

UNESCO States Meeting 1 and 2 July 2015

Comments from MOWCAP on the Draft Recommendation on “Safeguarding the Memory of the World”

MOWCAP wishes to comment on the draft Recommendation on the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, as part of the wider discussion of this document that will be of critical importance to the future of the Programme.

The September draft differs from the one produced by the Experts’ Meeting held in Warsaw in mid-2014, when four members of the MOWCAP Bureau (Dr Ray Edmondson, Ms Dianne Macaskill, Mr Sarah Choy, Mr Simon Chu) participated in the drafting process.

There are aspects of the current draft on which MOWCAP wishes to comment on, as follows:

1 THE TITLE

The title is crucial in the message that it sends.

The words ‘in the digital era’ have been added. This was discussed in the Warsaw meeting and finally rejected. Putting the words back is a serious mistake. There are other objections, as follows:

- “In the digital era” is a trendy phrase but it is already going out of fashion. Everyone knows we are in “the digital age” and we don’t need to say it any longer. When sound films began to replace silent films in the late 1920s they were dubbed “the talkies” to distinguish them. Within a few years silent films had disappeared, so the term became old fashioned and fell out of use. The same effect applies here. If these words are in the title they will “date” the Recommendation, to its disadvantage.
- It also suggests that the Recommendation refers only to digital documents and not the documentary heritage in its generality. This could inhibit the proper interpretation and implementation of the Recommendation in years to come, to the ultimate detriment of the Programme as a whole, which has focused since its inception on the totality of documentary heritage in all formats as conveying the memory of humanity.
- It will tend to isolate developing countries that are disadvantaged by the “digital divide” and remain heavily reliant on analogue documents and analogue culture.

2 RETENTION OF ANALOGUE ORIGINALS

The current draft omits the phrase “[analogue] carriers should be retained where they have continuing value as authentic originals, artefacts or information bearing objects” (in para 2.3 of the Warsaw draft.) This is a crucial part of the philosophy of MOW and must be reinstated. It not only represents best practice, but it is important to say this at a time when institutions can be put under economic pressure to de-accession analogue originals after they have been digitized (to whatever standard) in the belief that they have now been “fully preserved”. This can only lead to the impoverishment of the documentary heritage in the countries concerned.

3 WEAK DIRECTION

The general tone of the draft is too tentative in places. For example, in para. 1.1, “Member States are invited....”, and in para 1.2, “Member States are encouraged....” rather than the stronger phrase “Member States should...” which appears at some points elsewhere in the document. While a UNESCO Recommendation does not compel compliance by Member States, it does set a “world’s best practice” standard and this should be stated as strongly as possible.

4 DEFINITION OF DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

The MOWCAP Bureau is aware of wider discussions about whether the definition of documentary heritage, set out at the end of the Preamble, should be narrowed or made more prescriptive. We believe that the definition, as stated in the current draft, is appropriate as it stands and should be retained. It is consistent with the *General Guidelines* of the Memory of the World programme and any change is likely to cause unnecessary confusion. Further, documentary heritage is essentially a concept, rather than something that can be prescriptively defined, and it must remain valid in a constantly changing world.