Conceptualizations of Cultural Heritage in Information Science

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ABSTRACT
We survey core and peripheral journals in library and information studies (LIS) to identify conceptualizations and dimensions of heritage research. We identify the knowledge structure of the heritage literature in information science with its adjoining fields including museum studies, archival, and computer science.

Keywords
Heritage theory, conceptual analysis, information science, field survey, cultural information, digital heritage.

INTRODUCTION
There is ample evidence of a “heritage” buzz in LIS, primarily in the context of information management and access, and of new forms of public engagement with cultural institutions and their collections within digital heritage initiatives and crowd sourcing (e.g., The Flickr Commons). Concerns over how to articulate, structure, digitize, and disseminate systems for cultural heritage recirculation are augmented by considerations about access to, and purpose of, cultural information and heritage objects. The institutions engaged in cultural production are also engaged in conceptualization of heritage. We were interested in the production of knowledge in a field centrally dealing with practices and understanding of, as well as access to, cultural information and heritage. Clearly, LIS research, curriculum, and practice are shaping explicit and implicit notions of heritage, but what exactly is the nature of this disciplinary perspective? We examined published research in order to explore actual trends in conceptualizations, the use of theory, and overall patterns of writing about heritage in the past 15 years.

RELEVANT RESEARCH
We draw on a tradition of conceptual research in LIS, such as surveys of meta-approaches (Talja, Tuominen & Savolainen 2005), foundational perspectives (Savolainen 2007), emergent subfields, and structure of LIS as a field of study (Pettigrew, Fidel & Bruce 2001; Budd 2001). Our assumption is that LIS is a multi-disciplinary field.

THE STUDY
We examined recent published LIS work on heritage by focusing on a selected number of core and peripheral journals, and performed additional searches on relevant terms. We combined content and qualitative analysis to determine patterns in the LIS literature on cultural heritage.

Research Questions
To understand heritage as object of study in information science, we asked the following questions:

(RQ1) What are the key disciplinary frameworks of heritage research?
(RQ2) What are the key referents in conceptualizations of heritage?
(RQ3) What are dominant theoretical and meta-theoretical frameworks?
(RQ4) What are the methods of analysis and their implied assumptions about heritage?

Research Process
Data collection proceeded in three steps: (1) scoping the field, (2) identifying dimensions of heritage research, and (3) identifying dominant conceptualizations of heritage.

(Step 1) To identify foci of heritage research and their forms, we conducted searches in LIS journals with a high impact, identifying a corpus of relevant articles from core, peripheral, and external journals.

First, we searched in journal databases and the ISI Web of Knowledge (Journal Citation Reports) using “heritage” as a keyword; then, we used footnote chasing to find additional journals with relevant articles. Thus, we identified three main categories of journals. We labeled these categories core, peripheral, and external (based on their relation to LIS). Core journals cover most areas of research in LIS and/or have a high Eigenfactor score. They correspond to those identified by survey literature (cf. McKechnie & Pettigrew 2002, 408). Peripheral journals have a particular focus (e.g., cultural records, museums, archives) and/or a lower Eigenfactor score. They correspond to domains of memory work. External journals are situated outside LIS, but publish articles on heritage. Second, in each journal category, we searched for articles published between 1995 and 2010, using the following keywords disjunctively: “heritage,” “culture,” “tradition,” “memory.” Year 1995 is a
landmark moment corresponding to the emergence of digital libraries. We assume that a digital infrastructure makes possible digital information heritage. We looked for articles that may not refer to heritage explicitly but are still concerned with aspects of heritage. We identified 75 relevant items for analysis.

(Step 2) Content analysis based on this corpus started with a code book to manage dimensions and categories. Constant modification and comparison of categories enabled the integration of new categories as coding progressed, but we kept relevant dimensions stable. Coding was done on the following dimensions:

Sources {disciplinarity, genres, audiences} (RQ1)
Content {heritage taxonomies, topicality, institutional contexts, geographic scope} (RQ2)
Theory-Methods {use of theory, level of application, methods of data collection} (RQ3)

(Step 3) We recorded explicit and implicit conceptualizations of heritage. (RQ2, RQ4)

We report findings from our initial corpus of journals and plan to use this model expanded to other peripheral and external journals.

INITIAL FINDINGS
The findings follow the structure of the research questions.

Disciplinary frameworks
Heritage literature in LIS (68% of all articles) is concentrated in six core journals (out of 25 examined). This trend is also due to bursts of special issues (e.g., Library Trends). The disciplinary orientation of the 75 examined articles ranges from social sciences (52 articles) and humanities (14), with two that combine these frameworks, to only a fraction of the articles in computer science (7). We expect this number to change as we expand our search to cover lower impact journals (including online journals that deal specifically with digital libraries), and core computer science literature in our further work.

Dimensions of heritage
Culture is the central dimension of heritage. However, some articles also refer to knowledge (e.g., aboriginal knowledge), information (e.g., digital objects), science, sites, monuments, and historic, politic, religious, and literary records, thus presenting an operational dimension of heritage as object of LIS. Digital heritage is central to the literature we surveyed, channeling other considerations of heritage.

Theoretical and meta-theoretical frameworks
In a preliminary analysis of frameworks, we found that the field is under-theorized, with some theoretical framework (e.g., phenomenology, “multiple ontologies,” structuration and discourse theory, metaculture, and social constructionism) identifiable in 22 out of 75 articles. It is notable (Fig. 1) that the explicit use of theoretical frameworks is found in only 27% of all articles. Overall, heritage work is practical, while the existing theoretical models are largely meta-theoretical, considering heritage at a philosophical level, without empirical operationalization.

Conceptualizations of heritage
Most articles (73%) do not propose an explicit definition or discussion of heritage. They simply use the term and assume a commonsense notion of heritage. This is often coupled with references to digitalization processes (e.g., preservation of heritage, access to heritage). Most articles mention heritage issues in the context of new media (e.g., ICT Web 2.0) and their impact on museums, archives, and libraries. This is the clearest pattern detected in the literature. Only 20 articles (27%) include explicit references to various aspects of heritage, mentioning the need to secure digital content (1 article) or ensure authenticity (2), integrity (2), and permanence of heritage (2). Two frequent distinctions are: tangible vs. intangible heritage (13) and natural vs. cultural heritage (3). Such conceptualizations tend to appear in peripheral journals.

CONCLUSION
Heritage research is conducted within, and at the boundaries of, LIS, primarily in its peripheral fields (archival, heritage, and museum studies). We note that the literature is still largely focused on development efforts and description; reliance on models, theories, and data-driven research is not the norm. The conceptualization of heritage tends to occur along taxonomies involving a distinction between tangible and intangible forms of heritage. The focus is primarily on cultural heritage. Exceptionally, heritage is conceptualized as a type of knowledge, but more commonly it is viewed as information (objects) and in terms of digital data management.

REFERENCES