

Research Notes on the Emerging Concepts of Digital Heritage in Brazil

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***Abstract.** This paper presents the first results in our investigation of the emerging Digital Heritage concepts in Brazil. It focuses on the analysis of a government experience with social media intended to prepare an official report on digital culture. We found that this report follows the Unesco guidelines in general, but falls short in the discussion of so-called born-digital heritage. Our hypothesis is that this omission is due to the lack of relevant web-archiving initiatives in Brazil.*

***Resumo.** Este artigo apresenta os primeiros resultados de nossa investigação sobre a constituição do conceito de patrimônio digital no Brasil. O estudo analisa a experiência de uma rede social criada pelo governo brasileiro com o objetivo de formular documentos sobre a cultura digital. Nesta primeira fase verificamos, de uma maneira geral, uma sintonia entre o documento brasileiro e as propostas da Unesco relativas ao tema. Porém, observou-se que a questão do chamado patrimônio nascido digital não foi contemplada na rede. Nossa hipótese de trabalho é que tal omissão está associada a ausência de iniciativas relevantes de arquivamento de fontes nascidas digitais.*

1. Introduction

“The Long Now Foundation uses five digit dates, the extra zero is to solve the decamillennium bug which will come into effect in about 8,000 years.”

(The Long Now Foundation, 2010)

Essays, software, and other text produced by the Long Now Foundation in the United States already use a five-digit system, as mentioned above. This may hint at far-fetched science fiction, but it is really a contemporary practice meant to preserve and protect information. Dany Hillis proposes bringing the frontier of the future within the horizon of everyday life, something that seems to have slipped from our sights ever since the momentous turn of the millennium. However, when encountering this inscription on the screen it is hard not to feel a tinge of living in a present that already sees itself as the past of a faraway future. What is the meaning of this zero, or, more to the point, of the intention contained in the inclusion of this digit? What are the present day discussions and ideas concerning the preservation of digital content? Furthermore: to what extent is the international debate spearheaded by the UNESCO being reflected in Brazil?

Recent studies in the field of social memory have shown an increasing appetite for the consumption of the past (Huysen, 2001). Web-archiving is the focus of huge digital archive projects around the world, such as Internet Archive, the largest born-digital archive on the planet. It was created in 1996, based on data from Alexa.com, and its goal today is to be an archive of the entire web. Another example is Archipol, an archive created in 2000 by the Documentation Centre for Dutch Political Parties and Groningen University in order to preserve the content of Dutch political party websites. In the United States of America there have been several experiences involving post-trauma archives, such as the September 11th Digital Archive which was created to electronically preserve the memory of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks. This archive contains approximately 150,000 digital items and in 2003 was incorporated by the Library of Congress. In England, BBC People's War, a digital archive that was created in 2005 to celebrate the end of the Second World War, received a lot of attention - 48,000 online testimonies and 15,000 pictures have been uploaded. And there are even more examples. In April 2009, for example, New Zealand launched the National Digital Heritage Archive, considered "the core to addressing the collection, preservation and access of digital-born content"(NDHA,2010). It is also important to mention the broad variety in scope of all these aforementioned initiatives.

Some archives cover a wide range of subjects while others are theme-oriented, signaling that the configuration of this field is still undefined. The worldwide network of computers has become at the same time a tool to collect information and an object of study, and as a result, different kinds of web archives have started to flourish. According to Dougherty and van den Heuvel, "given this shift in attention toward online culture – both studying it and incorporating it into research practices – digital cultural heritage resources, such as web archives, are becoming fundamental assets to humanities and social sciences researchers. Web archive is growing in its own right, and this growth and the value it can offer to the humanities depends on steady development of tools, standards, policies, and services upon which researches using digital cultural heritage in their research can rely"(2009, p.3).

In order to understand this scenario, scholars are focusing on many issues related to the spread of social remembrance practices through new information technologies, such as the mediation of the medias (van Dijck, 2007) and the elaboration of theoretical frameworks in order to approach contemporary interfaces between memory and media (Olick, 2007). They also plea for the investigation of the main theoretical problems related to specific empirical cases (Zierold, 2008). This brings us to the exact purpose of this short paper: to map the emerging concepts of digital heritage in Brazil in a government-sponsored social network created to debate the so-called "digital culture." To this end, we will first explain the context in which the discussion about digital heritage emerged. We will then describe the project and explain why we think it is an interesting object of study. Next, we will present our analysis of the proposed "digital memory" document, and compare it to the guidelines set forth by Unesco. Finally, we point out some problems and try to understand why, intriguingly, there is a lack of interest in born-digital heritage in Brazil, and conclude by presenting a few possibilities for further research on this topic.

2. Digital Heritage: uses of the concept

Studies on the concept of heritage (*patrimônio*, in Portuguese) have shown its historical construction and situate it as an invention of modernity which developed and became institutionalized in nineteenth-century France. During the twentieth century, the concept expanded to embrace and include other cultural objects, in a trajectory which culminates with Unesco defining certain practices as immaterial heritage worthy of being preserved. In the Western world, concern for heritage expanded remarkably and was often connected to national and identity-formation projects (Choay, 2001).

Modern calls for heritage preservation are usually accompanied by a “rhetoric of loss,” that is, an appeal to the alarming prospect of the disappearance of certain assets deemed historically relevant, and has led many international and national organizations to assume an activist role (Gonçalves, 2003). The selection of the assets which deserve to be considered heritage is disputed territory; there is a complex political, cultural and technological dynamic underpinning the definition of what should be remembered or forgotten.

Mentioning this ongoing debate on the subject of heritage implies indicating its main points of reference. Within the broad universe of digital records we can classify as heritage, not only those whose production was intended for the worldwide computer web but digitalized ones as well, as, for example, manuscripts and other medias which are stored more effectively in digital format. The greatest challenges, however, lie in the definition of born-digital heritage, given the technical specificities of the content flowing through the web and the speed at which new support technologies become available (Dodebei, 2009).

In 2003, UNESCO launched a charter for the preservation of digital heritage. The charter advances a well-founded defense of heritage preservation based on the central assumption that this legacy indeed exists. Article 7 defines what falls under the definition of heritage to be preserved:

As with all documentary heritage, selection principles may vary between countries, although the main criteria for deciding what digital materials to keep would be their significance and lasting cultural, scientific, evidential or other value. “Born digital” materials should clearly be given priority. Selection decisions and any subsequent reviews need to be carried out in an accountable manner, and be based on defined principles, policies, procedures and standards. (UNESCO, 2003).

3. Brazilian digital forum: a snapshot

The Brazilian Digital Culture Forum was created in September 2009 with the cooperation of the Ministry of Culture (Minc) and the National Research Network (Rede Nacional de Pesquisa - RNP). The social network’s mission was to gather in the course of one year a variety of opinions related to “digital culture” in order to guide future public policies. The Forum itself is not an interface whose aim is to propose any legal changes, but the documents it drafted can potentially be discussed in future governmental policies.

Figure 1. Visualization of the geographic distribution of the forum users. Retrieved March 2, 2010 from <http://culturadigital.br/blog/2010/01/19/culturadigital-br-um-mapeamento-dos-usuarios-da-rede/>.

The map above shows that the distribution of participants in this digital interface is geographically uneven. On January 15, 2010 there were 3,692 users of which 1,045 were located in the state of São Paulo, the most industrialized area in Brazil. Despite this discrepancy, we notice that people from all over the country are involved in the Forum. As our main goal here is simply to provide a snapshot of the Forum, we can move on in our brief description.

In January 2010, there were a total of 191 groups discussing subjects such as music on the web, the digitalization of documents or the spread of knowledge through Information and Communication Technologies. Each group engaged in discussion and had its own networks, which could be created by any Brazilian citizen. At the same time, the proponents of the Forum created five working groups, each one with headed by coordinator in charge of elaborating a final report. These groups were: Digital Memory, Digital Communication, Digital Culture Infrastructure, Digital Art and the Economy in Digital Culture. In addition to this virtual network, the Forum organized a Conference in November 2009 to promote further discussions and debate the ongoing works.

By January 2010 the Digital Memory Work Group had 197 members. There were several debates on the themes related to the preservation of information on the web. It is important to mention, though, that principal institutions in the field of information in Brazil were not engaged in this initiative (Lourenço, 2010). This was a source of complaints among cyberactivists who tried to use the Forum as an opportunity to make their statements on the subject of memory preservation. It is important to explain that although in 2004 the National Council of Archives (CONARC) drafted a national version of the Unesco Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage (2003), there had been no prior initiatives related to this topic.

In order to try to map the concepts of “digital memory” circulating in the Forum, we researched the comment files and the final report. Our purpose was to answer this question: what is exactly being named “digital memory” (memória digital)? First of all, the category seems to be very broadly defined, resembling the definition of anthropological approaches to culture (Geertz, 1973). Basically, anything on the web could be made to fit under this large umbrella category. In the document on digital heritage there is just a description of the ongoing debate in Brazil. It is shown that the country is involved in important international movements such as the Free Software Movement and heritage projects such as the World Digital Library. However, there is a lack of coordination on the part of the institutions committed to these projects and there are no specific national protocols related to the preservation and access of digital data (i.e. infrastructures and metadata).

4. Final notes: an open concept of digital heritage

In the Digital Memory Work Group no mention was made to born-digital content or to initiatives related to it around the world. More than a concept, the term “digital memory” was used as a broad category, as we have mentioned, but it seems not to

include born-digital heritage. And what could be the reason for this omission? Well, more important than just pointing out this absence or trying, perhaps it is more fruitful to try to understand it by indicating the broad scope of the discussion and, above all, mentioning the connection to the main issues of the UNESCO official documents.

The Forum's final document defends the creation of a protocol for the preservation of "digital memory" by using open source software. At the same time, it posits that without a minimum level of communication among the country's institutions on the topic there is the risk of inefficiency: the same manuscripts might get digitalized twice, resources might be spent on the data processing of the same archive into binary code. Thus, as unlikely or even undesirable is the possibility the preservation of digital content might be centralized it is interesting to reflect upon the possible means of regulation and how to assure efficient use of resources. The document, as the discussions in the Forum, is for the most part related to the current state of the issue in Brazil. Taking this into account the absence of any explicit mention of the preservation of born-digital heritage becomes more understandable. We have realized that if, on one hand, Brazil was quick to incorporate social networking tools (such as Orkut and Facebook) or micro-blogging tools such as Twitter, on the other one, with respect to the sharing of "digital memory" tool such as Omeka or Archive-it there are few relevant experiences. There are many online archives rendering digitalized material available however there are no relevant experiences in Brazil concerning born-digital heritage.

We thus arrive at an important juncture, namely the relation between technological artifacts and social categories and concepts. This is not an issue requiring an immediate solution, rather it opens vast new territory to be chartered. The case we are reporting provides important information towards the elaboration of broader questions. How to understand the creation of categories related to a newly-created technology? Investigating cases such as this one, from a micro perspective, allows us to corroborate the hypothesis of Briggs and Burke (2006) on the non-linear character of the social history of media. The constancies and continuities in the appropriation and practices of new information technologies have also been detected by Pierre Lévy in his works (1993). Thus, although the Forum's discussion was guided by the use of new technologies, the assumptions at stake belong to a dated an analogical paradigm in which the heritage assets correspond to a static object and not to a webpage or a collection of "tweets" on politics. We cannot affirm that the final Document or even the discussion among the group's 197 members fully depict the Brazilian picture. This has not been the intention of these research notes. Our interest is to reflect upon this small universe and based on it reflect on the intertwining of concepts and technologies, and the continuities and changes in this process.

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