

Save Our Stories (SOS): Our Digital Heritage In Danger

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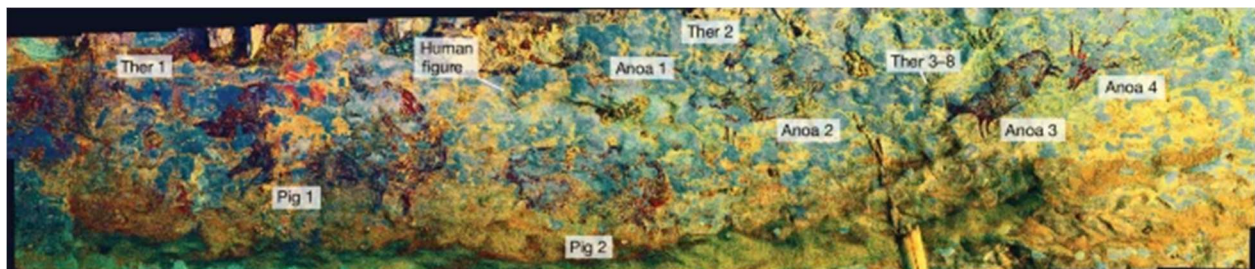
(Re)telling the Story

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Storytelling is [essential and inherent](#) to the human spirit and experience. We tell each other stories to make sense of ourselves, the world around us, and our place in it. Stories let us remember the past, navigate the present, and extrapolate the future, facilitating the transformation of factual data into evocative information, rich knowledge, and enduring wisdom.

One of the earliest tangible examples of storytelling we know of is an [Indonesian cave painting](#) over [51,000 years old](#).



Source: *Nature* 631 (2024), doi:[10.1038/s41586-024-07541-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07541-7)

The depiction suggests an animal hunt, but whether for prosaic, pedagogic, or ritual purpose is unknown. Regardless of informative intention, however, the painting presents all of the essential constituents of a story: a set of *actors* engaged in *activity* unfolding within a narrative *arena* bounded by thematic *scope* and pursuant of deliberate or serendipitous *purpose*. Through the (re)telling of the story, its listener/viewer/reader cannot help but undergo some inexorable change in affective attitude, cognitive understanding, or material situation.

One of the strategies that stories employ toward this end is narrative [displacement](#), the ability to refer to people, things, events, or ideas remote from the time and place of the telling. Transcending barriers to communicative experience imposed by time and space is also the imperative goal of the preservation enterprise. Preservation ensures that stories once told by us in the here and now can continue to be retold – and reheard – by others elsewhere and elsewhen. Through digitization or born-digital capture with subsequent proactive stewardship, preservation permits vital stories to flourish, captivate our interest, and bolster our understanding of the nearby and the far flung. Preservation takes us back to Colonial Shrewsbury through the structure, artifacts, and inhabitants

of the [Artemas Ward House](#); across 400 light years to the [Pleiades](#) and the underlying – and untold – contribution of women astronomical “[computers](#)”; to documentation of traditional rural life in mid-20th century [China](#); and to John Kennedy’s formative [political thinking and earliest captured speaking](#) as a college student. All of these stories are important, all are revelatory, and all are available (for now) at our fingertips.



Source: [HL](#); [CFA](#); [HYL](#); [HLPS](#)

The storytelling medium has evolved across human history: voice, song, dance, marks on bone, pigment on rock, ink on paper, dye on film, pixel on screen. The [Sulawesi](#) cave paintings survived largely through isolation and obscurity. Unfortunately, the persistence of the digital traces of past, contemporary, and future life would not be well-served by a similar approach of “[benign neglect](#).” Effective and sustainable preservation stewardship entails proactive preventative measures and monitoring to ensure both the technical integrity of a story’s digital vehicle and the narrative integrity of the story’s informative message.

Technical considerations are the least worrisome of these goals. Preservation practitioners have recourse to a robust and mature body of demonstrated best practices and tools to ensure the tangible fixity, authenticity, and accessibility of managed digital collections. Unfortunately, assurances regarding the narrative message are more problematic.

The democratization of storytelling enabled by digital technology has lowered barriers to participation, originally with the hope of encouraging the flourishing of voices and perspectives. Unfortunately, it has also opened the floodgates of potential [misinformation](#) and [disinformation](#). In an analog to economics’ [Gresham’s law](#), bad information tends to drown out the good, as the wisdom of crowds descends into the [banality of mobs](#).

Our response to this should *not* be a reductive reintroduction of exclusive gatekeeping. Prescriptive canonicity can be just as bad as promiscuous license, enforcing whose stories can be told, and whose cannot: keep *this* story, but not that one; tell it *this* way, but not that way; give it *this* context, but not that one.

Fifty millennia after the Sulawesi cave, we are all still the same storytellers and story listeners, individually and collectively engaging in the quintessential human propensity to argue, cajole, enrapture, and convince, and becoming convinced or remaining skeptical. However, the digital

medium of contemporary storytelling highlights the critical responsibility of a third group: the story *mind*ers, those who mediate between the teller and the told, who strive to ensure that the digital story is complete, accurate, reliable, available, and usable. Minders must remain open to a representation of all voices: the powerful and the powerless, the often heard and the seldom seen. The “our” of “saving our stories” needs to reflect all of us.

Humankind is the storytelling animal, *homo narrans*. The stories we tell – and preserve – are the way for the past to announce to the future: *I* was here; *we* believed this; *they* did that; remember us, learn, and thrive. The preservation *imperative* has never been clearer or more vital.

Abstract

Storytelling is essential to the human spirit and experience. The preservation of stories must reflect the vital spirit and experience of all voices, the powerful and the powerless, the often heard and the seldom seen.

