

Digitisation and communication of memory: from theory to practice

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Abstract

Digitisation provided enormous opportunities for presenting cultural heritage online. Archives, libraries and museums are commonly entitled as memory institutions and digitisation is considered a useful tool for performing their memory function. Currently, there is a tendency of aggregation of heritage content by building international digital portals oriented at the general public. However, many questions about the nature of memory and its communication, benefits gained by general public using the online collections etc. remain unexplored. The aim of this paper is to explain how memory is communicated in archives, libraries and museums basing on the theories of memory and heritage, and to demonstrate by employing the examples of digitisation initiatives how these theories can be applied for developing online heritage services. As a result of theoretical analysis and case studies a conclusion that digital conversion and online access should not be an ultimate goal of the initiative was made. When developing the concept of digitisation project memory institutions should bridge the idea of heritage service with the current context and needs of the user community. Technologies reflecting common memory practices (e.g. web 2.0 photo sharing systems) and providing attractive communication environment have a great potential for developing online heritage services.

Keywords: digitisation, memory, memory institutions, online heritage services, web 2.0

Introduction

The term “memory institution” originates from the recognition of the significance of memory function which is one of the essential pre-requisites for the existence of archives, libraries and museums. Digitisation offered new opportunities to communicate memory; however, it also brought the challenges of discovering meaningful ways of such communication in the changing socio-cultural and technological environment.

The major advantage offered by digitisation is an opportunity for wide access that allows overcoming geographical and time barriers. Inspired by access potential for cultural heritage archives, libraries and museums engaged in digitisation projects that evolved rapidly from small one institution experiments to large-scale initiatives implemented by international consortia. Today there is a time of large-scale online cultural heritage services as the *European Library*, *Europeana*, the *World Digital Library* etc. Majority of these international initiatives pursue the objective of providing rich collections to diverse audiences like general public, scholars, educators and others.

Such concepts as memory, heritage, knowledge are often put together in diverse visionary statements. “Information technologies can enable you to tap into Europe’s collective memory

with a click of your mouse”, as stated by the Information Society & Media Commissioner Viviane Redding in her speech [1]. Later on, in the European Commission communication on the progress of digitisation, accessibility and digital preservation of cultural heritage in Europe the metaphor “collective memory with a click of your mouse” transformed into “Europe’s cultural heritage at the click of a mouse” [2].

The visions formulated by politicians and large-scale digitisation consortia raise a lot of questions. How the general public benefit from cultural heritage collections? How digitisation relates to memory? Are cultural heritage and memory communicated in the same way? Is it enough just to put digitised materials online? Current research reveals that many contemporary digitisation initiatives ignore the needs and the nature of establishing links with the past by individuals and communities. Research of online cultural heritage initiatives performed by the American researcher Maria Dalbello has shown that in many cases project ideas were based on cultural heritage collection – its structure and content [3], but not related to the needs and expectations of its potential users. Similarly, the analysis of cultural heritage projects supported by the European Union performed by Zinaida Manžuch revealed that project initiators were more interested in issues of managing cultural heritage resources than constructing meaningful stories of the past [4].

The aim of this paper is to explain how memory is communicated in archives, libraries and museums basing on the theories of memory and heritage, and exhibit how these theories can be used for building cultural heritage services in the digital environment.

1. Theory: why and how the modern societies remember

Memory is a way of individuals and societies to deal with the past. The word „re-membering“ means becoming a member again and indicates that memory is a source of social cohesion in human communities [5]. Although by remembering we create the link to the past, it is not re-living it again. It is impossible to re-live again the same emotions or enter the same contexts or events as they were in the past. By remembering the past is always constructed again according to the present condition, views and needs of those who remember [5]. Individual recollections are influenced by the membership in communities that form the social memory environment. Communities are remarkable for common needs and interests, which become what Maurice Halbwachs called '*les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*' [*social frameworks of memory*]. Individuals "recall" events or experiences that may precede their birth, and these recollections are very similar within the same communities. Social frameworks, in Halbwachs words, are '*... precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to construct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society*' [6: p. 40].

Cultural heritage may be approached a mnemonic device that connects us to the past. When there are no living witnesses to tell the story of the past, events or experiences transform into remote symbols and rituals that become a part of the identity and history of a particular community. These stories of the past are mediated by cultural heritage [7].

Cultural heritage is a part of the past selected in accordance with contemporary needs of societies [8]. It is loaded with constantly shifting symbolic meanings. The meanings of

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heritage are different from memory per se, in that they are explicit: they may be disseminated and comprehended by any person. Memory always means “being” or “belonging”, while heritage may also mean “knowing about”, which is open for rational cognition. Only common life context, values and experiences enable the transformation of heritage into memory. In other cases, heritage may be valued for particular features, used in education, which have nothing in common with memory. Therefore, interpretations of heritage symbolic meanings also allow archives, libraries and museums to communicate knowledge about the past without any reference to the collective memory of communities [4].

In the modern societies remains of the past are transformed into heritage as a result of selection decisions performed by different institutions that usually include research organisations, memory institutions, governmental bodies etc. In archives, libraries and museums, for instance, particular items become cultural heritage as a consequence archival appraisal or well-defined selection processes in libraries and museums. The process relies on expert views on societies, their needs, contemporary context and values. This inevitably creates a gap between heritage experts and citizens. Therefore, cultural heritage does not become a heritage in a full sense until it is acknowledged by the society [9]. When cultural heritage is meaningful to citizens they are able to remember, i.e. construct their images of the past. The major role of memory institutions is to interpret and contextualize cultural heritage for it to become meaningful to people in their present lives.

Communication of memory in archives, libraries and museums is also shaped by the development of new media that introduces novel ways of interaction with cultural heritage collections. The impact of the communication technologies (in a broad sense – language, print, digital media) to the ways a human being understands the surrounding world and shares these meanings with others was widely researched and argued. Contemporary internet technologies (web 2.0 in particular) are remarkable for growing user-centeredness, focus on co-authorship and collaboration, interactivity of services [10]. Although all ideas about computer and web are rooted in older communication technologies, when used they undergo enormous transformations. This argument was illustrated by Christine Borgman reflection on email which was rooted in metaphors of traditional paper post and letters but evolved into an interactive service with newly developed language (i.e. short messages and abbreviations) and elements (e.g. smileys) [11]. In order to meet user requirements memory institutions should adapt to evolving communication technologies, environments and practices.

2. Practice: communicating memory in digitisation initiatives

The essential feature of memory and heritage is the link between the past and present context of community life. Memory institutions should consider these links while formulating the objectives of digitisation initiatives. In this paper the focus is put on services related to communication of memory; thus excluding all spectrum of services aimed at communication of heritage (e.g. services for scholars, learners, cultural tourists etc.).

Archives, libraries and museums often employ two ways of linking the past with the present. The first way involves orientation at the identity, values and structure of particular community, while the second – particular social issue or phenomenon that creates new communities. The instance of the first way are geographical communities, who mainly

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associate their identity and personal history with particular place. The instance of geographically oriented digitisation initiative is the project *Worthington Memory* (USA) undertaken by the Worthington libraries and Worthington Historical Society. The initiative was grounded on the needs of the local community to cultivate social bonds and determine identity of the community [12]. One of the remarkable opportunities offered to the users is so-called *Time Machine*, the service enabling the user to compare past and present views of particular geographical objects by manually uncovering the ‘elderly’ image layer placed under the modern photo of the item. The photos showing changes of the city become meaningful for local citizens, even those, who have never seen before how the object looked in the past. Communicating memory by focusing on a specific social issue/phenomenon is illustrated by the project *Moving Here* (UK), which was implemented by the consortium of 30 memory institutions and dedicated to exploration of 200 history of immigration to the country [13]. With increased migration flows this issue of the past is very actual to both those who immigrate to UK nowadays and those who face the challenge of multicultural society. Each person, visiting the portal can write a digital story about his/her own migration experiences. Sharing personal migration stories bridges past events with the current experiences and thus makes cultural heritage collections meaningful mnemonic devices for the contemporary migrants.

Examples of adoption of new environments for communicating memory is illustrated by the growing number of heritage initiatives that employ web 2.0 tools. Two collaborative initiatives with Flickr – *PictureAustralia* (Australia) and Library of Congress pilot project (USA) – are relevant instances of successful web 2.0 application for the development of heritage services. In the first case, the national online historical image service *PictureAustralia* was enhanced by enabling users to contribute their own photos. The service became available due to the partnership with Flickr that provided attractive and easy-to-use interface for uploading and describing the photos. One of the outcomes of the initiative was the increased participation of user community, who actively engaged in uploading personal photos and re-photographing historical images. The participative service also increased the visibility of *PictureAustralia* portal and its usage [14]. Another instance of successful web 2.0 uptake is the initiative of the Library of Congress (USA) aimed at representing historical photographs on Flickr [15]. The project exhibited new ways of engaging communities in cultural heritage interpretation, i.e. remembering: “It is particularly gratifying to see Flickr members provide all kinds of connections between the past and the present through discussions of personal histories including memories of farming practices, grandparents’ lives, women’s roles in World War II, and the changing landscape of local neighborhoods” [15: p. 26]. The project evolved into large-scale international consortium *Flickr: the commons*, which covered cultural heritage institutions from various countries.

Conclusions

Memory institutions, initiating digitisation projects, should realise that digital conversion and online access are not the ultimate goals of the project, but rather tools for developing heritage services. Understanding of cultural and social mechanisms of remembering should guide the development of service concept. In most cases representative of general public have no definite information need but is willing to reinforce the feeling of belonging to particular

community. Examples illustrated that the links between heritage and communities could be established by making references to important geographical coordinates of community life and contemporary social issues that were also faced in the past.

Heritage is not memory; therefore, the definitive feature of a memory institution is not merely holding a cultural heritage collection, but also performing activities that transform heritage into the cultural intermediary of memory. Heritage becomes meaningful mnemonic device when it is related to the present life context of communities and individuals. It is the responsibility of memory institutions to make the links between the past and the present meaningful to the user.

Experiences of current digitisation initiatives have shown that reliance on widespread memory practices and popular communication tools is an effective way of engaging users in recollection and active interaction with cultural heritage collections. Successful experiments with Flickr proved that this web 2.0 tool utilising popular habits to collect photo albums and imitating common actions of making descriptive notes allows developing attractive environment for communicating memory.

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