

Concept Note

Virtual Policy Dialogue

29 September 2020



Documentary Heritage at Risk: Policy Gaps in Digital Preservation

Overview

The Virtual Policy Dialogue (VPD), planned on **27 October 2020** via ZOOM, is organised by the [UNESCO Memory of the World \(MoW\) Programme](#) through the Preservation Sub-Committee of the Programme's International Advisory Committee (IAC) and in partnership with the Information for All (IFAP) Information Preservation Working Group. This event coincides with the celebration of the [World Day for Audiovisual Heritage](#).

The VPD is proposed to provide a platform to discuss current **priorities for the preservation of documentary heritage** and identify key components of an international policy agenda for Digital Preservation. This agenda will be promoted and carried out by the UNESCO MoW Preservation Sub-committee to facilitate support, legal framework and effective application of **Digital Preservation technologies and techniques**.

Given the present travel and gathering restrictions pursuant to COVID-19, VPD will be an on-line event, of 3 hours in duration, split across two sessions to maximise the participation of an international audience across time zones.

VPD will feature memory experts, academics, memory institutions and policymakers. National Committees will serve as the vehicles for inviting the participants, as will regional MoW Committees. Where these do not exist, National Commissions for UNESCO/Permanent Delegations to UNESCO will play that role.

The Documentary Heritage Unit, which manages the MoW Programme, will provide support in the following areas:

- Provision of the online conferencing platform.
- Provision of interpretation in line with UNESCO standards.
- Send out invitations to Member States, through National Commissions for UNESCO and/or Permanent Delegations to UNESCO.
- Comment on and improve aspects of the event.
- Provide opening remarks delivered by the DDG, with a presentation by the Documentary Heritage Unit on the First Consultation on the 2015 Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form, focusing on Member States' reporting on digital preservation.

The VPD event can be recorded (subject to permission by speakers) and will be made available through the websites of the Memory of the World, the IFAP, and the [UNESCO PERSIST](#). The MoW Preservation Sub-Committee will prepare the formal report of proceedings, for publication on the aforementioned websites, including for presentation during the 2nd Global Policy Forum to be held in 2021. The report will entice the community to contribute proposals for the policy level interventions that are critical to take timely preservation actions and preserve vulnerable documentary heritage. That will include concerns about both the content and the technologies that are essential for the long-term access to the preserved digital artefacts.

Scope

The VPD will explore the grand challenges confronting the preservation of documentary heritage. In particular, it will focus on current gaps in policies and frameworks that are essential to facilitate effective application of digital technologies and techniques for the preservation of the world's documentary heritage. It will take into account current and foreseeable political, social and environmental trends and their impact on policy-making in this regard. A select number of case studies will be presented to illustrate the issues at hand, each followed by a discussion session informed by questions from participants.

The VPD will conclude with a summary session that will draw together the key areas of discussion towards a coherent and effective international policy agenda on digital preservation. This final session will consist of a series of policy proposals compiled by Preservation Sub-Committee and extend a call for contributions to the ongoing work of the MoW Preservation Sub-committee. Parts of the VPD identified issues will be presented during the 2nd Global Policy Forum in 2021.

Programme

The Program Committee comprises members of the MoW Preservation Sub-Committee and the Information For All Preservation Working Group (with a representation from IFAP).

The proposed VPD programme is built around the key focus areas identified by the MoW Preservation Sub-Committee that should shape policy development for the preservation of documentary heritage.

The key focus areas are:

- **Technology**

This encompasses risks arising from the obsolescence of technology relied upon to select, preserve and maintain the accessibility of documentary heritage. Furthermore, the technology is at the core of digitalized and born digital content which is expanding in forms, formats and usage requirements. Finally, with COVID-19 restrictions on physical access to libraries and archives, the need and reliance on technology to provide online public services has dramatically increased. The effectiveness and appropriateness of technologies for remote access requires careful considerations.

- **Legal Frameworks**

The legislative frameworks within international, national and provincial jurisdictions that affect the ability of memory institutions to select and preserve documentary heritage, and may inhibit the universal access to the preserved material.

- **Cultural Identity at Risk**

This area addresses issues faced by initiatives focussed on fragile or endangered cultures at risk of loss through climate change, geopolitical trends, conflict or other social developments that lead to the loss of a culture and its cultural heritage. A key aspect of this involves using disaster risk reduction and management as a strategy for preservation of documentary heritage.

- **Sustainability**

With the current economic downturn related to COVID-19, and more generally as national economies move through 'boom and bust' cycles, governments generally do not prioritise cultural heritage alongside traditional national concerns such as employment, health and security. The variable, unpredictable level of funding available to preservation of documentary heritage elevates the risk of permanent loss of heritage.

This is particularly problematic for Digital Preservation where the persistence and access of digital artefacts incur ongoing costs of infrastructure (storage, computation and access) and skilled staff. Furthermore, the consistency of funding is of essence as gathering and preservation of digital cannot be postponed: the timing is of essence since digital documentary heritage can be easily removed, tempered with and permanently destroyed.

Preliminary discussions on these issues led to an initial list of policy aspects that will be crystallised through the community dialogue:

TECHNOLOGY

- Towards a framework for **risk assessment and risk management in relation to obsolete analogue and digital technologies** required to read and use content. That includes readers of magnetic tapes and issues of activation keys for physical and virtual software installations. Both are essential for accessing content that are locked in the specific media.

LEGAL

- Towards an international policy on **managing content protection** (e.g., copyright of original and digitalized content, replication and dissemination of born digital, etc.) of the national and world's heritage that needs to be preserved for long term accessibility.
- Towards an international policy on **life-cycle management and licences of legacy software** that is required to access preserved digital artefacts.
- International policy on **protection and retention of online material** that is of historical value and controlled use of such material. That includes
 - Protection of the Web and social media content that is often destroyed with the change of regime before there is a chance to archive them.
 - Prevention of out-of-scope use, e.g., use of archives for prosecution of individuals whose activities are reflected in the preserved content.
 - Biases introduced into the selection of the preserved material under the political pressure.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Towards a framework and guidelines for **assessing the significance of documentary heritage and effectiveness of practices and methods** for long term preservation of cultural heritage, including cultural identity at risk. Governments can use them to identify strategies, evaluate proposals, and plan funding for the preservation of national heritage.

- Policy and strategies to address appropriate digital preservation measures to prevent or to mitigate the effects of **destruction of our documentary and other cultural heritage**. This includes the **preparedness to protect digital content** from natural, technological, and socio-economic disasters. The storage, management and use of digital content depend on skilled labour, sophisticated devices and infrastructure, energy sources and computational capacities/capabilities, any of which can be affected by the world's events.

SUSTAINABILITY

- International policy on **economic sustainability of long-term digital preservation** initiatives and recognizing the **value of cultural capital** as part of the national economy.

Schedule

The programme is conceptualized to include two sessions, each including two presentations of 15 min duration and 10 min discussions.

The first session includes a brief introduction about the VPD event by a host, possibly a member of the UNESCO Preservation Sub-committee (PSC). Each presentation and the follow-up discussion will be moderated by a topic expert or the PSC host. The host and the moderators will be determined as part of the event organization by the Programme Committee.

The presenters will be briefed and instructed to structure their content so that they clearly state

- (2-3) Key messages, including the recommendations for improvements and action and
- Policy requirements, i.e., the needs for specific practices to be elevated to the policy level.

They will be asked to provide extended abstracts of their presentations that will be an integral part of the report.

Transcribed discussion sessions will be analysed by the Programme Committee to extract the key messages and include them into a report: a compilation and summary of the main takeaways from the event and policy recommendations. The report will feed into the plan of action for the MoW Preservation Sub-committee.

Topics which highlight impact of COVID-19 and socio-economic factors on digital preservation will be considered for inclusion into the 2nd Global Policy Forum (GPF) material (as noted above).

Organizing Committee

The VPD event is organized in consultation with the MoW Programme Secretariat (focal points: Ana Lomtadze [a.lomtadze@unesco.org] and Kenji Tamura [k.tamura@unesco.org]) by

General Chairs: David Fricker, Natasa Milic-Frayling, Lai Tee Phang,

Programme Chairs: Kevin Bradley, Robert Buckley, Laszlo Karvalics, Ryder Kouba, Ingrid Parent Dietrich Schüller.