their original audiences, in addition to the documentary recordings of the performances. This required the HIDVL project to put an immense amount of labor into collecting information about performances and performers and their relationship to both traditional performance practice and politics in the western hemisphere (including “detailed production information, synopses, image galleries, texts, interviews, bibliographics and additional materials”), and to make that contextualizing information available through the HIDVL.

Looked at in this light, the HIDVL is not simply an exercise in access to and preservation of video. It is an effort to capture intangible cultural heritage in its twin, intertwined forms of cultural knowledge and the ephemeral, physical manifestations of embodied practice, to fix both forms (and relationships between them) in digital records, and to make that complex interrelated set of records accessible on an ongoing basis for the purposes of scholarship. It is an effort to employ the tangible (if digital) in the service of enabling scholarly access to the intangible. Research libraries have long known that good collection management involves collecting materials that mutually support each other, and that one of the most valuable additions to a collection is an item which assists in interpreting and understanding other items in the collection. Increasingly, we believe that we are confronting cultural materials where some or all of the necessary interpretive context is intangible, and the cultural heritage community needs to understand how to ensure continuing access to that context if it is to succeed in enabling scholarly use of our cultural heritage.

We should, however, enter one important caveat. We believe there is a fundamental difference between preserving documentary records of intangible cultural heritage to enable scholarly understanding and preserving intangible cultural heritage itself. More simply, documentary records of intangible cultural heritage are not the heritage itself. A video tape of a performance is something separate from the performance; a book describing the preparation of *Homalanthus nutans* bark for the treatment of hepatitis is not the same thing as that knowledge as it exists in the mind of a practitioner of traditional herbal medicine in Samoa (Cox, 1994). Documentary records of intangible cultural heritage may very well contribute to the preservation of intangible heritage as living, embodied practice in its original context, but that is not necessarily the case. A book in English describing the traditional herbal medicine practices of Polynesia, stored in a library at Northern Illinois University, is unlikely to be making an active contribution to sustaining that knowledge and practice among the Samoan people. The HIDVL is certainly preserving records of intangible cultural heritage, and it may be contributing to the

² The Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library may be found at <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/hidvl>.

preservation of intangible cultural heritage itself, either by itself or as part of a larger set of activities in which the Hemispheric Institute engages (e.g., the Encuentros hosted by the Institute every two years which bring together scholars and artists), but we cannot definitely assert at this point that the HIDVL is preserving intangible cultural heritage, and if it is, we possess no detailed knowledge of how it is doing so, or how it might do so better. Those are research questions that we do not believe have received sufficient attention to date. However, what we believe the HIDVL example does amply demonstrate is that the fundamentally interconnected nature of cultural knowledge and embodied practice which constitutes intangible cultural heritage means that you cannot claim to preserve one (or even a record of one) without attempting to preserve the other, and this presents a far more difficult preservation problem (and knowledge management problem) than simply trying to preserve a video stream.

The HIDVL example also demonstrates that even the effort to document aspects of intangible cultural heritage involves more extensive collaboration with the community from which that cultural heritage originates than is typical for most libraries and archives. Libraries, archives and museums cannot undertake the task of preserving communities themselves. However, if these types of organizations wish to move beyond simply preserving documentation of intangible cultural heritage to supporting ICH's preservation, they will have to achieve some understanding of the processes by which communities themselves preserve their own intangible cultural heritage, and approach issues of capture, preservation, and access to documentation with an eye towards insuring it supports those communities' efforts to sustain their own heritage. This type of ethnographic understanding of communities is not something that libraries and archives usually conceive as part of their work (although some museums certainly do), and determining how to employ knowledge of communities' practices in structuring libraries', archive's and museums' services is another area requiring significant research and discussion.

As an example of the second case, where preservation activity itself may constitute a form of intangible cultural heritage, consider library, archive and museum conservation activities with regard to either rare books or early audio/visual materials. Repairing book pages with Japanese Washi paper is not a skill one acquires solely from reading books and journals. Knowledge of book conservation techniques is itself a form of intangible cultural heritage, a familiarity with practices and techniques that is passed on primarily through verbal instruction and demonstration (interestingly, UNESCO has actually recognized the creation of Washi paper as a form of intangible cultural heritage worthy of preservation in itself). It is telling in this regard that the graduate programs in conservation in the United States all weigh pre-program internship experience in conservation in their applications

processes, and many of them also require significant internships as part of graduate study. Similarly, preservation of older audio/visual materials like Ampex 2" helical VTR recordings or the missing SSTV recordings of the Apollo 11 mission require preserving not just the tapes and the VTRs necessary for playback, but the knowledge of the video engineers who used the equipment, much of which is undocumented. Preservation and conservation activity can be highly dependent on knowledge and practice that is not documented and in some cases is very difficult to pass on to others through tangible means such as books or audio/visual recordings.

CONCLUSION

The past two decades have seen significant practical and theoretical advances in the field of digital preservation. A critical insight that has emerged from research in this arena, such as that which led to the OAIS Reference Model, is the interconnectedness of recorded knowledge, and the necessity of preserving recorded context for a work if you wish to preserve its intellectual interoperability. What has not been sufficiently noted in much of the discussions around preservation of tangible information in the LIS field is that much of the critical context we might wish to preserve is intangible. While funding agencies in Europe have actively supported research on intangible cultural heritage and its preservation, a coordinated effort to promote research in this area in North America has been lacking. We hope that sparking discussions among LIS researchers on potential North American research possibilities in this field will help alleviate this problem.

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