

Capturing Community Memory with Images

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, communities are examining the issues of preserving cultural identity, documenting local history, promoting tourism and examining their shared heritage. Many communities have relied on official records, tradition, customs, stories (both oral and written), language, myth and similar means for the preservation of cultural identity and community memory. The Magee Community Collection (Leath, 2004) began in 1999 as an exploration of how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) might be used as a means of augmenting community memory through the provision of interactive and widely distributed ways of gathering, indexing and archiving multimedia assets. It was hoped that with time and effort cohesive processes and associated tools for these tasks would emerge (Leath, 2000). No established standards for processes and associated tools existed at the time of initial development, and it is anticipated that diversity in approaches, development and structure of community memory multimedia archives will exist for some time to come.

BUILDING COMMUNITY MEMORY AND ONLINE (VIRTUAL) COMMUNITIES

There is ongoing interest in the building of community memory. The term “building” rather than “creation” is more appropriate in that the process is most effective as a continuous, iterative process (Preece, 2000). In communities, as in individuals, the fundamental difference between knowledge and memory is persistence. An individual may at any given moment have awareness, knowledge and sentience, but only a portion of this momentary awareness is given persistence through commitment to memory. When an individual dies, their individual knowledge and memory perishes, with the exception of those memories that have been either implicitly or explicitly committed to means that ensure their persistence. A similar dynamic works within communities. Communities are made up of individuals, each of whom possesses unique memories. Within themselves, communities possess many of the means through

which individual memory may persist and be shared. Historical means of preservation include but are not limited to:

- Tradition
- Custom
- Language
- Writing
- Stories
- Myth

These historical means of building and preserving community memory may now be supplemented by technical means previously unavailable.

Geographic communities have differing motivations for developing community memory, these motivations may include (amongst others):

1. **The use of global communications to enhance local communication:** As well as connecting people in diverse places around the world, the wide availability of telecommunication and information technologies has also encouraged geographically local communication.
2. **The fear of cultural imperialism:** Is there to be only one village with uniformity of language, culture and custom? Concern over cultural dominance by the more technically advanced has resulted in a promotion of efforts toward the preservation of cultural heritage.
3. **The economic importance of tourism:** Improvements in transportation and greater disposable incomes for much of the more developed world have increased tourism and its resultant economic importance, particularly to less developed regions.

In light of the factors mentioned above, ICT can provide a means of augmenting community memory through the provision of interactive and widely distributed means of gathering, indexing and archiving digital multimedia assets, assisting in:

- The preservation of unique cultural identity and its propagation;
- The documentation of local history;
- Making available information of interest to prospective tourists and others;

- Fostering a spirit of community and shared heritage;
- Enabling cohesion with community “Diaspora.”

Each community will have a different starting point in building community memory through ICT. Some communities will have no first-generation assets (photographs, audio recordings, maps, etchings, drawings, paintings, books, etc.) and will have to begin by acquiring these assets. Other communities will have existing collections that will require equipment, software and procedures for digitisation. Still other communities will require tools and procedures for organising the multimedia assets they currently hold into a cohesive whole. To make the most of their multimedia assets, all communities will require interactive tools to promote community involvement.

Cliff Figallo lists the following benefits for Web site owners in fostering online (or virtual) communities (Figallo, 1998):

- It creates steady streams of fresh, user-originated content;
- It weaves a web of personal relationships that bind their participants to the site;
- It acts as a social flywheel, maintaining the momentum of interaction by feeding back into itself, drawing its members in and stimulating them to remain active and productive over time;
- It contributes to its own support and rejuvenation, attracting, training, and socializing its new members, and forging its own new directions for growth and expansion;
- It tells you, the host, what its members want and how to make your site more attractive and useful for them;
- It spreads your marketing message through the trusted grassroots grapevine of the Net in the testimony of satisfied participants, and in the stories that come out of its group interaction.

Building community memory through the utilisation of multimedia assets may be implemented alongside other community building tools and functions in building online communities. Community building tools and functions can be implemented in capturing community memory for those reasons listed above. Amy Jo Kim (2000) puts forward the following online community building tools and functions:

- **E-mail lists:** Moderated, un-moderated and broadcast;
- **Bulletin boards:** Threaded and linear;

- **Chat rooms:** Text-based, graphic, voice and virtual worlds;
- **Taxonomy and metaphorical models:** Categorical, geographical, media (i.e., TV channels, etc.);
- **Profiles:** System profile, user personal profiles, user public profiles;
- **Differentiated membership:** Visitor, novice, regular, leader, elder.

In summary, the process of capturing community memory and implementation of other community building tools and functions could and should co-exist, and are synergistic. Capturing community memory can assist in community-building activity, and community-building activity can assist in capturing community memory.

BACKGROUND

Every archive has to start somewhere, and the Magee College campus of the University of Ulster was fortunate enough to possess an archive of photographs and funding for digitisation. The Magee Photographic Collection consisted of nearly 4,000 photographic negatives of pictures of Londonderry and the Northwest of Ireland, dating from the 1860's up to about 1970. Before digitisation, the collection was indexed according to a system consisting of a set of index cards colour coded according to subject (Buildings, Events, Personalities, Ephemera, etc.) and number coded for location. In addition to this coded information, each entry contained such details as the name of the donor and any copyright restrictions governing the use of the material.

Around November 1996 a call went forward to invite institutions to consider inclusion of their digitised images in what was to be known as the Knowledge Gallery Project. At the time, there was considerable interest from commercial organizations including large multinationals like Kodak. In the meantime, the U.K. Joint Information Systems Council approved approximately £350,000 for an initial digitisation and cataloguing programme. The Magee Photographic Collection was submitted for consideration, and was ultimately one of the collections across the U.K. accepted for inclusion in what was to be known as the JISC Image Digitisation Initiative (JIDI, the JISC Image Digitisation Initiative, 2004).

The JIDI Project established core elements, which were required to accompany each image. These elements drew heavily from the Visual Resources Association (VRA) core categories describing visual resources (Lansi, 2002). These elements are collectively referred

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