



Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage

The COVID-19 pandemic has already been declared as modern history's gravest health emergency by many countries. The way the world is responding to this unprecedented global crisis will be part of history books. Memory institutions, including national archives, libraries, museums, as well as educational and research bodies, are already recording the decisions and actions being made which will help future generations to understand the extent of the pandemic and its impact on societies.

Against this background and amidst this global health crisis, documentary heritage is an important resource to provide a historical perspective on how governments, their citizens and the international community have addressed pandemics in the past.

Several countries have already issued orders for meticulous preservation of official records related to the pandemic. This not only underlines the gravity of the current situation, but also highlights the importance of memory institutions in providing the records or information management resources necessary for understanding, contextualizing and overcoming such crises in the future. At the same time, records of humanity's artistic and creative expressions, which form a vital part of our documentary heritage, are a source of social connectivity and resilience for communities worldwide.

UNESCO, through the Memory of the World (MoW) Programme, stands ready to support all Member States who wish to preserve official records related to COVID-19 within the framework of the UNESCO 2015 *Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form.*

There are four key areas which demand shared responsibility among Member States, memory institutions and citizens in responding to COVID-19 – and preparing to respond to future pandemics. These are based, among others, on the shared *educational, social, scientific and artistic* values of documentary heritage.

Firstly, there is need to amplify national and international cooperation in the preservation and accessibility of documentary heritage. This is done through the network of national and regional committees of UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme. To this end, UNESCO is also leveraging international solidarity among its partners, including the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International

Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA), to name a few.

Secondly, Member States need to increase investment in the preservation and accessibility of documentary heritage as a matter of disaster risk reduction and management. Most memory institutions rely on public support and the 'shelter-in-place' orders have inevitably had devastating effects on their revenue streams. Therefore, moving forward, state investment – along with private-sector investment – will be vital for their effective functioning and ultimate survival. It is commendable that memory institutions have exhibited tremendous resilience by continuing, amidst this global health crisis, to serve the public through free online exhibitions, making available digitized copies of ancient manuscripts and effectively engaging with citizens on social media. They need also to have the resources and rights necessary to collect materials – both from official records and wider society, online and offline – in order to ensure as complete a documentation of the crisis as possible.

Thirdly, it is important, now more than ever, for memory institutions to become even more readily accessible to researchers, policymakers, media professionals, scientists and the community at large. Understanding how leaders have reacted to health emergencies in the past can inform the decisions of policymakers today. Scientists can also use records from past outbreaks to improve their methods and identify the best course of action to counter the spread of new diseases. More generally, primary source materials give insights into socio-economic, political and cultural aspects of any pandemic that put into perspective today's perceptions about COVID-19. Additionally, through remote access memory institutions and other repositories could help communities to connect with each other and provide psychosocial help through records of shared cultures, languages and creative expression.

In addition, audiovisual and public service media archives are hard at work documenting the pandemic, including how lockdowns are affecting almost every individual, how governments are dealing with this health and economic crisis, how the media is reacting to it, as well as how new expressions of solidarity are emerging and contributing to an acceleration in the pace of digitization as a large proportion of the work force and young people in education have to resort to remote working and schooling.

Moreover, preserving and providing access to such primary source materials has the potential to enable public awareness and participation in public health procedures, grounded in historical lessons learned.

Finally, individuals, policymakers and the scientific community are encouraged to appreciate the utility value of memory institutions as holders of the memory of the world in all its manifestations, including pandemics and the world's response to them. Archives, libraries, and museums have always been the custodians of reliable and quality information. With increased disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic, memory institutions can collect, catalogue and disseminate fact-based, scientific information and provide critical, comparative perspectives. Ultimately, through their efforts to curate documentation on the prevailing responses to COVID-19, it is they who will shape the representation of this pandemic for future generations.

This call for shared responsibility is clearly manifested in the Records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme of the World Health Organization (WHO), inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World International Register in 2017. In 1966, the WHO launched a global programme to eradicate smallpox,

a disease that had afflicted humanity for millennia. In 1980, the World Health Assembly of WHO confirmed the eradication of smallpox. The records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme provide a documentary record of the decisions and actions taken for the eradication of the disease and guide any similar efforts for suppression of current diseases.

Therefore, it is essential that we ensure that a complete record of the COVID-19 pandemic exists, so that we can prevent another outbreak of this nature or better manage the impact of such global events on society in the future.

Co-signed:

Moez Chakchouk, Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information, UNESCO.

Gerald Leitner, Secretary General, IFLA.

David Fricker, President, ICA.

Peter Keller, Director-General, ICOM.

Webber Ndoro, Director-General, ICCROM.

Toby Seay, Chairperson, CCAAA.

Papa Momar Diop, Vice-Chairperson, ARCMOW (Memory of the World Regional Committee for Africa).

Kwibae Kim, Chairperson, MOWCAP (Memory of the World Regional Committee for Asia Pacific).

Sandra Moresco, President, MOWLAC (Memory of the World Regional Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean).

