

Provocation: What use is the digital memory archive?

Cultural institutions - including the media (most notably in the UK the BBC), but also (my focus here) museums and archives - curate both tangible and intangible artifacts of memory from a range of different sources, and increasingly facilitate others in related practices of creation and curation also.

The stories they tell are diversifying, multiplying and cross-fertilizing across platforms, and through varying constituencies¹.

One consequence of this has been a growth in the digital memory archive that has been unprecedented even since the advent of oral history and other techniques in the early part of the twentieth century.²

We might note that it is in the realm of the collective narrative archive that the authority and authenticity of institutional voice is most actively challenged, yet (perhaps for that very reason) these emergent narrative forms and outputs often remain the most invisible across institutional platforms, often nullifying their potential to democratise.

This provocation will present three museum initiatives that embrace and seek to archive personal narrative memory, one from the United Kingdom, another from Australia, and a third from the United States. Together, they raise a number of questions:

- Is there enough forethought about the kinds of memories that are being solicited?
- Is there a clear enough idea about what their use-value is to institutions? And is that communicated to participants?
- In what ways are institutions changed by the memories that emerge in such contexts? Does it matter if they are not?
- In what ways do technologies themselves become imbued with power in such projects?

¹ (Bennett 1995, Smith 2006, Vergo 1989, Walkowitz & Knauer 2009, Marstine 2006, Knell 2004, MacDonald & Fyfe 1996, Janes 2009).

² This practice is perhaps most famously demonstrated in the work of StoryCorps in the United States. See <http://storycorps.org/> [Accessed July 2013]

I take as my focus ‘the Museum’; a site where representation and memory are ensnared (Steyn 2014). Where ‘voice’ is deeply, *achingly*, political.

Why museums...

The cabinet of curiosity (the origin of the modern museum) was, in practice, a frame for the presentation of that which constituted the ‘spectacular’. Both natural and man-made elements from around the world were presented alongside one another seemingly at random.

Through hundreds of years of museum development this notion of the spectacular has remained at the heart of museum’s practice, and this has proved to problematise institutional purpose, collection practices and the ‘voice’ it utilises.

However, since the 1970s, the new museology movement has signalled a shift toward recognising that the everyday truth of the ‘ordinary’ is ‘intrinsically interesting’ in itself, that ‘voice’ needs to be democratised - prised open - and that wider fuller access to collections should be a right not a luxury.

Widening a museum’s appeal is no mean feat given the recognised sexism, racism, and Eurocentrism within ‘traditional’ collections³, and the reluctance of some members of the public to cross the (often intimidating) physical threshold into buildings that still maintain architectural nods to their ‘civilising’ Victorian function.⁴ Museums are of course big open spaces within which we can be watched.

The new museology movement has sought to confront this history with the multitude of narratives which we now recognise as comprising ‘truth’ in actuality. This means that museum output, including research and curatorial responsibility, has become increasingly about dialogue with the communities a Museum serves (and also, crucially, those communities *not* being served).

As part of this shift it has been acknowledged that access is not only about being *seen* to represent, but about democratising the right to speak, and to create. This kind of endeavour, according to Bradburne, ‘signals a far-reaching and courageous re-examination of the museum’s ‘top-down’ role’ (Bradburne 2000: 387). [NB One of my questions relates to how much of this kind of re-examination we see in practice]

³ As recognised by Vergo 1993 who said: ‘In the acquisition of material, of whatever kind, let alone in putting that material on public display or making it publicly accessible, museums make certain choices determined by judgements as to value, significance or monetary worth, judgements which may derive in part from the system of values peculiar to the institution itself, but which in a more profound sense are also rooted in our education, our upbringing, our prejudices’ (Vergo 1993: 2).

⁴ The historical development of the Museum – architecture, patronage, form and function - is detailed in Tony Bennett’s ‘The Birth of The Museum’. See also Hooper-Greenhill 2000 and Message 2006.

One of the ways in which museums have embraced this challenge is through the use of digital means and mechanisms for the collection and curation of different points of view, different histories, perspectives and ‘truths’; different voices that help to elucidate our collective past.

This is not a phenomena unique to museums (as Garde-Hansen attests - SLIDE) but I contend it is a particularly interesting one in those contexts.

So, here I’m going to look at three examples of digital narrative archives to explore what kinds of memories are being concretised therein.

In briefly overviewing the three examples here, I reference the concepts of autobiographical, topographical and flashbulb memory in order to explore what *kind* of memories – and voices - are being invoked in each of the calls to remember.

1. *Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums: Culture Shock! digital storytelling as autobiographical memory*

Digital stories are short multimedia films recognisable by their ‘scrapbook’ aesthetic (Meadows 2003). More often than not, they consist of a voiceover and images (photos, clippings, scans, home video) and are sometimes accompanied by a musical soundtrack. Their tone is often intensely personal, and their narrative deliberate.

The process itself, and the emphasis on photographic elements from the tellers’ lives necessitates an intimate and autobiographical feel to many of the stories. This autobiographical element is my focus here.⁵

The Culture Shock! digital storytelling project ran from 2008 in the North East of England, and was facilitated by Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums. The goal of the project was to collect up to 1000 stories⁶, to ‘preserve them in perpetuity’ as accessioned digital artefacts, and to circulate them via the web.

Autobiographical memories can be characterised and are facilitated by self-reference. Although there is no absolute and accepted definition, such memory might include: personal

⁵ I have written elsewhere about the history of digital storytelling and its impacts (Kidd 2009a) and how it might be understood as autobiography (Kidd 2009b)

⁶ later revised to 600 (Culture:Unlimited 2011)

interpretation, variable veridicality (faithfulness to fact), long memory duration, and imagery. They are often vivid, affectively intense, repetitively recalled, linked to other similar memories, and often represent unresolved conflicts or enduring concerns.

The variable veridicality, (possible unfaithfulness to fact) inherent in autobiography is of course an interesting consideration for museums – steeped in discourses about authority, knowledge and objectivity - and one that has received little consideration in the literature. It could of course serve to undermine the authority of the archive as a whole, or perhaps this quality in itself re-asserts the authenticity of the archive and thus it's own particular 'truth'. It depends what kind of authenticity we think we are looking for. It is perhaps this ambiguity that makes such archives easier to park online than to bring within the museum walls.

The Culture Shock! digital stories under analysis could all be easily understood as autobiographical. The emphasis on both personal story and unique individual artefacts contributed by participants (photographic, video, objects, the teller's voice) translate into stories that are affectively intense, often of enduring personal import, yet *true* only in so far as the teller deems appropriate.

The 'I' of the director-narrator comes through very strongly, and the past tense dominates; memories are the preferred subject – especially for older participants. This accords with previous research (Kidd 2009b) that noted definite trends related to the age groups of participants. Younger participants tend to write stories about hobbies, identity construction and stereotypes: Older participants are more likely to engage in life-writing and reflection (as below).

It has been suggested that in order for autobiographical memories (especially difficult or traumatic) to become authentic or even felicitous there needs to be an element of 'narrative witnessing' (Kacandes 1999, p.55). That is, there must be a teller and a listener in order for narrative of this kind to serve the purpose of the teller.

The digital storytelling process allows for various forms of witnessing; the other workshop participants and the museum staff in the first instance, and then in most instances family also. The opportunities afforded by the digital archive indicate a potential for *global* witnessing, but there is little or no evidence to suggest that this might be of use-value to the story makers in the same way that immediacy of witnessing and response might be.

So, whose interests, ultimately, do they serve? The individuals? Some notion of 'the collective'? Or the institution?

15 Second Place is a project ostensibly for students that encourages them to reflect in film the places and spaces that give their lives meaning; to demonstrate how we orient ourselves in space. If our understanding of space is shaped by memory, and our memories shaped by locale (as in topographical memory, Lindsey 2003) then 15 Second Place proposes to build an archive of short, often cryptic, insights into experience and personal reference bounded by location.

15 Second Place was launched in 2011 by the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, which has a history of collaborative video and digital storytelling projects. Funded by the Department of Education and early Childhood Development, the project seeks to involve young people in an inquiry based creative process through a focus on place, '[b]ased on the premise that place is fundamental to giving people an understanding of their environment'. If one looks at the stories, it can be seen that the relationship between memory, the present and place is deeply ambiguous.

The simplicity of the project, and the ubiquity of the tools for contribution (most mobile phones and many cameras now have the capacity to shoot 15 seconds of film) mean that the creative process can be driven by the students themselves. They can then share films via social media, create playlists, and leave comments making this simultaneously a personal and social form of documentary and place-making.⁷

For the most part, the videographer remains absent, being inaudible and invisible in their 'place', an absence of self *beyond* that selection of place. This lends most of the films analysed an abstraction, a playfulness, and a dependence on imagination even as the places, which become the subjects of the films, represent the everydayness of life in a city.

The venues knowingly foreground the backdrop of our lives; coffee shops, parks, stations and disused buildings, accompanied by the noises of the city. The films analysed were still and reflective; they were also predominantly un-edited.

In presenting a theory of topographical memory, Derek Lindsey asserts that 'Topography remembered is a kind of knowledge' (2003: 41) going on to note that '...landscape and the shape of the land literally makes an impression on our memories' (2003: 48). These connections are typically difficult to make cogniscent, and even more so to verbalise.

⁷ currently 684 films

15 Second Place has created a near silent archive of topographical memories that on viewing, can in fact be very unfamiliar and unfathomable. In many of these films, even at only 15 seconds, the landscape holds our vision for slightly longer than is comfortable, leaving the ‘witness’ in this instance disoriented, having seen through another’s eyes, but unsure of what in fact they saw. The archive does not constitute a spatial map, and neither could it, rather, it encourages film-makers to re-appraise the ways in which they ‘see’ and are ‘seen’ within the various places of their memory.

So, whose interests, ultimately, do they serve? The individuals? Some notion of ‘the collective’? Or the institution?

3. *9/11 Memorial Museum: Make History as Flashbulb Memory*⁸

Flashbulb memory describes the phenomena whereby people recall, with startling detail and intense feeling, a particular moment in time. These memories are long-lasting, vivid, and often emotionally recalled.

Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett notes that 9/11 was (at that time) the most photographed disaster in history in her 2003 article on flashbulb memory and photography saying ‘9/11 has created the powerful sense that one is a witness to one’s own experience and obligated to record it in some way’ (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2003: 27).⁹

The issue of how to enact an official museal memorialisation of 9/11 has been the subject of frequent and ongoing debate. In other outlets however, the rush to share, to speak and to document was unprecedented. Many websites devoted to discrete and dispersed personal narratives were launched¹⁰ before the 9/11 Memorial Museum began their own endeavor in 2009. This level of activity is symptomatic of the ‘highly charged public sphere that formed in response to the event of September 11th’ (Message 2006: 10).

The Make History project is articulated as a ‘collective map of 9/11 stories’ which now houses more than 1000 photos 17 videos, and 524 stories which have been submitted in text form.¹¹

⁸ The archive can be accessed at <http://makehistory.national911memorial.org/>

⁹ She also reflects on museum responses in the immediate aftermath of the tragic events.

¹⁰ Such as those at <http://www.rememberseptember11.us/>, <http://voicesofseptember11.org> and <http://11-sept.org/survivors.html>

¹¹ As at June 2013.

Individual stories vary in length from a few lines to 1000 or more words. Many include the location at which the teller was on 9/11 allowing for stories to be mapped (again via google maps) and accessed spatially. Indeed, this is a topographic memory also. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has asserted, the city itself has become a museum for and of 9/11 (2003). Stories can also be accessed on a timeline of events, via theme or topic (for example, if one wants to view those that are tagged as messages of hope).

Some contributors write in the present tense, although most write in the past tense perhaps indicating the extent to which these narratives are considered, and even rehearsed via performances in other outlets:

‘... the bus driver calmly announces, Ladies and gentlemen, you have just witnessed a plane crash into the World Trade Center.’ ... complete pandemonium broke out. Sobbing, praying, frantic questioning, and impromptu rapping all filled the bus to a crescendo of mayhem’ (Chelan David)

‘It was the longest day of my life. It was an event that forever changed me’ (Edith Gould)

‘When I finally got on the train, I was a sardine.’ (John Paul Durazzo)

Collectivity and connectivity of experience is also very evident, with a lot of reflection on mediatization of the ‘event’ itself, recollections of turning on the television or hearing a song on the radio. The detail is often overwhelming, as we might expect with flashbulb memories.

In the sample, the ‘need’ to speak manifests in narrative accounts predominantly in the first person, although there was also a poem, a letter¹², two diary/blog entries and two contributions which took the form of obituaries¹³. It is common to find the phrase ‘My September 11’ in the title of narrative entries, demonstrating contributors taking ownership of the memory, and its significance.

The storying process has a number of functions for the contributors, not least the therapeutic:

¹² ‘Dear Grandchildren

It is September of 2001 and I don’t know you yet, but I am writing to you because I guess I believe you will exist someday. I’m your grandmother Alice. I’m 53 years old and Daniel and Ian are my sons. If all goes well, they will be your fathers.

It is hard to think of how to begin. Something terrible has happened...’ [Alice Shechter]

¹³ One for Waleed J. Iskander who died aboard American Airlines flight 11 and another for Edward Carlino who was on the 98th floor of 1WTC.

‘I feel a strange need to dig up all of those feelings and cling to them. It was so horrible, but it all remains so precious’ (Carrie Pitzulo)

‘What is my reasoning for writing up my own story of events of that morning? Is it because I am just tired of repeating to friends and family the events of that morning? Yes. Is it because I am a historian (of a minor scale) or because I think it’s an event that any ‘eye witness’ should keep his/her memories of? Is it to sort out in my own mind and try to get through it? Yes, it’s all of these.’ (Robert Dorn)

As can be seen, these are flashbulb memories, topographical memories, but also autobiographical. And they raise, more acutely than the previous cases, the spectre of ethics in the digital memory archive.

And again we might ask; whose interests, ultimately, do they serve? The individuals? Some notion of ‘the collective’? Or the institution?

What to do with the accumulated digital memory archive

All three of the projects summarised here seek to open up museums to the voices of their constituents who are seen as being able to contribute a potentially unique and powerful perspective on very different themes. There are many many more of them that could be referenced here.

At face value, they seek to engender active audience – or user - participation (not necessarily visitor; and that distinction is an important one) which is about process as well as product (more so, in technical terms, in the first two examples), offering individuals the opportunity to contribute in one-off extraordinary ways to projects that are in themselves extraordinary to the traditional work of such institutions.

I’m interested in the connections between individual personal responses, the larger ‘collective’ memory archives produced, the technologies themselves, and the wider work of institutions.

Collective memory is ‘an inherently mediated phenomenon’ (Neiger et al. 2011: 3) which is, according to scholars, being ‘‘concretized’ on the Internet’ in the same way that it has been materialized through physical structures such as museums and monuments (ibid 2011: 5). This of course has ramifications, and raises questions around agency and the collective architectures of knowledge we think we are producing in these programmes.

There is, of course, no mutual exclusivity to the ideas of individual and collective memory; a memory does still take place in ones own mind, even at the same time as it might be called forth socially, or within particular group arrangements. Memory, although recognised as a personal act ‘belonging to a psychological sphere’, is simultaneously ‘culturally *mediated*’ (Bennett & Kennedy 2003, p.7),

The examples above all constitute the bringing together of individual memories, but vary in the extent they might be understood as collective. The frameworks within which they are called forth are indeed social, no more so than in the group workshop process associated with the *CultureShock!* Digital stories, or the school groups tasked with making films as part of *15 Second Place*. In such programmes the making process itself is a large part of the collective endeavor, giving rise to potentially more potent contributions (see Rodriguez 2001).

Make History is perhaps a more complex example of collective memory. We might note the history that is being recounted as being one that was famously collectively experienced (the events of 9/11), but the ‘act’ of remembering is a solitary one, one where ‘individuals interact with software, not each other’ (Silberman & Purser 2012: 18).

Silberman and Purser propose that there is nothing collective about such online archives other than the sum of individual experiences and as such, proclaim they fail to ‘escape the one-directional frame of the museum panel’ (2012: 19). This raises questions about what the use-value of such an archive might, or should, be, and how we expect any audience to respond. Who are the constituencies of ‘witnesses’ who can render these memories and their archival purposeful?

Participatory memory projects are seen as socially and ethically more desirable than those that are not participatory, and digital tools are fast becoming a go-to resource for collecting materials and later, providing an interface so that audiences can retrieve them.

But Silberman and Purser sound a note of caution about such tools; they ‘must be used with caution lest they merely enhance the dominance of the authorized, official narratives that have degraded and in many places replaced the creative power of both individual and collective memory’ (Silberman & Purser 2012: 16-17).

Here too the technologies themselves become imbued with power; to give voice, to facilitate, to archive, to accumulate. Those technologies also become forms of museological power; effective means for managing, framing, silencing and

disciplining. They are all the more potent for their seeming neutrality, and the wider discourses about empowerment, community and democracy within which they are utilized (often unproblematised and remarked upon).

These platforms also provide mechanisms for curators, education staff or marketers (say) to interpret and create additional layers of meaning through tags, end credits, project descriptions and transcripts that make connections across the archive; trying perhaps to render it coherent. To narrativize. And so, the traditional order of business is restored.

Gaynor Kavanagh's impassioned warning from 2000 still rings true:

people [are] whole beings, not just ... filing cabinets for oral histories of haymaking or the manufacture of Morris Minors, ready and waiting to be opened, emptied and shut again (Kavanagh: 31)

The desire to collect personal memories shows no sign of abating, quite conversely, in 2014, the Centenary of World War One, we are seeing a ramping up of activity in this arena; an increased urgency associated with the slippage of time, and the (now complete) loss of first hand witnesses to that 'theatre of war'. But in each and every instance we should be minded to ask whether a project is ultimately about process or product, and to honestly account for how such an archive will be given use-value both now and in the future.

Erlil (2011:4) notes that 'the Internet has rapidly become a kind of global mega-archive', and one of the consequences might be a sense of archive fever, or worse, archive fatigue. 'Cultural amnesia' might seem as likely an outcome as any lasting democratic intervention, as we invest the technology with the responsibility to remember and store the materials on a hard drive in some obscure location as 'dead knowledge' (Erlil 2011: 4). The archive is concretised, but to what end?

Digital archives have an increasing role to play as holding places for those artefacts which contribute to our sense of cultural and individual significance. They also take on a wider, collective significance as source materials and 'content providers' (Tan & Müller 2003, p.55).

This development and its implications for both professional and amateur media producers - terms that may yet lose their distinctiveness - have yet to be fully explored or (no doubt) exploited within the museum. This is a call for a more thoughtful and nuanced

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consideration of ethics in the online museum space around the crucial and knotty issue of 'voice' and agency.