

Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice –  
2013 – Volume 22, Issue 2, pp. 113–130  
URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-114585

ISSN: 1876-8830

URL: <http://www.journalsi.org>

Publisher: Igitur publishing, in cooperation  
with Utrecht University of

Applied Sciences, Faculty of Society and Law

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Received: 11 December 2012

Accepted: 6 May 2013

Category: Theory

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## NEW DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH ON LOCAL MEMORY WEBSITES

### ABSTRACT

#### **New directions in research on local memory websites**

Recent studies apply highly variable terminology in explaining the benefits of interventions using local memory websites. Our literature review systematizes this terminology into three, clearer levels of analysis that fit neatly into the empowerment framework: concepts on the micro level for individual benefits, on the meso level for group gains and on the macro level for community strengthening processes. On the macro level we distinguish three concepts: community memory, cultural citizenship and community capacity. With respect to all levels, the claims in the present literature tend to be based on offline data and seldom include an analysis of online participation.

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This one-sidedness is due to an emphasis on institutional interventions that often unintentionally prevent online participation. Nevertheless, the literature presents the accessible and online nature of local memory websites as a key driving force of empowerment, especially on the meso and macro levels. To enrich the body of knowledge, we propose research on the actual composition of the field of local memory websites and on more autonomous initiatives.

### **Keywords**

Digital memories, community memory, cultural citizenship, community capacity, empowerment, community informatics

### **SAMENVATTING**

#### **Nieuwe richtingen in onderzoek naar buurtverhalenwebsites**

Recente studies gebruiken een sterk variërende terminologie voor het benoemen van de opbrengsten van interventies met buurtverhalenwebsites. Onze literatuurstudie ordent deze terminologie tot drie meer eenduidige analyseniveaus, die naadloos aansluiten op het empowerment model: concepten op microniveau voor individuele opbrengsten, op mesoniveau voor groepsvoordelen en op macroniveau voor versterking van de gemeenschap. Op het macroniveau onderscheiden we drie concepten: collectief geheugen, cultureel burgerschap en gemeenschapskracht. Met betrekking tot alle niveaus zijn de beweringen in de huidige literatuur voornamelijk gebaseerd op offline data en bevatten zelden een analyse van online participatie. Deze eenzijdigheid wordt veroorzaakt door de focus op institutionele interventies, die vaak onbedoeld online participatie verhinderen. Desondanks, presenteert de literatuur het open en online karakter van buurtverhalenwebsites als de drijvende kracht voor empowerment, in het bijzonder op het meso- en macroniveau. Om de bestaande kennis op het gebied van buurtverhalenwebsites uit te breiden stellen we onderzoek voor dat de daadwerkelijke samenstelling van dit veld in kaart brengt en meer autonome initiatieven bestudeert.

### **Trefwoorden**

Digitale herinneringen, collectief geheugen, cultureel burgerschap, gemeenschapskracht, empowerment, digitale interventies

## INTRODUCTION

Local memory websites offer local residents a platform on which to collect and share their memories about particular places or experiences in their neighbourhoods and districts. The digital memories consist of audio recordings, videos, pictures or text. A prominent case in the body of literature is the Sharing Stories project<sup>1</sup>, developed in the Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) in Brisbane, a former non-residential area that hosted military barracks, a university and indigenous people. As part of the redevelopment process, residents from the surrounding neighbourhoods were involved in a series of professionally led workshops resulting in short videos recording stories of what they knew about the KGUV's past. Another frequently cited example in the body of literature is the Memory of the East project<sup>2</sup> in Amsterdam, in which, as part of an online and offline exhibition that it was preparing about the eastern parts of the city, the Amsterdam Museum trained residents from the district's neighbourhoods in the collection of memories of local everyday life. Volunteers interviewed other residents or went to group meetings to collect stories together. After the exhibition closed in 2003, an active group of volunteers notified the museum that they wanted to continue collecting memories and presenting them online (Ernst, 2006) and have continued to do so to the present.

In the digital age, it is not surprising that researchers and professionals note the importance of such local memory websites for the well-being of a neighbourhood and its individual residents. Books such as *Constructing and Sharing Memory: Community Informatics, Identity and Empowerment* (Stillman & Johanson, 2007) and *The Participatory Museum* (Simon, 2010) discuss innovative interventions that combine new media, memory and locality to solve problems that often arise in modern cities, with their high diversity and density. In doing so, these and other authors mention a wide range of effects that ultimately foster a stronger local community.

We see two problems in the research within this promising field of intervention. Firstly, the set of concepts used to theorize about the effects of these interventions remain fragmented, but could be combined to become the building blocks of a comprehensive view on the benefits of this emerging field. Although the *term* empowerment is used in some of the reviewed articles, here we will address the following question: Can the empowerment *framework* be applied to analyse interventions using local memory websites? Secondly, and partly arising from the first issue, it appears difficult to identify which of the claimed effects have been substantiated by empirical findings and which merely theorized on the basis of some kind of aggregation – if any. This leads to a secondary question for this article: How have the interventions been studied?

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This article will address these questions by systematically reviewing the current research on actual interventions using local memory websites. The first section will describe how we found and selected relevant articles. In addition, it will explain what these articles have in common in terms of their research approaches and how we analysed them with respect to the concepts the authors applied to describe the effects of the interventions. Based on our analysis, the second section proposes an overall framework with concepts on three levels. Furthermore, we illustrate this by describing in concrete terms how the concepts from one specific case fit into this model. The third section demonstrates how our findings map onto the empowerment framework and provides some examples of empowerment outcomes that remained implicit in the articles reviewed. The final section will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the existing body of knowledge, proposing two necessary directions for further research.

## LOCAL MEMORY WEBSITES AS INTERVENTIONS

We began by conducting a comprehensive literature search using Google Scholar, with the search terms “community memory”, “social memory”, “urban memory”, “local memory” and “cultural memory” derived from an article describing the discipline of memory studies (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008, p. 19). We also made a short list of additional constraints that we could apply, depending on the term used. For geographical constraints we used “local”, “neighbourhood”, “district” and “communal”; for constraints that pointed towards the involvement of the internet we used “new media”, “online” and “website”; for variations on the memory aspect we used “narratives”, “storytelling”, “life writing” and “stories”.

To select relevant articles from the search results we applied the following criteria:

1. The article had to describe a study on an initiative involving the collection of local memories online.
2. Each digital memory had to be a non-fictional expression regarding a place or an experience in the neighbourhood.
3. The initiative had to have a dedicated website containing at least 20 memories.
4. At least five residents had to be involved in the creation of the digital memories.
5. The initiative had to be limited to a particular neighbourhood, district, city or town.

An initial search and selection led to a set of four articles. For each one, we performed a backward search via the references used and a forward search using the “referenced by” function. We also

checked other publications by the authors of the selected articles. The end result consisted of 36 articles, 16 of which related to the well-researched KGUV case in Brisbane and 20 which described 11 other – sometimes multiple – case studies.

Nearly all of the 36 articles had four things in common. Firstly, almost all of them involved action-research approaches.<sup>3</sup> Although this research strategy has different definitions (Foth, 2006a), it always aims at changing some aspect of reality by creating or facilitating an intervention into that reality. The researcher and the participants work closely together, which empowers the latter to act and provides the former with knowledge about how to intervene. Secondly, the overall aim of the interventions described in each of the selected articles is formulated in terms of “the development of healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods” (Klaebe & Foth, 2006, p. 2). Thirdly, in all but one case<sup>4</sup>, the intervention is primarily characterized by a method called Digital Storytelling (DST). This method was developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling in 1994 and provides detailed guidelines for making short videos or “digital stories” (Lambert, 2002). Finally, the data analysed in the action-research projects described were mainly gathered offline. Only two of the articles offer a systematic analysis of the online memories and interaction associated with them (Burgess, 2007; Thumim, 2009).

Against this background, we conducted a rigorous qualitative analysis of the literature to identify and organize the concepts used to explain the effects of these interventions. Our analysis resembles the hermeneutics of the coding process in grounded theory (Bryman, 2008, pp. 542–543). Processes of constant comparison, saturation and three phases of coding are important characteristics of this approach. In the following it will become clear how we applied these processes.

We decided to start by analysing the cluster of 16 articles on the Brisbane KGUV case, based on the assumption that it would cover a large part of the body of knowledge on local memory websites. The first phase involved a process of close reading and open coding of text elements while constantly comparing them as indicators of concepts in development. The result was a list of more than 47 concepts that differed in terms of their level of abstraction. The second phase consisted of axial coding based on our research notes, as well as a second reading of the articles, which divided a remaining set of 39 codes into three levels of abstraction. For example, *digital creativity* was coded as barely abstract, *inclusion* as moderately abstract, and *cultural citizenship* as highly abstract. In the third phase, the remaining concepts were reconsidered in a process of selective coding, once again by re-examining the literature and our research notes. This resulted in the identification of three meta-concepts, each of which had a set of six intermediate concepts

more or less related to it. A set of 14 directly observable concepts was noted to be largely common to all the articles on the KGUV project. Although the final codes seemed to have reached a level of saturation at this point, we further analysed 11 key articles<sup>5</sup> on the other case studies, one by one. The analysis of the first articles led to some small adjustments in the terminology for a few concepts, but no further adjustment was required for the later articles. After analysing the ninth article we concluded that the resulting code tree had become saturated and as such was suitable for further modelling.

### **MODELLING THE INTERVENTION EFFECTS INTO A FRAMEWORK**

We distilled micro, meso and macro levels of analysis from our coding results, a model of which is provided in Figure 1. The concepts closest to the empirical observations form the micro level. These concepts were used to describe the direct individual effects of being involved in collecting local memories online. In turn, these effects were further developed into intermediate abstract concepts – forming the meso level – describing effects for larger groups in the community. The macro level contains three meta-concepts – community memory, cultural citizenship and community capacity – used to explain and frame varying selections of the lower level concepts.

Although the literature on KGUV dominates the body of research on interventions using local memory websites, the framework is based on all of the articles reviewed. This implies that all of these articles can be visualized with the framework. This is illustrated by two examples plotted in Figure 1: A1 (Ringas *et al.*, 2011) and A2 (Copeland & Miskelly, 2010). The aim of the intervention described in A1 was to facilitate community memory in new ways in order to “retrieve lost ambience in urban sites due to the constant change of the physical environment as time goes by” (Ringas *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). The article explicitly related the intervention to community memory, combining a rather small subset of all the concepts available in the two inner circles. The intervention in A2 aimed to increase community capacity by applying “digital storytelling as a cross-boundary method for community building and activism” (Copeland & Miskelly, 2010, p. 192). The effects pursued were discussed in the context of a rather large subset of concepts at the meso and macro levels.

Obviously, each article in our empirical corpus had its own focus, as the reported intervention had or still has its own specific aims. However, the basic process was similar in all interventions, with residents participating offline and online, producing and sharing stories based on their memories

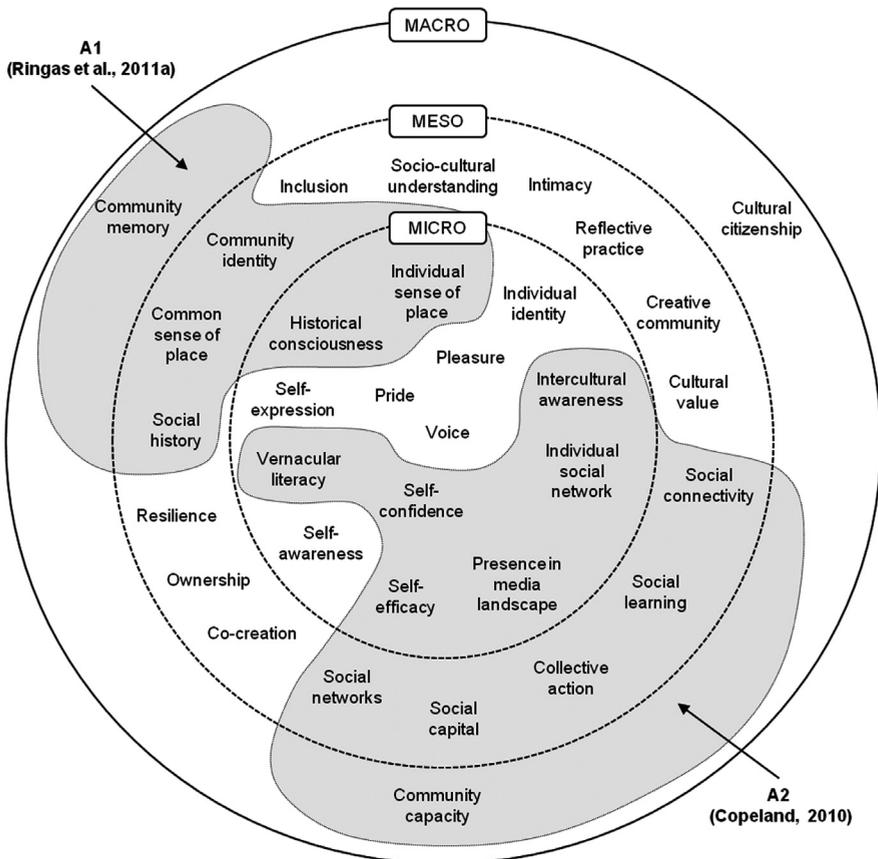


Figure 1: Three levels for analysing the effects of interventions using local memory websites.

of the neighbourhood. Thus, with the right ingredients, an intervention using a local memory website could have effects that relate to all of the concepts on all levels within the framework. As the KGVU intervention was the only case for which this was claimed in the literature, in the following section we use the literature on this specific case to illustrate how the effects are related within and across the levels of analysis. The three meta-concepts on the macro level will be our starting point.

### **Constructing community memory**

About half of the articles selected on the KGUV project describe the online collection of local memories in terms of the construction of “community memory”, which is defined as “the collective representation of past events and experiences that leave traces in the appearance of the built environment and contribute to a shared socio-cultural understanding of residents in a given locale” (Klaebe & Foth, 2007, p. 145).

Prior to the urban development process, residents from the surrounding neighbourhoods made short videos about the KGUV’s past in a series of professionally led workshops. These started with participants’ recollecting and sharing personal memories about the area, which reinforced their connection to KGUV and contributed to their sense of place (Foth, Klaebe & Hearn, 2008). By publically recounting these stories related to their personal past, as well as to the past of other people and the past of the area, the storytellers were assisted in the construction of their identity in the present (Burgess, Foth & Klaebe, 2006; Klaebe, 2006). Furthermore, the stories tended to make references to important events that had affected the area and in this way reinforced a historical consciousness among the participants (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Klaebe, Foth, Burgess & Bilandzic, 2007). Being involved in storytelling workshops also offered the participants a pleasant opportunity to recount what they knew about the area to a rather new audience. Sharing and comparing these memories was reported to be one of the most engaging aspects of these workshops (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009). When the stories contained elements of the storyteller’s residential history and sociocultural heritage, this also raised the listener’s awareness of differences in background and values (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Foth *et al.*, 2008).

In this way, the collective set of memories about KGUV grew among the participants of the workshops (Klaebe, 2008; Klaebe *et al.*, 2007). In addition, the co-created videos represented the participants’ perspectives on the site’s past, giving them a sense of ownership in relation to the creation of its history. Locals from the surrounding area could easily identify with these perspectives because “the incorporation of ordinary “voices” can facilitate the affective communication of [...] history to a broader public” (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009, p. 164). Thanks to this emotional element, the stories provoked discussion, reflection and enthusiasm among the viewers when shown at organized public events and to spontaneous micro-publics (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Klaebe, 2006, 2008). It also meant that the collection of videos attracted more traffic than any other content on the KGUV website (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Klaebe *et al.*, 2007), which suggested it would be an accessible and engaging reference point for future residents (Klaebe, Adkins, Foth & Hearn, 2009).

At a later stage, the new residents moving into KGUV were also involved in sharing memories (Klaebe, 2008; Klaebe *et al.*, 2007). Among other things, they were invited to translate their own sociocultural heritage and past residential history into narrative paths mapped onto a Google Map interface. These stories offered the new residents insight into the variety of their backgrounds in terms of sociocultural heritage and residential history (Klaebe, 2008; Klaebe *et al.*, 2009). In addition, some identified with the online stories because they described the anxiety they felt on arriving in the new community (Klaebe *et al.*, 2007). Contributors also discovered crossroads and analogies in each other's history lines, which contributed to mutual recognition and even instigated personal meetings (Klaebe *et al.*, 2009). On a collective level, these memories contributed to a better understanding between the neighbours and of the developing neighbourhood as a whole (Klaebe & Foth, 2007; Klaebe *et al.*, 2007). With respect to this collective level, the KGUV research drew on Dolores Hayden's book, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, which includes creative aspects of local preservation (as cited in Foth *et al.*, 2008). These aspects lie at the basis of the theoretical perspective on local memory websites discussed below.

### **Practising cultural citizenship**

The community that emerges from an online collection of resident-created videos is claimed to host a practice of cultural citizenship. Burgess and her colleagues subscribe to Joke Hermes' view of cultural citizenship to a great extent, which she defines as "the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture" (as cited in Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p. 4). However, the transformation of popular culture caused by the growth of user-generated content in new media contexts forces Burgess *et al.* to "take into account the interweaving of everyday life, creative content production and social life that are characteristic of digital culture" (Burgess *et al.*, p. 4). In addition, they specify the text-related practices as "everyday active participation in a networked, highly heterogeneous and open cultural public sphere" (Burgess *et al.*, p. 5).

Moulding the memories about the KGUV area into short videos led to a blending of informal and formal learning, resulting in what Burgess calls "vernacular literacies":

They include not only "learned" skills, like the ability to conceive and execute an effective narrative and use a computer, but also the more intuitive modes of collecting and arranging textual elements (as for scrapbooking), the oral performance of personal stories (learned

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through everyday social interaction), and the combination of sonic and visual elements to create televisual flow (learned through the consumption of television, film and animation). (Burgess, 2006, p. 210).

The creators enjoyed both the process of engaging in these kinds of self-expression and the final products themselves (Burgess, 2007). By publishing them proudly online, the participants gained both access to and a presence in the media landscape. This contributed to a growth in their self-awareness (Foth, 2006b) and self-confidence (Klaebe & Foth, 2006). As self-expressions, their stories had an authentic character: “[f]or the storyteller, the digital story is a means of “becoming real” to others, on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances. Many of the stories are, quite literally, touching” (Burgess, 2006, p. 211).

From the perspective of the viewer, the stories contained certain effective and affective qualities, which explained their strength in social communication. Firstly, especially with respect to videos, the personal voice-over led to a sense of intimacy. Secondly, familiarity with certain lexical elements such as stereotypical themes, clichés, nostalgia and sentimentality, gave the stories the power of social connectivity. Thirdly, the sense of authentic self-expression that was conveyed by these familiar lexical items lowered the barriers to empathy. Finally, these stories claimed agency for ordinary people in making sense of their lives within their social circumstances and in working out what “living a good life” means (Burgess, 2006).

What Burgess calls the “even access to “voice” in the media-landscape” (Burgess, 2006, p. 201) implies that the participants became involved in new practices with an important democratic potential. The intertwining of offline and online participation was based on cultural products that displayed multiple “modes of discourse, including everyday life, affect and pleasure” (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p. 3). In this environment, people negotiated local matters of personal concern that might not relate to a narrow view on democratic participation at first sight, but that in fact contain “the most powerful modes of citizen engagement” (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, p. 3). According to Burgess, this follows Jürgen Habermas’ definitions of “episodic” and “occasional publics”, but also introduces new public spheres with their own cultural value, in which there is little room for a popular culture that originates from mass media or dominant institutional discourses (as cited in Burgess *et al.*, 2006). The resident discourses that develop through a practice of cultural citizenship play an important role in determining how a community steers itself towards the future. This is the third perspective on initiatives using local memory websites in the KGUV literature.

## Growing community capacity

In the KGUV area, where new residents had only recently become neighbours, the memory project is claimed to have contributed crucial elements to the growth of community capacity, which is defined as “the awareness and ability of a community to effectively use their assets” (Foth, 2006c, p. 314). As Foth (2006c, p. 314) puts it, in a context which was characterized by “the absence of an established community culture and history, neighbourhood community building efforts ha[d] to focus on cultivating the assets, skills and values that lay dormant in individual residents”. The KGUV literature describes this in terms of the participants showing their digital memories in the context of family, friends or roommates, which tended to be popular and increased the creators’ pride (Burgess, 2006; Burgess & Klaebe, 2009). An important side effect for some participants was that their knowledge about and attitude towards new media shifted to become more positive (Burgess, 2006). During the production, the participants experimented with making independent choices about content and form for their future online expressions. This tended to demonstrate their growing agency in certain situations and helped them to develop a voice (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Klaebe, 2006). In addition, meeting new people at the workshops and on the website (Burgess, 2006; Foth, 2006c) enlarged the participants’ social network, which in turn strengthened their sense of belonging to a community (Klaebe & Foth, 2006).

In this context, the participants were encouraged to improve their self-efficacy in general and “to gain a better appreciation of their capacity to bring about change within their local community” in particular (Klaebe & Foth, 2007, p. 150). This appreciation grew when the digital memories not only informed the representations of space during the redevelopment planning phase, but also fed back into the ongoing development process and the discourses about the KGUV (Klaebe *et al.*, 2009). In this way, the urban planners and residents became a co-creative community in the urban design process:

The development of a discursive method to activate and embed rich, multivalent conceptions of the situated experience of the built environment (via multi-modal experiential narratives) in urban planning and design processes, offers the opportunity to move well beyond the conception of users as abstract/passive into a reality of a co-creative community. (Foth *et al.*, 2008, p. 8).

In the KGUV case this discursive method was organized in the light of Barry Wellman's claim that in the network society “the nature of the social ties people establish and maintain changes from

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what used to be door-to-door and place-to-place relationships to what are now person-to-person and role-to-role relationships" (as cited in Foth & Adkins, 2006, p. 118). The ties between people thereby become weaker and more egocentric, but the social connectedness they imply remains well developed. It was precisely this phenomenon that the narrative approach tapped into "via co-creation of content, and the use of locative media to reinstate "the local" in the midst of the global" (Foth *et al.*, 2008, p. 4). Thus, residents might not have engaged in many dialogues with their neighbours, but they were clearly informally in touch with residents in the same locale. The social capital involved in such interactions is recognized by KGUV scholars (Foth, 2006a) and incorporated with the other aspects mentioned into what is called "a local learning infrastructure" by Foth *et al.* (2008) and "a communicative ecology" by Klæbe *et al.* (2009). In this environment, community members share memories and experiences in new social networks, through which they create their own discourse that favours collective action (Foth *et al.*, 2008).

Having illustrated how the concepts in our framework manifest themselves as claimed effects in the theoretically fragmented literature on the KGUV case, the question arises of whether and how the three levels of analysis we propose here are compatible with the empowerment framework.

## THE EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK AS COMPREHENSIVE VIEW

*Empowerment* is seen within the empowerment framework as a multilevel construct with the micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (community) levels influencing each other in the ongoing attempt to bring our lives, our organizations or groups, and our communities closer to our ideal (Peeters, 2012; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). Obviously, this fits well with the three levels of analysis we distilled from the originally fragmented analysis of interventions using local memory websites in our empirical corpus of literature.

Although the term empowerment is used in the articles reviewed, it remains implicit as an analytical framework to approach the interventions studied. We will discuss some examples of incidental occurrences of the term to illustrate how a more explicit connection to one of the three levels of analysis could be made. In the literature, the term empowerment is sometimes used in the context of what we have called direct benefits for individual participants – the micro level – for example, the development of technical skills (Davis, 2011; Ferri, Mangiatordi & Pozzali, 2010; Klæbe *et al.*, 2007; Shewbridge, 2007; Watkins & Tacchi, 2008) or the growth of self-efficacy (Davis, 2011; Klæbe & Foth, 2006; Thumim, 2009). At other times it relates to meso-level concepts such as inclusion by increasing the online presence of a certain underrepresented group in the cultural identity of a city (Lenstra & Alkalimat, 2012; Vos & Ketelaar, 2007). Finally, the

growth of power is also articulated with respect to each of the three meta-concepts at the macro level. Firstly, in constructing community memory, residents present their own views online on how the past and present of a particular area should be represented for future use (Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Ferri *et al.*, 2010; Klaebe *et al.*, 2009; Ringas *et al.*, 2011). While these views do not replace the professional historical interpretations, they do extend the available reservoir of texts and interactions related to a certain locality. Moreover, this is a self-enforcing process, because these views are easily distributed online, and at the same time their authentic character invites other residents to participate in this process (Burgess, 2007; Ringas *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, as a practice of cultural citizenship, people use local memory websites to creatively express their experiences of and opinions about the local culture. Alongside commercial popular culture and institutional discourses, these environments form a growing independent public sphere where meaning is negotiated (Burgess, 2006; Davis, 2011; Freidus & Hlubinka, 2002; Lenstra & Alkalimat, 2012; Shewbridge, 2007) and cultural value is judged by ordinary people. A final example on the macro level with respect to community capacity, is that community members share memories and experiences in new online social networks, creating their own discourse in favour of future collective action (Carpentier, 2009; Copeland & Miskelly, 2010; Foth *et al.*, 2008; Thumim, 2009; Watkins & Tacchi, 2008). Again, this does not necessarily replace community-building professionals, although it does influence their profession because their work may shift towards facilitating a co-creative community (Klaebe *et al.*, 2009).

These examples show that empowerment theory, with its three levels of analysis, can be an overall framework for analysing and framing interventions using local memory websites. In addition, we can see that the use of new media tools and the internet is considered an important driving force in the underlying argument for the empowerment process. More specifically, the use of online environments seems to provide continuity of access related to claims on the meso level and particularly on the macro level, where past, present and future become connected. While the digital memories that we create in the present “result from a combination of recall and desire, which in turn are incentives to remodel our past and fashion our future” (Van Dijck, 2007, p. 173), they also need to be available for interaction in the future.

## **THE NEXT STEP: FURTHER RESEARCH**

Despite the promising empowering processes on different levels, the studies reviewed only reveal an awareness of a limited kind of intervention using local memory websites. The claims about the effects are substantiated through data predominantly collected during interventions hosted by institutions that applied the method of digital storytelling to collect and produce digital memories.

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The choice of this method was a conscious one, with the short films claimed to achieve strong affective communication through their aesthetics (Ferri *et al.*, 2010). However, this choice also has a number of related ethical consequences that actually threaten empowerment processes, especially in the context of action-research interventions initiated and hosted by institutions.

The choice of digital storytelling has five consequences. Firstly, since many of the participants involved are unable to acquire the level of technical skill needed to make short films, professionals remain essential to their production (Burgess, 2006; Thumim, 2009). Secondly, although the professional is empathetic to the storylines coming from the participants, the institution he or she works for influences the content of the videos (Burgess, 2006; Carpentier, 2009; Thumim, 2009). Thirdly, the fixed notions of what a good and understandable digital story should consist of force participants to reflect in a certain way on a limited set of themes (Burgess, 2006; Poletti, 2011). Fourthly, the content produced often remains on the websites of the institutions, which means the intended public remains at a certain distance (Poletti, 2011). Finally, these websites are often static, which implies that online interaction is almost impossible and that online social networks are unable to emerge around the content (Burgess, 2006).

These five consequences explain why the claims in the literature are predominantly based on data gathered through face-to-face interactions. Observations during workshops, public screenings, focus groups and interviews obviously deliver the data for claims about intervention effects on the micro level. Although the Internet plays a crucial role in the claims on the meso and macro levels, data from online participation is absent in the research substantiating these claims. Statistical insight into how often a story or website has been visited occasionally plays a role, but other data about online behaviour is lacking, because it simply does not exist. Without a certain level of autonomy in terms of making authentic content and an interactive platform for an active audience, problems emerge with respect to long-term participation, which Carpentier (2009) claims is due to the emphasis of these interventions on micro-participation to the detriment of macro-participation.

More autonomous initiatives by residents to collect local memories using other methods – including text or pictures – and to create an interactive website remain underexposed within the existing body of literature. Only one such case, The Brisbanites, has been studied by Burgess in the context of Flickr (Burgess *et al.*, 2006). The members of this group spontaneously developed a process of combining and discussing the old and new cityscapes of Brisbane. They scanned and uploaded old photographs and also added new ones, all of which fuelled discussion related to the changes in the city, both online and offline. The level of autonomy in this case, the more accessible level of

technical skill needed to contribute and the website's affordances have all led to a community of practice that has been around since 2004.

To determine whether and how the claims of empowerment on the meso and macro levels can be empirically grounded, we must increase our insight into the dynamics of online interaction about digital memories within more autonomous groups such as The Brisbanites. However, before we start studying such cases, it is necessary to establish the exact composition of the field of local memory websites. It is important to have a clear understanding of the distribution of institutional and autonomous initiatives. Based on the issues discussed in relation to institutional contexts, we propose that the following categories be used to describe a more diverse set of initiatives: the initiators, the aims, the methods of collecting and creating, the characteristics of the digital memories and the affordances of the websites involved.

## NOTES

- 1 The Sharing Stories project and its successors ran roughly from 2006 to 2009. The digital memories were online until 2011 on the website <http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing>.
- 2 Here we use a translation of "Het Geheugen van Oost": <http://www.geheugenvanoost.nl>.
- 3 The following three articles were exceptions: Carpentier, 2009; Poletti, 2011; Thumim, 2009.
- 4 The one exception was the CLIO project (Ringas, Christopoulou & Stefanidakis, 2011).
- 5 These 11 key articles were selected from the 20 articles on other case studies because they were either the most recent articles or they were peer-reviewed (see Appendix A).

### Appendix A: The key articles describing other case studies with local memory websites.

	Project	Key article
A	Melbourne	(Davis, 2011)
B	Memory Line	(Ferri <i>et al.</i> , 2010)
C	Charlestown	(Shewbridge, 2007)
D	Yorkshire Dales	(Copeland & Miskelly, 2010)
E	Amsterdam New History	(Vos & Ketelaar, 2007)
F	Champaign Urbana	(Lenstra & Alkalimat, 2012)
G	Finding a voice	(Watkins & Tacchi, 2008)
H	Massachusetts	(Freidus & Hlubinka, 2002)
I	Dordrecht/Brussels	(Carpentier, 2009)
J	London Voices	(Thumim, 2009)
K	CLIO	(Ringas <i>et al.</i> , 2011)

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