

SHARING COMMUNITY STORIES A KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION (KO) FRAMEWORK AND RATIONALE

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ABSTRACT

*Beginning from the premise that we all tell stories, and have special mementos to share, this paper proposes a framework and rationale for acquiring and preserving individual and cultural memoir, the everyday stories and objects of our lives. If we accept that we, as information professionals, have an obligation to promote global information justice, and to support individual and collective rights to participate fully in the cultural life of the community, then preserving the artefacts of our communal storytelling, and making them broadly accessible is our responsibility. In celebration of Dr. Mirna Willer, and her career commitment to developing knowledge organization (KO) tools and technologies for preserving and accessing information on a global scale, this paper explores genres of personal narrative and reminiscence with reference to a study of communal storytelling and the “caring connections” that are made. As mechanisms for community building, collective reminiscence and the stories that result may be viewed as more than ephemera, suggesting a cultural warrant for their preservation. As digital information has proliferated over several decades, Dr. Willer has contributed to the design of bibliographic models, standards, and applications hospitable to upholding Article 19 of the United Nations (1948) **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, wherein, “Everyone has the right ... to seek, receive and impart*

information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” We have the KO tools, if we have the will, to preserve the collective memory essential to forging connections, and building an enduring cultural life of community.

Personal narrative, life writing, and memoir

In his introduction to an exploration of personal narrative, Ingraham (2017, pp. 55-56) notes that, “People tell stories. And not just novelists or screenwriters: We all tell them. At the dinner table, on the phone, in the classroom, at the gym. In everyday talk – and in writing – we tell stories that relate the quotidian events of our day, funny happenstances, major and minor scenes from our past. In short, all the ordinary and extraordinary moments of our lives are eligible for expression through the vernacular sharing of personal narratives.” G. Thomas Couser (2011) identifies such narrations of everyday life as “memoir” – a particular genre of life writing that he considers, “especially expressive of cultural values” (p. 233). He adds that, while we all “do” life writing in the form of a job application, a resumé, a personal school essay, or a tell-all personal introduction, or have it “done” for us in an annual evaluation, a medical or scholastic record, an honorary citation, or obituary, few of us will actually have an opportunity or the inclination to write a lengthy life story, per se. Memoir allows us to go beyond the format of institutional record, to colour outside the box of a formalized life story, to tell our stories about our daily lives as we live them, anecdotally. As such, personal memoir, “offers the possibility of taking control of our own stories” (p. 234).

Whether in a written journal or diary, in a Facebook post, an Instagram photo, a YouTube video, a blog, a series of tweets or other social media exchanges, contemporary twenty-first culture encourages and enables the telling of personal stories *in situ*, often in real time. While the anecdotal narratives of previous generations might have been relayed in private diaries, letters, family stories around a meal, a celebration, or other communal event, in a home movie, or photograph album, their relative public reach or profile was limited as compared to memoir within a digitally-mediated space. The ability of capture, archive, and share our personal stories with any sense of permanence may also be in jeopardy, as much because the sheer volume of digital self-narrative, as with the impermanence of the recording media, itself. Do we consider personal memoir as ephemera, or as a genre with intrinsic value? If memoir is particularly expressive of cultural values, as Couser suggests, is there not some imperative to preserve our everyday stories with the same commitment as we have acquired and preserved other genres of life writing, and particularly those of a “literary” or “scholarly” nature? We will return to these questions later in the paper.

Artefacts, objects and storytelling

Added to the stories of our lives may be the variety of personal artefacts that illustrate or accompany them, whether photographs, physical objects, oral expressions through song, poetry, or spoken word, maps, books, individual documents, or other representations of associated persons, places, events, or things. Just as stories are a means of self-expression, so, too, are artefacts or objects and their associated narratives, which, together, can be instrumental in supporting a cohesive yet dynamic expression of self over time. The practice of common reminiscence underscores the continuous validation of self-identity, and the expression of “self” to others through objects as a means of building connection, fostering greater understanding, and remaining engaged socially (Jacques, 2007; Rowlands, 2008). Storytelling around cherished objects can provide often socially-isolated participants with a common and “neutral” space for engaging in conversation and rich interaction with others (Howarth, 2014, 2015; Hendry and Howarth, 2013). Objects that are core to individual identity can likewise serve as “bridges” linking to a group identity, and helping to forge connections where social, cultural, language, economic, ethnic, age, ability, or other barriers might otherwise prevail (Olson and Howarth, 2013; Howarth and Olson, 2013).

Personal objects can be regarded as concrete reflections of what is meaningful in one’s life, conveying one’s values, goals and aspirations, and serving as a form of self-expression, all of which may be more or less aligned with social norms (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). An object’s meaning is invested by its owner (Belk, 1990), and expressed through narratives told about it, which are ultimately about the self (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Personal objects in the ambient environment can be seen as assisting in the “stability” of self over time by acting as a form of “ballast”. As McCracken (1988, p. 124) observes, “They [objects] stabilize us by reminding us of our past, by making this past a virtual, substantial part of our present.” In addition, objects, their associated narratives, and “meanings” have properties and elements that allow them to be categorized in terms of affinities (similarities) and distinctions (differences), though perhaps not in the same way by any two people. For example, the same spoon might be viewed as a tool, or as an heirloom depending on one’s perspective. Objects can be seen to play a role in how individuals “integrate” or “differentiate” themselves from others in society (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Linking personal and communal life stories

Individual stories or self-narratives (used interchangeably by Baumeister and Newman, 1994), can be viewed as exercises in self-interpretation, by which people find meaning and make sense of their experiences. Bruner (2004) considers personal narrative or “autobiographies” from a constructivist stance. A “self-told life” should be interpreted, “not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a nonexistent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience” wherein, “we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (pp. 691-92; 694). But while personal meaning may derive from “an interpretive feat” (p. 693), Bruner also notes that, “life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some ‘deep structure’ about the nature of a ‘life,’ for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing.” Within this latter quote one sees the link between personal and communal narrative (life-storytelling), and the importance of negotiated meaning as one situates expressions of self-identity within the context of group-identity (community). Goffman’s (1959) concept of “the presentation of self,” likewise posits that individuals attempt to maintain a cohesive self and adapt their narratives and behaviour depending on audience and context.

Linking personal and communal artefacts or objects and storytelling

If, as Bruner suggests, both the individual and the community must negotiate a common understanding of the nature of a life in order to grasp what a storyteller is saying, or what she or he thinks the listener is hearing, then is there some role for a personal or a communal artefact or object to play in facilitating that interaction? Phrased otherwise, how might a surrogate for a person, an event, a place, or a thing that is integral to a story contribute to both individual and collective meaning-making in the construction of self- and group narrative, and add to a sense of both personal and collective identity of participants? In a study that involved talking circles of small groups of adults (5-10 individuals) within different public library settings sharing stories of treasured mementos with others who were unfamiliar to them (Howarth and Quirke, 2016), researchers explored how

objects and storytelling can build bridges among individuals to foster community. How do we share our stories with others, and can we use mementos (objects, photos, textiles, any “tangible” thing) to find commonalities as a group?

Findings from the study (Howarth and Quirke, 2016) suggested that a particular pathway to establishing commonality was not a given, and connections were unpredictable. Perhaps contrary to what we might have anticipated, connections are not necessarily cemented around similar ages or stages in life, around children, around language, or around experiences-in-common, such as travel or dislocation, loss, accomplishment, cultural affinity, collocation (place of birth or residence). Rather, bonds appear to form more readily based on a kind of affinity, even an empathy with the individual and her or his story. The “glue” necessary to finding commonality may rest less on sharing an affinity with the actual experience (“I have been to Paris, too”) of another, and more on relating to the *meaning* of that experience – an empathic connection – that the storyteller shares in presenting her or his memento. Another finding from the study suggested that, while the personal artefact or object was essential to initiating an individual’s story, and seemed an important lever to opening discussion among individuals who were largely, if not fully strangers to one another, once the conversation was underway, the memento ceased to have a prominence. In other words, once the connection was made between the storyteller and the listeners, others contributed actively to building a better understanding of the importance of the object and its particular significance to the individual. There was no judgment passed as to the relative value or inherent worth of the memento; each was accepted as an expression of what mattered to each participant.

Where a small group of former “strangers” can come to know another through a valued signifier – a memento linking an individual to another cherished person, place, event, time period, or thing – within the time allotted in a study to sharing stories and objects, there is potential for community-building. And when multiple self-identities can come to a sense of a shared communal identity around the telling of a moment in everyday life, there is opportunity for understanding the nature of a life, and the “deep structure” that underlies the personal narratives of all involved in the activity of reminiscence. In a society plagued by difference, social isolation, misunderstanding, even distrust of others, building bridges holds great promise. Do we have the frameworks and tools for supporting a process that encourages sharing and contributes to empathy? More specifically, are these within the ready reach of those of us engaged in the Library and Information Science/Information Studies discipline, and/or as those associated with informa-

tion-intensive institutions? It is to possible frameworks and tools that we now turn our attention.

Documenting communal stories: framing and rationale

In a 2001 paper, *Global Information Justice: Rights, Responsibilities, and Caring Connections*, Martha Smith describes the concept of global information justice (GIJ) with its aim, "... to preserve humanity through the creative uses of the technologies of information, knowledge, and memory using the practices of rights, responsibilities, and caring connections" (Smith 2001, p. 1). Underpinning the concept of GIJ is a number of ideals or aspirations set forth as articles by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Articles 19 and 27 (1) of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), proclaimed in 1948, offer a useful framework and a justification for the broad proposal for documenting communal stories articulated in this paper. Article 19 states that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers", with Article 27(1) noting that, "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." Stuart Hannabuss (1998, p. 1) adds, "... the attendant obligations of individuals and communities, including information professionals and their professional associations, to preserve and promote these rights" – an elaboration on the preamble to the *UDHR*. Consequently, we see in the writings of Smith and Hannabuss, and in the proclamation of the United Nations General Assembly, the rights of all to create, access, and share information anywhere and in any format with the support of the information professions. Individuals also have the right "to participate in the cultural life of the community."

If we concur with Couser's assertion that memoir is, "especially expressive of cultural values", and that storytelling around personal mementos is conducive both to forging communal bonds (Howarth and Quirke 2016), and to promoting "caring connections" (Smith 2001, p. 1), then we could agree that documenting and preserving communal stories aligns with GIJ, and is the obligation of information institutions and professions. Clare Beghtol's (2002) careful argument in support of, "A proposed ethical warrant for global knowledge representation and organization systems", offers further justification for promoting access to,

and dissemination of a community's collection of life stories and associated artefacts. She suggests that, "knowledge representation and organization systems are most useful when and if they can reflect the cultural warrant of a particular social group and are understandable and acceptable to the individuals who belong to and seek to perpetuate that group" (p. 517). Beghtol views "cultural warrant" as including the concept of "user warrant", wherein individuals are assumed to be members of one or more cultures, and engaged in "... representing and organizing knowledge to render it globally suitable for all users in all situations in all cultures" (p. 511) – an endeavour which, she acknowledges, poses ethical, intellectual, and technical challenges. One possible approach to addressing such problems is considering the concept of "hospitality", or ensuring that cultural warrant is flexible or permeable "... to other cultural warrants and to the specific levels and layers of individual user choice within each culture" (p. 518). Beghtol sees such cultural hospitality allowing for both individual and community choice, and, consequently, aligning with Smith's premises for global information justice, and related Articles proclaimed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Preserving stories and related artefacts in a contemporary knowledge organization (KO) context: tools and technologies

The purpose of this paper is not to offer pragmatic approaches or workable solutions, per se, but, rather, to propose a framework within which to consider acquiring and preserving individual and cultural memoir, the everyday stories and objects of our lives, and making them widely accessible. Are there bibliographic tools and technologies that have been designed in accordance with knowledge organization principles that can be readily applied to the artefacts of our cultural memory? Can we create bibliographic spaces that are culturally hospitable to individual and community stories and mementos? The *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* (1994), and publications, such as the *IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines* (2nd ed. 2010), underscore that there are publicly accessible, and amenable physical places where individual and communal sharing of stories and objects have a home. The communal memoir that may result from reminiscence, talking circles, or programs supporting life narrative activities, is readily supported in social networking sites (e.g., Facebook Groups), but remains largely ad hoc, and at the initiative of individuals or groups. While, practically speaking, resources may

be scarce or unavailable to support systematic access to memoir created individually or as a collective within a public library setting or program, I would argue that we have both a rationale and readily available bibliographic tools to accommodate community stories and objects as they are generated.

Over the past two decades, in particular, the bibliographic community has concentrated efforts on aligning cataloguing practice and outputs with burgeoning digital media and platforms. The bibliographic record structure that accommodated physical media (books, audio-visual materials, etc.), has been rethought and reconfigured to be modular – a more faceted approach where units of bibliographic data can be combined to facilitate re-use of authoritative, structured data. More recent developments favouring enhanced discovery through linked data have led to a redesign of data sharing formats that were supportive of legacy bibliographic record structures, for example, as BIBFRAME is being phased in to replace Machine-Readable Cataloguing (MARC) formats. Controlled vocabularies of structured data are essential units in the linked data environment, just as natural language metadata, such as social media tagging, is being accommodated as readily in bibliographic tools as in social network platforms. Creating community spaces for sharing memoir within public library portals can make such communal artefacts more broadly accessible, particularly if configured as linked data and discoverable through the vast network of the internet. We could readily imagine such stories and objects being rendered through mediated sites, such as the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) or Europeana, assuming that storytellers and listeners have access to simple tools that will welcome their data and align it with platform standards.

Assuming that we can design culturally hospitable tools, for ready use in spaces and places amenable to fostering community connections – such as the public library – and have a rationale for doing so – in support of global information justice; aligning with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – then we would appear to have “a way” for preserving and sharing the individual and communal stories and objects of our everyday lives. What remains is a collective will for promoting our shared cultural memory and building caring connections.

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DIJELJENJE PRIČA IZ ZAJEDNICE OKVIR I OBRAZLOŽENJE ORGANIZACIJE ZNANJA

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

pojedinačno i kolektivno sjećanje, priče zajednice, očuvanje, okvir organizacije znanja

SAŽETAK

Polazeći od pretpostavke da svi pričamo priče i imamo posebne uspomene koje bismo podijelili, ovaj rad predlaže okvir i obrazloženje za stjecanje i očuvanje pojedinačnih i kolektivnih sjećanja, svakodnevnih priča i predmeta našeg života. Ako prihvatimo da mi, kao informacijski stručnjaci, imamo obvezu promicati globalnu informacijsku pravdu i podržavati pojedinačna i kolektivna prava na potpuno sudjelovanje u kulturnom životu zajednice, tada je naša obveza čuvati artefakte našeg zajedničkog pripovijedanja i učiniti ih široko dostupnima. Prigodom odavanja priznanja dr. Mirni Willer i njezinoj predanosti razvoju alata i tehnologija organizacije znanja za očuvanje i pristup informacijama na globalnoj razini, ovaj rad istražuje žanrove osobne pripovijesti i sjećanja u odnosu na istraživanje zajedničkog pripovijedanja i nastalih „brižnih odnosa“. Može se smatrati da kolektivne uspomene i priče koje iz njih proizlaze nisu samo prolazne pojave kao mehanizmi za izgradnju zajednice, što upućuje na potrebu za njihovim očuvanjem. Budući da su se digitalne informacije proširile u posljednjih nekoliko desetljeća, dr. Willer pridoni-jela je osmišljavanju bibliografskih modela, standarda i aplikacija koji su u skladu s člankom 19. **Opće deklaracije o ljudskim pravima** Ujedinjenih naroda (1948.), prema kojemu: „Svatko ima pravo ... traženja, primanja i širenja informacija i ideja putem bilo kojeg medija i bez obzira na granice.“ Mi imamo alate za organizaciju znanja, ako postoji volja, kako bi se sačuvalo kolektivno pamćenje neophodno za stvaranje veza i izgradnju trajnog kulturnog života zajednice.