AI. Anthropological Implementation: Rethinking the Relationship Between Culture and Digitalisation

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Abstract: This essay explores the complex relationship between culture and digitalisation, moving beyond the dichotomy between utopian visions of democratisation and dystopian perspectives of cultural decline. Digitalisation is interpreted not merely as a tool applied to culture but as a co-evolutionary environment capable of redefining fundamental paradigms such as production, consumption, authority, and memory. The analysis focuses on four thematic axes: algorithmic access, the evolution of prosumerism, the transformation of institutional authority, and the dialectic between archive and oblivion. Through this critical lens, the essay highlights how emerging opportunities intertwine with systemic challenges, emphasising the need for a new digital humanism grounded in critical awareness.

Keywords: culture, anthropology, memory, identity, prosumerism, digitalisation

1. Overcoming Simplified Narratives

Digitalisation has permeated every area of human existence over recent decades, transforming not only communication, work, and leisure practices but also the deep structures of society and the cultural practices that define it. It is not simply a set of technological tools but a complex ecosystem redefining spaces, times, identities, and relationships. The dominant approach has often been binary, swinging between techno-utopian visions of unlimited connection

and dystopian critiques denouncing data commodification and cultural authenticity loss.

To fully understand these transformations, a radical "rethinking" of the culture-digitalisation relationship is necessary, one that surpasses technological determinism and delves into the complexity of human interactions with and through the digital. The advent of digital technologies and pervasiveness triggered one of the most significant contemporary debates on culture's future. Early narratives oscillated between two extremes: on one side, a utopia of unlimited democratic access to knowledge — a sort of global, interactive "Library of Alexandria"; on the other side, an apocalyptic vision of qualitative impoverishment, discourse fragmentation, and the end of cultural authenticity. Today, decades after the first waves of digitalisation, this dichotomy appears inadequate and analytically sterile. The relationship between culture and digital technology does not have a unidirectional impact, but it is a process of mutual co-constitution— a complex ecosystem where technological logics and cultural practices shape each other (Van Dijck 2013).

A critical rethinking of this relationship requires abandoning generalisations to investigate the specific transformations digitalisation imposes on the very concepts of cultural production, consumption, legitimation, and preservation.

Anthropology, with its holistic study of practices, meanings, and social structures, offers a privileged lens to face this challenge. Far from seeing culture as a static entity "influenced" by technology, digital anthropology (Miller & al. 2012; Haynes 2016) proposes investigating how digitalisation itself is a cultural process, shaped and reshaped by human practices, and how it co-constructs new cultural forms. This essay aims to explore this dynamic relationship by analysing the mutations digital media imposes on cultural understanding, the new forms of agency and sociality that emerge, critical challenges linked to power and exclusion, and opportunities for a more conscious and inclusive future.

2. The New Guardians of Culture

From an anthropological viewpoint, cultural access is never just a technical matter; it is a symbolic mediation process deciding which memories, narratives, and forms of expression enter the public sphere. Digitalisation initially promised radical democratisation, capable of making a previously elite or context-bound cultural heritage visible and shareable (Coleman 2010). However, the shift from "universal" to "algorithmic selective" access introduced new, less visible but equally powerful cultural gatekeepers.

Digital platforms — social media, search engines, streaming services — are not neutral channels but socio-technical devices embedding values, economic priorities, and worldviews (Gillespie 2014). Anthropologically, algorithms are new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984), establishing hierarchies of meaning and visibility. Recommendation logics select which texts, music, films, and museum heritage compose individuals' everyday cultural horizons, influencing what is perceived as relevant, authentic, or legitimate (Pavlidis 2019).

Pariser's (Pariser 2011) concept of the "filter bubble" finds anthropological expression in identity construction dynamics: when subjects repeatedly encounter the same content, their cultural identity consolidates around a partial imaginary, reinforcing like-minded communities but reducing encounters with otherness (Couldry & Mejias 2019). In Appadurai's terms, "mediascapes" (Appadurai 1996, 35) no longer appear as unlimited global flows but filtered spaces bounded by computational and commercial platform logics.

Digital anthropology teaches that algorithms not only organise content but also produce symbolic power: deciding who can be heard, which collective memories are recognised, and which voices remain marginal. The risk, as Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (Van Dijck, Poell, de Waal 2018) note, is the emergence of a "platformized" cultural regime, where engagement metrics prevail over intrinsic cultural value criteria. This creates tension between

diversity and homogenization: while new forms of digital expression arise (memes, fan cultures, participatory practices), algorithmic infrastructure tends to favour what is popular and monetizable, sidelining local traditions or minority narratives. Ethnographically, observing how users interact with these algorithmic spaces means analysing new cultural navigation, selection, and resistance practices. Some groups actively circumvent platform logics, developing counter-circuits and alternative practices (digital graffiti, independent archives, open-source communities). Others unconsciously internalise algorithmic criteria, adapting their cultural production to what is most visible or rewarded. In both cases, the issue is not simply access but the formation of cultural identities negotiated through opaque infrastructures.

3. Participatory Culture: Production and Consumption

Digitalisation has blurred the line between cultural producer and consumer. Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2006) introduced the notion of 'convergent culture', describing a media environment where consumers become active participants, appropriating, reworking, and distributing cultural content. Practices like remixing, fan-fiction, memes, and citizen journalism show unprecedented creativity. This hybrid 'prosumer' (producer + consumer) challenges the traditional idea of artwork as a closed, immutable artefact created by a single author.

Participatory culture can be studied through the daily practices of various online and offline communities. Interactions on social media transform social ties, create new forms of belonging, and collective identity. Studies like T.L. Taylor's (Taylor 2018) on eSports reveal deep insights into participatory dynamics in playful and professional contexts, showing how cultural production often results from distributed global collaborations.

Remix and fan-fiction practices also represent cultural resistance, where communities reinterpret and subvert dominant meanings. An example is the terseness of online conversations, where immediacy and clarity rely on memes, carriers of accessible and viral language. This shows participatory culture is not passive consumption but active negotiation of meanings.

Yet, this transformation also carries ambiguity. While fostering individual and community expression, it often takes place within the exploitation dynamics of users 'free labour by large platforms, which monetise it, creating new forms of economic value extraction (Terranova 2000).

Moreover, content fluidity and constant remixing may induce a 'presentification' of culture, where historical contextualization and philological depth are sacrificed to immediacy and shareability.

The shift from book to network risks weakening complex argumentative structures in favour of more fragmented, horizontal consumption (Roncaglia 2010). Participatory culture is thus a dynamic, complex field intertwining creativity, resistance, and exploitation. An ethnographic approach captures these rich experiences, offering a critical perspective on ongoing transformations. It is essential, however, to address issues related to free labour and cultural depth loss to ensure participatory culture remains equitable and enriching.

4. Crisis of Authority and Reconfiguration of Cultural Institutions

The digital environment has challenged traditional sources of cultural authority: critics, curators, academics, and institutions like museums and libraries. Cultural value validation no longer happens only through vertical, certified channels but also through horizontal, distributed mechanisms such as user reviews, likes, and shares. This has dismantled elitist canons and empowered minority voices, but also sparked a deep expertise crisis. In a context where every opinion

has potential equal visibility, distinguishing expert knowledge from misinformation becomes challenging, fuelling the contemporary "post-truth" climate. Social media's widespread adoption and algorithms privileging viral over accurate content exacerbate this polarisation (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017). Traditional cultural institutions face a dual challenge: embracing digital tools to stay relevant, opening to public participation and dialogue; and reaffirming their role as critical mediators, quality guarantors, and custodians of contextualised knowledge. Many institutions experiment with new public engagement modes via digital platforms and co-creation practices.

The rise of Digital Humanities represents an attempt at synthesis, using computational tools not to replace but to enrich cultural heritage analysis and interpretation (Fiormonte 2012). Recent projects like "Europeana" provide access to millions of digitised objects from European libraries, archives, and museums, promoting cultural sharing globally. Another example is the "Digital Vatican Library", offering online consultation of invaluable ancient manuscripts and historical documents.

In Italy, the University of Venice's "Atlas of Emotions" project analyses emotions in literary texts through text mining and data visualisation, exploring how emotions are distributed and represented in Italian literature. Another Italian initiative, "Imago Mundi", uses digital tools to map and analyse ancient cartographies, revealing connections between geographic representations and historical contexts. The Vatican Library also exemplifies excellence, using advanced digital technologies to digitise and provide access to ancient manuscripts, supporting preservation and worldwide cultural dissemination. These projects highlight digital technology's role in understanding relationships between emotions, places, and historical sources.

International projects, such as Stanford University's "Mapping the Republic of Letters" and the "Pelagios Network", continue offering valuable insights for methodological comparison and deepening.

Reconfiguring cultural institutions in the digital age is not just about technological adaptation but involves profound rethinking of authority, mediation, and cultural value construction practices.

5. Digital Memory: Between Total Archive and the Right to Be Forgotten

Finally, digitalisation redefines cultural memory, radically transforming how societies preserve, interpret, and diffuse their heritage. The illusion of a total archive, where every past trace can be indefinitely saved and retrieved, clashes with digital media's intrinsic fragility: format obsolescence, data degradation, cyberattack vulnerability, and phenomena like "link rot". Digital memory is thus neither permanent nor neutral.
A notable Italian example is "Internet Archive Italia", which preserves Italian websites and digital resources at risk of disappearing. However, these archives also face technological limitations and the need for constant updates to ensure long-term accessibility. The selection of what to archive and make accessible is often delegated to commercial players like major tech platforms whose economic priorities may not align with long-term public interest. The Geocities shutdown, and the consequent loss of millions of 1990s web pages, is a striking example.

Moreover, digital memory abundance poses an opposite problem: the inability to forget. The persistence of digital traces raises critical ethical and social issues, crystallised in the debate over the "right to be forgotten". In Italy, the Mario Costeja González case, which led to the landmark 2014 European Court of Justice ruling, had a significant impact also in Italy, influencing numerous Data Protection Authority measures. Requests to remove personal information from search engines invoke complex challenges, balancing privacy and information rights.

For culture, this means historic processes based also on selective forgetting and canonization are replaced by chaotic information

coexistence. The challenge is not only preserving but curating, contextualising, and knowing how to "prune" archives to allow meaningful narratives to emerge. Maurizio Ferraris (Ferraris 2017), in his work on "documanity", highlights that critical management of digital memory is essential to prevent data excess from turning into noise rather than knowledge.

6. Conclusion

Rethinking the relationship between culture and digitalisation requires a deep and nuanced analysis that goes beyond easy euphoria and sterile condemnations. The transformation underway is structural and ambivalent—a complex intertwining of opportunities and challenges that redefines our ways of living, thinking, and interacting. The increase in access to information and digital resources, although undeniably positive, is mediated by algorithmic commercial logics that often prioritise profit at the expense of content quality and diversity. Creative participation, democratized thanks to digital platforms, coexists with the economic exploitation of content and data, raising important ethical and legal issues. The democratisation of taste, which allows anyone access to a wide range of cultural expressions, is accompanied by a crisis of expertise that risks flattening the complexity of the cultural landscape and reducing the public's capacity for discernment. Finally, the enhanced archive, which offers the possibility to preserve and access an enormous amount of information, generates new forms of oblivion and fragility, as the proliferation of data risks making it difficult to search for and enjoy meaningful content.

However, it is essential to remember that digitalisation is not just a technological phenomenon but a true cultural process that redefines the ways in which communities construct meanings, pass on knowledge, and develop collective identities. Digital practices shape new forms of sociality, belonging, and daily rituals, transforming not only what we do but also how we think and

perceive the world. Digital platforms are fertile grounds for the birth and spread of digital micro-cultures—environments where new online social rituals develop, strengthening the sense of belonging and defining interaction norms within virtual communities. These rituals are not simple digital habits but complex symbolic structures that profoundly influence the social and cultural lives of their participants.

From "likes" on a post to ritualised comments and shared hashtags during global events, these digital gestures create a symbolic fabric that connects geographically distant individuals, allowing the formation of social bonds that transcend physical barriers. For example, viral "challenges," which invite users to participate in specific activities and share their results online, represent rituals through which digital micro-cultures strengthen social cohesion among their members and create a shared sense of belonging. Collective streaming marathons, which allow groups of people to watch and comment in real-time on an event or video content, offer opportunities for symbolic aggregation and shared experiences. Discussion "threads" on specific topics, which allow in-depth exploration of common interests through a series of linked messages, promote the construction of shared knowledge and the creation of thematic communities. Finally, virtual ceremonies like "watch parties," which enable people to watch a movie or TV series together with other online users, recreate the atmosphere of a cinema and offer opportunities for socialisation and emotional sharing.

The real challenge, therefore, is not only technological but deeply cultural and political. It is necessary to develop a critical digital media ecosystem that promotes user awareness, regulates the monopolistic power of platforms, and redefines the mission of cultural institutions in the 21st century. Understanding the role of new social rituals means analysing how they influence identity construction, collective memory, and the ways communities self-represent in the digital context. The goal is not to restore a golden age (which perhaps never existed) of analogue culture, nor to uncritically

embrace every innovation. Rather, it is about forging a new digital humanism: an approach that puts technology at the service of long-term cultural values—complexity, diversity, critical memory, and dialogue—ensuring that the digital future of culture is a space of enrichment rather than impoverishment for the human experience.

Only through ethnographically deep understanding and careful analysis of emerging social rituals can we build a cultural ecosystem capable of responding to the challenges of our time, respecting the ideas and values of every human being and every culture.

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