
Challenges and Possibilities of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Era of Convergence and Creativity - Safeguarding Without a Record? The Digital Inventories of Intangible Cultural Heritage -

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Introduction

Established by UNESCO through the Convention of 2003, the category of intangible cultural heritage is the result of some thirty years of discussion both in the international political arena and in academia. This Convention was designed to create a new protection system for cultural heritage radically different from the traditional system of safeguarding, represented at the international level by the 1954 The Hague Convention (for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict) and then by the 1972 World Heritage Convention. While these conventions are meant to protect cultural and natural property of “great importance” (in the definition of 1954) or “exceptional universal value” (in that of 1972), the 2003 Convention seeks to build a democratic system of protection adapted to safeguard all living oral practices considered to be cultural heritage within the restricted limits of a community. While the 1954 and 1972 Conventions are based on traditional tools of recording and safeguarding, such as the inventory of protected items, drafted by experts, intangible cultural heritage calls for new management tools that can contribute to safeguarding by respecting

the living and participatory nature of the practices. From its earliest applications, the 2003 Convention has raised many controversies about how to build inventories without attributing them with the permanent and stable character of any form of document (Otlet 1934; Briet 1951; Buckland 1997) and how to reconcile decisional sovereignty of the community with the role of the expert in the production of such inventories. Today, ten years after its implementation, many theoretical and practical aspects remain unresolved. In his book *Warning: The Intangible Heritage in Danger* (2014), Chérif Khaznadar, one of the most important contributors to the content of the 2003 Convention, underlines the paradoxical quality of the intangible heritage category, which, on the one hand, insists on the documentary nature of heritage that should be transmitted as a testimony to posterity, and on the other hand, is characterized by its living, unstable and open nature.

Recently, several observers have drawn attention to the role that digital media could play in solving such a paradox. Today, not only does UNESCO request a video to be published on YouTube as evidence of a practice, but also several national inventory projects (in France, Scotland and Finland) are based on the use of collaborative digital platforms. Considering this situation, this chapter seeks to investigate the contradictory relationship between the inventories of intangible cultural heritage and the concept of document defined as “contents inscribed on fixed and permanent materials in an editorial or a reading context” (Bachimont 2017, p.49, our translation). In particular, the objective is to comprehend whether “the digital”, through its new forms of production and editing of documents, can solve the puzzle of intangible heritage protection by proposing new ways for recording collective life.

The text is organized in three parts. First, we study the paradox of using the inventory as a system for recording intangible heritage. To do this, we summarize the fundamental features of a traditional cultural heritage protection system by emphasizing the role that documentation, through the construction of lists and inventory files, plays in recording and creating evidence of heritage objects. We also consider the category of intangible cultural heritage by highlighting the elements that make it impossible to use traditional recording tools for its protection. In the second section, we investigate the role played by digital media in proposing a new recording system suitable to intangible heritage. We will rely on analysis of three digital projects for the inventory of intangible heritage: in Scotland, France and Finland. The objective is neither to carry out a technological or communicational audit of these platforms nor to conduct analysis in the framework of the sociology of technology. By describing the objectives of these projects, we aim to immerse the reader in the issues affecting this sector. Finally, in the third section, we return to the concept of document and, in particular, we consider the opposition between document and trace. The objective is to examine the nature and normative power of documents generated by these new digital and collaborative inventory systems. For such a goal, it will be valuable to discuss the distinction proposed by philosopher Maurizio Ferraris (2012) between strong and weak documents, which seems particularly relevant in this context.

The Documentary Paradox of Intangible Heritage

1. The Inventory as Safeguarding System

The category of cultural heritage, employed in the Middle Ages for labeling private property, was soon extended to include public objects representing the collective identity that ought to be conserved for intergenerational transmission.

The concept of cultural heritage involves the idea of a legacy left by generations that precede us, and that we pass on to future generations. If we consider, for example, the definition given by UNESCO, cultural heritage is described as “our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations.”¹ Initially, the term “cultural heritage” mainly referred to material objects (sites, historic monuments, works of art, et cetera). In recent years, the word has been used well beyond these original contexts, ranging from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from the sacred to the profane, from the material to the ideal, from culture to nature. Despite the massive expansion of these new forms of cultural heritage, the system of safeguarding has not evolved in a comparable way. For a long time and still today, the inventory has been the preferred tool for organizing and recording cultural heritage. Thanks to its capacity to classify and archive information, the inventory, which is nothing other than a type of list, remains the pivot of conservation action. Introduced into the cultural field by curiosity cabinets (Impey & MacGregor 1985), the technique of the inventory has been extraordinarily successful with many institutions, such as museums, archives and libraries. Capable of producing a massive and efficient organization of information, the inventory has become the standard tool for managing collections of material objects. If we consider the inventory as a list that will keep in its memory what cannot be kept in the mind (Leroi-Gourhan 1964), its origins can be traced back to the first writing systems (Goody 1977). It was then rapidly adopted in a variety of contexts to store and classify information. A scientific list not only identifies the characteristics of a phenomenon, but also defines the very nature of the phenomenon by giving it a new form (Latour 1987, p. 96). Throughout the centuries, inventories have helped to organize species, diseases, books, monuments and knowledge in general. Whether as a catalog, an inventory, a directory, a dictionary or an encyclopedia, the classificatory power of lists shapes knowledge in numerous fields (Bowker and Leigh Star 2000).

The inventory has proved to be a particularly suitable tool for cultural heritage. In fact, there is a strong affinity between cultural heritage objects and inventories: “both depend on selection, both decontextualise their objects from their immediate surroundings and recontextualise them with reference to other things designated or listed” (Hafstein 2009, p. 93). For this reason, the inventory has played a very important role in the governance of cultural properties, both in the management of information and in the selection of heritage. Regarding information management, the first private collections already had catalogs. Using the model of naturalist collections, the inventory allowed the univocal identification of the property, but also the coherent organization of data, their recording and a monitoring of the object over time. Regarding the selection process, no state can disregard the necessity of inventories of national treasures in order to preserve them for future generations (Francioni and Lenzerini 2006, p. 35). Through inclusion in an inventory, cultural property becomes a document that can be transmitted to future generations. Taking the example of Suzanne Briet (1951, our translation), “the antelope that runs in the African plains cannot be considered as a document ...But if it is captured ... and becomes an object of study, then it is considered to be a document. It becomes physical proof.” According to such a view, the document is a form of recording reality: it “is evidence in support of a fact.”

2. The Peculiarity of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The origin of the concept of intangible heritage is rooted in the rejection of a safeguarding system based on inventories, lists, classifications and hierarchies, which appears inadequate to protect the cultural heritage of certain countries such as Japan, Bolivia or Peru. In 1984 an initial meeting of experts was organized within UNESCO to establish a program for “non-physical heritage.”

The Reflection Group succeeded in producing the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* in 1989, which evolved over the following years until the 2003 Convention. In the current version of the Convention, intangible cultural heritage² is defined 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” (Article 2 of the Convention). States have a duty to safeguard these practices through various safeguarding actions and mainly through the preparation of national inventories. These inventories have three characteristics that distinguish them from the system described above: (1) they must be drafted by the community (and not by external experts); (2) they are not selective but democratic by including all existing practices (without any selection based on value); (3) they must be living, in contrast to the fixity of the document.

Facing such a situation, Chérif Khaznadar (2014) makes two points. First, according to the author, the Convention, in order to protect a heritage at risk of disappearance, defines a “UNESCO-style” safeguard system based on identification and documentation. Consequently, Khaznadar states: “The convention can become a tool of museification and death” (2014, p. 28) and do more harm than good to heritage. Secondly, Khaznadar attacks the representative lists. These were created a few years after the validation of the Convention to give visibility to the Convention itself. According to the initial discussion between UNESCO and the States, such lists should include all practices considered to be intangible heritage in order to respect the democratic principle of the Convention. However, because the secretariat could validate only a limited number of applications per year, it was necessary to make a selection, and in order to avoid reproducing the selection methods of the World Heritage

Convention, it was decided that practices would be selected on the basis of their exemplarity rather than their outstanding universal value. Yet we find ourselves in this case at the starting point with a selection defined by experts rather than by the “community.”

These two criticisms of the Convention raise the general question of whether it is really possible to create a heritage paradigm that is an alternative to the traditional paradigm. As has been said, the latter is based on the transformation of cultural property into a document in order to guarantee its transmission to future generations. Such transformation is carried out mainly through the inclusion of the object in a list (the inventory), an action that would determine the shift from the oral to the written form, from trace to document, and eventually to the death of the living practice. Can inventory be used while respecting the living, informal and consensual quality of intangible heritage? Or is it possible to identify other alternative tools that are not based on the fixed nature of the written document?

The UNESCO Convention proposes an initial answer to this question through the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. This list does not directly document a cultural practice but the activities intended to safeguard it. Yet this register has not aroused the interest of states and communities and today there are only 17 registered elements compared with the 365 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and 47 on the Urgent Safeguarding List. The activities of promotion and valorization of intangible cultural heritage, essential to support the communities, surely do not impose the crystallization of the practice, yet they do not seem to be able to play the function of safeguard in the way inventories did for centuries. The Convention itself stresses the importance and necessity of inventories: “To ensure identification

with a view to safeguarding, each State Party shall draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory. These inventories shall be regularly updated” (Article 12). As Chiara Bortolotto (2008) points out in her institutional ethnography of intangible heritage, the pragmatic solution that has been adopted to deal with this “documentary tension” (Bachimont 2017) generated by the 2003 Convention consists in developing an informal level of implementation of the Convention which differs from the formal level of the Convention text. In particular, the author speaks about the “spirit” of the Convention:

“When questioned about the inventories, the ‘spirit’ of the Convention seems less attached to this process than the text of the Convention. While the text of the Convention requires the creation of exhaustive inventories designed to identify the totality of the intangible heritage items of each country, the secretariat’s discourse seems to recognize that exhaustiveness is an unrealistic ambition, while admitting the possible perfectibility of this tool subject to a structural incompleteness.”
(Bortolotto 2008, p. 19, our translation)

At this informal level, two elements regain importance: the inventory that can be used as a document while recognizing its perfectible nature; and the expert that can help institutions and communities to find viable safeguarding solutions.

The Impact of Digital Media

1. Digital Media as Living Environment

Recently, digital media have emerged as a key player in safeguarding heritage. In recent years, more and more institutions have relied on new digital technologies to catalog their collections (Cameron and Robinson 2007). Information and computerization systems have been built to digitize inventories and facilitate their management. These systems not only ensure the sustainability of data, but also contribute to standardizing the heritage selection process (Frayse 2008). Digital media have also attracted the attention of institutions in charge of intangible cultural heritage. Among them, two types of position can be identified.

Some institutions consider digital media to be the panacea of intangible heritage protection. Surely one of the features of digital media is their power to create a trace. All actions that go through them are voluntarily or involuntarily tracked and recorded. This phenomenon has generated strong enthusiasm both in the commercial world (through the Big Data phenomenon) and in research with the explosion of computational social science. The basic idea behind these phenomena is that digital data today constitute a source of information on social life that can enable us to observe *in vivo* facts related to social interactions. According to this viewpoint, in the case of intangible heritage, digital platforms such as YouTube, Wikipedia or Facebook allow community members to leave traces that could be used by the researcher or manager to build “living” inventories. In fact, the inventory would already be there without the need to build it. As an example, Sheenagh Pietrobruno (2013) analyses the case of YouTube videos of the Mevlevi Sema ceremony. The scholar shows how the videos make it possible to represent the ceremony in a much more participatory

way, respecting its evolution over time. Conversely, the inventory file (and also the official UNESCO video) fixes the definition of the practice in a precise temporal moment and with a precise political orientation (in this case, that of the Turkish government which proposed its candidacy). Pietrobruno notes that unofficial YouTube videos show certain ceremonial practices, for example, the fact that today the ceremony can be performed by women in public and dressed in colorful clothes, which is excluded by the official representation in which women can dance only in private and dressed in white. Thus digital traces have two important advantages: they are created by the community and they make it possible to follow the evolution of practices over time. We shall return to this point in the third part of this chapter.

Many other authors have a much more vigilant attitude towards digital media, considering them to be not as useful for safeguarding intangible heritage. According to this second viewpoint, traces available on the Internet, such as YouTube videos, are only images of the practices and not the practices themselves. Such images cannot be considered as a suitable way to safeguard living heritage because they are always a way of fixing the practice in a given moment. In fact, they do not really constitute a digital trace but digital data because they have lost the link to their socio-material context of origin (Bachimont 2017).

Rather than arbitrating between these two positions, we prefer to adopt an empirical approach through the analysis of case studies and then to return to the concepts of trace and document. In the next paragraph we will present three projects in which digital media have been used in a similar way to address the documentary paradox of intangible heritage. In Scotland, France and Finland, the national inventory is based on a collaborative digital platform.

2. Collaborative Digital Inventories of Intangible Heritage

In 2008, Museums Galleries Scotland, an institution with more than 340 museums and galleries, with the support of the Scottish Arts Council, funded a team of researchers from Edinburgh Napier University to create an inventory of Scottish intangible heritage. Alison and Alistair McCleery, who piloted the project, decided to build a collaborative digital inventory (McCleery et al. 2008; McCleery and McCleery 2017). Given the inadequacy of traditional methods and tools, they chose to build a new platform using tools adapted to the new participatory paradigm. To do this, they implemented two types of initiative: they created a website based on a wiki and organized focus groups to enrich content. “The most appropriate solution – the one that has been enabled to twin requirements of accessibility and dynamism to be met – was a customized wiki” (McCleery and McCleery 2016, p. 191). The fact of providing a deeply democratic (anyone can modify) and living (modifications can be made at any time) digital tool is the element that made this project unique. In its initial version, the online inventory relied on Mediawiki software (<http://www.mediawiki.org>), which allows users to create an account and add or edit an item. The Scottish wiki could be modified by either authorized or anonymous users. However, modifications by users external to the project were rare and use of the discussion page, which should facilitate exchanges between users, was practically nonexistent. After some years, the project was taken over directly by Museums Galleries Scotland. The wiki, with its rather homemade appearance, was replaced by a more professional content management system (Drupal), which attempted to reproduce the democratic beginnings of the original project. Anonymous access was no longer possible and the discussion page was deleted, but the institution relied on a “Wikimedian in Residence” to encourage participation in the wiki and moderate contributions (Orr and Thomas 2017). While maintaining the flexibility of a wiki, this new

system organized the content in a more structured way as in an inventory with the presence of fixed fields that had to be completed for each element (such as category³ and location) and tags that could be added by users (region, time, support, et cetera).

In France, *Ethnopôle InOc Aquitaine* is in charge of the digital inventory of intangible heritage. This institution decided to manage the documentary paradox by opting for two parallel solutions: (1) Migrating the files of the national inventory directly to Wikipedia. The content of each file was published on Wikipedia either by adding to an existing page or by creating a new one. The link to the inventory was indicated by an infobox in the top right; (2) moreover, the files were published on a dedicated website (www.pci-lab.fr), which has just been put online (October 2017). The strength of this project is its attention to the semantic web. The data are structured in connection with Wikidata (Casteret and Larché 2017). According to the spirit of Wikipedia, participation in the inventory is facilitated through the organization of contributory days (Wikipedia workshops or editathon). Publishing files on the world's largest collaborative platform makes the inventory potentially open to anyone at any time. Moreover, unlike the Scottish project, users do not need to learn the rules of a specific platform, they must simply comply with Wikipedia's method of conduct. However, such organization raises very complex questions about content moderation.

“This presupposes, under the aegis of the ministry, a shared governance and the implementation of a collective animation of the tool by favoring the circulation between local and national dynamics for the valorization of intangible heritage. Collaboration is also the outcome of interaction between the website and Wikipedia: the French inventories evolve over time, but only within the framework

of a process piloted by the ministry, as the PciLab website does not allow inventory modification. On the other hand, it aims to stimulate contributions to Wikipedia, which already relies on a dynamic community.” (Casteret and Larché 2017, p. 158-159, our translation)

To sum up, the French system is based on a delicate balance between a website that is not open to publishing, and Wikipedia pages that are open to all and where the ministry cannot play the role of moderator. From our viewpoint, this duplicity reproduces the documentary ambiguity of a traditional inventory, but we shall return to this point in the final part of this chapter.

The third example is the Finnish inventory. This inventory is also based on a collaborative digital platform available online since February 2016. The National Council of Antiquities has chosen a wiki (Wiki-inventory for Living Heritage) based on MediaWiki software. The wiki can be modified only by registered users, but the registration form is open to all. The wiki is believed to animate democratic discussion around candidacies. The National Council of Antiquities serves as moderator and administrator of the platform. It may request changes to the proposed texts or delete inappropriate ones. However, the overall Finnish system for the protection of intangible heritage is not completely open like the wiki is. In fact, it relies on the creation of small circles of people linked to each heritage category and on a group of experts who play a leading role in the heritage selection process. Today the link between these actors and the wiki is unclear.

These examples provide us with two interesting points for our argument. First, in all three cases, the institution in charge of cultural heritage has chosen the Internet as the ideal medium for building a more transparent and democratic inventory. In this way, not only does the institution admit the existence of a

cause-effect link between the chosen medium and the type of safeguarding action guaranteed by the inventory, but it also admits the existence of a difference between the action of traditional inventories and that of new digital inventories. Second, among digital solutions available, the institution identifies the wiki as the only tool capable of providing accessibility and fluidity to an inventory of intangible heritage that must be living and open to its community. Indeed, the main features that distinguish the wiki from other web-based content publishing systems are: (1) the fact that it is open to publishing and facilitates the creation of shared knowledge (Aguiton and Cardon 2007). Content can be modified not only by site managers but also by users; (2) the fact that it tracks any change; (3) the fact that it can provide a discussion page for each page of the wiki. Indeed, the pages of a wiki can be considered a new type of document that does not have the stability of the classical document. Thus, in all three cases, the choice of a digital platform based on a wiki can be interpreted as a response to the documentary paradox.⁴

Between Document and Trace, the Inventory as a Weak Document

Considering the proposed case studies, two theoretical questions merit further attention. First, we aim to investigate the documentary nature of wiki pages and, more generally, the ability of the internet to create new types of document, or better signs, that do not have the fixity of the document in its classic definition (Otlet 1934; Briet 1951; Buckland 1997). To do so, it becomes worthwhile to review the distinction between digital document and digital trace and to consider on which side of the scale contributions to a wiki go. Second, if we can recognize the existence of a new type of document, it will be necessary to

question its normative power. In other words, can these new wiki-inventories be as effective in safeguarding cultural heritage as traditional inventories?

Considering the limits of this chapter, we would like to focus our attention on the contribution of Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris on this issue. In his theory of documentality (2012), a document is a social object, an “inscribed act.” Social reality is based on documents. Using Derrida against Searle, and Searle against Derrida, he attributes an ontological priority, but just in the social world, to registration, inscription, and writing over communication and orality. He also introduces the “documentary pyramid,” where documents are situated above three other layers: (1) the trace, which is the basis of the pyramid, is a sign that has been generated by events, without signification or intention; (2) the trace becomes the registration when it is generated by a support that is designed to preserve it over time: for example the recordings of a camera or a microphone, but also something memorized passively in the brain. Registrations must be accessible to at least one person; (3) then, registration becomes inscription when its knowledge is intentionally shared with at least two people and becomes a social fact. The intention to leave a sign differentiates inscriptions from recordings; (4) finally, inscription becomes document when the trace obtains an institutional form, and it is precisely the institutionalization that leads to the fixation of the trace.

Another important element, for our purposes, is the distinction Ferraris proposes between weak and strong documents. A document in the strong sense (the legal document) is the inscription of an act. A document in the weak sense is the recording of a fact. Weak and strong documents both have social value. Yet, the strong document also has normative, institutional and political value. From an ontological point of view, the strong document is the

inscription of an act having its own agency, where the weak document is only proof. The author explains: “In this scheme, a document in the strong sense is mostly linked to writing, while one in the weak sense may be, as in the case of traces and discoveries, connected rather to archiwriting” (Ferraris 2012, p. 267). Archiwriting is writing around writing; it embraces “the thousands of ways we keep track of everyday experience and the world around us” (Ferraris 2012, p. 207): rituality, memory, animal traces, et cetera.

If we return to consider our case studies, we can develop two points. First, the distinction between *digital trace* and *digital document* is less relevant than expected. The contribution published on a wiki is the result of the passage from trace to registration (the platform makes it possible to record any change) and then from registration to inscription (the wiki is a collective and intentional system). This allows us to explain why cultural heritage’s institutions are so attracted to participatory digital platforms: they create inscriptions that do not have the fixedness of the document but which, at the same time, maintain social value and permanence over time well above the trace⁵. Second, the distinction between *strong* and *weak document* allows us to question the relationship between these wikis and their institutional value and, consequently, their safeguarding power. The concept of weak document is particularly appropriate for describing the characteristics of the wiki: its dynamism and openness, as well as its weakness with regard to its social and institutional action.

These are two sides of the same phenomenon. It can be effectively observed in the three case studies that we propose: in each one, the wiki is proposed as a solution to avoiding the fixity of the document; but, at the same time, this solution always loses institutional power. In all three cases, the institution seems to “feel” this tension between weak and strong documents, between a social force

and normative weakness, and in all three cases, seeks to overcome the obstacle with idiosyncratic solutions. For this reason, the first Scottish wiki, which was completely open and based on Mediawiki, was replaced by a “fake” wiki, which was controlled and easier to moderate. And this is also the reason why in France the safeguarding system is based on a separate website that contains the official inventory and is not open to publication. Similarly, in Finland, the wiki favors discussion around candidacies, whereas the institutionalization of an element is always established outside the digital platform.

Considering all this, these new platforms do not seem to constitute a definitive solution to the documentary paradox. They are, rather, a workaround and, at the same time, display a desire for openness and transparency that is not really achievable in today’s cultural heritage system.

Yet, on the basis of Ferraris’ book *Mobilizzazione Totale* (2015) – a previous and shorter version of the thesis contained in this book is available in English in Ferraris (2014) – we can take this reflection even further. In this text, the philosopher applies his theory of documentality to contemporary society, dominated by new digital technologies. According to him, the use of digital technologies always corresponds to a call to action that has normative value. Digital devices that go by the acronym ARMI (which stands for “*Apparecchi di Registrazione e Mobilizzazione dell’Intenzionalità*”, “Devices for the Registration and Mobilization of Intentionality”, but which also means “weapons” in Italian) generate a system of “total recording” that leads to the total mobilization of human beings. The Internet is seen as an accelerator of documentality that makes recording and registration limitless. All that is online, is then a document. But is it a strong or a weak document? In *Mobilizzazione Totale*, Ferraris redefines this distinction in these terms: “The strong document is the document that owns

a power The weak document is the document that only keeps track of what happened These documents have a simple informational and not normative power” (2015, chap. *Il potenziamento tecnologico: la rete*, our translation). A little further, he states: “the web is a performative system, not merely descriptive system.” He therefore recognizes in web documents a social force even if they do not have an explicit normative value.

While the opposition between social force and the “force of law”⁶ is not new, what is interesting is the fragility of the border separating these two. As Wittgenstein (1986) points out in relation to language, while we can distinguish between the rules of language, on the one hand, and everyday use on the other, items of everyday use are quite often integrated into the normative system of language and become essential for its comprehension.

Similarly, we do not know exactly what the normative effects of digital inventories of intangible heritage will be in the future. Today, they fall into the category of weak documents, compared with the traditional legal system of safeguarding. Nevertheless, digital technologies constitute a power system, which, through its affordances, could put into crisis the distinction between weak and strong document and thus facilitate the transformation of the social force of inventories into the force of law. Yet, in this case, would it be only a question of time – the time needed to recognize the authority and normative value of a wiki, in this case – or rather one of the manifestations of the conflict, always unresolved, between the social and the institutional?

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