Digital Humanities for Communicative and Cultural Memory: A Case for a Digital Humanities Repository at Universities in Rural Settings

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Abstract

Cultural memory is tied to material objectivations. Thus, cultural memory is consciously established and ceremonialized (Assmann, 2011). While communicative memory “is tied to the temporal dimension of everyday life” (Erll, 2011a, p. 53), cultural memory creates a mnemonic canon that is passed down through generations using various media as a mode of transmission of events, figures of importance, paradigms, and events. These media are then maintained, interpreted, and evaluated by trained professionals. However, between the time remembered in the framework of the communicative memory and that remembered in the cultural memory, there is a shifting “floating gap” that moves along with the passage of time (Erll, 2010, p. 311). This paper examines the role of digital humanities in preserving information that is communicative memory but may become cultural memory and explores different avenues for digital humanities to be used as archives in the modern university classroom.

Keywords: digital humanities, communicative memory, cultural memory, transnational memory, digital cultural repositories

Introduction

Memory is a subject that is studied across disciplines, and entire fields in the humanities and social sciences are dedicated to examining and attempting to interpret tangible artifacts of memory. From food to literature, the study of human memory is broad and complex (e.g. Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010; Erll, 2011b; Erll, 2010). The memory of a people may be bound to a place (e.g. Erll, 2010; Erll, 2008) or exist totally online (e.g. Hilderbrand, 2007; Kansteiner, 2002; Pentzold, 2009). In psychology, memory is studied by examining lasting effects in the body that the mind might not remember. These sensory memories are tied to recalling specific experiences through some sense instead of from the mind (Botta, Martín-Arévalo, Lupiáñez, & Bartolomeo, 2019). A common phrase about unique memory types is, “The body keeps the score.” This phrase is in reference to personal memories called somatic memories. A somatic memory is tied to specific events and experiences—usually tied to PTSD and trauma recovery and healing, but not always (Van der Kolk, 2015). If you smell strawberries, for example, a memory of a picnic or fight may be triggered. These experiences are triggered by smell. Both somatic and olfactory memories are two types of sensory memories. Sensory is only one type of memory. This personal memory is contrasted with other types of memory, called collective memory.

Collective memory is a spectrum from the immediate or short term to the extremely long-term memory of a group of people. At Universities across the globe, researchers are evaluating novel ways to view, share, and preserve collective memory and culture using digital spaces (Chen, He, Mao, Chung, & Maharjan, 2019; Li, 2018; Lu & Lu; 2019) evaluated the role of the popular app
TikTok, called Douyin in China from various perspectives. Lu and Lu examined user data to explain how the app is instrumental in presenting and promoting cultural artifacts, their uses, and traditional handicraft techniques. On TikTok, users create short videos 3 to 60 seconds long, similar to Vine videos, in which they can share stories set to music which may be archived and references using hashtags. These videos can also be shared and reshared by the community just like sharing posts on other social media platforms. However, these videos have no time or date stamps, which makes them easier to steal. Universities, like other institutions with a brand to promote, should consider ways to create, promote, and store digital content.

Most universities are becoming more social media savvy because over 88% of prospective students have a social media presence (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Still, even institutions with a vibrant social media presence may be missing key components to capturing and housing their own stories. The integration of digital humanities into rural universities give these institutions the opportunity to share their own voices and stories. Functioning as archives, integrating digital humanities into universities also affords many stakeholders the opportunity to share varied perspectives instead of only those that conform to an institutional or hegemonic world view. Digital humanities at rural institutions create the opportunity to participate in collective memory by creating and maintaining their own communicative memory which may, in time, become cultural memory.

Communicative Memory

The short-term side of the collective memory spectrum is communicative memory. Communicative memory is concerned with everyday things. To liken communicative memory to social media platforms, communicative memory is Twitter or Snapchat. As a means of aggregating information, communicative memory organizes itself by themes, topics, and fads. Areas of this type of memory exhibit engaged and permeating activity in short bursts before moving on to a new topic Welzer (2008). Slang is a form of communicative memory, as are diet trends. Hot button topics and issues are also a part of communicative memory. In university settings, semesters and in-class discussions are a part of communicative memory. The repetition and recycling of ideas is, in part, a trial at making these things become a part of cultural memory (Candia, Jara-Figueroa, Rodriguez-Sickert, Barabási, & Hidalgo, 2019).

Institutions, particularly higher education institutions, face unique challenges in preserving and perpetuating memory. The difficulty is partially caused by acknowledging and representing the voices and perspectives of diverse stakeholders, which begins with a fundamental difference in values. Differences between high-context cultures (HCC; cultures that value collectivism over the individual, and low-context cultures (LCC; cultures that value the individual over the collective Hall (1989; can result in misinterpreting messages in asynchronous communication platforms like online learning forums Delahunty (2012). In other cases, these differences cause people in charge of systems to overlook messages that do not align with cultural values entirely.

The studies mentioned above fail to acknowledge the culture gap. This is the “gap between the communicative culture of an individual and the communication culture of the [platform] itself” (Reeder, Macfadyen, Chase, & Roche, 2004, p. 92). The culture gap acknowledges that the values
of online communication favor HCCs over LCCs. Yen and Tu (2011) explain that differences arise in the communication patterns of the two types of cultures’ communication patterns. They write, “Learners from different cultural groups may observe, perceive, and interact differently due to the communication morphology derived from their cultural backgrounds” (Yen & Tu, 2011, p. 221). HCCs tend to avoid mediated communication while LCCs choose words to show an intent, which fits with online communication. The communication differences may exacerbate the isolation problem many online learners feel in online classes (e.g. Hannon & D’Netto, 2007; Hannon & D’Netto, 2005; Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder, & Roche, 2002; Delahunty, 2018). Isolation can be a barrier to projecting an online social presence, which is the ability to project oneself emotionally and socially as a real person through a medium (e.g. Delahunty, 2018; Yen & Tu, 2011; Gerlock & McBride, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Liu, et al., 2010). As a result, stakeholders from LCCs tend to be overlooked when selecting the messages that align with institutional values and goals which are used to shape cultural memory.

**Cultural Memory**

Cultural memory is the act of passing down meaning through traditions and artifacts across generations; however, according to biologists Laland and Rendell, cultural memory is unique to humans. While other species possess the ability to transmit information socially, they lack the ability to store information. Laland writes, "Humans have a form of externalized memory. They are able to transmit information across generations in the form of learned cultural traditions and preserve this knowledge in artefacts. How this capability evolved from the simpler traditions of other animals is an active area of research” (2013, p. R736). Other animals have forms of social memory. These animals include vertebrates and invertebrates, and the social transmissions range from safe places to forage for food to how to escape from predators. Laland determined that copying what is successful is an important way to ensure survival.

Copying, however, is not cultural memory. There are several things that make cultural memory unique. First, cultural memory must adaptable and transmittable. The uniqueness of cultural memory is that information remains accurately transmitted across generations. Laland and Rendell express:

We humans possess language and teaching, which allow for very high-fidelity information transmission, and consequently lead to very long-lasting traditions, and massive amounts of culture. Indeed, teaching can be defined as behavior that functions to increase the accuracy of information transmission, whilst language allows accurate transmission of abstract concepts...Cultural memory also depends on the size and structure of the populations, which means that demographic processes can both help and hinder the build-up and retention of cultural memory...It is easy to see why: if you have a good idea, but there is not enough cultural transmission for it to become distributed in shared cultural memory, then the idea dies with you; if enough people are around to take your idea on-board, it will outlive you. Larger or denser populations are capable of preserving innovations for longer (and generate more innovations; leading to bigger cultural repertoires (Laland & Rendell (2013) p. R737- R738).

As shown above, several issues exist with the current perpetuation of cultural memory. First, larger, dominant cultures have a more enduring effect on cultural memory. The second issue is the perpetuation of misinformation and outdated information remaining in the repertoire longer than
it should be. Stereotypes about LCCs and colonization are some examples of misinformation passed down through cultural memory (Cook, Ecker, & Lewandowsky, 2015; Stern, 2016; Yoon, Hasher, Feinberg, Rahhal, & Winocur, 2000). Some of the ways in which cultural memory and its issues are transmitted include art and writing.

Writing is one aspect of preserving and perpetuating cultural memory. According to Plate and Rose, writing, along with revision, impart time and difference to events as a part of evolving the culture. The authors write, “Rewriting is a productive concept for understanding cultural memory as an act of transfer, for it invites recognition of its technological dimensions as well as of its intentional ones, acknowledging the role of agency and that of the social and media frameworks in which cultural remembrance takes place” (2013, p. 623). It is through writing, rewriting, and revisiting ideas that ideas and events get added to the cultural memory. Therefore, writing should be included in records and archives to be passed down in institutions. Writing is one aspect of digital humanities.

Images are another aspect of conserving and continuing culture. Plate and Rose stress that images re-present the here and now instead of preserving a moment in time. The authors rely on the ideas of Carruthers and Duggan to explain the importance of images to cultural memory. They write, “At a more theoretical level, Carruthers (2008) underlines the performative function of visual images as carriers of memory. Due to their mnemonic function, she argues, images do not merely imitate reality, but re-present reality in the sense that they make the depicted reality present in the here and now. Images function ‘recollectively,’ then, in the sense that they recall a reality to mind, just as letters ‘make present the voices (voces) and ideas (res) of those who are not in fact present’” (Carruthers, 1990, p. 275; Duggan, 2005, p. 69 in Plate & Rose, 2013). Entire image repositories now exist for sharing and archiving images now exist. Instagram is a social media platform dedicated to posting, commenting, and sharing images and videos of personal and cultural moments.

A third form of cultural memory is performance. Buckland (2013) writes, “The notion of cultural memory as embodied performance has particular relevance in interpreting amateur, as well as professional, performances of national dance repertoires. Since the mid-twentieth century, deconstructions of concepts of ‘the folk’ and ‘the nation’ have given rise to suspicion and often rejection of historical claims made for a repertoire of dances believed to embody national or ethnic characteristics. . . critical interrogation of perceived notions of identity and authenticity has almost become routine in scholarly analyses of dances and discourses which lay claim to a past that ultimately legitimizes the present” (Buckland (2013; p. 29). Performance is one way a culture can perpetuate its story, as seen with hula, taiko, and arirang are examples of cultural performance.

Some key aspects of cultural memory include creating a socially shared version of history, concepts of identity, values, and social norms, and stereotypes and prejudices. Different things like engaging with other cultures and geography help to shape cultural memory. It is these norms, mores, stereotypes, and ways of life that shape interactions in different interactions. Think about online classes and perceived differences in levels of engagement and participation. Some students come from cultures where engaging is highly valued where other students’ cultural backgrounds value observation and collective decision making.

Collective decision making on behalf of preserving ideas and traditions is an act of perpetuating cultural memory. Cultural memory is passed down through cultural mnemonics. These devices
include writing, art, food, dance, and ritual to pass on myths, stories, significant events, and figures of importance. One current example that we can witness right now is Merrie Monarch. Aside from hula, the Merrie Monarch event is a place for Hawaiian language revitalization, practicing lauhala (weaving) and making cordage. Other cultural practices include pounding poi, making kava, buying clothes fashioned after traditional indigenous designs, and playing modern and cultural instruments Skillman (2012).

Merrie Monarch is a festival that celebrates hula, but halau come from near and far to participate. They have to apply and get invited to perform at this prestigious and unique annual cultural event. So how did this spread? King Kalakaua did kind of a cool thing. He transmitted culture by going to other countries. Otherwise, the culture of Hawai‘i would have remained geographically bound, isolated by an ocean, and oppressed. It is this change in boundary that makes hula more than an aspect if cultural memory. It is now transcultural memory. While the Merrie Monarch Festival used to be an example of culture that was geographically tied to place, the annual event is now an example of transnational culture and transcultural memory.

Transcultural Memory

Transcultural memory is a fairly new field. Astrid Erll is one of the founders of this research area of memory studies, publishing her first articles explaining transcultural memory in 2010 (Erll & Nünning, 2010; Erll, 2010). Erll explains that the transcultural turn in memory (Bond & Rapson, 2014) is a term that describes the programmatic move away from the assumption that memory is the product of bounded cultures, often national cultures. Holocaust archives and repertoires of memory have increasingly become networked and have travelled around the world. This collection of interlinked archives helped to create and maintain a language that enabled people to address histories of extreme violence and the violation of human rights. Similar activities, archives, and repositories connecting events and memories across geographical isolation and national boundaries are now visible as a result of Erll’s work.

Erll describes transcultural memory as having several defining criteria. Of Transcultural memory:

(1) Refers to deliberate and productive connections of memories that were formerly considered as distinct and belonging to different groups; it can more generally be conceived of as (2) the movement of mnemonic archives across spatial, temporal, and social, but also linguistic and medial borders (Erll, 2011) as well as (3) the mixing of memories in contexts of high cultural complexity. Memory is fundamentally transcultural. No version of the past and no product in the archive will ever belong to just one community or place, but usually has its own history of “travel and translation”. This is not only the case in our present age of globalization, but as mnemonic history has shown, this holds also true in a long-term perspective on memory (Erll 2014, p.178).

One goal of universities and other institutions now is to recall make this memory type static over a longer duration without much editing of the record. As a result, institutions are gathering and storing mass amounts of data in an attempt to create static representations of moments in time.
that can be referred to and understood in the future.

Worcman and Garde-Hansen worked on a project to predict flood patterns and prevent future environmental damage and infrastructure damage in their study. Requires a clear connective strategy for social memory technology to work within and across communities for understanding weather and landscape changes through stories, artefacts, rituals and performances that is, forms of intangible environmental heritage. Establish and use methods of social memory technology for exchanging personal and collective memories of the events as a form of inter-generational communication (Worcman & Garde-Hansen, 2016). What did they mean when they said, “social memory technology?” Some people are trying to figure that out right now. Employing digital humanities and digital storytelling archives are ways to attempt to create sustainable memory.

**Digital Humanities**

Digital humanities (DH) is an area of research that is a hybrid of computer science, information science, social science, and the humanities. According to Humanities (2017), DH is at the intersection of computing and digital technologies and the disciplines housed under humanities. Digital humanities projects can, therefore, examine philosophical issues like the existential nature of protests while using digital tools like video to tell a story or explain an issue. In addition, the DH field includes the employment of digital technologies in the humanities and the examination of those digital tools for use and function. YouTube as a platform, for example, can be evaluated for its usefulness for preserving and sharing cultural artifacts and techniques in the same way as Douyin is currently being evaluated for platform affordances, diffusion of ideas, transmission of culture, and audience reach.

DH can be used for new ways of doing scholarship in the humanities that involve collaborative research across disciplines. These project examples can include the use of virtual reality software in humanities classrooms, valuating new teaching methods, and digital publishing. Because digital humanities recognizes that the print medium is no longer the primary mode of publication, scholars are able to use novel tools and methods while pursuing research in traditional areas of the humanities for knowledge production and distribution. This makes digital humanities a practical area of study for students because students will need to be acquainted with digital tools used in the workplace today (eCampus, 2019).

**Digital Humanities at Universities Today**

When living in a given time period, everything seems important. However, not everything makes it into the cultural memory of a place. One example in the last 100 years is the recollection, or lack thereof, of United States Presidents. Not everyone in the United States remembers President Calvin Coolidge, what he did, or what he contributed to our history. This is starkly contrasted with events in popular culture though as some Americans remember that Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindberg made historic flying voyages during the years of his presidency Lewis (1992). By nature, universities have the ability to collect information about social, political, scientific, and cultural people and events and revisit them over time as a part of their institutional practices.
Universities serve the communities in which they are situated. While most scholars in the field argue for national repositories (e.g. Hua, Chengfu, & Haiyuan, 2013; Abd Manaf, 2008; Oladumiye & Bolajoko, 2013; Kounoudes, Artemi, & Zervas, 2010) some argue that repositories need to be created for specific and exclusive cultural practices (e.g. Tsolis, Tsolis, & Papatheodorou, 2001; Golshani, Vissicaro, & Park, 2004). Still, a fewer number advocate for the university to create institutional repositories for cultural practices (e.g. Barwick, 2007). To understand the role universities have, one must go back to the geographic boundaries originally set by cultural memory. What is cultural memory here in Hawai‘i, for example, is not comprised of the same events as the cultural memory on the mainland. Cultural memory may still be bound by geographic borders.

Scholars have yet to see the role transnational culture and transnational memory will play in shaping cultural memory, but the preservation of voices and perspectives highlighting current paradigms are an integral part of communicative memory. Archiving an array of perspectives can provide more context when looking back at important events. Some institutions that have begun the DH process include San Diego State University and Hamilton College.

San Diego State University has an extensive digital humanities program. Some of the activities that promote DH are an electronic literature competition, digital humanities blog, and digital humanities showcase. Big Data for San Diego and Digital Humanities at San Diego State University define DH as “... efforts to study digital technologies and culture, employ computational practices in research and teaching, and reflect upon the impact of the digital. The Digital Humanities Initiative at SDSU seeks to promote such critical engagement by providing a hub for strategic innovation and collaboration across campus” (Humanities, 2017). With such a broad definition, disciplines across campus can feel included in the creation and maintenance of a DH repository. This inclusion is reflected in their collection of projects. Another model program is at Hamilton College.

Hamilton College also has a DH initiative and project database. Their initiative states, "The Digital Humanities Initiative (DHi) creates opportunities for new interdisciplinary models and methods of collaboration between faculty and students" (Initiative, 2018). The projects housed in their repository include ongoing projects like the American Prison Writing Archive, where imprisoned folks and prison staff can document their experiences, and The Refugee Project. This is a collaborative documentary project in which refugees document their experiences living in transition. Other projects are completed like the Digital Mesopotamia and The Euphrates Project and the project examining advertising in India. The Digital Humanities Initiative here also hosts classes and workshops to develop skills, create digital archives of photographs, and has guidelines that are applicable to final projects in any discipline. The policies and guidelines are visible on the initiative’s home page. This initiative is an example of how research projects in digital humanities can achieve objectives and be housed in any discipline, contributing to ongoing discourses in specific fields of study as well as contribute to real-time community needs to create and sustain communicative and cultural memory.
Digital Humanities at Rural Institutions

Regional and rural universities are primarily seen as teaching institutions, so exposing students to tools and developing relevant skills like using software and apps currently in use at workplaces is a responsibility shared by faculty at these institutions across the globe. Employing DH programs at rural institutions have two primary benefits. First, DH prepares students for using tools and apps. Learn new skills like developing databases so you can manage your own content or present information in dynamic and engaging ways by using digital storytelling techniques and action research and Preserve moments that may be important later because we don’t know what is going to become cultural memory.

Second, DH scholars contribute to heteroglossia of a region or locale. Digital humanities projects collect a range of voices and perspectives on a wide scope of topics spanning disciplines. These projects are of interest to students majoring in business, the sciences, and the humanities. Since perspectives are usually maintained and perpetuated by larger institutions, as can be seen in Laland & Rendell (2013), collecting and housing these points of view is important for advancing communicative memory. These stories may become an integral part of the construction of cultural memory of a place. Therefore, by studying humanities in novel ways, students and other marginalized individuals contribute to cultural heritage and digital culture. These projects are also available for future study.

Once repositories or archives are created and maintained by institutions and research is available, future scholarly activities can examine the DH works. This research can include looking for common themes across disciplines, examining distinct perspectives about an event, or people of note in a given time period. All of this material can be used to shape the institutional and cultural memory of a place and time (Van der Kolk, 2015; Van Dijck, 2008; Steiner & Zelizer, 1995). Thus, a distinctive feature of DH is its reflexive nature, firmly situating digital humanities as a discipline that is engaged both in the scientific pursuit of knowledge visible in social and computer sciences and the processing and documenting of the human experience that is unique to humanities.

Conclusion

Digital humanities has the ability to promote a sense of place at rural universities. A sense of place is something that, if one possesses it, can transcend many issues a person faces by providing a sense of hope, courage, and strength. Belonging to a place connects one to the land and history in a unique and previously undefinable way. Digital humanities an accompanying archive of digital work can help foster those feelings of belonging and pride that comes with the acknowledgment of showing that your work matters.

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