Digital archives, cultural identity and diversity, meaning economy[1].

Some general ideas.

Peter STOCKINGER

(Paris, INALCO)

Tallinn University – 29th of September 2016

1) Introduction

I would like to develop some general ideas concerning possible evolutions of *digital archives* in relation to *cultural identity and diversity*.

After having worked as a researcher and professional during more than 30 years about these topics, I am convinced that they constitute scientific and also strategic cornerstones in the evolution from the actual knowledge economy to something what scholars call a *global meaning economy* and of which the so called digital social media are a prefiguration.

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[1] Speech given in the Council of Europe Conference « Culture 4D : Digitization ; Data ; Disruptions ; Diversty » ; hosted by Tallinn University and Estonian Ministry of Culture within the framework of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers – Tallinn ; September 29 and 30 2016

2) Meaning economy

What should we understand under the label "meaning economy"? One of the central themes that seems to characterize this kind of "new" economy is the production and consumption of data and objects which reflects or express (which, so to speak, *stage*) our (personal or collective) experiences and emotions, expectations, desires and fears, values, believes, truths, ideas and also our knowledge.

Key-words and examples characterizing such an economy based on the (personal or collective) symbolic capital represented and staged through data and objects are, for instance:

- multisensory communication;
- landscapes as brandscapes (Anna Klingmann; the – architectural, urban, … – space staging personal and/or collective identities);
- personal and life branding;
- immersive multimodal, 3D and 4D textscapes and allospheres (cf. JoAnn Kuchera-Morin from the UCSB working with the California Nanosystems Institute in domain of visualization and experiencing of complex data structures);
- Objects and data tailored to the individual desires and needs; co-creation of objects by users/consumers (cf. the site "Made in the Future");
- Smart (semantically structured) data (cf. for instance the technological solutions offered by the company "Cambridge Semantics");
- Recollecting and re-assembling of data (cf. Richard Rinehart & Jon Ippolito: Re-collection. Art, New Media and Social Memory);
- User appropriation of data, data reprocessing, data remediating/re-mediatizing, data republishing;
- Data animation (ex.: a digital photo collection representing souvenirs of family holidays turned in a 3D multisensory textscape);
- creative platforms (cf. for instance the platform for creative projects *Kickstarter*);
- the profile of the imaginer and the process of imagineering (cf. Gabrielle Kuiper & Bert Smit; 2011).

In a nutshell: meaning economy has its roots in the principle of *sensible and perceptible world* of data forming a *signifying textscape* (or semiosphere, in Lotman's sense) which stages the *"inner" (mental, emotional …) world* of a person or a collective agent (cf. also Stockinger; [Semiotics of textscapes and cultures](), 2017).

I would like to discuss now briefly the initially quoted key notions *digital archives* and *cultural identity and diversity* and their place in the emerging meaning economy.

3) Digital archives

The notion "digital archive" means basically, as we know, the selection, the storage and the preservation of data (written, spoken, visual, audiovisual, real objects, …)

However, a more complete vision of digital archives would add at least four other dimensions for characterizing them:

1. First: The storage and preservation is *regulated* (there are explicit or simply tacit rules and norms to be respected).
2. *Second*: there are not only data in an archive but also the *meta-data* for identifying, describing, commenting, enriching, versioning, linking data … *Meta-data* represent, so to speak, the *meaning* of data (of pictures, videos, texts, …) for an actor - a person, a community, an institution or company or again a computer program (i.e. an "artificial agent").
3. Third: An archive includes also a series of processes of how to store data, of how to access them, of how to read them, of how to interact with them, of how to reuse and exploit them, of how to preserve them, etc.
4. And finally fourth: archives form the *central part* of social and cultural *ecosystems*. In other words, and somehow metaphorically speaking, archives constitute the *brain* of which the body is a (personal or collective) social and cultural ecosystem.

A social and cultural ecosystem of which an archive constitutes, so to speak, the "brain" is an organized *collectivity of actors* (persons, communities, institutions …) who share a *pool of meaning*, i.e. a pool of *experiences*, *values, believes, evidences, knowledge, …* And such a collectivity of actors, indeed, cooperates for maintaining this pool of meaning[2], for enriching it, for transforming it in contact with other communities of actors (i.e. with other cultural ecosystems), for using and exploiting it in daily life and

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[2] Cf. also my article « [The semiotic turn in digital archives and libraries]() » (2015 ; DOI:10.3166/lcn.11.1.57-82)

professional situations and also for interpreting and acting with actors belonging to another social and cultural ecosystem and, finally, in defending it against outer or inner menaces.

In my opinion, very illustrative examples for such *meaning ecosystems[3]* are the to-days social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, etc. They are the necessary technological platforms for millions of people aiming at the building of and/or participating in social and cultural ecosystems which reflect their personality, their experiences and their life-styles. You Tube hosts millions of channels; each channel forms a small social and cultural ecosystem of which the brain is an "archive" (broadly speaking) of shared data and meta-data (videos, images, sound, …), of a common pool of meaning.

These social and cultural ecosystems composing the global platform YouTube can be more or less important, possess a more or less long time-span but what is important here, is the fact that they "function" as meaning producing, meaning sharing, meaning consuming and meaning using communities of actors.

4) Cultural identity and diversity

This vision of social and cultural ecosystems as *meaning producing, sharing, consuming and using communities* which possess in their (symbolic) center an *archive where the meaning is stored and processed*, leads me to the notions of cultural identity and diversity.

Culture is considered by many scholars as a *meaning system* (a language in the broad sense of the French word *"langage"*).

In this sense we face a huge diversity of traditionally acknowledged cultures that form complete meaning systems: language cultures, religious cultures, ethnic cultures, national cultures, social cultures or again technical and scientific cultures. There are many concrete examples that show us the central role of archives for these cultures understood as meaning producing, sharing, consuming and using collectivities. Let me quote here the importance of national archives and more generally of what is

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[3] For a deeper understanding of *social and cultural meaning ecosystems*, I would like to quote Urie Bronfenbrenner's « ecological systems theory » (cf. his book The ecology of human development , 1981) ; Y. Lotman's approch of culture as a semiosphere (cf. Universe of the Mind , 1990) ; Michel Foucault's approach of the archive as an historical a priori of discourse and rationality (cf. Archéologie du savoir , 1969) ; A.J. Greimas' semiotic approach of the « natural(ly) given world » (cf. « Sémiotique et sciences sociales » ; 1976) ; Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural approach of traditional or industrialized civilizations (cf. « Anthropologie structurale », 1958); C. Geertz interpretive approach of the common sense of cultures (cf. « Local Knowledge » ; 1983) ; Alfred Schütz' phenomenological approach of cultures as Lebenswelten possessing their specific meaning horizons (cf. « Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt » ; 1932).

called in a "politically correct" terminology "cultural heritage institutions", i.e. of institutions of which the official – political – mission is to conserve and disseminate the "heritage" in form of data or objects which have been identified by an official academic or "expert" discourse as objects to be conserved because they are supposed to constitute relevant material traces of memorable achievements or events witnessing the identity, the glory, the traditions, the intellectual achievements, … of the given (national) ecosystem.

However, besides this "traditional" form of cultural diversity, we have to acknowledge the emergence of a *diversity of rather new forms* of cultural meaning systems such as, for instance:

- social organizational cultures,
- informal group cultures;
- brand and consumer cultures,
- life style cultures,
- or again personal cultures.

These cultural forms constitute indeed a very *new landscape* of cultural diversity. Good examples here are, once more again, the social and cultural *ecosystems* emerging and consolidating due to social media platforms such as FB, Twitter, or YouTube.

All this huge diversity of – traditionally acknowledged or actually emerging – cultures possesses a same *structural pattern*:

⇨ 1) They are all *meaning ecosystems*, preoccupied with the production, sharing, consumption and use of meaning.
⇨ 2) The (symbolically) central part of these ecosystems is the *archive* as I have defined it before.

Considering this situation, we can stress some points showing the tasks and the importance of (digital) archives in a knowledge driven or, broader speaking, meaning driven economy. Archives fulfill several vital functions for a social and cultural ecosystem:

1. Archives constitute the *memory* of an ecosystem;
2. Archives shape the *identity* of a (personal or collective) meaning ecosystem (and hence the representation of the *alterity* – of the other);

3. Archives possess – as already pointed out by Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau – a regulative role in the understanding and (re)writing of the *history* (the past, the present and the future) *within the meaning horizon* of an ecosystem;

4. Archives deliver the cognitive and axiological resources for the behavior of an ecosystem and for its capacity to dialogue with, to understand other meaning ecosystems, to "translate" (Wolfgang Iser) the meaning of other ecosystems in its own meaning horizon.

These different functions identify some – in my opinion - important challenges in research and development for the coming years. In taking seriously the metaphor of the "brain" of an ecosystem, we should indeed:

1. not restrict our understanding of archives to simple *static repositories* of masses of data nor to the traditional understanding of archives as represented typically through their historical instance of "national archives";

2. but better consider archives (and here especially digital archives) as *selective meaning storing and producing, dynamic, adaptive and evolutive* hubs *of cognitive (and axiological) resources* for communities of (social) actors – individuals, informal social groups, social organizations, etc.

All this in order to say that in my opinion, one of the most challenging R&D objectives is the definition and systematic description of the *conceptual design* of digital archives understood as *hubs* of meaning resources for social and cultural ecosystems – no matter if these ecosystems are represented through traditionally recognized cultures (such as, for instance, national cultures) or through personal cultures, life style cultures or again brand and consumer cultures; no matter also if we restrict for ad hoc practical or institutional reasons the implementation and use of a (digital) archive to its traditional "core" activities. In any case, we have to try to understand and to describe the whole potentialities of digital archives *as cognitive and axiological resource hubs for community of actors*.

Finally, I also believe that a *conceptual design* of archives that re-contextualize them in their *corresponding meaning ecosystems* is an indispensable prerequisite for an appropriate technical specification of the *semantic framework* of environments enabling people to interact with archives in the sense we have briefly described earlier in this short speech[4].

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[4] Cf. Abdelkrim Beloued, Peter Stockinger, Steffen Lalande; *Studio Campus AAR. A semantic platform for analyzing and publishing audiovisual corpuses*; in: Samuel Szoniecky (ed.), Collective intelligence and digital archives ; ISTE-Wiley (under press)