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AI AND SOCIAL MEDIA FOR INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: TEA, WINE, AND DIGITAL MEDIATION

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Abstract

This talk explores the intersections between artificial intelligence (AI), social media platforms, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH), focusing specifically on tea and wine practices. It examines how generative and predictive AI technologies reshape the transmission, visibility, and transformation of cultural practices. Through theoretical perspectives and two case studies—Gong Fu Cha and French wine culture—it highlights the opportunities and risks associated with digital mediation, including issues of authenticity, algorithmic bias, cultural hybridization, and ethical governance.

1. Introduction

The convergence of artificial intelligence, social media platforms, and centuries-old cultural practices raises critical questions regarding the transmission and transformation of intangible cultural heritage. The coexistence of AI-driven content, platforms such as TikTok or Douyin, and traditional rituals such as tea ceremonies illustrates a contemporary reconfiguration of cultural mediation.

An initial observation emerges from exposure to digital representations of tea-making practices characterized by highly stylized performances combining precision and aesthetic choreography. This raises a fundamental question regarding whether such representations constitute heritage, performance, or both. The answer lies in recognizing that they embody multiple dimensions simultaneously.

This study investigates how AI and social media reshape the transmission of what UNESCO defines as intangible cultural heritage.

2. Intangible Cultural Heritage and Artificial Intelligence

According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage encompasses oral traditions, rituals, and craftsmanship. It is inherently dynamic, existing within communities rather than institutions, and is continuously evolving through transmission across generations. Intangible cultural heritage is therefore not limited to preservation but involves transmission and reinvention. It includes practices such as lullabies, culinary traditions, and ceremonial dances. As noted by Blake (2009), heritage must be safeguarded without being fossilized, remaining alive and adaptable.

Artificial intelligence introduces new dimensions to this dynamic. Generative AI refers to technologies capable of producing new content, including images, texts, and synthetic media, while predictive AI analyzes user behavior to recommend content and shape digital consumption patterns. These technologies enable new forms of cultural transmission. Generative models can simulate rituals, recreate songs, or produce virtual performances (Colavizza, 2021), while predictive algorithms ensure dissemination through personalized content curation.

These transformations must also be understood within the broader framework of digital uses and practices, particularly regarding how users interact with technological systems and how meaning is constructed through these interactions (Paquienséguy, 2019).

3. Algorithmic Culture and Smart Cultural Heritage

Contemporary digital environments can be understood as instances of “algorithmic culture,” a concept proposed by Striphas, in which algorithms increasingly influence cultural choices and visibility. This has direct implications for intangible cultural heritage, as the most visible practices are not necessarily the most representative but rather the most engaging within platform logics.

The concept of Smart Cultural Heritage further illustrates this transformation by integrating digital technologies, urban environments, and cultural assets. It encompasses the use of Internet of Things technologies, artificial intelligence, big data, augmented and virtual reality, and participatory approaches to enhance cultural experiences. These dynamics echo previous work on smart cities and open data, where the circulation and structuration of digital information reshape both urban governance and user practices (Paquienséguy et al., 2020).

Projects such as FLIGHT (2021–2023) demonstrate these developments through the combination of sensor data, open data policies, and digital applications to facilitate access to heritage sites. This framework relies on interconnected technological systems that monitor environments and behaviors, analyze user interactions, create immersive experiences, and involve citizens in co-creation processes. Such transformations also relate to broader reflections on the role of digital technologies in reshaping knowledge production and mediation within contemporary societies (Paquienséguy, 2017).

Ethical considerations remain central. Cultural heritage cannot exist without its originating community, and when communities persist, they must retain authority over representation. In cases where communities have disappeared, technology may serve as a tool for reconstruction and testimony.

4. Social Media Platforms and Cultural Transformation

Social media platforms function as cultural mediators rather than mere entertainment tools. Their logic of virality and algorithmic recommendation shapes both the visibility and reception of cultural practices. While digital technologies allow for the transformation of content through editing, enhancement, and synthesis, they may also produce distortions and misleading representations.

Generative AI enables the creation of content such as deepfakes and automated narratives, while predictive AI personalizes content delivery based on user behavior. These technologies provide opportunities for increased accessibility and creativity but also introduce risks of standardization and contextual loss. These processes are closely linked to platform logics and user positioning within digital environments, where value is co-constructed through usage, recommendation systems, and attention economies (Paquienséguy, 2011).

Predictive systems contribute to the formation of filter bubbles that reinforce cultural silos and limit exposure to diverse traditions. This leads to a form of algorithmic reductionism in which cultural diversity is constrained by behavioral data patterns. As a result, recommendation systems should not only predict user preferences but also promote discovery and diversity.

5. Case Study I: Gong Fu Cha and Digital Mediation

Gong Fu Cha represents a ritualized tea preparation characterized by precision, rhythm, and symbolic objects. Each gesture, temporal sequence, and material element contributes to a meditative and culturally meaningful experience. In digital environments such as Douyin, this practice becomes a performative act in which visual emphasis on gestures, soundscapes, and scenography enhances aesthetic appeal while transforming the ritual into a digital spectacle.

This transformation raises a central question regarding whether digital mediation preserves cultural depth or prioritizes viral potential. On the one hand, digital platforms democratize access, increase visibility, and enable the dissemination of knowledge. On the other hand, they may simplify practices, prioritize aesthetic appeal over authenticity, and diminish philosophical depth.

At the same time, these platforms foster community engagement through interactive features, allowing Gong Fu Cha to become a collective practice beyond its traditional context.

This evolution reflects a tension between preservation and reinterpretation, as the practice risks becoming an aesthetic object detached from its original cultural meaning.

6. Case Study II: French Wine Culture and Digital Performance

Wine tasting constitutes a ritual involving gestures, sensory perception, and symbolic objects refined over centuries. Traditionally practiced in environments emphasizing concentration and sensory analysis, it is increasingly mediated through digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.

These platforms transform wine tasting into a visual and interactive performance, emphasizing gestures, sounds, and scenography to create engaging content. This transformation alters the nature of the practice, as blind tasting becomes a playful and social activity in digital contexts. The emphasis shifts from expertise and analysis to entertainment and participation, redefining the relationship between heritage and practice.

7. Cultural Interface and Digital Mediation

The notion of cultural interface refers to the space in which digital platforms mediate interactions between cultural practices and digital norms. It encompasses the transformation of cultural experiences, the adaptation of practices to platform-specific formats, the integration of participatory mechanisms, and the hybridization of cultural and digital aesthetics.

These transformations are consistent with analyses of digital mediation and cultural industries, which highlight how platforms impose formats, temporalities, and modes of engagement that reshape both production and reception (Paquienséguy, 2011).

8. New Cultural Mediators

Content creators have emerged as new cultural mediators, replacing traditional figures such as museum curators, ethnographers, and educators. Their practices rely on humor, emotion, and visual aesthetics rather than academic or institutional frameworks. This shift reflects broader transformations in the relationship between users, technologies, and content, particularly in the transition from appropriation to design-oriented uses of digital tools (Paquienséguy, 2019).

9. Ethical Considerations

The circulation of cultural content on global digital platforms raises significant ethical issues, including cultural appropriation, monetization, and unequal distribution of benefits.

Algorithmic moderation introduces concerns related to censorship and bias, as certain cultural expressions may be marginalized.

Ensuring ethical digital mediation requires attention to consent, fairness, and accountability, recognizing that cultural heritage represents identity rather than mere content.

10. Key Tensions

The relationship between digital platforms and cultural heritage is characterized by tensions between algorithmic logic and cultural depth, between the temporal dynamics of social media and the continuity of living heritage, and between cultural practices and their transformation into data.

11. Discussion and Perspectives

The integration of artificial intelligence into cultural practices raises fundamental questions about creativity, authenticity, and governance. These issues are part of broader transformations within information and communication sciences in response to technological change (Paquienséguy, 2017).

12. Conclusion

The integration of AI and social media into cultural practices represents both an opportunity and a challenge. While these technologies enhance visibility and accessibility, they also risk transforming heritage into commodified content.

Intangible cultural heritage is not merely content but identity, and its preservation requires careful consideration of technological, cultural, and ethical dimensions.