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Networking – Shared Memory (1)

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Shared Memory: What is it?

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Definition or description of Shared Memory

Shared Memory, an inspiring, fascinating and captivating concept, but what does it mean or what's in the term? Most people are intrigued and become interested when they hear about a new concept that eventually has to become a program. Certainly they want to know what kind of memory it will contain. They are curious to discover how this kind of memory can be identified and described. The curious thing is that until now there is no exact definition of the term. The intention is however to get your input to come to a precise definition and description of the shared memory concept.

My task in this opening paper is to give some guidelines, hints and a few examples of archives (memory), which may fit in the concept of shared memory. And after discussing the content of shared Memory we can conclude together with a description of the concept that all of us can agree upon.

I would like to start with distinguishing a few categories of archives and examples of what could be defined as shared memory. But before exploring the different categories of shared memory I will talk about the significance of archives in general and the World Memory Program.

Significance of archives (memory)

Archives are the memory of people. Archives contain the information that people need to understand the society they live in. The information helps people re-examine the recent and more distant past, in order to develop a stronger sense of its own identity and to come to terms with its individual and collective character. That's why it's important to preserve archives; to preserve them so that they can be used by researchers. But sadly enough much of these archives are in bad material condition and in 1992 the UNESCO launched a program with the explicit objective to rescue these archives. This Memory of the World Program can serve us as example when defining the concept of shared memory.

The World Memory Program

The Memory of the World Program thus had its origins in the growing realization that much of our documentary heritage is in alarming state of preservation and, that in addition, access to it is extremely difficult in many parts of the world. This program was set up by UNESCO primarily in order to prevent irrevocable loss of large quantities of our collective memory.

The participants in the World Memory Program are:

The UNESCO, the co-ordinator and catalyst for the program, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, the financier and the two NGO's most heavily involved: IFLA and ICA.

Definition and guidelines

What are the definitions and guidelines of the World Memory Program?

World Memory has been defined as documentary heritage deemed to be of international, national and possibly regional significance. This documentary heritage will be listed on Memory of the World Registers. To be entered on a Register, documentary heritage must be recognized as having national, regional or international significance.

The guidelines of the World Memory Program were drawn by the IFLA for libraries and by the ICA for archives.

What are the guidelines?

The general guidelines to the Memory of the World Program were prepared in 1995 under the auspices of the IFLA and revised in 2002 for UNESCO by Ray Edmondson.

The general guidelines are a document that serves as a foundation for the program and the values it represents. The general guidelines provide a sound operational basis for the continuing growth of the Memory of the World Program. This document contains for instance:

- the definition of Memory of the world ;
- the objectives of Memory of the World Program;
- the background of the Memory of the World Program;
- the foundations, such as the basic assumptions and the character of the program;
- key strategies;
- principles of preservation and access;
- selection criteria for nomination.

These guidelines can serve as an example for the development of a Shared Memory program.

Objectives of the World Memory Program

The Memory of the World Program has four complementary objectives, all of equal importance. These are preservation, access, awareness and promotion.

Preservation: UNESCO's primary impetus for establishing the program is the need to preserve the world's deteriorating documentary heritage by using appropriate techniques;

Access: The access to the Memory of the World has not been equitable throughout the world because of all kinds of barriers and very little has been done to date to overcome them. New technologies open up a wealth of opportunities for democratizing and improving access. To facilitate access to the World Memory for all kinds of users is the aim;

Awareness: To assure a widespread support for the preservation of documentary heritage there should be a widespread awareness of the existence and significance of documentary heritage. To increase worldwide awareness of its existence and significance of documentary heritage of the world is an integral part of the program.

Promotion: Critical to the access of the World Memory Program is the promotion of the program and its products to the widest possible audience and encouraging the preservation of nationally and regionally significant documentary heritage. To promote the Program and its product to the widest possible public is also an important objective.

What can we borrow from the World Memory program to define the concept of Shared Memory?

The World Memory Program speaks of archives that have international, regional and national significance. In the concept of shared memory we will also be talking about archives that have international, regional and national significance. But an extra dimension in the concept of shared memory is that these archives we would like to preserve and make accessible are interrelated. To fully understand the information in certain archives you will need additional information from the other sources. Sources that most of the time are not available. They are kept in other countries and institutes. In the case of shared memory it should be stressed that the important element of distinction is the interrelationship. To study a particular topic of history the World Memory program is interesting but to understand in depth social, political and economical aspects the shared memory concept is more promising.

Categories and examples of shared memory

Now I would like to present to you a few categories and examples of archives that could fit in the concept of Shared Memory.

The first category consists of the archives that were created by the mercantile companies of the European countries through the seventeenth century and in the colonies of these European colonial powers. The archives of these companies and the archives of the settlements in which these companies operated are so intertwined that they are valuable for not only the country where these archives are located but also for the other countries.

I would like to give you some examples of what may be considered to fit in the first category. I have to apologize for the fact that these examples are Dutch examples. I am not well informed about the developments in the other former European colonial powers. But I am sure that there are similar examples in for instance the French, English, Spanish and Portuguese territories. I know what is being done in the Dutch territories. These examples may stand as models for other European countries.

The first example is about the VOC, the Dutch East India Company, and the TANAP. TANAP, abbreviation for "Towards A New Age of Partnership" is a Dutch-Asian-South African Heritage Project. TANAP is a joint venture project between the Dutch, Asian and South-African entities, which has as objective to preserve, to improve accessibility and to research the records of the VOC. The VOC was the first multinational of the world that existed from 1602 till 1795. The VOC was a Dutch trading company founded by traders and burghers from the port towns such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Middelburg. It was the largest and most impressive of the early modern European trading companies operating in Asia. It was formed in 1602 when the States-General of the United

Provinces, the highest authority of the Republic of the Netherlands, persuaded several competing Dutch spice-trading firms to unite into a single trading company.

The VOC presence in and around Monsoon Asia resulted not only in warehouses packed with spices, textiles, porcelain and silk, but also in shiploads of documents. Most of the papers found in VOC archives were produced by locally-stationed Company officials, but much was also produced by the peoples with whom they interacted: kings and nobleman, traders and middlemen, shippers and harbor masters.

In all the territories in which the VOC operated, like Indonesia, Malaysia, South-Africa, the Netherlands, archives have been created which contain information that we can call "Shared Memory" because of the interrelationship. These archives are of great importance to get a greater picture of the historical events in later independent countries. Over the last few decades, the VOC archives around the world have gained recognition from governments, NGO's and top research institutions as a vital historical source with global importance because it contains a wealth of new and valuable information that is important for all the countries with which the VOC had relationship.

The second example is also a Dutch mutual heritage project about the Dutch West India Company. The Dutch West India Company, better known as WIC, was maybe the second multinational that was founded in 1621 by merchants of a group of Dutch towns with the approval of the States-General. They aimed to attack Spain and break the Spanish trade monopoly (through anti-Spanish privateering but also piracy and raiding) in her colonies in the Americas during the last stage of the Spanish-Dutch war, the Eighty Years' War, 1568-1648. After the Treaty of Munster in 1648 the Company became especially a trading and smuggling company that specialized in ivory, pepper and the slave trade and later specialized in the trade of tropical crops like sugar, coffee, cacao, tobacco, indigo etc. The Company was abolished in 1791 and the newly formed "Raad der Coloniën" (the Council of the Colonies) subsequently assumed responsibility for the possessions in the Caribbean and Western Africa.

So the Dutch West India Company initiated contacts between a series of countries in Africa, the Americas and Europe that, for better or for worse, helped to shape a past that is shared to this day. In the course of these many centuries, archival records were formed, books and pamphlets published, the present material cultural heritage was built, oral histories were told and passed on. Together, these multiple sources are of great value to the understanding of the past and present of the various countries that were involved with these interactions over time.

Since 1998 the KITLV, an institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, has started a project to establish a program to rescue the documents of the WIC and to make them accessible for researchers. This mutual heritage project is called: "The Atlantic World and the Dutch, 1500-2000". The project has not only the archives of the WIC, 1621-1791 as its objective but also the records of the period before the foundation and the period after the demise of the WIC.

Locating and accessing relevant sources about the Dutch West Indian Company and the nations (countries) the Company once dealt with, scattered over many collections and archives in various countries are one of the objectives of this project. But the ultimate objective is to research the archives as much as possible in partnership with other institutions.

The first phase of this project started in February 2003 and will conclude in November 2004. It is a fact finding mission or an identification phase in which KITLV strives to determine the condition, the volume and the accessibility (access to history) of the archives in the regions in which the Company once established more or less permanent settlements. It also aims to include countries where contacts were more transitory.

The examples mentioned above are concrete examples of projects that aim to rescue, to preserve and to access the memory that is shared by various countries. But I strongly believe that other former colonial countries, like Great Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, even Denmark, Sweden and in lesser extent Norway and Germany and their former colonies also have archives of this kind with valuable information that is important for more than one country.

Second category of archives that can fit in the concept of Shared Memory are the archives with international significance and value. I'll give two examples of this category.

The first example of these archives is the "Archivo General de Indias" situated in Seville. In the archives of the General Archives of the Indies there are all kinds of records about the relations between the Spanish Crown and the countries that formed part of the Spanish colonial empire. There you can find vast amount of records about the former Spanish colonies. To write a big part of the history of all these countries of South-America and Central America researchers will have to rely on the archives in the "Archivo General de Indias". The information that these archives contain is of great importance not only for Spain but also for all its former colonies.

Maybe Portugal also has an archive like the "Archivo General de Indias". I am not aware of that.

Another example is the archive of the Vatican. The Roman Catholic priests accompanied the conquerors of the Americas from the beginning of the encounter between the countries of the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas. They sent and are still sending all kinds of reports to the Vatican. These documents contain information about a lot of countries and could therefore be identified as "Shared Memory".

A third category can be found in the archives of nations in certain regions. In a certain region countries have had all kinds of contacts with each other as the result of conquest, warfare, commercial ties and migration. To understand these phenomena we have to have access to these archives. Unfortunately much of these archives are situated in poor countries and these archives are in bad conditions and not accessible. They contain valuable information for several countries.

In the Caribbean most of the islands changed sovereignty frequently in the course of their history. As a result part of their memory is kept in archives in different European capitals. Most of the islands in the Caribbean and countries of the northern coast of South America, Venezuela, Colombia and what's now Panama and even Mexico had strong commercial ties because of the slave trade, trade in commercial goods and smuggling. In the archives of these islands in the Caribbean and the countries of Latin America the information that is present is of great importance for other countries because of the interrelationship that grew. Take for instance the notary acts of the archives of Coro, Venezuela. They contain information that is very valuable for the understanding of the asiento slave trade and the smuggling activities in the Caribbean. They contain memory that can be shared.

The fourth and last category that I would like to mention consists of the archives of modern international organizations like the World Bank, IMF, United Nations, UNESCO, NATO, IFLA, ICA etc. I am not sure if we can speak of shared memory in the case of these archives. I will leave this category for a later discussion.

The above mentioned categories of archives that may fit in the concept of "Shared Memory" should be made accessible as much and as soon as possible so that researchers can study them and come to comparative history. For many countries, especially the former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Americas of which the archives have deteriorated, been damaged, disappeared, or lost this shared memory is their only source of information. The accessibility of the shared memory located in other countries can help researchers to obtain valuable information to research their history using raw materials.

Archives and History

History begins with archives (sources). Without archives (sources) it is not possible to do serious history. Jean Pierre Wallot, a former president of the ICA once said about the link between archives and history: "Every generation owes it to itself to re-examine the recent and more distant past, in order to develop a stronger sense of its own identity, come to terms with its individual and collective character, and identify the knowledge, symbols and values necessary for conscious and enlightened action. This analysis is carried out for the sake of culture, and the desire, implicit or explicit, to preserve and transcend it."

"People need to know where they come from, not only as individuals, but also as organized groups that have evolved gradually, over centuries, with a particular "architecture" of institutions, habits, customs and cultural traits. Archives are the roots of this awareness. They provide evidence, information and testimony that enable citizens to document their rights and obligations, obtain an accounting from their governments and organizations, understand and embrace the complexity of the forces and factors at

play in their society. Without records, there is no memory; (and also no shared memory); without memory, there is no identity, thus no conscious present nor planned future. There is only ignorance, short-sightedness, prejudice, fear, narrow mindedness, hatred even.”

This is why we have to launch a program to preserve but most of all to make accessible the shared memory and to diffuse them through appropriate means making use of modern technology as much as possible, such as digitization and the Internet. So that researchers may get the opportunity to make good use of these archives in research that will bring about studies that are comparative and enlightening, with more depth. These studies will definitely shed another kind of light on the history of a lot of countries.

The definition of Shared Memory

Finally a few words about the definition of shared memory. It is the intention to define or describe shared memory officially in the conclusions of the CITRA Conference of 2006. So from now on all of us have the opportunity to discuss the concept at length and to contribute to the definition of the concept. Furthermore we can determine the criteria, the amount of criteria, the weighing factors etc that can be employed to determine what intellectual heritage, memory, will be categorized as fitting the Shared Memory project and program.

Criteria to employ for identifying shared memory

The criteria that could be used to identify shared memory can be divided in primary and secondary criteria. Primary criteria could be that the documentary heritage must contain information that is relevant not just for the country and archival institution where it is located, but also for other countries. The value of the information must transcend national boundaries. Furthermore it has to have a high interrelationship with information in other archives.

What criteria are to be employed in selecting documentary heritage for the Shared Memory program? If there are a lot of criteria how many may a documentary heritage need to meet for inclusion in the program or is it enough if it meets only one criterion? And should all criteria have the same weight or do we have to apply weighing factors to prioritize?

We all have some homework to do in relation to the questions mentioned above. I wish you good luck and I thank you very much for lending me your ears.