

Oral Tradition in the Age of Algorithms

From Margins to Feeds

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Knowledge as Text — and Its Blind Spots

In professional and public imagination alike, "knowledge" often appears as text: printed, bound, stored, cited. We measure its legitimacy in ISBNs, page counts, and citation indexes. This is not an accident; it is the legacy of what I call *literocentrism* — a cultural habit, centuries in the making, that privileges the written over all other forms of expression.

In literocentric frameworks, oral heritage —the living, spoken, sung, or performed memory of communities— is often treated as supplementary, anecdotal, or unreliable. The bias is structural. Colonial administrations used the absence of writing as evidence of the absence of civilization. Libraries, archives, and museums inherited this prejudice, embedding it into their selection criteria, descriptive vocabularies, and preservation priorities.

This has real consequences. Entire knowledge systems —ecological, legal, historical, spiritual— have been excluded from the official record simply because they were transmitted orally. The result is not only an impoverished collective memory, but a distorted one, tilted toward those with the means and authority to write.

While this article focuses on the spoken word, oral expression is not the only form of knowledge transmission that has been "otherized" or relegated to the margins by literocentric and text-bound paradigms. Pictorial systems, three-dimensional artefacts, embodied practices, and even territorial inscriptions have long carried complex and authoritative knowledge. Yet such media have often been dismissed as decorative,

symbolic, or secondary when compared to written records. The mechanisms of exclusion are similar: what does not fit the dominant medium is rendered invisible, stripped of its context, and denied epistemic legitimacy.

A Practical Entry Point: The *Manual*

Against this backdrop, the *Manual de gestión de oralidad para bibliotecas*, which I recently authored (Bogotá: Secretaría Distrital de Cultura, Recreación y Deporte, 2024, open access online), enters the scene. It is not a political treatise. It is a practical resource: an introduction to concepts, techniques, and tools for working with oral materials in library contexts.

The manual draws on my own experiences collecting oral tradition in Indigenous communities in north-eastern Argentina between 1998 and 2005. I began knowing virtually nothing about the methodologies or ethics involved, and gradually built a self-made set of notes and guidelines. Those early field notes evolved into the first blog on oral tradition in Spanish, which in turn became a series of articles, and eventually matured into the present book.

The manual covers three main domains: a theoretical section that defines oral tradition, outlines its distinctive features, and examines its relationship with literacy and power; a practical section that addresses the planning and conducting of interviews, the building of trust with communities, and the challenges of working with the unpredictability of live speech; and a management section devoted to transcription, translation, description, the use of metadata, and the long-term preservation of oral archives.

While the manual focuses on methodology, its very existence invites a larger conversation. And that conversation, for me, is inescapably political.

Oral Tradition as a Challenge to Literocentrism

Recognizing oral tradition as fully legitimate knowledge means questioning the hierarchies that have shaped our cultural institutions.

Oral tradition is not a nostalgic relic of a pre-modern world. It is a dynamic, adaptive, and often subversive practice. A fisher naming the seasonal shifts of a river no hydrographic chart captures; a migrant narrating border crossings absent from official statistics; an artisan teaching an embodied skill through gesture and story — all are forms of oral knowledge production and transmission.

These forms survive precisely because they live in people, not in documents. They can respond to change, adapt to new contexts, and carry meanings too complex or situated to be reduced to text.

The Digital Turn: From Fire Circles to Algorithmic Feeds

Ironically, while many libraries still struggle to accommodate oral heritage, the digital sphere is teeming with it. Social media platforms —TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, WhatsApp voice notes— have become vast, uncurated oral archives in real time.

Podcasts carry testimony, debate, poetry, and instruction to millions. TikTok storytimes distill personal histories into one-minute narratives. YouTube channels document craft techniques, political struggles, and everyday life with the same immediacy as a conversation across a kitchen table. These are not perfect analogues of traditional oral forms: they are shaped by platform logics, monetization, and the attention economy. Yet they demonstrate that the urge to speak, listen, and remember is as strong as ever — and is finding new, global stages.

This is not a romantic revival; it is a transformation. Oral tradition is now entangled with metadata tags, content moderation policies, and algorithmic visibility. The challenges are new—including ownership, consent, and the risk of decontextualization—but the core dynamic is familiar: knowledge living in voices, shaped in dialogue, and adapted to changing environments.

Implications for Memory Institutions

For libraries, archives, and museums, this context is both an opportunity and a provocation. The opportunity lies in connecting traditional methods of oral heritage work with the new realities of digital expression. The provocation is in confronting the literocentric assumptions that have long marginalized the oral.

This may involve reforming metadata so that descriptive standards can capture performance, context, and relational meaning without reducing them to text; developing access models that respect community control, cultural sensitivity, and non-written modes of engagement; adapting institutional workflows to integrate the collection, processing, and preservation of oral materials into routine practice rather than treating them as exceptional projects; and replacing extractive forms of "documentation" with collaborative approaches in which communities co-design and co-manage the work, deciding what is recorded and how it will be used.

These changes are not just technical. They are epistemic shifts, requiring institutions to rethink their role from custodians of objects to facilitators of living, polyphonic memory.

From Manual to Movement

The *Manual de gestión de oralidad para bibliotecas* offers an accessible set of tools for starting this journey. It addresses the *how*: how to plan an interview, how to transcribe speech, how to manage recordings responsibly.

The *why* —why it matters to rebalance our systems of memory so that the spoken and the written coexist on equal terms— goes beyond the manual. It is a choice about the kind of cultural record we want to build for the future.

In an age when voices are everywhere, from rural markets to algorithmic feeds, refusing to engage with oral tradition is no longer a sign of professional caution. It is a decision to let whole worlds of knowledge remain invisible.