Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli

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Abstract. Homesickness for the main author's home town and the capabilities social media gave me, led to the creation of a Facebook group and a Facebook page, where we collect rare photographs and record their history and the history of the people depicted in them. This has now developed in a largescale crowdsourcing platform for the documentation of local history.

Keywords: Social media, CrowdSourcing, Cultural heritage, Local history.

1   Introduction

Living in the modern technological culture of the 21st century, we daily receive plenty of stimuli from all over the world. It seems that the world has become a neighbourhood for all people. However, at the same time, modern human beings appear to be cut off from their immediate environment. The people, the buildings, the streets that surround us lose the meaning and the significance that would turn them into memories, reference points of each one's identity. The opening up and exposure of human to the endless time and place of technological culture seems to carry a risk instead of extending their horizon to the perspective of the global community. Eventually technology is eradicating the people, destroying their ties with the society around them and isolating them.

Any effort, therefore, to create links with the world that surrounds us, to build communities, to create a memory, cannot be but an effort that contributes positively to the inherent characteristic of the human as a social being, the creation of culture. Indeed, if technology itself appears to be something that, at a first level, leads to the breach of the traditional ties with the world, it is interesting to explore if, at the same time, it can offer new qualitative perspectives into the shaping of the individual and collective memory. In this paper, we will attempt to answer the above question through an example, a personal project "Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli", which started in 2009 and continues to this day. Homesickness for the main author's home town and the capabilities social media gave me, led to the creation of a Facebook group https://www.facebook.com/groups/GeitoniesAlexandroupolis/ and a Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/AlexandroupoliHistory/, where we collect rare photographs and record their history and the history of the people depicted in them.

The story of a place at this project is conceived as a collage of images. "The picture does not convey an objective truth, but invites to a fertile encounter. The story becomes "the object of a composition, whose place is not formed by the uniform and empty time, but by the time which is full of the presence of now". Contrary to the close meaning of coherent historical narratives, the past, through the fragmentation of images remains open to new interpretations and evaluations, to new meanings, where insignificant can become important through the active reading of images by as many participants as possible. This way the past is united with the present and the present acquires a depth and a meaning.

It is a detailed presentation of events that have happened over time. The views of Alexandroupoli and the memories of its inhabitants are expressed through personal histories and kept alive through the facebook page and the archive, which is constantly expanding. This has become possible thanks to the active participation of my compatriots located all over the world who send unpublished photos from their family archive, as well as their testimonies, stories of their ancestors and their own.

The participatory community of the members of the Facebook page has been created through a large network of volunteers who are involved with the page daily. In addition to sending photos, they participate in conversations with the other members. They also make and correct comments or add details to incomplete photo descriptions. Their purpose is to inform and share their knowledge and memories with the rest of the community. It seems that everyone's need for communication has found a way out, to a great extent, through social networking, as it offers a way of spreading information through the creation of connections with people with similar interests.

Fig. 1. 1946, a group of young people are in front of a house at Apolloniada district of Alexandroupoli. In the photo from the archive of Mr. George Kanellos, we read the comments of other members who identified their relatives but also the location of the house in the city of Alexandroupoli.

With the help of the internet, thousands of members of a social network like Facebook, looked for their origins, their interests, their history, their city, their school, and many other personal references. These personal references, though, happen to be common and shared with a large number of other users who have looked for their cultural heritage and found it in the "Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli" page. At the same time, members have a double role. They are both the creators of the cultural commodity which is produced within the page, but also its consumers. They are no longer just recipients of cultural information but active citizens who are involved in the saving of their history and culture and they gain great satisfaction from it.

2   Crowdsourcing procedure

The procedure with these kinds of features is in fact a Crowdsourcing application for the development of cultural heritage, where at the same time members meet their personal need for social interaction and reconnection with other users of social networks united by their place of origin, their love for history and folklore.

Crowdsourcing is an open invitation that appeals to and attracts a multitude of people to contribute to the implementation of a project. The real word appears, for the first time, in 2006, by the writer and journalist Jeff Howe in an article in Wired magazine, entitled "The growth of Crowdsourcing". It describes a new way of involving people who want to help or work on a project and offer their time and effort at a low price, or even for free.

"Designing a crowdsourcing project plays a prominent role by engaging the public and triggering its interest". In this way, the "Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli" page urges its members to open their long-forgotten photographic archives and digitize them. This results in bringing the generations closer, since the digitization of the material is usually undertaken by the younger members of a family who, at the same time, learn their family history. The collective memory is also the collective power of people in this continuous development of new content. They produce a new cultural object, as they convert old photographic material or old documents into a digital form, which can be recorded and imparted to the younger generations. They, in turn, through the interaction with the older generations, are really getting acquainted with their family origin, but also with the historical facts they were unaware of. Through this interaction, the historical and cultural continuity between generations of the past, the present and the future, is secured and the sustainable development through culture is achieved.

Thus, they create stronger ties and, at the same time, manage to increase the value of the cultural product which is collected through their specific actions, such as "tagging, geo-location, collection, and classification and co-curation. The capitalization of the crowd wisdom is linked with the motives which trigger it".

The successful mobilization and motivation of the members has resulted in the creation of an electronic repository which is now a digital timeline extending from the late 19th century until recently. Furthermore, through the site-based information management and their time and participation in the page, users increase their social networking. Friends, classmates, relatives, fellow citizens are socially reconnected, both at the Facebook page and offline.

The lives of their ancestors and the lives of the members of this community who send the material are constantly crossed at many points over the decades. This is a natural consequence of the development of friendships, marriages, same jobs or education, and other shared experiences, even though they come from different social starting points. The same happens with their memories too and the photos of their lives and the genealogical trees of Alexandroupoli.

3 Results and statistics

Currently, the Facebook page and the Facebook group "Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli" have 15,000 and 19,000 active members, respectively. The photographic repository includes 12,000 photos and documents in digital format. All participants' memories complement each other's and co-record the history of the city.

The historical memory is a process of selecting what will be saved and what will be left in oblivion, not just an automatic process of preserving the past and storing information. Therefore, memory, as a selection process, entails the social factor. Who determines what will be left in oblivion and what will be saved? Usually, this process is left to the experts, such as the historians or the dominant group of the time, such as the government and its policies. More often than not, the process is left to chance.On the contrary, in the case of the project we are studying, a new process of collective memory construction, based on the democratic principles emerges. Through the active participation of all in the process of shaping the collective memory, a public space that freely allows and encourages the expression of everyone's opinion, without exclusions, is formed. It is not just about free access for all to what has already been saved, but their active participation in the construction of the collective memory. Social media seem to be a privileged environment for the creation of such spaces.

The purpose of the project "Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli" is to preserve and shape the collective memory of the city of Alexandroupoli and Thrace, which consists of all the memories shared by its citizens and those who come from there but no longer live in the city. "Boyer considers that the whole city can be seen as a form of collective memory. Consequently, the city, as a place, is an exhibition of events that have happened through time, while its aspects are expressed through personal memories and narrations. Lately, several researches have been done on what Crinson calls an urban memory.
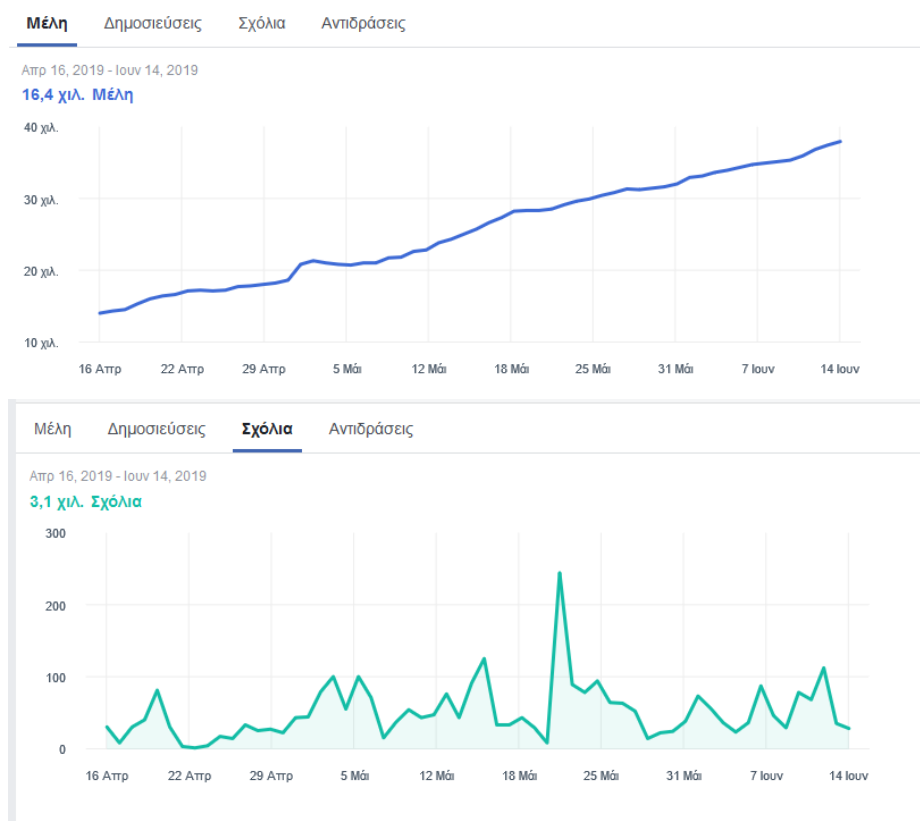
Fig. 2. Statistics on number of members and the comments added on a daily basis.

The memory of a city, according to Postalcy et al. is a "kind of collective memory formed by the experiences of individuals at the particular place through its history and social environment". With the help of the social networks and the great possibilities they offer, personal memories can be recorded, preserved and transmitted to the younger generations which by interacting with each other, with older generations and with place, they will shape the collective memory of the city, their home country, their place of origin. Personal memories pass from generation to generation through narratives and testimonies of important events that happened in the past. The changes in the urban environment (buildings, roads, parks), which is a point of reference for them, are also being recorded. One can also observe the evolution of the professions, technology, living conditions, of families themselves, of regimes over the decades.

In Europe, cultural and creative industries have been some of the most dynamic sectors in recent years. They are considered as a "catalyst for innovative developments in the industry and the service sector" and therefore "occupy an important place in the

Europe 2020 strategy, since they contribute to a new type of growth" , strengthening the EU's international competitiveness and promoting its knowledge and cultural diversity. They are closely linked to education and training, and their dynamic development is reflected not only in the economic, but in the social development as well. It is said that "Culture can contribute to inclusive growth through the promotion of the intercultural dialogue, with full respect for the cultural identity" .

Fig. 3. August 20, 1953 at Patriotic Institute for Social Welfare and Understanding (PIKPA) in Alexandroupoli. Awards are given to the Healthiest Babies of the City by Mayor Betsios and Doctor Rachmanidis. Evangelos Mammos, a musician today, 16 months old is in the arms of his mother Olga Mammou. Next to them George Bacharoudis, a cardiologist today is in the arms of his own mother. The photo was sent to the page by Ms Maria Mammou. Right beside we can read the comments of other members who identified their relatives

The "Neighbourhoods and Memories of Alexandroupoli" page is an open platform that strengthens this social cohesion and social development. It acts as a mediation tool that allows its members to participate fully and creatively in a collective effort with continuous, daily action. This contact and the enjoyment they find in it, results in acquiring new knowledge and, at the same time, in increasing their self-confidence and pride in their contribution and their roots. The most important thing that is cultivated is the conscientiousness and the special emphasis that is given to the correct documentation and classification of the photos and the rest of the archive, which grows daily.

Our digitized cultural and historical heritage can be the raw material for a continuous, long-term production of cultural goods, as well as interactive history lessons. This is achieved through the use of the good practices found in social networks and new technologies which are popular among young people. In this way, young people, together with their creative, participatory education, will also have a basis to start observing everything that is around them. However, a starting point for any individual and

collective action cannot be but what lies near us. Thus, we will be able to connect human with place and time.

4   Conclusions and outlook

What started as a small Facebook page has developed into a large-scale crowdsourcing platform for the documentation of local history. We now find ourselves managing a group of more than 16000 active users, jointly working towards salvaging the history of Alexandroupoli.

At the same time, we have the opportunity to observe in practice how theoretical estimations about the efficiency of such approaches and the internal dynamics of such groups, produce methodologies and good practice documents and examine how/whether this can be transferred to other places and form the basis for a broader effort to salvage local community history.

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