

## Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

### Multilevel participation within on-line collections of local memories as a practice of cultural citizenship

*the value of local cultural heritage for societ*

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### Multilevel participation within on-line collections of local memories as a practice of cultural citizenship

#### The value of local cultural heritage for society

**Abstract:** Collecting local memories\* on-line is a growing practice with participatory elements on different levels. Three levels of participation – micro, meso and macro – are introduced by describing an exemplary case: the Memory of East in Amsterdam. These levels of this particular case can be grounded in the statements of the Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. This indicates that the Memory of East case might be a good practice. However, looking at 53 other cases shows that the three levels are present, but designed differently with respect to the degree in which residents participate. Since the convention is not specific enough we choose the notion of cultural citizenship to assess the value of cases like these. We claim that the cases that have more focus on ordinary residents participating on all three levels assures a sustainable and self-feeding system, which is the best answer to the goals of the convention.

**Keywords:** storytelling, social media, neighborhoods, memory, cultural heritage.

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#### The Memory of East

In the preparations of an exhibition about Amsterdam East the [Amsterdam Museum](#) started a neighborhood story website in 2003 ([www.geheugenvanoost.nl](http://www.geheugenvanoost.nl)) helped by developer [Mediamatic](#). Residents collected informal personal stories about their neighborhood or about events situated in their neighborhood. After the exhibition the residents asked the museum if they could continue to use the website for their stories and comments. Today the website contains approximately 1700 stories, over 7000 comments and 1300 who-knows-questions.

Looking at this case from the perspective of participation, three levels can be distinguished. A [common definition](#) of participation functions as starting point: “The act of taking part or sharing in something.” One level of participation consists of the decisions on what topics the stories should cover. In the Memory of East case the residents mainly decided themselves what they would incorporate in their stories with the only constraint of the neighborhood (Ernst, 2005). This resulted in a co-creative process between the active group of story collectors and the Museum professionals in which for example the set of keywords for the stories evolved. I would like to call these interactions among professionals and/or residents, with respect to the development or architecture of the on-line memory, the meso-level of participation.

A second level of participation is the involvement of residents in selecting what memories about the neighborhood should be saved for the future (Ernst, 2005). This makes new participatory processes possible as we can see in the large number of comments. In other words: the group that participates today fuels and steers the participation possibilities of the collective tomorrow. I would like to call this emergent property in relation to the local community at large the macro-level of participation with respect to on-line collections of local memories.

In the Memory of East case many of the stories were – and still are – collected by locals loosely interviewing other residents (Ernst, 2005) about their memories, which makes a third level of participation. In

this case, the skills to do this were acquired by following a series of workshops covering the co-creational aspects of interviewing and validating a written story. Even people writing their own stories tend to ask someone to give them feedback and how to sharpen the story. These creative interactions on resident level could be called the micro-level of participation.

In order to get a feeling of the value of this case for the local society, we can compare it with one of the heritage conventions of the Council of Europe.

### **The Faro convention**

The Memory of East case with its levels of participation can be grounded in the statements of [the Convention of the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society formulated in Faro](#) by the Council of Europe and enforced on June the first 2011. First the definition of what constitutes cultural heritage clearly includes the on-line local memories like those in the Memory of East:

“a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time.” (Article 2)

The macro-level of participation can, for example, be recognized in the following words of the convention:

“a heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations.” (Article 2)

Participation on meso-level can be identified in a statement like:

“to (...) develop the legal, financial and professional frameworks which make possible joint action by public authorities, experts, owners, investors, businesses, non-governmental organizations and civil society” (Article 11)

Finally, phrases about the micro-level interactions between residents working on contributions are also present in the convention:

“everyone, alone or collectively, has the right to benefit from the cultural heritage and to contribute towards its enrichment” (Article 4)

Grounding the levels of participation found in the Memory of East case in the Faro convention shows that this case might be a good practice from that perspective. However, it does not say anything about whether this is true for other cases in the field of on-line collections of local memories.

### **Participation in other cases**

I have studied 53 cases from the field of on-line collections of local memories on six dimensions (article forthcoming): the initiating participants, the aims, the collecting methods, the types of stories, the websites affordances and the on-line activity. Looking at some of the results from the perspective of the three levels of participation, gives us the following area's of attention.

With respect to the meso-level we can plot the cases on a continuum based on arriving at decisions or actions in different dimensions. On one side of the continuum the professional does not approach the residents to participate in the developmental questions of the on-line memory. On the other side the residents find each other to participate and act, with no professional involved. In between there are cases in which residents ask professionals to participate and, vice versa, professionals that invite the resident to participate in different decisions. The question that is underneath this continuum is obviously who takes the lead and who participates in, for example, initiating an on-line memory website, defining the aims, collecting the stories, the deciding on the characteristics of the stories and designing the affordances of the website.

Similarly, on the micro-level, we find a distinction in who is taking the initiative. In some cases the professional mainly approaches the residents as a resource for stories on already determined topics to be harvested by interviews. But more common is the resident taking all the initiative by writing stories about personal experiences, researching archives or interviewing other residents. Also common is residents working together with professionals applying different collecting methods. The underlying question here is who participates in the creative process of writing a story and in the interaction that comes with it.

The manifestation of the macro-level can best be described in terms of the aims, the affordances and the online activity. The plentiful aims categorized under 'community development' and 'preservation' can be related to sustaining and transmitting neighborhood memories to offer to the future generations. However, the affordances in order to let future visitors participate through the website by directly contributing stories and comments are present in approximately half of the number of cases. Moreover, more than half of the number of cases receive ten or less contributions per year, and thus can be considered as static presentations of collections of local memories. This leads to the question in what degree the initiators of an on-line collection of local memories want future visitors to be able to interact with the existing collection and thereby participate in expanding it to a new one.

To assess certain cases as being bad practices and others as good practices is not realistic based on the convention because it does not offer sufficient specific details. We need an intermediate notion that gives a normative perspective on the levels of participation and is able to translate them to the aims of the convention in terms of 'human development' and 'quality of life' (Article 1c). One of these notions is cultural citizenship.

### **Practices of cultural citizenship as frame**

According to Burgess, Foth and Klæbe (2006) following Hermes (2005) practices of cultural citizenship within the digital age contain the participation in every day life in "text-related practices of [creating], reading consuming, and criticizing, offered in the realm of (popular) culture." ('[creating' my addition based on Burgess et al., 2006, p. 4](#)). Discussing a case in which locals share pictures and a case in which locals share stories they mention, among others, the following characteristics that further specify a practice of cultural citizenship:

1. Vernacular creativity as the ongoing learning-process in which personal memories become remediated by creating and publishing stories.
2. Real-life meetings with other residents sharing or creating content contributing to skills, a sense of belonging, self confidence and reflection.
3. On-line representations – from artistic to historical – of what the involved locals find important to save for and show other residents.
4. Access to this public sphere for everyone to be able to contribute, consume, complement, discuss, criticize or bond.

Obviously informal learning processes cut through these characteristics, contributing to what could be called an ongoing search and negotiation that produces ideas about individual development and about what it is to have a quality of life (Trienekens, 2004; Hermes, 2005). If we revisit the levels of participation with these characteristics in the back of our mind, we do become able to assess the different cases as better or worse practices.

### **The levels of participation reinforce each other**

The output on the macro-level offers future visitors local cultural heritage they should be able to interact with (characteristic 4). So affordances are non negligible. But more importantly, the cultural heritage should be recognizable as being selected and made by ordinary fellow residents (characteristic 3). This functions as an invitation to participate not only secondarily, but also in creating stories as a new member on the micro-level and maybe after a number of contributions on the meso-level. If on the contrary, the interaction

on micro-level is mainly in the hands of a professional or another non-ordinary resident, this does not only violate the learning of creativity and meetings between residents (characteristic 1 and 2), but also the already mentioned recognizability.

This analysis shows that the different levels are intertwined. If we assume that the meso-level is where an initiative starts, ordinary residents should already participate in a high degree. These residents are presumably the first ones to also participate on the micro-level, which makes way for other ordinary residents to participate on the micro-level too. This in turn makes the macro-level inviting for new participants who might move on to the micro-level, etcetera. It should be noted that the connection between macro-level and micro-level can be disturbed within both resident initiatives and professional initiatives. The explanation for this lies in the possibility that an initiating group of residents on the meso-level has a strong internal cohesion and as such is not experienced as something to identify with for other residents.

Summarizing we can claim now that the cases that have more focus on ordinary residents participating on all three levels connects the levels, resulting in self-feeding and thus sustainable system. From the perspective of cultural citizenship this is the best way to design an answer to the challenge the convention provides. And finally, seen this way, the Memory of East can indeed be called a 'good practice', together with about 10 other cases among the studied set.

Having said that, important issues still remain. One of them is how a story-collecting community can refrain from becoming representative of the dominant part of the local society. Education in the positive effects of the contrary – remaining a diverse heritage community – might be the only solution. This would imply that on the meso-level residents need these educators (professionals and experienced locals) by their sides.

\* The word 'memories' in 'on-line collections of local memories' might be misleading, because strictly taken memories are only available mentally. Once they are expressed or caught on media they should be called mediated memories. Nevertheless, because of books like *Save as ... digital memories* (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins & Reading, 2009) we also choose to use the word as we do.

## Literature

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