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The Mari Lwyd Has Entered the Chat: Intangible Heritage in the Age of Covid-19

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Abstract

Covid-19 and lockdown measures severely limited social movement and interaction. These protective measures had significant impacts on intangible cultural heritage. In a global context, living and performance based forms of heritage largely ceased, causing damaging interruptions for the continuity of traditional practice. Many traditional practitioners and community groups turned to online video sharing platforms as a means of continuing and communicating their cultural forms. This chapter explores the potential and limitations of digital media as a means of maintaining intangible heritage in extreme scenarios, and questions what lessons need to be learned by heritage practitioners when considering these forms of media as part of heritage safeguarding strategies.

Keywords: intangible heritage, lockdown, social media, video conferencing, Mari Lwyd, performance heritage, choral tradition, communication, Wales

1. Introduction

Since the 2003 adoption of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage [1], living forms of cultural heritage have enjoyed an elevated status, greater visibility and are now better positioned in terms of longer term safeguarding. While ratification of the convention has been far from universal (the United Kingdom remaining a prominent absentee) [2], attitudes towards and uptake for the convention have generally been positive. With the organisational infrastructure of UNESCO and access to bodies of international funding, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has slowly been given a platform of significance similar to that enjoyed by built and natural forms of heritage.

The emphasis placed on living forms of heritage by the 2003 convention acknowledges the particular vulnerabilities faced by this unique body of cultural forms. Traditional practice, custom and religious based activities, are dependent on living populations. Where those populations are pressured, through ageing demographics, the loss of landscapes and the influence of other cultural forms, intangible heritage can disappear rapidly. With ICH practices often being reliant on the knowledge of practitioners, the loss of a single practitioner can have devastating impacts on the long term sustainability of traditional forms. This is a challenge compounded by a historical underappreciation of ICH and a lack of emphasis placed by cultural organisations in the documenting and archiving of traditional practices.

Visibility is a major element of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Enhancing awareness of, and, in circumstances where it is appropriate, access to ICH plays a major role in promoting traditional practice and ensuring its viability in a contemporary, global society [3]. Covid-19, however, presented unique challenges to ICH. By definition, living intangible heritage requires people and in many instances these heritage forms require the gathering of people in particular locations. The widespread use of lockdown measures meant that most forms of ICH (where lockdowns were implemented) simply ceased to be practiced. Physical heritage forms, such as built structures, while often reliant long term on tourism derived funding, are not directly damaged by restriction on movement of people. For natural heritage, movement restrictions were recorded as having positive impacts as environments were able to recover from the damage of tourism, traffic and pollution [4]. Intangible heritage, however, is particularly sensitive to rapid changes in social structures. The loss of a narrow body of practitioners to ill health or old age, the interruption of traditional practice threatening the very notion of a practice being 'traditional' and the inability of younger members of communities to have access and exposure to practice, all directly threaten the viability of living heritage, short and long term.

Despite the range of specific threats and challenges facing communities and individuals who act as custodians of ICH, access to new technologies has provided mechanisms by which practitioners and communities have been able to continue, to varying extents, to practice and promote their activities. This chapter considers some of the ways in which online video sharing platforms and online video conferencing has made it possible for communities to explore ways in which their cultural activities could continue, in spite of the threat and movement restriction consequences of Covid-19. While such technologies are increasingly accessible, heritage professionals need to be cautious about the use of digital resources, question whether the digitisation of tradition can undermine the integrity of practices [5], and remain aware that digital archiving can only ever serve as a support mechanism in the process of safeguarding living traditions.

In this chapter, specific attention will be given to forms of intangible cultural heritage in Wales. Wales offers a distinct case study as intangible heritage is not formally acknowledged within the nation, the overarching government of the United Kingdom deciding to not ratify the 2003 convention [6]. Without formal structures of support from the Welsh or British governments, and an inability to access support from UNESCO, the emphasis on free-to-use digital technologies is of particular importance. The response of Welsh choral groups to the adoption of digital technologies will be considered, in addition to an extended exploration of the role of the Mari Lwyd custom. The Mari Lwyd is often described as an 'ancient' tradition, though it is probably rooted in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The tradition is focused on an animal head effigy, specifically a horse skull. The decorated skull would be carried around communities during the Christmas period, visiting households, where competitive rhyming and poetic battles would play out, as the Mari Lwyd 'party' would attempt to gain entry to people's homes [7]. The practice would see the party invited into a house, where food, drink and song would be shared, before the Mari Lwyd horse and companions would move on to the next household. The tradition was seen to decline sharply in the early part of the twentieth century, but became the focus of revival movements in the later part of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Both the Mari Lwyd and Welsh choral traditions are regarded as distinct forms of Welsh heritage and are increasingly used as reference points in any discussion of Welsh culture. The resilience of such traditional forms is of significance in the safeguarding of Welsh cultural identity, and the responses by curators of these practices to maintaining traditions in time of

Figure 1.
Examples of the modern Mari Lwyd. The Llanfihangel Mari Lwyd is shown on the left, made out of wood, the Chepstow Mari Lwyd uses a horse skull, on the right. Authors image.

Covid, is revealing of both the potential and limitations of digital communication technologies, in the distribution and archiving of living traditions (**Figure 1**).

2. Video conferencing and virtual choirs

While communication via digital platforms was firmly established prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the normalising of video conference meetings for non-work based activities stood out as a significant evolution in social communication during this period. As 'stay at home' mantras became common place in most western European States, employers, community and family groups began to make more liberal use of digital platforms which would allow for multi-user visual presences. This alternative to 'in-person' gatherings allowed for work based collaborations to continue almost as normal (though many businesses had already utilised *Zoom* and related platforms from the beginning of the second decade of the twenty first century. A notable distinction though, came in the form of community groups making use of such resources. During the pandemic, the largely free *Zoom* platform meant it was possible for local groups to continue 'meeting' and conducting or performing events and activities, allowing for both a sense of continuity of practice, and community participation [8].

Studies conducted into the emergence of 'Virtual Choirs' illustrate the potential benefits of video conferencing in the context of practicing intangible cultural heritage [9]. Choral singing is a cultural practice critically dependent on social interaction – the importance of being able to stand/sit next to and hear another individual or members within a group, audibly perform, being of profound importance. In turn, continuity of practice is of value for the progression of personal and

group performance skill levels. In addition, in a Welsh cultural context, the role of choral tradition can arguably be traced to the seventeenth century [10], providing almost three hundred years of cultural, performance driven, continuity. The social gathering restrictions (where particular emphasis had been placed on the dangers of singing or shouting in confined spaces with other people) meant choral gatherings were impossible. However, the adoption of conferencing technologies, and the innovative establishment by Eric Whitacre of the 'Virtual Choir' online community, meant choral groups were able to maintain a version of group performance [11].

A limitation in the 'Virtual Choir' model, however, was the inability for performers to hear each other sing. While group moderators were, in theory, able to hear all performers at once, it was more likely the case that moderators would mute large numbers of those within the group, due to the poor quality of sound transmission from multiple users performing at the same time [12]. These performance based challenges were echoed in the Welsh Government's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the creative sectors within Wales. Members from the Welsh Association of Male Choirs highlighted this challenging balance between technology facilitating gatherings, while not being able to maintain equivalence for 'gang singing'. The Phoenix Choir (Swansea) noted that 'time lag makes singing during the meeting tricky unless everyone is muted' [13]. Caldicot Choir described the Zoom platform as being 'no good for a practice unless you like singing to yourself' [14], while Brecon choir seemed more positive about Zoom as a platform for practice, though still acknowledged that all participants had to be muted [15].

An additional challenge noted within the Welsh choral community, was age demographics and 'new' technologies. While *Zoom* platforms presented opportunities for the community groups to gather in digital environments, this was only applicable where access to technologies was possible, and user confidence high enough. Burry Port male voice choir stated that 'far too many members [are] technophobes...Most don't even have a mobile phone' [16]. Dowlais choir observed that 'with so many elderly members, many do not have the appropriate devices to be able to join in [with planned Zoom meetings]' [17]. Whereas the 'Virtual Choir' project perhaps had success while appealing to more urban choirs, and younger demographics, those practitioners of intangible heritage forms in rural communities, where demographics tend to be significantly older, are not necessarily empowered by the mere existing of group chat technologies and might even risk furthering a sense of isolation as anxieties regarding technology manifest. The Welsh Government report into the impact of Covid-19 on Welsh language community groups further highlighted this issue, where the 'older generation' were seen to be unwilling to make use of available technologies [18]. This was despite many community based activities continuing via digital platforms, potentially further isolating some members as a consequence of the technology being utilised to maintain group cohesion and practice. In addition, choral groups in particular were identified as among those least likely to have learnt any lessons regarding their own management and sustainability during the period of Covid-19 [19], perhaps further highlighting issues regarding age demographics and related resistance to change/ adaptation/new technologies. This further reinforces a key point, that access to 'new' technologies is no guarantee of adoption.

Despite instances of reticence regarding the use of digital communication platforms for older practitioners of intangible heritage forms, or frustrations expressed with the limitations of the same platforms, wider global examples suggest that the implementation of digital platforms for the transmission of traditional practice has had some success. Considerations of the health of representative examples of Intangible World Heritage in Spain reveal the potential for digital platforms to both promote and increase access to ICH. A UNESCO review into Spanish ICH recorded

the expected widespread cancellation of many performance driven elements. Public performances of the flamenco, castells (human tower) building, ritual drumming (in the form of the Tamboradas) and processional horse drives all faced widespread cancellations. However, all Spanish examples of intangible heritage to be inscribed on the UNESCO list adopted some form of digital presentation as a means of communication of events and practices. This ranged from the sort of practice based workshops and rehearsal elements seen among choral groups in a Welsh context, to the distribution of recorded materials through social media platforms, the development of online training projects, and the performance and/or development of virtual tours to ensure wider user access to intangible cultural forms [20]. While the vulnerability of intangible heritage was acutely highlighted as a consequence of lockdown measures, the potential for transmission and in turn, sustainability, through digital platforms was successfully exhibited.

In addition to the monitoring of Spanish intangible heritage forms, UNESCO launched eight initiatives, as part of their 'Living Heritage and the Covid-19 pandemic: responding, recovering and building back for a better future' project [21]. Drawing on recommendations based on community feedback regarding the way in which intangible heritage forms have been weakened as a consequence of the pandemic, UNESCO oversaw activities which would provide test cases for enhancing the sustainability of ICH in the immediate post-pandemic period. Virtual platforms have been established as a major component of the UNESCO led interventions. In Barbados, virtual 'links' were established to allow for practitioners to 'meet' and to enhance both accessibility to and visibility for ICH [22]. Similar activities were undertaken in the South American nations of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, where online platforms provided an environment in which practitioners could meet and share reflections on the themes of sustainability, as part of a response to Covid-19 pressures [23]. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, an emphasis was placed on digital archiving and recording of intangible forms [24]. While it is likely that such recording activities would have been aspired to anyway, as part of ongoing safeguarding measures, the urgency provided by the circumstances of the pandemic has meant that increased funding has been released to facilitate the implementation of such projects, with a likelihood for similar activities to be explored and expanded in other regions where ICH has been notably compromised. Therefore it is possible to consider the Covid-19 pandemic as a potential stimulus to the safeguarding and longer term viability for specific intangible forms. While communities might have desired to conduct recording activities, or to build networks, the inability to 'practice' traditional forms may well have served to highlight both the urgency of such interventions, and the related vulnerabilities of local intangible heritage to rapid social change.

While there are degrees of overlap between the activities undertaken, of their own initiative, by Welsh choral communities, and the more structured programmes launched by UNESCO, the critical distinction is funding. Welsh intangible heritage lacks any formal recognition within the Welsh and British legislative structures [25], a system of oversight and neglect for intangible heritage mirrored across England as well [26]. As a consequence, there is little in the way of formal support and structure for the safeguarding measures undertaken by Welsh choral societies. Indeed, Welsh Government led investigations into how choral groups have managed within lockdown settings, further highlight that political leadership in Wales has offered little more than a means to record and analyse that which community groups have already undertaken themselves, rather than leading with and funding central government shaped policies on safeguarding ICH. While considering themes of sustainability, it is questionable how long community groups will be able to maintain their digital activities and presence without formal support.

3. Limitations and risks of ICH online

The potential for digital technologies to provide a level of safeguarding for intangible heritage forms is undeniable. If nothing else, the mechanism of affording lines of communication between practitioners was critical to maintaining that element of 'community' which gives life to custom and tradition. In addition, though, an emphasis on recording and enhancing the visibility of tradition through online platforms, has profound potential in ensuring future generations have the means by which to access practices when circumstance might not allow for in-person engagement. Yet the very process of recording performance based heritage, with the intention to make that material accessible for wider audiences, is far from a simple process of 'record – upload – go live'. Critical thought must be given to issues of ownership, both of the source material and recorded archive, while consideration must also be given to source communities and whether they desire their cultural material to be digitised and distributed in the first place. That we, as heritage practitioners, can produce digital archives, does not resolve the question of whether we should.

In our desire, as heritage practitioners, to document threatened forms of ICH, the role of source communities in the production, maintenance and distribution of the final resources must be emphasised. Hennessy summarises the role of dialogue in the development of a visual record of firewalking practices among the Sawau Tribe in Fiji. Here, the creation of a visual record in the form of a DVD, was one which deliberately focused on distributing related resources only among local community groups, and not for web based distribution [27]. The creation of what was ultimately a limited (in terms of audience) resource might appear at odds with the process of enhancing visibility of traditional practice, yet, if source communities are anxious about the way in which those records, or the traditions themselves, might be used as a consequence of wide spread distribution and access, then questions must be asked as to who the resource is being developed for. Our capacity for the digitisation of cultural materials is without a historical precedent, further, with the significant affordability and availability of smartphones and supporting data networks, bringing ICH archives to a global audience is a relatively simple process [28]. However, a forced 'liberation' (without consent or approval of source communities) of an otherwise intimate tradition through digital media, would be little removed from former colonial practices which led to the removal without permission of thousands of ethnographic items, many of which are now subject to repatriation claims.

In the context of choral groups, the performative, audience driven nature of the tradition might serve to supersede the above concerns. This aspect of Welsh ICH is not driven by ritual or subject to sensitive materials. Yet, copyright and ownership issues are as valid a point of concern here as they are with traditional tribal practices in Polynesia. Choral groups suffer fiscal penalties for the misuse of copyright owned sheet music [29], and the digitisation of performance material in which 'owned' or otherwise licenced music may cause problems. Who owns the written music? Is it the author, the choir, those who produced the recording? In addition, are all of those who appear in the recording happy to be digitally displayed to a wider internet based audience, or was the intention of the performers to be seen by no one other than those who attended the specific performance in which a recording took place? In the context of choral practice, it is feasible to find solutions to such issues, as practitioners can be traced through the organising body of the specific choirs. A more free form cultural practice, such as the Mari Lwyd however, presents different challenges.

The very nature of most manifestations of the Mari Lwyd means that there is only ever a degree of structure. While the 'official' element of a Mari Lwyd – the

form of the horse, a prearranged set of venues to visit and a core Mari Lwyd 'party' to accompany the horse effigy – remains generally consistent, Mari Lwyd events will usually evolve into a more fluid occasion. Party members will drop out and be left behind at some venues, other people will then join the procession. As new voices join the party, the repertoire of the gathering evolves. A new range of verses and rhyme can be introduced, some of which will be spontaneous compositions. Other contributors might perform more popular contemporary arrangements. In such instances, questions over the recording and archiving of the event become problematic. Where does ownership of the performance piece ultimately reside? Should 'popular' (licenced) verse be performed; can these be included in a digital archive which is then shown to a wider public audience? The same question must then be probed: should materials be kept for display in a digital, online setting? In turn, are all participants happy to be recorded for both archiving and digital display purposes? Gathering consent of practitioners in a fluid, public event, is not without challenge, yet to draw attention to filming and seek permissions prior to the occasion would inevitably change the nature of the occasion – an awareness of a camera recording potentially changing the way in which members would perform, behave, or alter the nature of what is being performed.

4. Continuity, cultural practice and Covid-19

Continuity of practice is a critical element for the safeguarding of intangible heritage. Significant attention is given to the challenge of ageing demographics among practitioners, and the reduced number of younger, local, potential participants for traditional knowledge to be passed on to. In addition, the loss of place, the physical setting in which ICH is practiced or performed, is a growing point of concern. This issue is considered in the context of compromised environments, natural landscapes being undermined through development activities, or traditional-territorial spaces decreasing in size [30], limiting the areas in which ICH can be practiced, if practiced at all. For the Mari Lwyd custom, while earlier forms of the tradition moved around communities and the homes of (often unsuspecting) community members, the modern form of the tradition has come to concentrate on public houses and similar establishments. The restrictive Covid-19 lockdown measures meant that what had become traditional venues for the custom, namely pubs and bars, were now no longer viable as host venues. While broader social restrictions placed on gatherings and social movement meant that traditional practices such as the Mari Lwyd would have been unlikely to continue anyway, the interruption of relationships with host venues is an important point of consideration.

The temporary loss of host venues for the Mari Lwyd has a number of short and long term consequences. The initial loss of access to venues results in an interruption in the continuity of practice. The establishment of an example of ICH as being 'traditional' can occur over a very short space of time. For the Llanfihangel tor y Mynydd Mari Lwyd, the practice of 'performing' the event on the 6th of January, was a detail 'enshrined' in the practice of this particular local variant of the tradition, after only a single year of practice. On the first occasion of the Llanfihangel Mari Lwyd event occurring, the 6th of January fell on a weekend. In subsequent years, the 6th of January fell on weekdays (less favourable for some original practitioners) yet there was staunch resistance to change the date because, after only one year, it was deemed that the 6th was the only day on which the event could take place [31]. In turn, relationships between cultural forms and specific venues or locations, can become established and expected within small windows of time. Covid-19 interrupted this continuity of tradition and venue. In some instance, these

interruptions will become permanent as host venues cease to trade, while subsequent lease holders of properties may be disinclined to host such specific and (for some) sensitive forms of cultural practice. It is possible that Mari Lwyd forms might lose all of their 'performance' venues – a community with only one public house, which might have been forced into closure for economic reasons, may leave the tradition with no hosts as all (the modern variant of the tradition having become increasingly dependent on the good will of public houses). However, the possibility remains that the loss of public houses as host venues may precipitate a return to a more 'mobile' Mari Lwyd, which visited households within the community instead. This evolution would mark a return to the more 'traditional' Mari Lwyd, recorded as visiting homesteads during the nineteenth century. This though would require the ICH form to survive Covid-19 interruptions, something that cannot be guaranteed.

The Chepstow Mari Lwyd example is striking in a context where rapid growth of a tradition, and social restriction factors have critically undermined the practice. The Chepstow Mari Lwyd, first formed/performed in 2004 had grown to become one of the most well-known examples of a modern Mari Lwyd custom. A distinctive element of this traditional variant is the emphasis placed on a gathering of Mari Lwyds in one place. Rather than a single horse head effigy making its way through a community, Chepstow encouraged Mari Lwyd practitioners, and the practitioners of related, regional, variants, such as the Poor Ol' 'Oss example from the west country, to gather together on a moveable date in mid to late January. At least ten examples of Mari Lwyd variants have been recorded gathering in this event [32]. In addition to each visiting Mari, it became a norm for dance troupes from the locales of each visiting Mari to attend as well, meaning that the combination of host practitioners, visiting practitioners and attending spectators, created an event that was witnessed by hundreds, a distinct removal from the more intimate nineteenth century examples which would rarely feature more than double figures within a Mari Lwyd party.

However, in response to the rapid growth of the tradition, organisers of the event suspended the Chepstow Mari Lwyd in 2020, saying that 'the Organisers feel that The Event has outgrown the limited facilities that our Town has available to us' [33]. A similar trend regarding exponential growth of a tradition was also observed as part of the Llanfihangel Mari Lwyd where, as the event grew in popularity, homeowners who had originally enthusiastically welcomed the Mari Lwyd, grew to become frustrated with the increasingly large numbers of 'new' people coming to their homes as part of the event. In the Llanfihangel example, this led to the abandonment of visits to households, with a sole focus being placed on visiting the local pub [34]. The growth and popularity of ICH forms, while generally a cause for celebration, can also have several negative impacts. Large numbers of spectators can ultimately cause traditions to change, or organisers feel compelled to compromise aspects of the tradition to accommodate the demands of audiences. In the instance of the Chepstow Mari Lwyd, an event which originally marked the appearance of only two Mari Lwyd horse heads, and a participatory audience of roughly fifty, grew to the point where it was no longer deemed plausible for the town to host its own Mari Lwyd event. Arguably, the popularity and demand for this local form of intangible heritage, has directly led to the loss of it. Striking the balance between the visibility of a tradition and increasing access to it, is not a guarantee of sustainability, and can quite often undermine this principle [35].

For Chepstow, the initial decision to suspend the cultural practice for one year was then extended by Covid-19. While it is unclear if the Chepstow Mari Lwyd would have returned in January 2021, what form it would have taken and indeed whether the event would have taken place in Chepstow at all (given stated reservations by organisers about the limitations of the town for hosting large social

gatherings), social circumstances enforced a continuation of the suspension. The Chepstow Mari Lwyd has therefore been absent as a cultural practice for two years. Former lead organisers of the event have since left the body which oversaw this Mari variant [36], and the continuity of practice and relationships with hosting establishments has been broken. There is nothing to say that these connections will not be quickly re-established, yet there is an inherent vulnerability for any cultural practice to come back from an absence. The loss of key practitioners, or changes in ownership of host venues have the potential to weaken momentum, or remove key hosting sites from the equation altogether. While digital variants of the Mari Lwyd (including Llanfihangel) will be discussed further in this chapter, it is perhaps of note that the Chepstow Mari Lwyd did not have a 'substitute' digital presence in 2021.

While many Mari Lwyd groups found means of expression through Zoom and YouTube, the Chepstow Mari's absence in this period was total. This perhaps reveals a weakness or vulnerability within the Chepstow variant. The issues that led to an initial suspension in activities leading into Covid-19, meant that momentum and continuity of practice was not there to maintain anything digitally while moving into a phase of social lockdown. 'Smaller' examples of the Mari Lwyd, those focused on the appearance of a single horse head effigy, within a local community setting, do appear to have embraced digital platforms more effectively and indicate that traditional practice which is focused more on community than on visiting crowds, are in turn more sustainable and resilient to rapid change.

Digital manifestations for ICH remain a limited forum in which practitioners can express themselves and their cultural practices. Yet, for the near two yearlong (at time of writing) period of Covid based interruptions, such platforms provided a degree of continuity. If nothing else, practitioners have been able to 'meet' and converse. Elements of traditions, especially those with heavy emphasis on performance, can still be delivered to groups and audiences. For annual events, avoiding the total loss of a cycle of performances could be critical to continuity, providing a reference point and something to build on for future years. For 'smaller' examples of the Mari Lwyd, it is possible that the recreation of related events through Zoom-like platforms was more viable than the Chepstow tradition – Chepstow being so large in scope that any digital exploration of the practice would struggle to replicate the sense of scale of the occasion. In turn, it might prove that smaller examples of cultural practice might prove more resilient going forward, as they are more able to adapt to the use of digital resources to share their performance elements. Finally, instances where a 'Zoom Mari Lwyd' was formally recorded provide a potentially unique opportunity for video archiving. Given the often fragmentary and chaotic nature of a Mari Lwyd evening, documentation and filming of the modern Mari tradition is rare and of variable quality. While Zoom events lack the link to location, place and, arguably, community, a formal recording of the event continuing in lockdown allows for communities to have a point of reference going forward and the beginnings of what be described as an accidental digital archive. More formal, institution led collation of digital Mari Lwyd recordings in lockdown could further aid in the safeguarding of the tradition and in the monitoring of where living examples of the tradition continue to be practiced.

5. The Mari Lwyd and digital dissemination

The twentieth century revival of the Mari Lwyd has been significant in the context of Welsh intangible heritage. Following the establishment of a small number of revivals between the 1960–80s, predominantly focused in the former county

of Glamorgan, a much wider spread (and perhaps what should be recognised as a distinct stage in the history of the tradition) revival was recorded across Wales at the turn of the twentieth century, into the early part of the twenty first century. Coinciding with a digital revolution, the commonality of smartphone ownership and social trends of filming and uploading experiences to social media platforms, the Mari Lwyd revival has been the subject of extensive, though informal, documentation.

While recordings of Mari Lwyd – Zoom events are notable additions to the archiving of the tradition, platforms such as YouTube had already become de facto digital archives as amateur recordings of events became commonplace. The Cwmafan Mari Lwyd, in the Afan Valley, was recorded in 2015, following the smaller Mari Lwyd party of four members, enacting the tradition within The Brit pub. The 'pwnco' poetic rhyming battle plays out among the party members at the door of the pub, before moving inside where members of the public participate in gang singing [37]. Of importance, the Cwmafan recording also includes a short interview with the Mari party members, explaining why they maintain the cultural practice – a level of detail rarely recorded in the context of the Mari Lwyd revivals. Moving into the first year of lockdown, the Llandinam Mari Lwyd was recorded on the 4th of January, 2020. Taking place in both the Church of St. Llonio and the Llandinam Village Hall, this more formal recording documents the arrival of the Mari Lwyd at the church, set piece songs within the church, and a ceilidh dance following [38]. The recording is of particular value as it documents the use of the 'Poor old horse' song, a verse more commonly associated with English variants of the Mari Lwyd custom. This detail reflects the geographic area in which the Llandinam Mari Lwyd is enacted, close to the more anglicised area of Newtown on the northern part of the Welsh-Anglo border. The addition of lockdown Mari Lwyd videos, feeds into and further develops the body of resources already established in an amateur context.

As explained above, the adoption of social media and video conference technologies has been of critical value for practitioners of intangible heritage forms, and has been identified by bodies such as UNESCO as being of significant value to assist in safeguarding programmes. Several groups responsible for the maintenance and performance of Mari Lwyd variants adopted these technologies as a means of continuing their practice during the period of lockdown. While lockdown measures made social gatherings, an inherent element of a Mari Lwyd event, impossible or even illegal, platforms such as Zoom provided a viable alternative in which events could continue, albeit in severely abridged forms. Discussed below are four examples of community groups, or individual practitioners utilising digital platforms, with consideration given to the potential and limitations of such communication methods, in the performance and safeguarding of this unique form of Welsh heritage.

Mentrau Iaith Cymru, an organisation responsible for the promotion of the Welsh language, produced a short video where a Mari Lwyd was 'interviewed' about its experiences during lockdown [39]. While intended as a humorous work, the video also serves to discuss the nature and form of the Mari Lwyd practice, in addition to inviting Welsh language learners to participate in a digital 'pwnco' [40]. The poetic battling which would normally take place between the Mari Lwyd party, and those inside a home or a pub, is frequently performed around a single tune, where performers spontaneously sing rhyming verses in an effort to out-do those on the other side, and secure entry for the Mari Lwyd and the travelling party. Multiple video entries were submitted, with some performers filming themselves with their own Mari Lwyd horse head examples in the background [41]. This allowed for a key element of the Mari Lwyd tradition, the 'pwnco', to be given far greater prominence

than is given in many modern Mari Lwyd examples. The contemporary form of the tradition tends to see performers deliver the 'pwnco' from a song sheet, using the words committed to paper by the Reverend William Roberts in 1852 [42]. These performances though usually lack the spontaneity seen as a critical component of a 'pwnco'. While video responses to the Mentrau Iaith invitation for pwnco performances were generally delivered from written down notes (therefore lacking the spontaneous element), each submission was unique, and encouraged the process of creative writing through the medium of the Welsh language.

In the increasingly standardised form of the performed Mari Lwyd, where performers sing from a song sheet, to a set schedule of songs and activities, the tradition might be seen to 'fossilise'. Rather than being a living form of heritage, the enactment of the tradition in such a way so as to 'do the Mari Lwyd correctly' rejects key elements of the custom. Mentrau Iaith successfully encouraged people to explore the process of creative Welsh language verse writing and, arguably, made a significant contribution to the promotion and raised(greater?) visibility of a critical component of the practice, one which is otherwise overlooked or over simplified in the modern manifestation of the custom.

In a similar vein, the Llanfihangel tor y Mynydd Mari Lwyd event encouraged participants to deliver creative performance pieces within the context of a Zoom meeting. The Llanfihangel Mari Lwyd is one of the late twentieth century 'revivals' [43], first documented as being enacted in 1999 [44]. This variant had been performed without interruption every year, including one winter where extreme snow fall meant it was impossible for the Mari Lwyd party to converge, the Mari Lwyd head was still taken out and walked around part of the community. The Llanfihangel Community group decided to develop a Mari Lwyd Zoom event, where numerous households within the community were able to join in with singing, poetic verse and storytelling. The community Mari Lwyd, a rarer wooden example, can be seen in the background of the home of the Mari party 'leader' [45]. Participants engage in 'gang singing', with individual households then performing prepared stories or solo singing elements. In this regard, the Mari Lwyd Zoom event bears a closer resemblance to the living (in person) tradition, where members of the Mari party might be called upon to deliver a unique performance, though once again, the spontaneous element is compromised is order to accommodate all those attending the meeting and the limitations of the technologies involved. All performance elements in this example were prepared in advance and a more formal schedule had also been distributed prior to the event. The event was also private, focused on local community members. Access to the digital gathering would be provided by a code, so further aspects of spontaneity provided by individuals arriving on the night was not a factor.

Between the emphasis on new creative pwnco verses through the Mentrau Iaith Mari Lwyd event, and the gathering of people and voices in one digital space through the Llanfihangel Mari Lwyd, it is possible to see how key elements of the Mari Lwyd custom can be maintained in a digital environment. Yet, it is also challenging to bring all of the key elements together in a single digital setting. Other examples of Zoom based Mari Lwyd meetings highlight the challenges faced in replicating or adapting the tradition to a digital platform. Several examples of late 2020/early 2021 Mari Lwyd videos have been shared, where old footage of Mari Lwyd outings is edited together with new dramatic readings or musical overlays. David Pitt, musician, records the appearance of a Mari Lwyd in Swansea, Christmas Day 2020. Filmed during lockdown, participants operated from within one household, filming a Mari Lwyd on the household's own front door [46]. The short 90 second video includes one verse or song, with only an accompanying musical track, though the video still captures a sense of the nature of a Mari Lwyd arrival at a home.

The final example for consideration records a Zoom meeting shared by Eleanor Greenwood, from late October 2020 [47]. The video opens and closes with verse accompanied by music, but the focus of the production is the gathering of four Mari Lwyds on screen simultaneously. This is a closer, digital, representation of the Chepstow Mari Lwyd variant – one which places greater emphasis on the presence of a large number of Mari Lwyd horse heads, over elements such as the spontaneous pwnco. Indeed this video features no rhyming battles, or singing (the only such element coming in the form of a recorded track played over the closing stages of the video) (**Figure 2**).

As traditions evolve, departures from source material are not uncommon, and it is possible to argue that entirely new tradition forms emerge from attempts to maintain or re-establish early cultural forms. This has been argued in relation to the Chepstow Mari Lwyd, where the form of the event is so removed from that which could be described as a traditional Mari Lwyd, that what has instead developed is a distinct, unique form of intangible heritage [48]. While digital Mari Lwyd examples from Mentrau Iaith and Llanfihangel seem to aspire to replicate and digitally archive the early Mari Lwyd form, the Greenwood video (described as such because the recording does not have a singular geographical or organisational affiliation) creates a digital archive entry for the Chepstow Mari form, first established in 2004. The four Mari Lwyds filmed, look into the screens, performers occasionally 'clacking' the jaws of the skull (a feature of Mari Lwyd performances). The emphasis here is on the multitude of Maris, the cultural practice of gathering Mari Lwyd examples from different geographical locations in one place. As discussed above, the Chepstow variant of the Mari Lwyd does appear to be vulnerable, after exponential growth and concerns regarding the viability of the host town to continue supporting the event. This digital record of the practice of gathering multiple horses in one location may prove to be an important documentation should the practice in places like Chepstow fail to re-establish after lockdown.

Figure 2.
Four Mari Lwyd examples appear on screen together as part of a digital alternative to in-person gatherings. Image provided by Eleanor greenwood.

Finally, while digital platforms have the potential to increase visibility of traditional practices an increased audience is in no way guaranteed. As seen with the Sawau tribe, the production of a digital resource does not automatically conflate with a desire for the recorded practices to be distributed to non-local viewers. While video platforms like YouTube are publicly accessible, community groups may upload materials in the expectation that those resources will only be sought out by those closely related to the community. A desire to increase knowledge of a particular local tradition, through shared video media, is challenging in light of the vast body of material uploaded onto video sharing sites. If it is the intention of communities to become more visible, extremely low viewing figures on all of the materials discussed above would suggest that significant work is required should communities wish to realise that ambition. This point is worth further consideration in light of the pilot projects developed by UNESCO, where social media and digital platforms are seen as critical to the enhancing of access and visibility. Such objectives can only be achieved with additional promotional activities, otherwise the engagement and reach of such video based materials may extend no further that the communities which produced them, or were the source for them.

6. Conclusion

Digital technologies have provided a communications lifeline for practitioners of ICH during the Covid-19 pandemic. In some instances, the social aspect of ICH has been maintained, as choral groups gather to informally practice together online, with participants fully recognising the limitations of video conferencing resources for actually singing together as a group, but instead utilising the platforms as a means of maintaining a sense of community. It is the sustaining of these communities through a period of extended social isolation which will be critical to bringing practices back into a performance, audience driven environment in the years to follow. Without the continuation of practice, many choral groups may well have ceased to operate, leaving gaps in the Welsh cultural performance landscape in the short term, and breaking a continuity of choral tradition in Wales that dates from the seventeenth century.

Maintaining cultural practices such as the Mari Lwyd, through video conferencing, further allows for continuity of custom to be achieved, in an albeit highly limited form. Those cultural forms which depend on movement through landscapes, interactions with households and differing public establishments (namely public houses in this example), will struggle to replicate such elements in a digital context. That a digital archive now exists for some of these practices that, without Covid, may never have been formally committed to film, is an important step in maintaining the visibility of such traditions. However digital technologies must be seen as a resource that can assist in the support and safeguarding of traditions, rather than ever serve as a replacement.

The challenge for heritage professionals now, especially in nations like Wales where there is no formal infrastructure for the safeguarding of intangible heritage, is to find ways of working with community groups that allow for informal digital archiving lof tradition to strengthen the status of ICH forms. The creation of recordings does not equate with higher levels of interest in or appreciation for cultural forms. Equally, the heritage sector must be cautious in respecting the wishes of host communities and acknowledge that while digital archiving is an increasingly affordable and viable pathway to pursue, it is one which may not always be consistent with the desires of the source communities themselves. Finding the appropriate balance between a desire to safeguard and promote practices, two objectives which are not

consistently compatible, through digital pathways will increasingly become an area which the heritage sector will need to resolve. For the time being, and especially during the period of Covid-19, the potential has been demonstrated for video conferencing and sharing to be a means by which aspects of the intangible heritage landscape can be maintained and made visible. Without such resources, customs might well have been lost for the want of a means of transmission of tradition.

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