

Discussion Paper

**Container or Content: Is Social Media a Form of
Intangible Heritage or Tool for Transmission?**

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Introduction

According to Statista 6.04 billion people use the internet and there are 5.66 billion social media accounts worldwide as of October 2025 (Statista, 2025). This accounts for sixty eight percent of the world's population. It is clear therefore that social media has become a primary driver for human collaboration including practice of ritual and the transmission of storytelling.

This paper questions whether social media is a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in its own right or whether it is a tool for the transmission of ICH. To do this the UNESCO definition of ICH will be considered along with notions of identity and cultural memory. UNESCO defines Intangible Cultural Heritage as 'oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts'. Central to this definition is the notion that practices and rituals, along with knowledge and abilities are passed down through the generations.

Crucially for this paper UNESCO set the following framework: Intangible Heritage must be

- Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time. It is not only inherited tradition but also reflects contemporary practices
- Inclusive, fostering shared identities, passed from one generation to another and is socially cohesive
- Representative and shared to other communities and generations
- Community based with practices recognised by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain or transmit it.

(UNESCO, 2025)

Alongside this UNESCO recognises that digital heritage is an ever more important aspect of heritage as resources are increasingly being created digitally and require careful preservation in ways that are different from other forms of heritage (UNESCO, 2023a). From this perspective the question of whether social media is ICH or merely a digital receptacle is an important one. Using this framework provided by UNESCO, this paper asks the following question: Does social media act as a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage or is it merely a tool for its transmission? In order to

explore the first part of this question this paper will consider the way in which social media responds to the framework of practices before considering whether the generational requirements of the UNESCO definition are relevant to the way in which Social Media is relevant to ICH.

Social Media as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Social Media as a Site of Ritual

According to Trillo, Hallinan and Shifman social media can be typified by diverse rituals, created by the users as 'communicative practices that formalize and express shared values, [...]'(Trillò, Hallinan and Shifman, 2022). They argue that social media provides 'culturally situated practices' which have 'deep rooted patterns of communication [referred to] as social media rituals' (Trillò, Hallinan and Shifman, 2022).

Trillo, Hallinan and Shifman's typography of social media rituals reflect many seen in the physical world. These rituals are created in the physical world via cultural and personal memories as part of 'a transmitted culture from generation to generation' and memories that are supplemented with strong visual cues are commonly retained for longer (Benton, 2010). In a social media setting, these rituals can be seen in commemorative posts such as birthday greetings and remembrance posts. In addition to those discussed above, other rituals can include those based on behaviour and socially accepted norms, rituals based on philanthropy as well as games and craft videos. These rituals include storytelling, transmission of memes and folklore along with folklorism. These include folklore 'belief' practices on Facebook, such as ones in which users believe they can override terms and conditions by posting a statement, much like a written incantation which says they do not give Facebook permission to share content, along with storytelling content of urban myths both of which are designed to be shared from user to user and group to group. Further, posts that are designed to elicit nostalgic responses, facilitate collective identities thereby strengthening the cultural memories of the group. Fig. 1 shows a post from 'Swansea and its History' Facebook page showing an urban street, probably from the 1970's which elicited many nostalgic responses. Giaccardi argues that we have moved beyond the traditional norms of interacting with heritage, such as museums into something that is more participatory and states that Social

Media has fundamentally altered the way in which heritage is experienced and navigated stating that the 'impact on heritage discourse and practice is significant' (Giaccardi E, 2012, p. 1). Social Media therefore can be seen as a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the difference between practicing traditions on the internet compared to the practicing of traditions in a church hall or living museum is merely one of digital or non digital space.

Memory, Time, and "Invented Traditions"



Fig 1. Facebook post on a group page about local history and nostalgia

One of the elements of the UNESCO definition is that ICH is formed of 'traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants' (UNESCO, 2025). The concept of the need for longevity is supported by the likes of Assmann and Apaydin who argue that cultural memory is formed over generations and that this is vital for cultural identity and heritage.

Assmann (1995) agrees with Halbwachs that memory is socially

mediated and relates to a group and in this sense Assmann may agree that there are elements here which are integral to social media. However, he terms this 'collective' or 'communicative' memory and argues that this is temporal in nature, limited to at most one hundred years.

Cultural memory leading to cultural identity, he states, are not lost with time and memory here is preserved through festivals, rites, rituals, written stories etc. This is what UNESCO designates as ICH. Assmann rejects Halbwachs's notion of communicative memory as being too temporal in nature to be able to form cultural memories or identities which in turn provide the foundations for traditional practices. In addition, Apaydin notes that 'cultural heritage and the memory it embodies is vital for individuals, groups and communities in forming collective identities' (Apaydin, 2020, p. 1) and argues that cultural memory and heritage are inextricably bound,

primarily because heritage is an active form of cultural production—one that continually constructs and refines meaning for both individuals and communities. Heritage is a living thing which, through its practices, brings the past into the present. ICH is about the preservation of the past and by use of this argument social media cannot be seen as Intangible Cultural Heritage; it is too ‘quick’ and ephemeral. Indeed, snaps on the platform ‘snapchat’ can disappear almost immediately with the content (video, meme, song etc) being lost which invites the question of how the past is preserved in this context.

However, Eric Hobsbawm argues that traditions do not necessarily require the deep passage of time to be accepted as part of our cultural identity and heritage, and he argues that traditions can be invented: ‘Invented Tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. Hobsbawm (2012, p. 1) Hobsbawm states that traditions are invented by a process of reinforcement and ritualisation which references the past, even if only by the imposition of repetitive practice. Further, Hobsbawm goes on to describe a typography of invented traditions which includes those which create or signify group membership, those which create or validate status and those who exist to facilitate social interaction, including the establishment of belief systems and behavioural convention (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 9). Critically however, this does not need to conform to the temporal requirements for these traditions to pass into cultural identity as can be exemplified by the case of the Scottish Clan Kilt which came about as the result of the writing of a fraudulent history of Scotland in 1760 by James Macpherson. This work was debunked in 1805 by Sir Walter Scott, who went on to introduce the notion that the kilt was worn as early as the third century A.D. In fact, the kilt was invented in 1707 and the clan tartans came into being even later. The kilt became the official national dress of Scotland when King George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822. Having been convinced to wear the tartan he then encouraged others to follow and when the false catalogue of clan tartan was developed in 1842, the wearing of the Scottish Kilt became a practice of both national and personal identity and heritage (Trevor-Roper, 2012). This case study demonstrates that practices can become heritage in much less time than Assmann’s theory of cultural memory would suggest. Indeed, the time the kilt

was popularised until it became a symbol of personal and national identity was thirty seven years. This speed can be seen in the way in which social media has also become part of an individual and group identity. From its first post in 1997, (*The evolution of Social Media*2025)Social Media has become a ubiquitous vehicle of participatory practices including rituals, group identification and value transformation.

Social Media as a vehicle of Intangible Cultural Heritage

This paper will now turn to the question of whether social media is a vehicle of ICH.

Community Participation and Resilience

In their article discussing heritage sites and climate change, Ginzarly and Teller argue that social media and other digital tools help to embed Cultural heritage via



Fig. 2 Facebook post for a Carol singing service

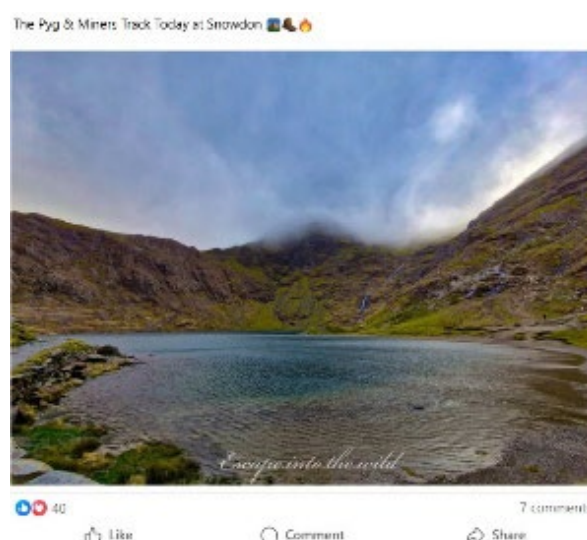


Fig.3

knowledge distribution and inclusionary practices. Quoting Choi et. al, they argue that that; [...] digital platforms empower communities, enhance participation, and contribute to the resilience of both the heritage itself and the communities that safeguard it'.(Ginzarly and Teller, 2025) They further suggest that social media can be used to transform and build heritage values in populations by fostering the participation of individuals groups and communities and to facilitate collected identities via such things as individual and group pages, along with other organisational presences designed to either encourage or transform the Authorised

Heritage Discourse as well as pages designed for information exchange. For example, Facebook groups that facilitate nostalgia such as those dedicated to the history of a particular geographic area, those which foster collective identity based on hobbies and pastimes, such as photographic groups and neighbourhood pages which not only promote heritage activities but act as a repository and archive. For instance, Fig. 2 shows an example of the group page 'Talog News' giving information about a 2025 Carol Service. In addition, groups such as 'Love Wales' promote ICH via numerous images of the Welsh Landscape such as in Fig. 3. In turn, these groups encourage non-digital participation such as attendance at an annual event or in the form of encouraging tourism to heritage sites and landscapes.

Social media also has a role in the promotion of large heritage organisations engaged in ICH. Kavoura et al. argue that using Social Media to facilitate the transmission of Heritage is vital in order to achieve the 'widespread distribution of cultural heritage and [bridge] the gaps between the public and cultural institutions' (Kavoura, A., Briciu, V.-A. and Briciu, A, 2025, p. 638) They argue that the practices of liking and sharing information facilitates the introduction and promotion of ICH and that Social Media has now become fundamental to 'digital cultural heritage communication' by promoting enhanced accessibility to cultural heritage activities (Kavoura, A., Briciu, V.-A. and Briciu, A, 2025, p. 640) They exemplify this with a case study. The Museum of Canvases and Stories in Mandra, Romania sits in the Fagaras region and exists to promote local traditions and practices. It is involved in both the preservation of historic canvases and other local artefacts, alongside educational and creative activities. It also facilitates other innovations including 'Mother Ruta's Suveica around the world' which connects local and global audiences. The authors note that the museum is critical in preserving the ICH of the region acting as an intergenerational 'cultural bridge'. The museum has had a presence on YouTube since 2009, Facebook since 2011, Instagram since 2015 and TikTok since 2021. The results of the case study demonstrate that engagement on TikTok and Instagram are higher than other platforms, reflecting a younger audience show preferences for these networks. Content of posts are platform dependant but typical themes include local crafts and techniques, events, story telling and sales of traditionally embroidered clothes. They also note that the highest engagement was around a wedding event where male traditional dance was performed. They

conclude that Social Media serve as 'dynamic spaces for building cultural awareness' and that it, promotes local and regional identity. Moreover, the amount of engagement on Instagram demonstrates the potential to foster interest in heritage based products and activities. They conclude by asserting that Social Media is a crucial inclusion in heritage preservation as it ensures 'that intangible cultural heritage continues to thrive in the digital age'(Kavoura, A., Briciu, V.-A. and Briciu, A, 2025, pp. 640–643).

Writing in 2012, Giaccardi views Social Media through the lens of participatory culture, citing Jenkins who defines participatory culture as one which doesn't always have contributions from every member, but one in which every member feels they are able to contribute and will feel valued for that contribution. It is also concerned with 'diverse forms of affiliation, expression, collaboration and distribution' (Giaccardi E, 2012, p. 3). **Paragraph needs completion**

Questions: If Social Media is a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage, what implications does that have for the UNESCO definition?

If Social Media is a vehicle for Intangible Cultural Heritage, what implications does that have for intangible heritage in the non-digital space?

Can Social Media be both a vehicle for and a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage?

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If one considers that social media is indeed a form of digital ICH, further questions not within the scope of this paper could then be asked. For example, 'How does social media fit within the UNESCO digital preservation program' (UNESCO, 2023b)? Or, 'How do the algorithms embedded within social media platforms influence the way in which ideas of heritage are disseminated to its users'? Or, 'Have Assmann's theories of Cultural Identity been subverted by the onset of digital technology and in particular, Social Media'? Perhaps the most interesting questions arising from this paper are those regarding the function of AI and Heritage.

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