

**Opening ceremony of the  
'Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation'**

**26 to 28 September 2012**

**Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada**

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Ladies, Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Director General for her opening remarks which gave a concise overview of the key underlying elements for this conference. Please allow me to share some thoughts with you.

UNESCO was created in 1945 with a mandate to build peace in the minds of men and women through the spread of knowledge from improved access to printed and published materials. The core of this material, our documentary heritage, is held primarily in archives, libraries and museums which are the major caretakers of recorded memories.

As you all know, documentary heritage is the vector for the transmission of knowledge. However, its physical form is extremely vulnerable and runs the risk of disappearance. As a result, since the earliest of times, human beings have sought lasting ways recording knowledge to benefit those who come after. From cave drawings to clay tablets; from papyrus to photographs; from folios to Facebook™, different forms have been deployed to share content and knowledge. Yet, paradoxically, modern documents are more endangered than older ones. It is because our understanding about the complexity of the ecosystem underpinning the digitization and digital preservation lags behind the rapid pace of technological development. Here I am talking about mid-term preservation which may be measured in terms of perhaps a decade or less, not centuries.

New challenges have appeared in relation to information in digital format. We are particularly concerned about audiovisual and digital documents as these need dedicated hardware and software to be retrieved. However, these rapidly become obsolete due to technological progress, and hamper our ability to access invaluable content. Therefore, timely migration to newer technologies, operating systems and software platforms must be factored into digital management policies and plans. Traditional management policies are irrelevant where digital materials are concerned.

Ownership, preservation practices and concomitant increases in costs affect the ability of institutions everywhere to maintain their mandates to protect heritage and knowledge. As we move ever closer towards an Internet of things, where smart devices become the main source of access to services, new knowledge preservation and management policies will be needed. These are especially required where the concept of privacy and respect for human dignity are concerned.

I have evoked just a few of the very many issues that will be addressed in your discussions and presentations. UNESCO is placing high hopes in this multi-stakeholder expert conference and count on your active participation. Our plans are ambitious. We would like to define what role UNESCO

could play, apart from awareness-raising, advocacy and policy advice to the governments of our Member States, and how it can contribute in practical terms in moving overall understanding and the practice of digitization and digital preservation ahead. We would like to challenge industry and invite it to include the principle of long-term accessibility to information in the Terms of Reference of any new technological development task. We would like to challenge governments and invite them to create national sustainable ecosystems for digitization and digital preservation. We would like to challenge the research community to work on sustainable solutions for long-term digital preservation. And I can continue....

It is essential to build the basis for collaborative strategic alliances for the joint responsibility of preserving human knowledge. In this regard, we believe that establishing networks and partnerships will contribute to better sharing of resources for the benefit of humanity.

Collaboration can overcome some of the major challenges threatening the preservation of digital information which is usually poorly funded in comparison with the extent of the problem. Few institutions receive adequate budgets to address digital preservation needs, and have to resort to short-term measures or reallocate scarce resources.

It is impossible to understate the importance of documentary heritage in our lives. It constitutes the necessary basis for dialogue, building respect and mutual understanding in relations between different civilizations, societies and social groups. It contributes in an important manner to the understanding and recognition of the value of cultural diversity. It is the record of sources of history and artistic expression of cultures and communities as well as civilizational change. Its loss would truly be an impoverishment of humanity! Therefore, let us all join forces in preventing mankind from developing digital Alzheimer's.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank our host – the University of British Columbia in association with the University of Toronto and the sponsors of the conference for their generous contributions. In addition to these, the programme committee headed by Ms Luciana Duranti and Mr Jonas Palm worked tirelessly to develop the programme of the conference. My gratitude goes to them and all members of the different committees, as well as those who contributed to the preparation of this knowledge sharing and policy driving event.

I wish all of us successful and thought provoking conference. Thank you.