



International Conference on

## **The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation**

26 to 28 September 2012  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

### **1. Introduction**

Digital documentary heritage is important for humanity as digital technology has become the primary means of knowledge creation and expression. All areas of life produce digital documents, which need to remain technologically stable and accessible in their authentic manifestation by current and future generations. Apart from digitally created new documents, digital surrogates of traditional documents, prepared to enable democratic access to hitherto hidden information and knowledge, have also become an ever growing part of the digital heritage. However, the vulnerability of the documentary heritage in digital form is a major source of concern and UNESCO is proposing to organize an international conference to explore the main issues affecting digitization and digital continuity, in order to develop a strategy for the protection of all types of documents, and define implementation policies that are sustainable, scalable and globally applicable, especially by developing countries.

### **2. Current situation**

The safeguard of digital documents requires specific measures that significantly differ from those needed for documents recorded on traditional supports. Although digital documents and records are becoming the main source of knowledge today, their permanence, authenticity, identity and integrality are constantly at risk. Few countries have as yet adopted a national policy regarding digital information, and most decision-makers are unaware of the risk of disappearance of commonly used means of transmitting and storing digital information, such as email, databases, and websites; of the implications of engaging in digitization projects and building digital repositories; and of the scale of the resources required to preserve authentic digital information and maintain permanent access to it.

The realization of the growing importance and vulnerability of the world's digital documentary heritage led to the adoption of the UNESCO *Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage* in 2003. However, a 2009 survey revealed that few governments in either developed or developing countries had adopted or even articulated preservation and access strategies for their digital heritage. The survey also showed that hardly any countries had undertaken steps to implement the provisions of the Charter or were familiar with its recommendations. Consequently, it is necessary to raise a greater awareness of the issues involved in the protection of digital heritage over the long term so that it will remain accessible to future generations; otherwise the world will lose its digital past.

The undeniable efforts of a small number of countries to solve some of the prevailing issues have had little global impact, notably because these efforts have seldom been coordinated across or within countries and their results have not been adequately disseminated. This Conference will provide a platform to showcase major initiatives that could lead to synergies both in research and implementation. By initiating an in-depth discussion of the most pressing issues and the existing tested solutions, UNESCO further anticipates that this Conference will contribute to reducing the threats to the digital documentary heritage by catalysing appropriate action to scale up awareness of issues and result in the adoption of effective mechanisms at the global level.

### 3. Challenges

Digitality is an integral feature of modern society. Digital technology has facilitated easy access to different sources of information anywhere in the world, and enables it to be easily exploited by individuals, business entities and governments. Across the world, information is easily created, recombined and repurposed in a new form that may contribute to national development and improvement of the human condition. Enabling continuity of documentary heritage will support good governance and transparency, protect rights and contribute to building equitable Knowledge Societies.

The economic value of digital information is important to national sustainable development. But digitized national assets also constitute an immense wealth of the countries concerned and of society at large. The disappearance of this heritage will engender economic and cultural impoverishment and hamper the creation of new knowledge.

Digital continuity requires meeting technological, legal, economic, political and cultural challenges. The Conference will address these challenges, identifying the key issues that it is essential to overcome. These include:

- technological challenges: obsolescence; loss of integrity; variety of file formats, wrappers, encoding, etc.; proprietary nature of technology; technological infrastructure; inconsistency of standards; trusted digital repositories; audio-visual preservation; scale of preservation programmes; dynamic content (streaming, etc.); multiplatform services; metadata;
- legal and ethical challenges: data/documents/records accuracy, authenticity, authentication; intellectual and economic rights management; control of material entrusted to cloud services providers; protection of data privacy (non-authorized personal data tracking); right to oblivion and right of access; e-discovery and legal hold; legal deposit; professional/institutional liability and legal certainty; copyright exceptions to enable digital preservation; ownership vs licensing;
- economic challenges: costs of technology; cost of expertise and training; cost of digitization, preservation and human processes; outsourcing; sustainability of economic models; roles and responsibilities;
- political challenges: instability of political systems; low priority given by governments to technological infrastructure; limited or inexistent national information policies; insufficient awareness among decision-makers; digital self-determination (citizens'

rights);

- cultural and professional challenges: lack of cooperation among Information Technology, legal, archival, library, museum and other professionals or institutions; organizational and institutional culture; competing interests between creators and preservers and between access and preservation philosophies, grassroots preservation, evolving skills sets, cultural sensitivity.

#### **4. Outcomes**

Digital preservation is intellectually challenging and resource-intensive. Its successful implementation requires the cooperation of all stakeholders, including policymakers, heritage/stewardship institutions and organizations, publishers, IT developers, academia, creators and custodians of digital heritage, social networking media and third-party services providers. To ensure permanent access to digital heritage, including that in private hands, it is vital to share responsibilities. In light of this need, the Conference expected outcomes will include:

- the launch of specific initiatives related to digital preservation and to the fostering of access to documentary heritage through digitization;
- elaboration of a "standard on standards" for better management and understanding of existing, and occasionally conflicting, standards;
- closer cooperation among different stakeholders for the promotion or development of exchange standards;
- identification of individual country needs in terms of digital preservation and access to digital heritage;
- identification of the legal frameworks that would facilitate long-term digital preservation;
- identification of best practices for scalability of solutions, including the elaboration of economic models for sustainability;
- clear definition of the respective roles of professions, academics, industry and governments in addressing various issues and of a model for their cooperation.

#### **5. Organizational Details**

##### **Date and Place**

The Conference will take place from 26 to 28 September 2012 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in cooperation with the University of British Columbia and in partnership with IFLA, ICA, ICOM, WIPO, Google, Microsoft and others. An open dedicated space will be established on UNESCO's CI website for this event which will provide a restricted area to share documents. The public area will also feature the names of all contributors, whether financial or in-kind.

##### **Participation**

The Conference will be opened by UNESCO's Director-General in the presence of the more than 500 participants who are expected to attend. English/French interpretation will be provided. Participation will be open to all those interested in heritage preservation: government decision-makers and policy planners, practitioners and professionals, as well as academics, legal specialists, information and digital technicians, representatives of the private sector, graduate students in the heritage disciplines, etc.. Participants from developing countries are strongly encouraged to attend and some financial support may be provided to partially cover their expenses.

The Conference will blend plenary and parallel or breakout sessions. The exact structure and themes are currently under consideration and will be published in the near future.

### **Preparatory conferences**

A series of conferences organized by different parties, such the IFAP National Committee in Moscow and the InterPARES International Conference in Barcelona (both in October 2011) have provided inputs towards the Conference.