How to digitally preserve UNESCO intangible cultural heritage?

A web-archive for ephemeral events at the Basler Carnival

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Abstract

In recent years, awareness of the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to protect humanity's cultural diversity has increased. However, much remains to be done to document and archive this heritage for future generations. This proposal outlines an implemented solution for the digital preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

For the living culture of the Schnitzelbänke, a part of the UNESCO world cultural heritage, the Basler Fasnacht [1], we implemented an archive that functions simultaneously as an archive, digital news portal and basis for the documentation of ongoing and future events. This living web archive combines digitization, registration, meta dating, contextualizing, and storytelling. It acts as a digital archive by providing documents of past times, as a broadcast by almost direct transmission during the event taking place and as a news platform by announcing venues, members and perfomers, because the same technological solution offers a flexible stage for all of these digital practices.

Motivation

With www.schnitzelbankbasel.ch we created a comprehensive and accessible web archive of this UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. Culture creators, researchers, educators, and the general public can use this digital platform to learn about and engage with the world's diverse cultural heritage.

The Basel Fasnacht is attended by around 200,000 visitors annually. It begins on the Monday after Ash Wednesday at four in the morning with the Morgestraich. During these Days, in the evenings the Schnitzelbänk perform in restaurants, private houses, and clubhouses. The origins of the Fasnacht go back to the Celts and Germanic tribes with the winter exorcism, ancestor worship and fertility rituals. The oldest tradition of the Basel Fasnacht dates back to the end of the 14th-century [2]. The origin of the Schnitzelbänke cannot be clearly traced, although the oldest known Schnitzelbank in Basel dates back to 1839. The predecessors were probably the rhapsodies of antiquity and the taunt and mocking songs of the Middle Ages or the "Liedflugschriften". The direct forerunner of the Schnitzelbank is considered to be the "Bänkelsang" and the "Moritatensänger" [3].

The *Schnitzelbänke* are individuals or groups dressed up in "Larve" (mask) who perform mocking songs written in verse in the Basel dialect. More than 100 *Schnitzelbänke* sing, mostly accompanied by music, which can be a guitar, a band, or just a shaken pillbox. Usually, the individual verses are illustrated with "Helgen" (picture board), and the verses are in such a way laid out that in the last words, the punch line lies.

The treasure of this cultural heritage was difficult to access in recent years, as no systematic database existed to mediate this ephemeral cultural event.

Today, the Web and its associated digital technologies most clearly represent the possibilities of using cultural media that can be of central importance, especially for intangible culture [4]. Social as well as regional customs change over time. If we can make them available to younger generations as comprehensively and as far back as possible, long-forgotten things will be rediscovered, reinterpreted, or referred to. That is why such digital archives are very important for collective memory as well as for shaping society's future.

The possibility of quasi-limitless mediation in the WorldWideWeb, which is maintained and further developed by the (W3C), allows the exchange and presentation of audio-visual content. This essentially free infrastructure allows the visualization of archives and digital storytelling. For the Basel *Schnitzelbank-Comité,* this is an ideal situation for communicating the intangible cultural asset in digital form, as the spirit of the carnival should be handed down to the next generations. The database is curated on the basis of a very simple CMS based on Strapi by the volunteers working in the association, who also upload most of the files to the platform themselves. The only cost is the maintenance and hosting, which is paid for by the money the association receives from foundations. However, perhaps because it was developed with research-based aficionados and not large-scale commercial software companies, the costs are very reasonable compared to other commercial providers.

Problem

While UNESCO insists on the digital preservation of cultural heritage, fear exists that such lived culture is endangered by digitization. On the contrary, the presence of new media does not simply lead to a loss of tradition, as is often claimed, but can be an important source of inspiration and renewal. It also addresses the common ways of dissemination of today's mediality. The Web allows an incredible reach out and therefore a large audience. Depending on the format, these ways of cultural mediation touch and connect verbal, visual, and physical and virtual. Digital media products (texts, recordings, clips) should not be read as opposition to the real practices taking place but as in line with them, taking them up and further developed by cultural practitioners; The digital repository can be a part of a process in which lines of tradition are continued, and new cultural forms emerge [5].

Digital preservation of ephemeral phenomena with a complex set of different resources and agents is challenging. Some sound recordings have been made since the 1950s and for many years part of the *Schnitzelbänke* has been broadcast on television. After the performance, the *Schnitzelbänker* distribute the "Zeedel" (written script of the performance' text) so the audience can read what has been performed.

The "Zeedel" have different colors and paper formats; the long, narrow, and colored paper strip is the dominant variant. The texts on them are almost exclusively written in Basel dialect, with no uniform spelling of the dialect followed. Every year, 400 to 500 different "Zeedel" are written, printed, and distributed in small or large numbers.

Figure 1. *Zeedel Brunzguttere, 2023.*

Another challenge is the importance of the knowledge of the testimonies, as insiders can read and interpret posthumously the "Zeedel" before the event could be recorded audio-visually. This means that the knowledge of the contemporary witnesses is very important for the understanding of this cultural heritage. This is why we worked with historians to preserve as much knowledge as possible.

Last but not least the responsible collection did not have the know-how to develop and implement such a digital solution. The aim was to bridge this gap and support the initiators in this process. So we gathered different specialists at the start-up www.virtualculture.ch to create a new platform that should be state-of-the-art in regards to technology, yet simple to use, so that curation and data maintenance can be done by the members of the *Schnitzelbank-Comité* themselves. With the simplicity of the CMS, the focus here was on the growing competence of people to move in the digital world and to upload and design content themselves as well as to simplify their own processes with targeted automation.

Approach

The content of the web archive was created through a process of scanning and digitizing existing documentation. This includes photographs, videos, audio recordings, and written descriptions of cultural practices, traditions, and expressions. Choosing file formats that are robust, open and well supported is important to make it easier to manage and maintain (migrate) the growing number of digital files. Considering this early on in the creation of digital archives is a key step to successfully securing digital content. Each digitization project is individual, yet each project in turn can learn from another, which is why we have published guidelines together with the support of researchers from the University of Basel [6].

The web archive is designed to be as open and accessible as possible, focusing on making the information available to a regional and global audience. That's why we for example implemented the GND standard for the people register Basel [8], The handing down of contents goes directly along with a corresponding mediation concept. The desired mediation is not only to make the archives accessible but also to communicate the annually emerging events and quasi live streaming of new content. This curation makes it possible to raise interest, ensure dwell time, and pass on knowledge about the *Schnitzelbänke*. For this reason, a digital platform was created for the *Schnitzelbank-Comité,* which can secure the existing data long term (bitstream preservation), ensuring the attractive presentation of the information and allowing an agile and intuitive form of digital curation also for non IT experts.

Conceptually we focused on the "Zeedel" and put this as the key resources, because this is the core of the analog archive and what is kept and digitized by the *Comité*. So for our database, the "Zeedel" was chosen as the central resource, around which we added the other resources such as video, image, transcription etc. The metadata schema itself is rather simple and reduced to the needed core functionality. The back-end is a relational database with a CMS system layered on top. The back-end is headless, to ensure a maximum flexibility for future applications. Heavy load video content is served by Vimeo. In such a way the problem of

responsive streaming is no issue. The vimeo API allows automatic synchronisation and simple upload, as well as automatic transcoding of the video content. Audio recordings are converted to small size videos as well, to be able to make use of Vimeo also. In such a way the media content is homogenous and reduced to pictures and videos.

The skepticism on digitizing ephemeral cultural events was opposed by the experience of the pandemic, where in 2021 (the *Schnitzelbank-Comité* celebrated its 100th anniversary that year) the entire carnival was canceled and banned. So the digital platform was the only public stage, which in terms of potential reach significantly exceeds what would have been possible with other conventional, analogue media.

According to the inherent orientation of the Schnitzelbänke, the web archive shows the plus of the time, but also leads the spotlight on topics that are not mainstream, but which in fact has moved the people in a specific year. At this point, we touch on topics, which do not always correspond to the accepted culture and can also be politically sensitive. As the *Schnitzelbank* is a format where these topics can be articulated, we do not want to censor but try to contextualize and support a better understanding. To solve the problem of missing contextual information, as often contextual knowledge is mandatory for understanding, historians collaborate to locate the "Zeedel" and examine and evaluate in a yearly review for each year the topics of the *Schnitzelbänk*.

The design of the front end is influenced by today's browsing and streaming platforms. A simple input or search slot is offered, which can be used as in a web-browser search.
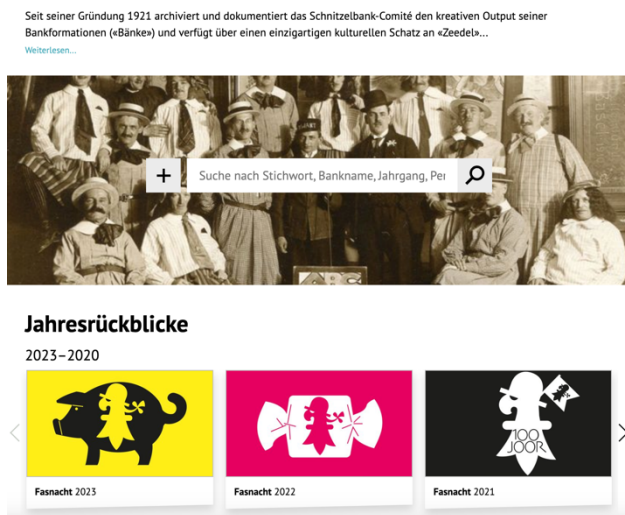

Figure 2. Cutout Screenshot "Entrance to the Archive".

The audio-visual content is structured in different ways, e.g. by age, name of the *Schnitzelbank*, by topic (keywords), or completely customized. All the metadata work and also the structuring of the presentation can be easily done with the administration user interface of the web based solution. The

transcript of the written verses is visualized side by side with the image of the "Zeedel" in the front end.

This project attaches great importance to curatorial cataloguing. That is why historians write one-page summary for every year, which highlights what was particularly important in the specific year. This way, the keywording is already embedded in a meaningful way and the broad audience is given an insight into the variety of topics and at the same time taken by the hand to lead them into the archive to search for further own keywords or own interests like the best *Schnitzelbänke* of women (which rather made the minority).
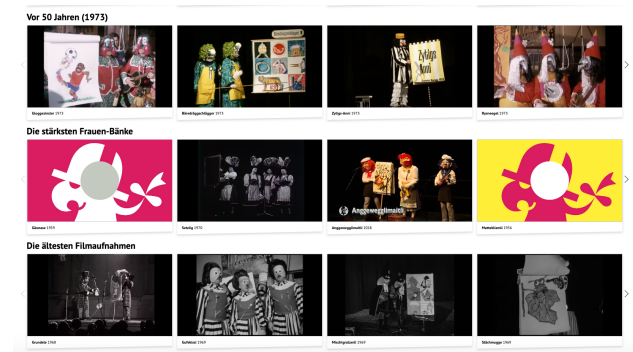

Figure 3. Cutout Screenshot "50 Years Ago, The Best Femal Schnitzelbänke, The Oldest Video-Recordings".

Results

The creation of a web archive of this UNESCO intangible cultural heritage has several important outcomes:

- Preservation: By digitizing and archiving existing documentation, we support the preservation of this ephemeral cultural heritage event for future generations.
- Accessibility and Engagement: The web archive makes cultural heritage accessible to a regional and global audience, helping to promote cross-cultural understanding and dialogue and encouraging people to participate and engage with the heritage in new and meaningful ways, promoting a deeper appreciation for the diversity of human culture.
- Education: The web archive provides a valuable repository for educators, providing them with a wealth of information and materials that can be used to teach about different cultural practices and traditions.
- Research: Thanks to the close connection with young researchers on the one hand and the scientific advisory board from the Digital Humanities Lab of the University of Basel on the other, the research of the holdings can now be processed with digital means for further research projects. Thus, this digitization project has already attracted a PhD project, and a larger Fasnacht digitization project is also seeking contact.

Conclusion

The project shows that it is possible to create a state-of-art digital from the scratch, without exploding costs. It also shows that such a custom made solution is capable of focusing on the

important aspects of the content. The back-end as well as the front-end is designed to deliver the content in a best possible way.

The archive can be consulted in many different ways. Regarding the curatorial concept, we combine different possibilities for exploration. Content can not only be browsed, it is also conceivable to prepare visual "data stories" and thus apply a modern form of using the data stock.

In addition to digitized documentation, the web archive includes extended elements that allow users to engage with the heritage in new ways. This includes motivation and opportunities to become a *Schnitzelbänkler* themselves, information about venue opportunities, where and how to buy tickets, and related memorabilia.

The creation of a web archive of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage is an important step in the ongoing efforts to safeguard and promote cultural diversity. By making this heritage accessible and engaging to a broader audience, we can help to promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation and ensure that this heritage is preserved for future generations.

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