

Preserving memories on-line: the exhibition 'memories of our childhood' and the Catalan Immigration History Museum

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- Abstract
- Memory model: main features
- Creation of "Memories of our childhood: the war children": the model
- The Immigration portal: other project on personal testimonies
- Final comments
- References

ABSTRACT

Memories are the new cultural assets of heritage institutions (libraries, archives and museums), which were, in the past, left aside in shelves full of documents and now they are potential attractions for those institutions. So what is the reason that such testimonies have become so successful in the last decades? Perhaps, the new media (video, audio, photography, Internet) provide alternative ways to present such special documentation that before was only kept in archives and history Museums. Besides, there is a greater public interest in the life stories of ordinary people. These common stories show how people managed to overcome terrible difficulties and situations.

Thanks to the introduction of Internet, memory institutions can now go a step forward and provide narratives and documentation on-line. The present paper attempts to discover how may be used memories on-line based on two experiences: an exhibition on War children and an Immigration portal.

I. Memory model: main features

Designing any real exhibit involves searching for a series of elements that may stimulate visitors' attraction. Wagensberg (2001, 43) distinguishes between three kinds of elements that may produce interactivity with visitors:

- a. **Manual interactivity** or provocative emotion (Hands on): in this case it covers museums and exhibitions with objects that make easy the comprehension of phenomena or processes, so visitors may distinguish between what it is fundamental and accessory (i.e. Science and Technology Museums) (Delàcote, 1996)

- b. **Mental interactivity** or intellectual emotion (Minds on): creation of experiments in the Museums that may explain ideas of everyday life (i.e. Science Museums)
- c. **Cultural interaction** or cultural emotion (Heart on): it gives priority to creation of collective identities. These kind of exhibits are directed towards sensibility of a people's community, in which any human being may be reflected.

It is the cultural interactivity (Heart on), which uses personal stories as a mean to connect with public, because it becomes easy to identify themselves with the exhibition. Normally, this collective identification is local, near to the physical space in which Museum is located, though its message may be universal. In the last decades, some exhibitions and Museums are based as thread in the museographic narrative in the recovery of collective and individual memory, such as Holocaust Museums (Washington and Jerusalem), Migration (Ellis island and National Museum of Australia) or other of History or Ethnography.

Amongst them, War Museums such as the Imperial War Museum (<http://www.iwm.org.uk> - United Kingdom) stand out. The Imperial War Museum collects testimonies of people who took part in conflicts, and now, it keeps important archives with records (audio, video), such as a monographic on the Spanish Civil War. Besides, there is another resource in Internet about memories of participants in the First World War (<http://www.firstworldwar.com>). Most memories used in these exhibits deal normally with traumatic facts and periods for the correspondents, so they bring about anxiety or pleasure when explained. They are memories, which cannot be obliterated as the times goes by, due to their traumatic nature. Sometime explaining them in public may have a therapeutic effect (Rose, 1992).

As people get older, and enjoys more spare time, they need to explain their life stories. However, they sometimes do not find anyone who wants to listen to them, as shows a study carried out in a geriatric in Southampton (Coleman, 1994, 9). That is why Museums have become a mean to listen and recover some of these testimonies, from an audio to a video record, or even employing elder people as guides in the own Museum, because of their own experience in a particular historical period. There have been some experiences with elder people acting as Museum guides for youngsters and results were quite positives (Schweitzer, 1993). The way memories are showed in an exhibit always attempt that visitors should be in the narrator's feet. For instance, in the Holocaust Museum of Jerusalem names and ages of all the victims are called, whereas each visitor receives in the National Museum of Australia an identity card with the name of an Australian immigrant with similar surname to the visitor's one.

Nevertheless, one of the main problems of real Museums turns up when displaying and making accessible those testimonies in a exhibition. Generally texts, images, audios or video clips are showed creating a scenography effect, bur never in all their extension except when consulting archives. That is why a virtual exhibition brings together a series of advantages, since it can display complete testimony records, link them and even, allow the own actors to register their records on-line.

For instance, two exhibits on-line such as "Remembering Nagasaki" (<http://www.exploratorium.edu/nagasaki/mainn.html>), based on series of pictures remembering the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The virtual exhibition, designed by the Exploratorium of San Francisco, included an interactive space in which any testimony could provide its own version of the drama. This interactive space became a real catalyst of the whole exhibition, because of the high quality of the Japanese testimonies. These Japanese elder people took part with the assistance of their sons and grandsons, who typed their life stories in Internet. At the première of the virtual exhibit, none expected that this section will have so much life to even escape from the organizers control. Other virtual exhibit with active visitors participation was "A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the USA" (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion>).

A quite different example is recording community memories through their songs. This is the Mexican *corridos*, a type of popular song that registers stories and experiences of the Mexican community. Recently, the Smithsonian Institution organized an itinerant exhibition called "The Corridos without Frontiers", complemented with a virtual display (<http://www.corridos.org>), which deserved a prize in the Museums and the Web contest. The virtual exhibit contains an interactive section in which anyone can create lyrics for its own *corrido* (Figuerola and Songer, 2003). As said before, there are Museums exclusively dedicated to the memory of communities such as the Immigration or Holocaust Museums. Besides, they have developed on-line resources in the last years. Since they are stable institutions, their graphic and multimedia documentation on memories have been organized in two ways: records databases and virtual exhibitions with some narratives.

Perhaps, the Ellis Island website (New York) is one of the most outstanding examples (<http://www.ellisland.org>), with an application that allows to search in the database for any American immigrant record on the basis of name and surname. The search engine displays the personal file including the data of arrival at New York, his/her origin and even, his/her first residence in the country. Other immigration Museums are preparing similar applications, as happens with the own Immigration Museum of Sant Adrià del Besòs (Spain). Other illustrative samples are the Holocaust Museum of Washington (<http://www.ushm.org>) that contains a section with a database with personal stories of people who suffered the Holocaust, as well as virtual exhibits on monographic related subjects. Other Holocaust Museums, in either United States or Israel, share similar facilities. This preliminary information of distinctive traits of memory Museums serves as starting point to explain how the exhibit "Memories of our childhood: the war children" was designed, and understand why a different model of virtual exhibition, **memory model**, was developed.

II. Creation of "Memories of our childhood: the war children": the model (<http://oliba.uoc.edu/nens>)

Once we acknowledged the potential of people's testimonies as core element in the exhibit, we modified the structure of the virtual display with regards to the presential one by the Fundación Largo Caballero, in which personal records were the result of parallel seminars and conferences. In the virtual exhibition, under the headline EXPOSICIÓN (Exhibition), the most important section is **Historias de vida** (Life stories). The section includes a selection of testimonies (textual and video clips), which conform a mosaic of specific experiences that are contextualised by the remaining sections' content. Most memories come from children who suffered traumatic experiences in such period that had never forgotten. On the other hand, outside the exhibition section (**Vuestros recuerdos** – Your memories), visitors are invited to provide any record of that period including their own experience in an interactive way through an open formulary. Stories introduced by visitors pass immediately to take part of the testimonies archive, thereby it is an interactive sections that escapes from the own organizers control. As was said, the exhibit central structure consists of 4 sections that contextualise the main section of **Historias de vida** (Life Stories), with the following titles:

- a. **Escuela** (School)– How was the scholar life of the children of that period and how the civil war affected children and teachers
- b. **Guerra 36** (War of 36) – Section that describes particular features of the Spanish Civil War on the basis of a mosaic of texts, justifying the children fleeing to the rearguard and later abroad
- c. **Propaganda** (Propaganda) – How children's image was used as propaganda during the war
- d. **Evacuación** (Evacuation) – Section that describes the Spanish children odyssey around the diverse admission countries (France, Belgium, Russia and Mexico) and what their experience was

- e. **Historias de vida** (Life stories) – Selected testimonies of some people who suffered those circumstances

Because of the heterogeneous nature of all exhibition sections, a fiction testimony was used to introduce each section (El Recuerdo – The Memory) that is a collage of a series of real stories. On the other hand, the exhibition includes 4 transversal complementary heading, employed to understand better the historical period and phenomena of evacuation and exile of the civil war. Those transversal sections are:

1. Guerra 36 (War 36)– Showed with the help of maps, comparative chronological table and a short critical text with the key points about the conflict
2. Webs– websites in Internet with more documents on the exhibition topics
3. Bibliografía (Bibliography)– recommended readings on topics covered by the exhibit
4. Glosario (Glossary)– Terms and characters who appear in the exhibition texts

As was pointed out, the exhibit “Memories of our childhood: the war children” was linked to current world conflicts, thanks to a collaboration with Campus for Peace (<http://www.campusforpeace.org>). That is why a “time button” appears in each main section that allows us to jump from the year 1936 to 2002, showing similar problems of School, War, Propaganda, Evacuation and War end, for children who suffer the current conflicts in Rwanda, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Palestine... The same section is accessible through Actualidad (Nowadays) through the INFORMACIÓN (Information) menu.

1. Formal and technical characteristics

So far the reasons behind changes in the museographic design in the exhibit have been discussed, since own testimonies (**Historias de vida** – Life stories) and visitors records (**Vuestros recuerdos** – Your memories) constitute the central axis from which all the contents articulate. However, the exhibit has other formal and technical elements, related to the content that should be taken into account. Initially, the exhibit starts with an introduction in Flash, very light so as it can be downloaded by the user very quickly. Besides, there is a second introduction in Flash for the section EXPOSICIÓN. From the first introduction, there is only the chance to choose language, in this case, only Spanish and Catalan, because dissemination only thought that these two linguistic communities would be mainly interested in the subject. We believe that the exhibit should be translated to other languages such as English, due to its success amongst foreign visitors.

Once a language is selected, a menu with 4 headings turns up: EXPOSICIÓN, INFORMACIÓN, VUESTROS RECUERDOS and OPINIÓN. The EXPOSICIÓN section, is already discussed above, it is only worth mentioning that scrolled menus were required due to the volume of information. Since they are hidden and most people do not recognize them, an animation with a clicking hand was employed as well as a note in the main page in the Flash introduction.

In the exhibition, there are texts written specialists for each heading. They are normally long, more than a exhibition sign and less than an article in a catalogue. Since none believes that people will read the content from screen, a print option was set up for every text. As a contrast to the textual part, there is a large section of images, chiefly black and white photographs and documentary videos. Since most images of high quality are in black and white, these scale of colours were employed for the whole website. Images are put in the left side, with the possibility to enlarge them. Only colour images appear in the sections dedicated to children drawings, propaganda posters and current videos of testimonies and the TVC (Televisió de Catalunya) program “Els nens perduts del franquisme”.

If life stories and texts provoke an emotional interaction (Hearts on), the image selection also favours to keep a sensitive connexion with the virtual visitors. Always images with children are very effective, and it is demonstrated in this case. The section VUESTROS RECUERDOS collects all testimonies that virtual public has introduced in the display, providing data about the person and dates. Clicking up the correspondent icon you may access to a formulary so as to add a new record, its update is immediate in the server. In the OPINIÓN section the virtual visitor is asked to provide some feedback to the webmasters, as happens in other group Òliba projects. With regards to the section INFORMACIÓN, it contains details about the itinerant exhibit, timetables and places where you can visit it. Besides, it includes a list of international organisations caring for children and war, the "Actualidad" section, already discussed, and credits.

2. Personal testimonies: an analysis and interpretation advance

One of the most relevant aspects of group Òliba research is the analysis, following up and evaluation of virtual resources impact on public. In the case of "Memories of our childhood: the war children", this aspect takes particular features. Let analyse which kind of contributions are made by the virtual visitors:

- 1) Visitor **opinions** regarding the exhibit affect specially the following levels of analysis: personal data, short data related website and content evaluation and an open answer. This last heading has provided a rich source of information for the analysis and overall evaluation (Carreras and Munilla, 2003).
- 2) The section **Vuestros recuerdos** (Your memories), in which visitors are invited to leave their own experiences and testimonies on the civil war and exile, is becoming an inexhaustible knowledge source for the "everyday life" of war children and exile. This section, together with the virtual questionnaire, are the main sources for the results, which are introduced below

A) War memories:

The first group of personal stories consist of direct records of the conflict. Elder people still keep clear traumatic memories of the Spanish Civil War. As observed in other works of oral history, people received very lasting impacts when they were young. With independence to other later experiences, taking part in a extraordinary event such as a war – even more a civil war – affects deeply the actors. Personal stories describe either atrocities generated by those conflicts, such as losses or separation from love ones, or human inner strength to overcome the worst adversities.

C.G.E. / 2003-03-18

For me it was very hard, my mother was killed by a bomb, in the Egipcíaques street, and I became responsible of a 7 years old sister. I was only 14, afterwards we had to live in the underground, we took scabies and we did not have anything to eat. A war is the most horrible thing.

B) War children memories and exile:

Records from people, whose own life is reflected in the exhibit contents, conform a second block of testimonies. Despite the fact that they are known stories, they still surprise due to their drama. All of them add new data about the exodus of these "war children", standing out evacuation stories from France, Belgium and Mexico. The stories still keep the same impression today of the traumatic separation from their parents and families split up. Besides, some parents rejected later on their own children so they could have a better future when the war was over.

M.Q.D. / 2003-03-03

I was with my sisters, who are still alive, war children. Notwithstanding my short age, scenes and episodes were recorded in my mind, I have never forgotten them. We were survivors, together with

my parents, of the Sanctuary of Virgen de la Cabeza (Andújar), where we remained 9 months captives, with famine, misery of all kinds, death and desolation.

Once the bastion was occupied by republican forces, it was proposed that children should be sent to **Russia**, taking them away from their parents and a perspective of never seeing them again. Today I am involved in the hard task of writing such a sad story, so I would like ask survivors or relatives to supply information related to this deed happened in Sierra Morena. Thank you for letting me exposes that, even so lightly.

C) Oral war memories, 2nd generation:

Stories on experiences and sufferings from the Spanish civil war explained in first person by fathers to children constitute a third group of testimonies. As happens in other occasions, memories are focused on the hardest and negatives moments of the conflict and post-war. Especially for the people who lived in the loyal territory to the Republic, they remembered chiefly terror during shelling by national air forces. Because this was one of the first conflict in which civil population in rearguard was bombed directly with the aim to demoralise people. However, the aerial terror did not achieve its objective. Despite the disgust for these actions, the Republic did not gain any support from the Western democracies, but the resolution and suffering from city population deserved sympathies from the Europeans. They remembered the Republican resistance during the Battle of England, in which the primer minister Winston Churchill encouraged British people suffering the German bombing with the example of civilians in Barcelona in 1938.

A.M.S. / 2003-05-06

I did not suffer the Civil War, but I always heard my mother talking about this period. Now, she is 88 years old. Her name is M^a del Carmen Soler Cuenca and in the War Refuge N^o 1 of Barcelona, located in Sant Felip Neri Square. There, many children from Madrid were kept. 20 of them died in 1938, during a fascist bombing over Barcelona. I am trying to write a book about this part of the history and I would like to contact with some of the survivors or relatives. Thank you very much.

D) Searching missing people, 2nd generation:

The split up of families did not finish in 1939. In many cases the evacuated children could not come back, because of their relatives decease or lack of contact amongst others. Nevertheless, none can obliterate the memories of those love ones, since sometimes there is a feeling of guiltiness when one manages to survive.

M.C.S. / 2003-04-21

The child JOSEFINA SANJUAN FERRER, born on the 28th February 1939 in Albalate de Cinca (Huesca-España), disappeared in late January 1939 in the children colony set up by the Republic in the province of Barcelona. Specifically, this colony was located in Arenys de Munt, in a farm called "Can Boter". We do not know where he is now, perhaps in Italy. The story of her search may be accessed in the following website: <http://personales.com/espana/huesca/desaparecida/> Please, give a look. There you will find the story in Spanish, French and Italian, as well as some pictures that may help to remember. If anyone knew something or how to help me to contact anyone in Italy, please do not hesitate in getting in touch. I am her sister Pilar's son, one of 5 children that Josefina still has in Spain and Argentina.

E) Emotional impact of those who did not live the war: teenagers and youngsters:

One of the most interesting aspects of analysis and evaluation of different visitor's contributions to the website is the one made by teenagers and youngsters with diverse backgrounds and scholar levels. Most of them reflect no real knowledge about the Spanish civil war and the exile, except information that appears in the course books and manuals. Therefore, sometimes their opinion reflects a certain emotional impact, also related to some contemporaneous event from which they got more references through the mass media.

28/01/2003:

This document is quite sad regarding the war and the poor people that suffered without fault. People's opinions about the war seemed to me incomplete, since there are very long ones, but others do not

say anything about war experiences. I cannot say that I enjoy it because it is very sad to see people suffering and read comments of elder people wasting their youth in concentration camps or hidden in refuges.

Oral heritage is a fundamental part of our Cultural Heritage. Communication of live memory of events and facts supposes the possibility of knowing not only data but also consequences and the way they were perceived. The conservation and analysis of the oral history of the Spanish Civil War must be done now in the present time, before testimonies start to disappear. Finally, for the ones who still think that Internet is a cool media in which no emotional interaction can be made (Heart on), a last testimony, which has even shackled us:

M.A.S. (Mexico) 29/01/03

I would only like to thank you. Three of my brothers left with the Spanish group of children going to Russia. I was born in Mexico, after my parents' exile. In 1946, we could meet with two of them (my brothers), one of them died. I knew only one part of the story; I am touched to tear-drops. Thank you.

III. The Immigration portal: other project on personal testimonies

(<http://oliba.uoc.edu/lab/migracio/index.htm>)

The experience of the memory model has been rewarding since the group Òliba has been ordered recently a new research project for the dissemination of personal testimonies, the portal for the Immigration Museum of Catalonia (MHIC). In this case, the portal will become also an archive online in which any visitor may include their own story as immigrant in whatever digital format is wished (audio, video, image, text). This digital archive is an output of the European project called **Coine** (Cultural Objects in Networked Environments – <http://www.coine.org>) funded by the European Commission (IST-2001-32258), in which different European partners (Museums, Universities, companies) take part sharing the same database and interface.

3. The immigration portal

The MHIC has not a physical space already though by the end of 2004 it is supposed to have a Resource Centre for researchers. With the portal the museum will become available to visitors by summer 2004 through Internet. Here, the application appears to be a little bit different, since the memories archive becomes the most important section in the virtual resource, while exhibition narratives are complementary interfaces to make testimonies more accessible to general public. There are two kinds of narratives, the ones that represent the Museum permanent collection and the others that display temporal exhibitions on monographic subjects.

The permanent collection follows a chronological and thematic structure with the sections, which appear below:

- a. Catalonia – a crossing land until XIXth century
 - b. Open society – XIXth century and XXth century
 - c. New migrations – present migrations under construction
1. Immigrants origin
 - Places from which immigrants come
 2. Journey towards Catalonia
 - One of their most vivid memories is the first journey to Catalonia
 3. Place of arrival
 - Initial feelings of the newcomers at their arrival
 4. Jobs
 - First jobs in Catalonia
 5. Housing and town quarter

- How they live and how neighbourhoods were organised
6. Daily life
- Daily problems and solutions
7. Women and Children
- How women and children settled down in this new community

The project is still under way, and hopefully a first prototype will be available on-line by summer 2004. As soon as the portal becomes fully accessible, we will be able to evaluate its results and analyse, once again, if the memory model still works in the same way as the exhibit *"Memories of our childhood: the War Children"*.

4. The digital archive

The digital archive of the MHIC portal uses the results of the COINE project, whose heart lies on the idea of empowering citizens to tell their own stories. Thus, the COINE software is used for rendering everyday objects digitally and in an easy manner. It provides the tools for the creation and maintenance of descriptions (metadata) and dynamic links to other collections. And the system uses standards for structured deployment and retrieval of digital resources in distributed networked environments.

The main authors of the archive's content will be the main characters of the live stories: the immigrants themselves, their children or their grandchildren. In this way, the curators of the museum will play a role in the encouragement of these people to participate with their stories. In this sense, the physical museum will offer innovative services for helping the audience to participate in the creation of the content.

5. An interface for non-expert users

A simple, easy-to-use and intuitive interface disguising sophisticated functionality is the idea of COINE software system. The interface reflects and fulfils the user's needs enabling them to tell their stories easily whilst presenting the stories of others effectively. The software is being tested in many different social, cultural and technological environments representing a wide range of test scenarios. In the MHIC we will test the software among elder people that have very low skills in IT.

Language and layout have been improved to try to ensure a logical and intuitive system whilst maintaining a simple but attractive screen. Some visual obstacles have been overcome by the technical developers such as the insertion of a thumbnail within the text of the story to indicate an image instead of a string of html language which was confusing to the users and too easy to accidentally modify or delete.

However most of the users have low literary skills. This handicap has been overcome with digital voice and video.

6. Metadata

The focus of COINE is to deliver content in a form acceptable to both authors of stories and users who simply want to search for information. Metadata is required to enable stories to be identified and retrieved but the challenge of COINE system is to maintain an effective level of metadata whilst hiding its complexity from the end-user. Because our end users are unsophisticated in their IT skills, we cannot expect them to wrestle with complex anthologies or schema.

As much metadata as possible is automatically generated from the user registration information or accessible computer data (i.e. current date) and the format used to add further data has been streamlined. Besides, the users are encouraged to tell the stories of their own localities. That is the reason why we could use none of the internationally recognized standard vocabularies because they will not provide the required level of detail.

For this reason we have adopted a two-fold approach: we use very general themes to describe the different stories coming from every library, archive and museum that test COINE software. These are 30 wide subjects decided by the partners of the COINE project taking as a basis existing subject headings and thesaurus but not taking any of them as a whole. These top-level themes are used and translated into all the languages of the participants of the COINE project to ensure the interoperability between languages.

In addition, each story can be described with a set of keywords from a list of terms describing "people", "places" and "subjects". These are chosen from local lists maintained by the administrator of the COINE software who is a professional from the museum where COINE is being used. This ensures vernacular language and a greater level of specificity is achieved for local subjects. These local lists are created by downloading terms from existing thesaurus or subject headings and other terms more local are created by the administrator. Users can also suggest terms for adding to the thesaurus very easily, but, to maintain consistency, these have to be approved by the administrator.

Further metadata is required to the user at the end of the process of creating a story and has been kept as simple as possible based on the Dublin Core standard (fields such as creation date or rights management). Pop-up boxes appear where metadata is required for a specific object within the story such as image (source of image, title, copyright holder). The ultimate aim is that the user enters metadata almost without realizing it.

7. Backend system architecture

The backend system is defined as everything that is provided by the COINE webservice, that is, all of the components that can be called by a web server that is acting as a front end to COINE. Additionally, a number of the COINE components are visible to the 'outside world' in general. The majority of system calls will originate from an IIS web server, using XML over SOAP to initiate a request on the SOAP server (shown here as Apache Tomcat running AXIS). The system call is then passed onto the COINE Controller, which does little more than create an implementation neutral *transaction* (i.e., a transaction that has no knowledge of XML), which is then passed to one of the COINE services (Data, Search and Authoring).

The services themselves consist of two distinct layers. The top layer is a handler that accepts the *transaction* and holds the business logic of the requested operation. That particular operation may then make use of any of a number of underlying service objects, and these objects form the lower layer. The service objects present an API that can be used by the upper layer handlers, but have no business logic of their own. (Thus a service object can transform an object into XML, but would not know when to do such a thing; conversely the handler knows when to transform an object to XML, but relies on the service object to actually do the work).

This approach promotes reusability of the service objects in other works as they are generic. Naturally, if later it was decided to move COINE away from being an XML webservice, only the controller interface with axis would need to be changed – the transaction is implementation neutral and thus it can be re-used also. This reuse allows the same underlying service objects to be shared between different handlers.

IV. Final comments

Memories are the cultural assets that thanks to applications of ICT may have prominent role in the future cultural institutions. We attempt in the previous pages to show some case studies in which the employment of memories have been a quite useful experience not only as a way to preserve personal information but also to educate new generations and include the old generations as educators.

Both cases studies demonstrate the importance of allowing the own people to introduce their memories, even from distance locations in as many formats as possible. Therefore, giving them full control of the process that means providing more information than the one that the staff from a unique cultural institution may supply.

Memories keep social bonds in local societies and despite inconveniences of globalization; ICT may help to keep these social bonds even from the distance.

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