

Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Bridging the Gap between Global Policy and Practice

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Introduction

UNESCO set up the Memory of the World (MoW) Programme in 1992 with the objectives of safeguarding the World's documentary heritage, facilitating access to it, disseminating it, and raising public awareness of its significance and the need to preserve it.¹ Within the Programme, documentary heritage is defined to include textual items (books, manuscripts, documents, stone inscriptions, etc.), non-textual items (maps, drawings, etc.), audio-visual materials (films, sound records, photographs etc.), and electronic files (web pages, databases etc.).²

While traditionally the Programme has focused on analogue documentary heritage, increasingly, more attention has been paid to developing guidelines and standards for digital heritage, including digitization of analogue material for access and preservation purposes, as well as to address issues pertaining to continuity, access, and preservation of authentic, reliable, and accurate digital materials. This paper aims to provide an overview of the current developments from UNESCO relating to digital heritage at the global policy level, and suggests ways that this work can be implemented at the regional, national and organizational level.

UNESCO Instruments on Digital Heritage

UNESCO has developed a series of standard-setting instruments covering digital heritage, including the *Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage* (2003)³, the *UNESCO/UBC Vancouver Declaration* (2012)⁴, and most recently, the *UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form* (2015)⁵ (hereafter referred to as the 2015 Recommendation).

¹ Heaney, M (2016), 'The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme', Alexandria, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 46–55.

² UNESCO Memory of the World Secretariat (2002), *Memory of the World: General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary heritage*, p.6.

³ UNESCO Intergovernmental Council for the Information for All Programme (2002), Document 32 C/28 Annex 1.

⁴ UNESCO General Conference (2013), Report on the International Conference, Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation, Document 37 C/INF.15.

⁵ UNESCO General Conference (2015), Draft Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form, Document 38 C/24.

The 2015 Recommendation was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2015, and was formulated through a sequence of experts' and states meetings over a period of three (3) years. The Recommendation is a normative instrument, which aims to promote agreed standards of best practice that all UNESCO Member States are encouraged to follow. Although not legally binding, Member States are required to report on the implementation of the Recommendation every four (4) years.

While there have been previous UNESCO normative instruments that relate to aspects of the documentary heritage, this Recommendation is the first to embrace the field in its entirety including documentary heritage in analogue and digital form, and is also significant as it responds to opportunities and challenges brought by the rapid development of information technology and Web 2.0.⁶

The Recommendation provides a legislative basis for MoW Programme, and was catalyst for the revision of the Guidelines for the UNESCO Memory of the World in 2017⁷. In this regard, the Recommendation is a useful tool for museums, archives, and libraries with collections inscribed on the MoW register to consider when providing access to their collections.

UNESCO Recommendation and the Memory of the World

The MoW program and Recommendation encourage memory institutions to provide access to their collections. The MoW Guidelines (2017) outline that:

"Permanent access is the goal of preservation; without this, preservation has no purpose except as an end in itself...MoW encourages universal, democratized access to the whole documentary heritage...the provision of access has many aspects, and these are listed in the Recommendation".⁸

The key elements regarding the 'provision of access' are covered in section three (3) of the Recommendation, and urge: *"...memory institutions to provide accurate and up-to-date catalogues and finding aids, equitable person-to-person access services to the*

⁶ Ray Edmondson (2017), Implementation Guidelines for the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form, UNESCO MoW Secretariat, Paris, p.1.

⁷ Memory of the World Guidelines Review Group (2017), UNESCO Memory of the World General Guidelines, MoW International Advisory Council.

⁸ Memory of the World Guidelines Review Group (2017), Article 3.2

original documents, if necessary for research, Internet and web-based publications and portals, electronic and digitized content, using international best practice standards.”⁹ Furthermore, memory institutions are encouraged to use “international standards for access and use...that support interoperability. Whenever possible, content should be structured, machine-readable and linkable”.¹⁰

Article 3.7 further outlines that: “Member States are invited to enhance the visibility and accessibility of their documentary heritage through the outreach activities and publications of the Memory of the World Programme as appropriate, with investment in digitization of content for access purposes now being one of its key components. Member States should support and promote public domain access, and wherever possible, encourage the use of public licensing and open access solutions.”¹¹

Opportunities for Access in the Digital Age

Articles 3.2,3.3 and 3.7 of the Recommendation emphasize that in the “digital age”, avenues for access are multiplying, and new and exiting opportunities exist to share collections with the public. While catalogues and finding aids are still essential, they are now supplemented now by a host of digital options including searchable on-line content, downloads, social media.¹²

The Recommendation highlights that it is crucial for memory institutions to have a web presence, including a portal to their own collections or ‘digital archive’. Catalogues and finding aids, whether analogue or digital, should be structured to international standards so they can be machine readable, globally searchable and linkable.¹³

In addition, digitization of content enables remote research and democratization of access and is therefore strongly encouraged by the Recommendations. Also, importantly, the Recommendation highlights the important developments in public licensing and open access solutions.¹⁴

However, one problem with the Recommendation is that it is general in nature and seeks to cover principles at the macro level. For example, it does not specify what the best practice for standardizing interfaces for managing documentary heritage are, how

⁹ UNESCO General Conference (2015), Article 3.2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ UNESCO General Conference (2015), Article 3.3

¹² Ray Edmondson (2017), p.18.

¹³ Ray Edmondson (2017), p.19.

¹⁴ *ibid*

interoperability of data across institutions can be achieved, and what public license and open access solutions are available.

In this regard, there is a need to identify best practice examples and initiatives that can make the link between the principles of the Recommendation, and the realities faced by museums, archives and libraries to manage and provide access to their collections especially in developing country contexts.

This issue was also evident at Consultation for the Implementation of the UNESCO Recommendation on Documentary Heritage 9-11 May 2017, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, involving delegates from 10 ASEAN Member States and Timor-Leste. The delegates at the meeting identified that support was needed in the area of digital heritage, especially guidelines for digitization, digital preservation, and creation of digital management systems. It was also apparent that many collections were closed off due to outdated copyright laws.

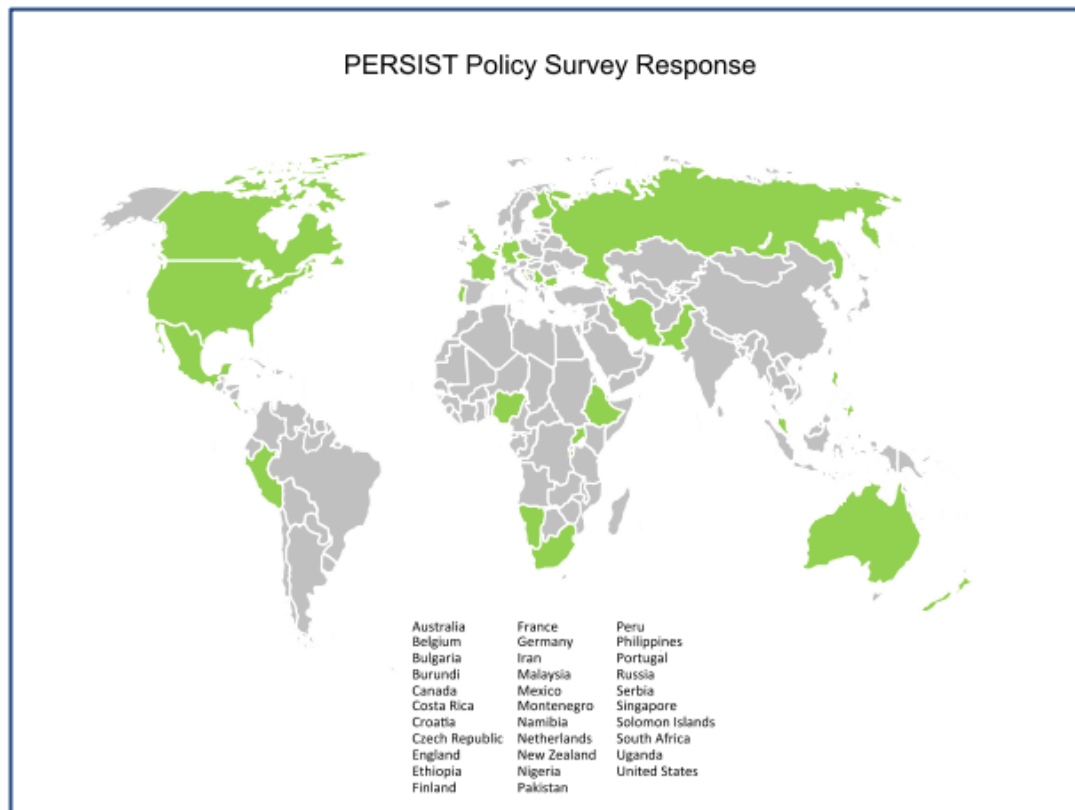
This issue is compounded by the gap between developed and developing countries theorizing, developing policies, and implementing projects relating to digital heritage. In Europe, for example, Europeana is a well-established platform with an associated network for the discussion of issues relating to the digitization, digital access to collections, meta-data standards, open access and other important issues. The developments in the UNESCO standard setting instruments are informed by such discourses and communities of experts in developed countries, however, there is little consideration for aspects of digital heritage in developing countries, for example in addressing limited data cloud storage possibilities, costs for digital preservation etc.

A further example that illustrates this issue can be found in the case of the OpenGLAM initiative run by Open Knowledge Foundation. OpenGlam that aims to promote free and open access to digital cultural heritage held by galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) globally.¹⁵ In 2018, OpenGlam conducted a survey to ascertain how well the OpenGlam principles were understood. Overall, of the 109 responses received for the survey, 30% were from Europe, 25% Oceania (predominately Australia and New Zealand), 19% from North America, and 19% from Latin & Central America. Only 2.8% came from Asia with zero responses from Africa.¹⁶ This demonstrates that the community of OpenGlam is still heavily based in Europe, Australia/New Zealand, and North America.

¹⁵ OpenGlam (2019), About, access via: <https://openglam.org/>

¹⁶ OpenGlam (2019), OpenGLAM Principles: Ways forward to Open Access for Cultural Heritage, access via: <https://openglam.org/2019/04/30/openglam-principles-ways-forward-to-open-access-for-cultural-heritage/>

Similar results were also evident in the UNESCO-PERSIST global survey regarding governmental policies and national strategies on long-term preservation of digital heritage.¹⁷ The online survey took place between September and December 2016, and in total, 48 respondents from 33 countries completed the survey (image below). Again, there were few responses from Asia (two countries) and Africa (five countries).



This demonstrates that the networks for digital heritage preservation and access are not extending in to Asia and Africa. Furthermore, it shows that there is there is a disconnect between policies and standard setting instruments, and the realities faced by museums, archives libraries, and other collecting organizations in these regions wanting to digitize, publish, manage and sustain their digital collections,
Digital Heritage Conference, 2019

UNESCO, in cooperation with the Commemorative Association of the National Debt Redemption Movement, Asia Culture Centre, and the Memory of the World Committee for the Asia-Pacific, have taken the initiative to work together to seek to address these challenges by holding an international conference *Preserving & Providing Access to Digital Heritage, 5-8 November, 2019*. The conference aims to bridge the gap between

¹⁷ UNESCO PERSIST (2017), Survey on National/Federal Policies and Strategies on the Preservation of Digital Heritage

developments at the global, regional, national and organization levels for digital heritage preservation and access.

The conference will be arranged around the five thematic areas of the UNESCO Recommendation - namely (1) Identification of digital documentary heritage, (2) Preservation of digital documentary heritage, (3) Access to digital documentary heritage, (4) Policy measures for digital documentary heritage (5) National and international cooperation.

Within this framework, the conference speakers will share current tools, initiatives, guidelines and best practice, covering:

- Open-source and standards based digital preservation systems such as Archivematica, an open-source digital preservation system designed for standards-based, long-term access to digital material.
- Initiatives to promote free and open access to digital documentary heritage held by libraries, archives and museums, such as the OpenGLAM is an initiative run by Open Knowledge
- Regional cooperation and platforms for sharing digital documentary heritage, such as the ASEAN Digital Library, a regional project to aggregate and connect the digitized resources of National Libraries, and the World Digital Library.
- Digital heritage preservation initiatives, including the Digital Strategy for Information Sustainability ([PERSIST](#)), UNESCO [Software Heritage Initiative UNESCO/PERSIST Guidelines for the Selection of Digital Heritage for Long-Term Preservation](#); and UNESCO/Digital Preservation Coalition [Executive Guide on Digital Preservation](#).
- Open source software for managing and sharing documentary heritage, such as Omeka open-source web publishing platform and the ICA-AtoM (Access to Memory, open source archival description software.
- Open licensing, including Creative Commons' work to create a range of creative works available for others to build upon legally and to share through copyright-licenses free of charge to the public.

In the Charter on the Preservation for Digital Heritage (2013), UNESCO's task is "*to serve as a reference point and a forum where Member States, intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations, civil society and the private sector may join together in elaborating objectives, policies and projects in favor of the preservation of the digital heritage*"¹⁸. This convening role was reinforced in 2015 Recommendation.

¹⁸ UNESCO Intergovernmental Council for the Information for All Programme (2002), Article 12.

In this regard, the *Preserving & Providing Access to Digital Heritage Conference* will bring together a range of stakeholders in one platform, including regional and national MoW committees, government, academia, the ICT industry and UNESCO. Specifically the Conference will bring together:

- Delegates from National MoW Committees¹⁹ in the Asia-Pacific
- Delegates from National MoW Committees in Africa
- Delegates from National MoW Committees in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Memory of the World Committee for Asia-Pacific (MOWCAP) Bureau members
- Speakers from government, academia, the ICT industry and UNESC
- Stakeholders from memory institutions and organisation in the Republic of Korea including National Archives of Korea, KAIST, Association of Digital Humanities, Commemorative Association of the National Debt Redemption Movement, Kyungpook National University and more.

Conclusion

Digital documentary heritage has critical importance for humanity and has become a key aspect for knowledge creation and sharing. This importance can be seen all around us with the transformation of economies, culture, and social relations into information societies.

The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme has sought to respond to the opportunities and challenges of this 'digital age' through the creation of the 2015 *UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form* and update of the MoW General Guidelines (2017).

These important normative instruments aim to support memory institutions to increase access to their collections through digital technology and platforms, whilst also preserving digital heritage. However, one current challenge is that these initiatives currently exist at the global policy level and do not clearly outline what best practice tools, guidelines and examples can be used at the national and institutional level, especially in developing country contexts.

It is expected that Preserving & Providing Access to Digital Heritage conference will lead to greater awareness of policy tools, guidelines and best practice examples, which can be of great use to museums, archives, libraries, and governments in their day-to-day work.

¹⁹ National MoW Committees are the peak MoW bodies at the national level, and involve representatives from museums, archives, libraries, and government.

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