Constructing and Sharing Memory
Constructing and Sharing Memory
Community Informatics, Identity
and Empowerment

Edited by

Larry Stillman and Graeme Johanson

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The process of the choice of a book topic functions very much like the themes advocated in this book. The organisers attempt to take the pulse of how the life-blood of the academic and practitioner communities are flowing, and then they channel the observations into a conference theme, thereby highlighting and affirming the selected emphasis as of contemporary collective value. The editors consulted with colleagues verbally and online, and reviewed the current published literature and practice, in order to plan the selected papers for this publication.

As Alex Bryne, President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions observes in his splendid and wide-ranging Introduction: “community memories are multilayered, changeable, conflicting and contested”, and multilayering, changeability, and dimensions of conflict and contest provide fertile theoretical and practical ground for community informatics and its interdisciplinary cousins.

There are several chapters in this volume that deal with the elicitation of community memory, and its facilitation by information and community technologies, and many about how community memory emerges, is privileged, and manages to perpetuate itself through time and place (Stoecker and Stillman, Mulholland et al.). If we now understand community as not an entity frozen in time and space, but as a form of ongoing action, as verb (see Bongiorno), then being able to understand community as affect also helps us to question how that affect is created and emphasised or underemphasised in the recorded memory. The entire volume reflects a sensitivity to the real effects of language, the complexities of power relations, and their mediation by and through technology as factors which ‘monumentalize’ certain memories and trivialise others. The different interpretations of the word ‘memory’ by the conference participants would permit a fascinating future chapter in its own right. For instance, the very concept of memory is challenged by the fact that technologies permit the ubiquitous recording of ‘instant daily memory’ in banal, unprecedented quantities. Furthermore, the notion of official memory, as once recorded in formal records such as official
reports or statistics, is now undermined—or even supplanted—by the explosion of information and opinion made available through democratic electronic possibilities. Yet trust remains a critical issue in the development of outreach (Singh), notwithstanding more fundamental structural issues of access in developing countries (Steyn, van der Wyver).

The most rewarding aspect of editing this volume has been that it provided the opportunity to review an entire corpus of contributions as one offering, rather than as separate presentations. The overall scope is synthesised and remarkable.

Broadly, the three themes of this book can be grouped around community technologies, the dynamics of community memory, and current research. A number of papers, for the first time, take up issues involving theoretical and practice aspects of archive and library sciences and the emergent challenges of community informatics (Grossman, Iacovino).

1. Technologies

Several chapters make it clear that technologies shape memories, just as memories shape technologies. Technologies assist in many ways in the capture of community memories. This volume covers an enormous range of technologies—not just portals—for supporting communities and their social contexts, including metadata and GPS maps, mobile technologies, as well as experimental or emergent technologies and processes for e-democracy (Williamson).

The book identifies a constant struggle in communicating the importance of the interests of communities to technologists, designers, businesses and policy-makers. Some social institutions are threatened by the formative influence of technologies, and many are seeking collaborations with communities to sustain meaning and to survive. If they can reposition themselves as central nodes in a community network, then they will be in a stronger position to facilitate the construction and preservation of community memory. They need each other.

The storage capacities of online interactive datasets are a growing influence on the formation of large-scale archives for researchers and the community worldwide (see Chapters by Nilsson, Quisbert). New paradigms of ownership of research encourage communities to have direct input. They also bring with them a need to reassess the research implications of ethical practice, rights management, ownership, intellectual property, copyright, privacy and access of their use (Iacovino, Torrens). At a local level, networks allow the capture of community oral
reminiscence and image, to form new local archives to help to maintain a regional story or indigenous story (Lissonet & Nevile). New Internet architectures are tending to fulfill the needs of the network users rather than pandering to the interests of the technology designers or vendors themselves (McIver).

2. Dynamics of community memories

Storytelling—especially digital storytelling—is an important function for encouraging the formation and sustainability of community identity for different sorts of communities (Klaebe & Foth). Yet there is a paradox (in the capture of community memory) in that an individual story will objectify the individual and diminish the contribution of the community milieu from which she/he emerges. Whether we like it or not, long-term control of collective memory is ultimately often in the hands of distant powerbrokers engaged in large-scale program implementation and evaluation (Williams).

Memory retention is not automatic. Repressed trauma can cause memory obliteration. One contribution (Kapralski) argues that reconstruction of a new secondary identity—to counter extinction forces—forms an imagined community which is subject to much the same influences as those which shape primary memory. It is necessary to accept that some memories survive accidentally, while others are persistently nurtured and promoted. Design of technologies can assist deliberate, planned preservation, especially for organizational memory and student learning. Fortunately, several chapters deal with the memories of migrant, minority and marginalised communities, which are facilitated by technologies in ways were not possible in the recent past (Byrne, Knutson, McIver et.al, McQuillan, Vos & Ketelaar).

A number of authors deal with the paradox that memories in public spaces and private places can be in constant tension; one ignores the needs of the other. Also, community memory is as much virtual today as it is based in face-to-face interactions. This compounds the conundrum of space/place and is a challenge for institutions that traditionally have been custodians of physical objects, rather than virtual and emergent memory (Pang et. al).

3. Research

This book is itself a tribute to the excellent research undertaken by many within the community and academia. A tenet of community
Informatics is that connected citizens (as actors) are best positioned to control research that is useful to communities. Community members themselves structure the routines for the most accurate and ethical representations of community experience as social documents. This commitment is borne out in many chapters, including those that deal with the theoretical dimensions of such issues (de Moor, Upward & Stillman).

It is just and equitable that communities demand acknowledgement of the role and historical connection of actors as key agents of change, both within communities and institutions. Social power must always assert that support of community goals comes before technocratic or bureaucratic interventions.

Many people and institutions in different countries deserve to be acknowledged for their hard work and support in the development of this book. They include:

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INTRODUCTION

THE WARP AND THE WEFT: COMMUNITIES, INSTITUTIONS AND MEMORY

ALEX BYRNE
PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

Often called “memory institutions”, libraries, archives and museums convey the records of peoples through time and across space. Those records are interwoven with community memory, sometimes exposing and reinforcing, at other times contradicting. The occlusions of memory and records shape our interpretations and reproductions. Both are mediated through technology, folding and unfolding in many layered visualisations. Through this intersection of community and institution, a public sphere is evident, sometimes shadowed, sometimes exposed, sometimes hidden. Its geography contains the texture of civil society, the enriched life for all which has been promoted so forcefully in the World Summit on the Information Society and other fora. Achievement of a truly civil society—worldwide—depends on the effective and contextualised use of technology but much more.

In August 2006 I was fortunate to visit an extraordinary exhibition at the National Museum of Australia. Entitled “Cook’s Pacific Encounters” (National Museum of Australia, 2006). It displayed over 350 artefacts from the Cook-Forster Collection of the Georg-August University of Göttingen, artefacts which were collected mainly by Johann Forster during James Cook’s third voyage of exploration in the Pacific. The artefacts came principally from the Polynesian ocean, extending from the Marquesas to Aotearoa-New Zealand to Tahiti, Tonga and Hawai’i. Seldom exhibited, or even viewed by scholars, the collection returned for the first time to the Pacific after more than two hundred years, for display in Hawai’i and Canberra. The exhibition included truly extraordinary items which illustrated the cultural richness of Polynesia and striking consistencies in design across the tracts of that vast ocean. Especially
stunning was the *kiʻi hulu manu* (a feathered image believed to represent the Hawaiian war god Kūkaʻilimoku) and a helmet, both from Hawai‘i and both covered in red parrot feathers which were still bright because they had been so seldom exposed to light, an extraordinary range of beautiful and functional fish hooks, and a shell encrusted bark cloth mourning dress (*heva*) from Tahiti.

No less interesting were the visitors to the exhibition at the time I was there. They included the usual proportion of retirees visiting a national institution while caravanning around Australia, and some school children on a cultural excursion. But the audience for this exhibition also included a great number of people of Polynesian origin including Māori, Samoans and a Tongan museum guard. They would have been seeing these fine expressions of their culture and their ancestors’ artistic and technological skills for the first time. Through the prism of the exhibition, they were directly linked to their ancestral cultures at the time when Europeans began their incursions into the Polynesian ocean.

**Community memory**

This meeting of peoples and objects, mediated through curiosity led collecting and curatorial skills, weaves perspectives together. As visitors to that exhibition, we bring with us memories of colonialism, of the onslaught on traditional ways and of the creation of new nations with a post-colonial heritage woven into older cultural fabrics. We bring the knowledge of the great ocean which we have seen imaged from space and which aeroplanes daily traverse. It is difficult for us to place ourselves inside the psyche of the roving Europeans who seized on these objects as curiosities which were interesting in themselves and as symbols of those they encountered on those islands, but also as tradeable commodities which they knew would fetch a pretty price on the Thames docks. It is no less challenging to try to enter the minds of those who were so comfortable inside their cultures, so confident of their knowledge of the cosmos and who were meeting these foreigners in their large ship for the first, second or third time. In the transactions evidenced by these artefacts, we can glimpse that early dancing with strangers, to use Inga Clendinnen’s memorable phrase (Clendinnen, 2003). For all of us who have read accounts of exploration and contact, seen movies or visited other museums, there are resonances and glimmers of understanding. But for those whose ethnic and cultural origins lie in Polynesia, it must be so much more powerful to look through the time-machine of this exhibition. The objects they and we see are interwoven with personal and community
memory, sometimes exposing and reinforcing, at other times contradicting.

The community memories are multi-layered, changeable, conflicting and contested. They include the painful, sometimes shameful, memories which are suppressed and often persist only as faint echoes, as chimera just out of our gaze, as night terrors. They include for the colonised and those who have benefited from colonisation, the memories of what was done to Indigenous peoples and how that trauma travels on to hurt generations far removed in time and, sometimes, place from the events. They also include the triumphant myths of colonisation as process of discovery, of bringing light into darkness. For Australia, that myth is powerfully linked to Captain James Cook who “discovered” the east coast of the continent—or rather mapped it and reported its location to Europe. It is an heroic myth for most Australians but it is a no less powerful myth of destruction for Aboriginal Australians. As Hobbles Danayarri put it “… he’s the bloke who started to kill my people up in the Northern Territory … If he had said: ‘All right’, we would have started to make it all right. Because Captain Cook started it, not my people.” (Rose, 1991: 17) Of course, Captain James Cook did not go to the Northern Territory, nor did he kill to take land but his great symbolic importance to the colonisers and their heirs has been transmuted to a symbol for the invaded of all the invaders who followed.

In other countries, similarly powerful myths valorise victory over unjust foes and the sorrows of subjugation. They have fed contemporary hostilities in many parts of the world – perhaps especially in the horrors that swept the former states of Yugoslavia in the last decade. The resentments which can fuel such violence and cruelty are often just below the surface and may relate to unresolved histories. We see that in the response of many in East Asia to the visits by former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni shrine for the war dead. His obeisance at the shrine was seen as insensitive especially in Korea and China where many feel that Japanese history books gloss over the cruelties perpetrated during the Second World War period and, for Korea, in earlier times.

As the threads of angry memories are cored, they can draw the passions which stimulate the horrors we have seen all too recently at Srebrenica and in Rwanda. They have been fuelled by memory and in turn provide horrific memories.

**Oclusions of memory**

Willful or ignorant occlusions of memory are as central to community
identity as the memories which are celebrated. They shape our interpretations of events and our responses. They form the “negative space” around which our symmetries of myth and identity are constructed.

It is a brave endeavour to confront these occlusions as in the extraordinary “truth and reconciliation” process which followed the ending of apartheid in South Africa (South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/). By initiating and pursuing that painful process, South Africa made a brave attempt to put behind it the grim history of racial segregation and violence which had characterised the nation. In shining a light into those dark recesses of memory, pain was illuminated, honesty was celebrated and some foundations for a fresh start were laid. Others, such as East Timor, have attempted similar processes. Over a longer trajectory, Germany, especially since reunification, has attempted a similar degree of honesty, the fruits of which were recently acknowledged when the first rabbis were ordained since the Third Reich (Spiegel Online, 2006, 14 September). That ceremony confirmed the re-emergence of Judaism in Germany and took place, appropriately, in the phoenix city of Dresden which had been rebuilt from the dreadful fire bombing of February 1945. The ordination, following so soon after the reconsecration of the baroque Cathedral, the Frauenkirche or Church of Our Lady (Washington Post, 2005), identified a new confidence in post reunification Germany. It showed a nation which had come to terms with a horrific past and was able to accept it and embrace new futures. Such painful memories are very difficult to deal with and to surmount.

Time heals but it is very difficult to relegate such memories to the extent that the terrors of the bubonic plague have been left as hidden traces in the melodies of the children’s rhyme, “Ring a’ ring a’ rosie …”. However, we must remove, or at least reshape, pain and anger if we are not to recreate past horrors through contemporary atrocities. As we can see in the powerful use of memory to shape the present texture of Aotearoa-New Zealand against the strong warp of the Treaty of Waitangi, new community relationships can be woven through revisiting past conflict (Hickey, 2006).

**Memory institutions**

These reflections highlight both the roles of our memory institutions and some issues for them. In our libraries, archives and museums we convey the records of peoples through time and across space as a tapestry of records, documents, images, artefacts and—increasingly—digital
simulacrum as well as those which are born digital. Through applying our curatorial skills to those traces of past achievements, we enable generations to reconnect with those of earlier times. We enable others to glimpse understandings of creativity and experience even though they may be far removed by time, space, culture or language. We inform the scholar and find ways of engaging the general public in the tattered seines of memory.

We do this of course through the application of our professional knowledge and skills. They include: the selective collecting of materials which illuminate epochs and aspects of human experience; the description of the materials which makes them manageable and findable; the preservation of the materials for future interrogation; and their presentation to the viewer. In doing this we constantly evaluate, interrogate, contextualise the materials which we collect and those with which they are linked. We are informed by scholarship and often provide the stuff from which scholars work. Through arrangement and description we create relationships, continuities and discontinuities.

In applying our skills in this way we certainly add a great deal of value to that which is in our care but we also change it. The tapa cloth weavings, baskets, fish hooks and ornaments in the Pacific Encounters exhibition are not the same artefacts which were handed over to Johann Forster and others two and a quarter centuries ago. No longer the functional or ceremonial items they were to those who passed them over, they have become museum objects which we see through backwards telescopes, over emphasising some aspects and missing others. While the Polynesians appreciated that their cultural expressions were part of a larger story, a waka which had sailed across the ocean, we cannot but see the artefacts in relation to items produced in other places and other times and via a postmodern, adaptive transformation through which a hat rack can become a sculpture. The care with which the artefacts and, in most cases, at least some details of their origins have been preserved has changed them from use-full and meaning-full items to cultural glyphs, signs of a culture which we can only know partially. They are nonetheless valuable but their value has changed significantly. Our descriptions have likewise changed them.

The label “a fearsome image of a helmeted head [which] was created by the Hawaiians as a representation of their war god Kūkaʻīlimoku” (National Museum of Australia, 2006, Catalogue), hardly conveys the potency of object to the naïve observer, let alone what it must have held for those who made and used it. The list of ingredients—feathers, basket weave, shells—tells us nothing of the beliefs which invested its design, construction and decoration. We can amplify those spare details by
This is easy to see when we think of artefacts from a strikingly different cultural context which have been stored for two hundred years. But the same is true of the books, journals and other resources which fill our libraries and the records held in our archives. The tapestry of the past which they form is at best partial and changeable. All are products of their place and time which can only be seen kaleidoscopically at other times and in other places. And we control the kaleidoscopes, at least to a degree, by our selection, arrangement and description. When we select items for addition to our collections; when we describe then to make them findable in our databases and catalogues; when we classify them to arrange them in groupings on library shelves or for museum exhibits; when we curate collections or formulate bibliographies; when we perform all of these professional acts, we impose our constructs, our knowledge systems on the objects.

In doing this we create a dialectic between knowledge systems, a powerful contest of constructs. It is not a contest in which there must necessarily be victor and vanquished, it should rather be a conquest akin to the trials of strength of Ancient Greece which were in honour of the gods. But, too often, as in the trials of strength and speed, the dialectic becomes a competition through which one knowledge system must win and the other be subjugated. The other becomes relegated to the status of “the studied”. It becomes reified as an object of study, an object of description and its identity as a knowledge system is lost. The manifestations of culture—books, artefacts, records, images—cease to have an identity of their own, a congruity within a knowledge system, and become simply exemplars—albeit very beautiful and intriguing exemplars—within a pantheon of cultural expression.

Our ethic as curators to select without bias and to present fairly is thus challenged because we inevitably and inadvertently must impose our constructs on that which we collect, preserve, describe and make available. The inevitably of this process does not mean that we should abjure our professional skills but rather that we should practise them conscientiously and with the humility of knowing that that which we do so conscientiously must inevitably misportray. Our defence is our humility and the honesty of our professional practice.

Our practice aims to preserve and carry forward knowledge, it does not act to dominate or subjugate other knowledge systems, nor does it hold our knowledge systems to be superior. It becomes a perversion of our
professional ethos and our professional skills when we do otherwise, as has happened in totalitarian systems and as we are encouraged to do within our own communities. The urge to censor sits ill with our professional commitments whether it be the well meant, but profoundly misguided urges to suppress Enid Blyton books for the danger they might pose to the young or the removal of “trashy literature” and works with “fascist, anti-democratic or anti-socialist tendencies” in Communist Czechoslovakia (Malek, 1963: 20). The desire to censor is nothing but an attempt to impose one form of knowledge, one understanding, on others.

It is for that reason that libraries resolutely oppose censorship as was seen recently when peak library bodies joined with the Australian Society of Authors to protest the banning of two books by Sheik Abdullah Azzam, *Join the Caravan* and *Defence of the Muslim Lands*, at the instigation of the Federal Attorney-General, the Hon Philip Ruddock (Council of Australian University Librarians, 2006). The banning had led to their forced removal from the University of Melbourne Library. The Attorney-General requested that eight books be reclassified, so that they might be banned, because of a concern that they might incite terrorism. The Classification Review Board declined to reclassify six on the list but found against the two titles. In regard to *Defence of the Muslim Lands*, it found that “the publication, being written by a prominent Islamic terrorist, may appeal to some disenfranchised segments of the community and that the book was designed to encourage such people to take up arms and commit specific crimes against non-believers, in the cause of Islam” (Australia Classification Review Board, 2006). The associations argued that this action threatens both our freedoms and our capacity to respond to terrorism. In the context of this address, there is another reason: censorship is an attempt to eliminate or at least change memory as Orwell showed us so forcefully in *1984*.

Changing memory was certainly a subtext in this case. Sheik Azzam’s books had actually been written at the time at which the United States was supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan in their resistance to the occupation of “Muslim lands” by Soviet forces. He died in 1989 and so the decision is at best misleading in its implication that “a prominent Islamic terrorist” is part of the current wave of terrorist attacks.

Libraries, in common with other memory institutions, fight against such occlusions of memory through the development and management of collections, both physical and digital, within their areas of emphasis. In doing this, we try to avoid and where possible repair the gaps cause by decay as well as those resulting from conflict and the wishes of the powerful.
Bad taste

In fulfilling this responsibility we collect and make available not only the pleasant and the beautiful, the things on which we can all agree, but also the unpleasant, the contentious and the repugnant—all aspects of community memory. These can include reflections of political views which we find objectionable but also resources which we consider morally unacceptable or simply in bad taste.

Speaking of bad taste, humour is often employed as a way of dealing with the unimaginable. For example, I imagine that many will have heard of Steve Irwin, the Australian Crocodile impresario, who died in September 2006. Because of his larger than life enthusiasms, his irrepressible larrikinism, Steve Irwin was the butt of many jokes. In the Australian way, we love to poke fun at each other and, especially, to lop “tall poppies” with a scimitar of mockery. Steve attracted such raillery in life and it has followed him to the grave.

In Australia, such teasing humour is not usually meant to be destructive although it can have a sharp edge. The use of humour, and especially humour with an edge, is often a way of building community. It can also be a way of dealing with horrors as was noted after the September 11 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon (Ellis, 2001). What may be humorous to some will be bad taste to others and objectionable to still others. But of course even offensive humour can be accepted if applied within a band of culturally determined acceptability.

For the professional, this is a warning not to be too po-faced, to take our responsibilities seriously but not to pursue them without humour. In recognising our limitations, we acknowledge our strengths which include a continuing openness to new information, to new ways of viewing our resources. We cannot therefore commit to a single orthodoxy because we are forced to recognise that memory is fallible and mutable. As custodians of memory, we need to deal with that fallibility and mutability which we can achieve by accepting both, by accepting that our memory kaleidoscopes will present differently to each of our clients.

Intersection of community and institution

Through this intersection of community and institution, a public sphere is evident, sometimes shadowed, sometimes exposed, and sometimes hidden. The public sphere includes the formal instruments of government and the structures of economy and society but it also includes the informal, shifting polity. It is that “mob”—to which we all belong at least
some of the time—which can be susceptible to demagogues and the blandishments of the mass media but also display considerable collective sense at elections and in response to extremism. It is that mob which uses our libraries, archives and museums.

The memory institutions capture the views and expressions of the mob—Harrison’s “common people” (Harrison, 1984)—as well as the formal records of government and business. Some make special efforts to record ephemera, including today’s evanescent Internet resources, while others attempt to make sense of the middens of history. Both formal and informal are mediated through technology, folding and unfolding in many layered visualisations. Our institutions are getting better at presenting these laminar stories through imaginative use of technology so that our clients can experience and engage with them and, in turn, take them into new directions. This was visible in the Cook’s Encounters exhibition I mentioned previously: the exposure of a long hidden treasury of Polynesian cultural artefacts has engaged contemporary Polynesians who are far removed in time and experience from those from whom the artefacts were collected. Viewing the exhibition has filled some gaps in memory but challenged others to shape interpretations and reproductions by the descendants of those who met Cook’s ships two centuries ago and others with an interest to visit the exhibition.

**Texture of civil society**

Of course, the “mob” in this sense is not the undifferentiated threat to public order that the expression often conjures, at least in the tabloids. It is really civil society, the peoples of a polity who are distinguished from the formal institutions of society—government, executive and judiciary—and from business institutions which drive the economy. In the London School of Economics working definition (London School of Economics, 2003), civil society refers to:

... the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-government organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations,
professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

These interwoven relationships offer an enriched life for all which is predicated on memory. It posits communities in which all can participate in a variety of ways according to their current interests and needs, interests and needs which may change tomorrow. Participation creates memories, individual and community, and is shaped by memory, manifesting public and private textures of experience and reference, the textures which are refracted through memory institutions.

The importance of civil society has been recognised increasingly. Involvement with the organisations of civil society feeds a sense of community and the vitality of those organisations is an effective indicator of the health of a community. They augment and challenge the other main sectors of society, government and business, as was recognised during the World Summit on the Information Society. That process, which concluded is formal work with the second Summit meeting in Tunis in November 2005, was the first United Nations sponsored summit process to acknowledge fully the importance of civil society. The Summit’s Declaration of Principles (World Summit on the Information Society, 2003) and Plan of Action reflect the contributions of a vast array of civil society organisations including those such as IFLA which participated directly and those which were involved in regional and specialist discussions.

Key recommendations of the World Summit on the Information Society concern the development of a ‘just and fair information society for all’ and recognise the importance of culture and language as well as the urgent need to redress disadvantage (International Federation of Library Federations and Institutions & Byrne, 2004). The issues of libraries and archives are well represented and the Summit’s recommendations offer an agenda for the nations of the world to achieve by 2015. Particular challenges include those emanating from the “digital divide” between rich and poor in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), the skills to use them and the content which they can convey. Addressing those issues over the coming decade will do much to strengthen communities around the world and will require the emboldenment, and in some cases reinvention, of memory institutions.

Memory, institutions and community

Achievement of a truly civil society—worldwide—depends on the
effective and contextualised use of technology, but much more. The powerful tools for communication, analysis, manipulation, storage and representation which we are developing through ICTs are not the information society but they do enable an information society for all if we wish to apply them to that task.

For those of us in the “memory game”, for those of us who are concerned with community informatics and with the roles of memory institutions, a key challenge is the need to make our institutions more responsive to cultural difference, to both the warp and weft of civil society. By addressing that challenge, our institutional kaleidoscopes will not only present varied images but will present those refracted memories, those differentiated perspectives, to the multi—layered communities of the twenty-first century.

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Constructing and Sharing Memory: Community Informatics, Identity and Empowerment

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This chapter focuses on the relationship between narrative, community memory and technologies. It tells the story of a research project where we reviewed the literature on those concepts for a conference paper, and then analyzed and reflected on the process and its outcomes. It is one facet of the research, the other being a wiki that is open for contributions and change on an ongoing basis. The underlying research method is autoethnographic and a “communities of practice” perspective is used to frame the analysis. The narrative and analytical results could help inform the design of technology-supported communities and their learning.

Introduction

This chapter purposefully crosses genre boundaries and is inseparably linked to a wiki\(^1\) at http://pratonarrative.wikispaces.com. Here we tell our story and reflect on how a literature review for a conference paper began as a traditional document, static and linear and with a clear academic lineage, and metamorphosed into a collaboratively constructed hypermedia text on a wiki. The wiki, unlike a paper, provides a space for adding to and editing community memory. It invites our audience to participate on an ongoing basis, fostering community and supporting the

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\(^1\) A wiki is a website that allows visitors to edit it, thus becoming a tool for collaborative authoring over the Internet.
further construction of memory amongst researchers and practitioners who share our interests. This makes the paper just one way of telling our research story, with the wiki being a second. Both allow for different, independent readings.

Our primary research method is autoethnography, as described and advocated by Carolyn Ellis (2004) and others. We use Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice and meaning making for framing our analysis, in particular the duality between reification and participation. Participation, or taking part in something and relating, and reification, as a way of giving form to experience, are a duality through which we make meaning. They are distinct and complementary and neither one exists without the other. We argue that autoethnographic methods are key to the study of the intersection of communities of practice, technology and memory, since issues of participation, meaning-making, and identity are fundamental to how communities function and develop over time. But let us start at the beginning.

A story: Beverly, John, Patricia and a literature review in high modernity …

Our story begins when we, researchers and participants in technology-supported communities, take up a new research project, preparing a literature review on community memory, narrative and technologies for a community informatics conference. We live in three different time zones, speak different mother tongues and engage in this project alongside many others. Exploring various technologies and practices to build community memory across time and space is an instance of what we seek to study in this project. The deeper we delve into the subject the fuzzier it gets. Fuzziness is also reflected in our use of technologies and the emerging literature review that is recorded both on paper and in various virtual spaces—tidily tagged\(^2\) and yet precariously suspended in different parts of cyberspace between projects, disciplines and professions. An emerging hybrid product and its documentation, and a conference paper with an accompanying wiki start to reframe the literature review that we thought would be a simple project.

A typical meeting about the paper takes place on Skype, a shared conversation at night for Beverly and Patricia, early afternoon for John. Evening calls are sometimes interrupted by family concerns, but it is the

\(^2\) Tagging refers to the process of giving labels as descriptors (and as a kind of metadata) for objects on the Internet.
only time we can find to meet. We have worked on and off together for seven years and the calls usually begin with an update on other projects and sharing stories of success or failure. These conversations have supported each of us at different times through professional and personal trajectories and uncertainties. As our work crosses disciplinary and professional boundaries, we often share the sense of ambiguity in the roles we take on, or which are assigned to us, and the calls become a place where we encourage and coach each other through the process. In the meantime, however comforting our conversations on Skype may be, they seem to lead us to take on more work, leading to more intricate juggling of family and job commitments. Each Skype conversation becomes an engagement in a community in which our families and our everyday work places are not involved. And each fragment of conversation becomes a weaving together of our individual identities into a bigger story, with the bigger story shaping our individual and shared identities.

In our collaboration we also experiment with technologies to support our collaboration. In the literature review project we begin with open-ended conversations (and disciplined note-taking with the Skype chat), as we have done for previous projects. But this time our practice does not carry us forward: it does not seem to help us in constructing community memory on our topic. We move to a discussion platform and experiment with various online storage tools for keeping our conversation fragments, notes and links. The more tools we use the more we also need to use RSS feeds and a tagging system to organize our ideas and tame the centrifugal forces. This turns problematic. Beverly has already become comfortable with the tools, which she uses on one single computer and that integrate with her other projects. This puts pressure on Patricia to experiment and invent new ways of working, trying to take into account her precarious access to the Internet, the different computers she uses, her commuting patterns, and time constraints. Suddenly we spend considerable time asking ourselves if we are using the right tools for our ambitious plans. Have we created memories of understanding that are accessible and retrievable for the three of us, given that each of us has a different way of storing our Skype notes, documents and links? How could our practice possibly map to a larger community?

Eventually we move our collaboration project onto a wiki. There, on the wiki, after weeks of disorientation and turmoil we find a place where all of us can record our ideas. We organize the wiki so that we have a home base and can easily make the connections between different ideas.

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1 RSS feeds are a way to keep track of frequently updated content in the Internet.
The text becomes a shared enterprise of connecting fragments. The fragments can include visuals. Each page has a discussion area for a meta-discussion (or not). The wiki has an RSS feed so that when someone updates it, subscribers are informed. Through these feeds we can include the different fragments of our lives that lie in web pages, blogs, social bookmarks and discussion groups on one page in the wiki. People interested in the topic can view our work-in-progress, leave a comment, or contribute to it. We think we have found a compromise. We start working on two related texts, a conference paper and a collaborative hypertext on the wiki.

**An analysis: writing a literature review in a fragmented world**

How can we make sense of this story in terms of high modernity? Beverly, John and Patricia, are principal characters in the narrative. We struggle in a post-traditional order of modernity, reflexively organizing our self-identity. Our life choices leave us standing on the frontier of academic and professional life, straddling academic boundaries and navigating our way through cultural ones. Self-identity as a “reflexively organized endeavour” (Giddens, 1991:5) and issues of fragmentation and dispersal of self-identity are analyzed and written about by sociological thinkers of our time, such as Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells.

In high modernity, the influence of distant happenings on proximate events, and on intimacies of the self, becomes more and more commonplace...Mediated experience... has long influenced both self-identity and the basic organization of social relations... It is in many ways a single world, having a unitary framework of experience (for instance, in respect of basic axes of time and space), yet at the same time one which creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal (Giddens, 1991:4-5).

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4 A blog is a website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. They normally offer the possibility of commenting on entries as well.

5 In this paper we refer to both self-identity as used by Giddens and identity as used by Wenger. Self-identity emphasizes an awareness of being (in relation to others or not). It draws on psychology (self) and identity (social science). It makes a distinction between self and social identity. Giddens refers to self-identity as “a reflexive project of the self”. Wenger, refers to a “social ecology of identity”, constituted by our investment in various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts (1998: 188). Identity, in this case, is always social identity.
Michael Foucault’s formulation of the “specific intellectual” as opposed to the “universal intellectual” (1980:126) makes it possible for us to “develop lateral connections across different forms of knowledge” (ibid.:127).

Similarly, we draw meaning from our distributed community and practices in a way that significantly affects our identity in all other parts of our lives. In his first volume, The Rise of the Network Society (1996), Castells discusses identity in the context of globalization and the networked society:

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. This is not a new trend since identity, and particularly relations and ethnic identity, have been at the roots of meaning since the dawn of human society. Yet identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in a historical period characterized by widespread deconstructing of organizations, delegitimization of institutions, fading away of major social movements and ephemeral cultural expressions. People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are. (1996:3)

An ongoing thread in our Skype conversations is related to (re-) defining what we are in our day-to-day lives and the discordance between identities conferred by our employers, nationality or even families. In this situation, we find solace in our “niche” community, a non-territorial one; a juxtaposition of different professional and academic practices and one which breaks with traditional time. It is a community that both encompasses and isolates us at the same time. Foucault refers to this type of niche community as a heterotopia (1994: 178–185).

Authors, such as Ronald Deibert, go further in displacing the global-village narrative and describe a landscape that is dynamic, unstable, and peopled by individuals and groups who form and reform according to multiply defined identities (1996:199). Celebrating the dynamic capacity of transgressive identities that are generated within and through literacy practices on the web, Deibert provides a vision of the postmodern character of the web. He describes it as:

the postmodern sense of juxtaposition and superimposition, and nonlinear, pastiche-like orderings of space as characterized by Foucault’s notion of “heterotopia…”. And the recognition of “difference” and hyperplurality… suggest that the emerging architecture of world order is moving … toward nonlinear, multiperspectival, overlapping layers of political authority.
Likewise, modern mass identities centered on the ‘nation’ are being dispersed into multiple, nonterritorial “niche” communities and fragmented identities (1996:201).

The sense of community that connects us is continuously under construction and could be seen as another character in the story. Although we each experience our learning and our memory individually, our collective action is oriented toward the negotiation of meaning around the design of new points of contact, both social and technical, that combine participation and reification in new and useful ways. We systematically try to expose the differences in our recollections and interpretations. The result is an expansion of knowledge and of memory that is produced and held collectively. In Wenger’s (1998) use of the terms, neither participation nor reification exists without each other. Memory, to be meaningful, always has both of them.

There are two separate but overlapping issues that emerge in the story of our fragmented writing of a conference paper; the issue of methodology and that of new literacy practices. Methodology in this case is more than just the defining characteristics of an academic discipline, as it is central to the operation of power and knowledge in a discipline (Robin Usher, Ian Bryant & Rennie Johnston, 1997: 214) and reaches into epistemology. Robin Usher et al. call for “relocating the self in research” (op.cit. 216) describing how “until the emergence of so-called ‘new paradigm’ research, there was little appreciation of researchers as sense-making agents involved in developing understanding through dialogue.” He foregrounds the notion of the “self” as a questioning practitioner within the research arena suggesting that:

[H]aving identified the importance of seeing practices as scripted and of research as the practice of generating a convincing narrative, we can proceed to this to the idea of the self as an author (op.cit.: 217).

Usher et al. also emphasize the centrality of writing to the practice of research and develop ideas about the self as a scripted and scripting agent on a trajectory of enquiry. Usher explores a model which attends to the dispositional and situational features of personal experience as well as to technical requirements. He uses examples to demonstrate that “scripting oneself as an effective researcher can assist one to become an effective researcher, especially in an action research/reflective practice context” (op.cit. 227) and proposes the following:

The metaphor of research as the texts of personal journeys which readers as potential fellow travelers are invited to a) follow imaginatively in