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**A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ON STRATEGIES OF  
REMEMBRANCE USING THE WORLD WIDE WEB:  
FRAGMENTS OF 1944**

***Câteva considerații privind strategii de rememorare prin uzul  
internetului: fragmente ale anului 1944***

**Abstract:** *In a world where the position of historians is increasingly more complex to delineate and characterize, the World Wide Web represents a medium where history and histories are being written, restored or interpreted on a daily basis. Faced with the tremendousness of this space and their intrinsic liability to infinite obliviousness, events and places of the past are still waiting to be uncovered. But how can one draw the attention to history and bring the 'voices' of the people into the digital age whilst using community-created content in a coherent manner? Given this framework, it is the aim of my paper to analyze two projects that aspire at engaging people with history: 'Yellow-star house project' and 'A mate from the past. 1944 LIVE'. My analysis is based on the interpretative structure proposed by Suzanna K. Conrad, according to which digital stories have multiple purposes. While referring to the projects' context, audience and message, the current contribution focuses on two aspects, namely outreach-activism and the practice of digital storytelling as a way of archiving history.*

**Keywords:** *1944, commemoration, public history, World Wide Web, digital storytelling.*

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According to Meg Foster, “Web 2.0 is a dynamic terrain that provides both opportunities and challenges to the creation of history”.<sup>1</sup> It is a space where people can engage with communities in active remembrance and where the imagery of the past is being constructed, accessed and restored through digital mediums. Given this framework, it is the aim of my paper to analyze two projects that sought to engage online users with

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<sup>1</sup> Foster 2014: 2.

history: *Yellow-star house project*<sup>2</sup> and *Kumpel z Przeszłości – 1944 LIVE* (A mate from the past- 1944 LIVE).<sup>3</sup>

Although these projects share the common ground of reaching the public via World Wide Web, they differ in their strategy of presenting the past and engaging with people. In my paper I question the way in which their messages were conveyed and I investigate their practical implementation, whilst considering both projects as public processes of creating and engaging with history. My analysis is based on the interpretative framework proposed by Suzanna K. Conrad, according to which the digital stories have multiple purposes. In this sense, my paper focuses on two aspects: outreach and activism, and as a way of archiving history. In doing so, I refer to the projects' context, audience, message, and I conclude by indicating a series of limitations and the impact of their endeavors.

**Theoretical considerations.** Generally, as historians seek to endorse the relevancy and the importance of history today, they turn to historical figures that can serve as possible role models. From this perspective, public historians must pay attention to the needs and the interests of their audience in order to conform to the public's perceptions as these determine the historical figures that are brought forward as potential role models while also driving the way in which stories are wrapped and explained or inflicting on what is included and what is omitted.<sup>4</sup>

For the projects concerned, the top-down approach of presenting historical characters is reversed. Thus, we have the case of two bottom-up approaches of presenting the past, with individual stories gathered and integrated in a larger historical narrative. Thus, the World Wide Web gives public historians the opportunity to engage the community by using the raw material of history. It also provides a medium for the collection of historical documents and artifacts, allowing the public to interact with history in new ways: not only in a passive way, but also by empowering it to contribute, comment, share it through social media, and combine it with other web sources.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of their online presence and their seemingly infinite possible reach, both projects are focusing on matters dealing with the local history of Budapest and Warsaw, respectively. For the indicated projects local history is brought to light in its multilayered forms and thus the past is used as a source of insight that can inspire a sense of acquaintance between people who share a commitment to places in their area and can stir up

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<sup>2</sup> "Yellow-Star Houses," <http://www.yellowstarhouses.org>. [July 15, 2018].

<sup>3</sup> "Case study: San Markos: kumpel z przeszłości. 1944 Live" <http://www.marketing.org.pl/index.php/go=2/act=2/aid=m4b1bf9c396278/> [July 15, 2018]

<sup>4</sup> Rosenbaum 2014: 56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*: 58.

curiosity and contributions from those unfamiliar with their stories. Thus, as Valk and Ewald argue, the individual stories contribute to a city's identity, and a *voice* should be given to them, as "they are kept inside of the heads of the people who live" or once lived there.<sup>6</sup>

But how can one draw the attention to history and bring the *voices* of the people into the digital age whilst using community created content in a coherent manner? Internet-based social networks are places where *active remembrance* and a social construction of the past can take place. At a time when the digital overshadows the analogue, when emails and instant messages have long overshadowed post mail, digital storytelling is the new way of keeping a record of one's experiences either through social media, blogs or audio-video productions. In a tentative attempt to explain the term of "active remembrance", Heiko Zimmerman proposes a new term, which refers to the internet user as a *prosumer*, a "creature that is a producer and a consumer at the same time", turning social media platforms (i.e. Facebook) into indispensable tools in digital memory-making and personal archive assembling.<sup>7</sup>

Following Conrad's framework of interpreting the purposes of digital stories,<sup>8</sup> I now turn to the projects concerned. One possible function is that of outreach and activism with the intention of influencing public opinion, which makes the case for the *A mate from the past. 1944 LIVE* project. Secondly, digital storytelling can function as a way of archiving history, especially local history, and thereby creating a new way to generate micro-histories. I argue that the *Yellow-star house* project, through the activities deployed, makes the case of both of these aims.

**Historical context & projects' context.** A vast amount of research, from all fields, has been dedicated to the events of 1944, from all over Europe, within the framework of World War II. Consequently, numerous forms of commemorations are nowadays organized, ranging from international to local level. As Bills argues, "the past lives in the present" and contemporary events, trends and prospects lose their meaning when faced with obliviousness. Even though the past is never literally reproduced, there are lessons to learn, faults to avoid, injustices to be remembered and fused in the collective consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

The year 1944 is of particular importance for the projects concerned as it was marked by the interconnected tragedies of the Holocaust and the Second World War. On June 16<sup>th</sup> 1944, the mayor of Budapest issued a decree that marked out almost 2,000 apartment buildings in the city, into which 220,000 Jews were constrained to move. They all had to move out of

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<sup>6</sup> Valk & Ewald 2013: 14.

<sup>7</sup> Zimmerman 2012: 156.

<sup>8</sup> Conrad 2013: 459.

<sup>9</sup> Bills 1998: 183.

their homes in a matter of days, and move into one of the 1,944 designated apartment buildings marked with a yellow star, the “yellow-star” houses, in an action that served as a preliminary step for the deportation of Jews.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, the Warsaw Uprising is considered one of the most dramatic events in Polish modern history, as members of the Polish resistance faced the German army between August and October 1944, in an attempt to fight off the occupiers of Warsaw. This action was a part of *akcja Burza* [Operation Tempest], a series of anti-Nazi uprisings conducted by the dominant force in Polish resistance, *Armia Krajowa* [Polish Home Army].<sup>11</sup>

Before moving forward with the analysis, a few words about the creators of the projects are needed. The Open Society Archives (OSA) is both a research institution and a complex archival institution, serving as a repository of important collections, primarily related to the history of the Cold War and international human rights violations, but also a laboratory of archival experiments on new ways of assessing, contextualizing, presenting and finding new uses for archival documents.<sup>12</sup> In 2014, OSA Archivum commemorated the 1944 episode of Budapest's past by exploring the history of the “yellow-star” houses. A website was launched as the first event in a year-long series of public programs focusing on the city of Budapest in 1944. Online visitors were given the opportunity to explore an interactive map of the former yellow-star houses which was supplemented with relevant decrees, a list of houses, a chronology, a glossary, and people`s recollections.

In the second case, the Warsaw Uprising is one of the key events in Polish modern history that benefits from the coverage of The Warsaw Uprising Museum, established in 2004. The institution sponsors research into the history of the Uprising, the history and possessions of the Polish Underground State. It collects and maintains hundreds of artifacts, ranging from weapons used by the insurgents, to love letters, in order to present a full picture of the people involved. Moreover, it aims at creating an archive of historical information on the Uprising and records of stories and memories of the still living participants.

In 2009, on the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, the Promotion Department of Warsaw City Hall decided to commemorate the event in a meaningful way for the younger generations. The advertising agency San Markos, not affiliated with The Warsaw Uprising Museum, created and developed a project aimed at engaging people with history via social media. A day-to-day live account of the Warsaw Uprising was provided with the use of two fictitious characters on the *Facebook* platform,

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<sup>10</sup>“Yellow-star houses website” <http://www.yellowstarhouses.org/#overlay=about> [July 12, 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Klejn 2004: 251–92.

<sup>12</sup> “Open Society Archives” <http://www.osaarchivum.org/about-us> [July 12, 2018].

while pictures, links, quizzes, songs, and para-documentaries were used to enrich the projects' content.

**Audience.** According to De Bruyn, initiatives of Public history on the web are of importance for their pedagogical, ethical or political function, but their effectiveness does not only depend on the openness and interactivity of World Wide Web applications, but also on the degree of their local, national, or international diffusion.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, one should remember that even though their discourse may be regarded and interpreted on a global scale, the local, regional, or national specificity of their rhetoric should be taken into consideration.

From this perspective, the *Yellow-star house* project's audience consists of the population who is living or once lived in Budapest, tourists, and people interested in the past. This is also reflected in Istvan Rev's<sup>14</sup> declaration: "you cannot feel at home if you don't know the place you live in".<sup>15</sup> Concerning the online audience, even though the primary language of the activities was Hungarian, the organizers also provided an English version, which expanded the theoretical reach beyond the 7.2 million Hungarian internet users.<sup>16</sup>

In the other case, first and foremost it must be pointed out that the message of the campaign was conveyed in Polish. Moreover, considering the fact that the main activities of this project were deployed on Facebook, it ultimately had the potential to engage an audience of around 1.3 million users.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the fact that the message of *A mate from the past. 1944 LIVE* project was conveyed only in Polish indicates that this commemoration practice was mainly local and national, with very little access to non-Polish speakers.

**Online development.** June 21<sup>st</sup> 2014 marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the forcible relocation of Budapest's Jews. At this time the website of the *Yellow-star house* project was already launched. Based on the *Google Maps* platform, it provided an interactive map of the former yellow-star houses, visitors being able to compare the current size of Budapest with the one from 1944 and easily discover that two thirds of the named houses are still standing today. The map was supplemented with relevant decrees, a list of

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<sup>13</sup> De Bruyn 2010: 46.

<sup>14</sup> Istvan Rev - Professor of History and Political Science at the Central European University Budapest, and the Director of OSA Archivum, Yellow-star houses project coordinator.

<sup>15</sup> "Budapest: Yellow Star Houses," *Euronews*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/06/23/budapest-yellow-star-houses/>, [July 15, 2018].

<sup>16</sup> According to these estimations, at the time of the project, Hungary had 7.2 million internet users, "European Union Internet Usage Stats and Population Statistics," <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm>. [July 15, 2018].

<sup>17</sup> According to these estimations, in 2009 there were 22.5 million internet users in Poland, out of which 1.3 million were Facebook users. Kuś 2011.

houses, a chronology, a glossary, and people's recollections. Thus, along with the stories of the houses, the visitors could engage in a virtual tour, as each of them benefited from a snapshot from *Google Street View*.

Regarding the Warsaw project, on July 27<sup>th</sup> 2009 the Facebook profiles of the two fictitious characters were created, carrying the names of *Sosna*<sup>18</sup> and *Kostek*<sup>19</sup>, two supposed fighters in the resistance. As of August 1<sup>st</sup> they provided informal reports on their preparations and first undertakings in the Warsaw Uprising. The content of their messages seemed as if they were “real” people that offered their online friends a live report from the events, in which they actively took part as a courier and as a soldier, respectively. The tone of their inputs fluctuated from sober recollections to joyful reactions to various mundane activities and social events of the time.<sup>20</sup>

Their daily updates were complemented with historical pictures of the objects, people and the city of Warsaw during the Uprising. Whilst doing so, they revealed footage of para-documentaries as real-life remakes of battle zones, and distributed songs and websites related to the Uprising. As De Bruyn points out, their profiles gradually grew into commemorative communities which encapsulated various layers of daily pleasantries from the period with the more sober debates over the implications of the larger historical processes that were being unveiled.<sup>21</sup>

**Community engagement on and beyond the Web.** In the *Yellow-star house* project, the survivors and former residents were encouraged to contribute with their recollections. This could be done either by contacting the volunteers or by submitting a story via email. As stated earlier in the text, the website was a part of a series of events which took place throughout 2014. In its attempt to construct a memory depository of the times, June 21<sup>st</sup> 2014 was marked by commemorations such as readings, concerts, performances, and tours around the city. Moreover, there were also ceremonies for the foreign diplomats who brought their contribution in alleviating the condition of Jews, and in late 2014 an exhibition was also organized.<sup>22</sup>

As for the *A mate from the past-1944 LIVE* project, the online community gradually spurred to approximately 3.000 Facebook friends that engaged with the characters. Their activities went beyond Facebook when people were invited to search for “air drops” throughout Warsaw. As the characters gave clues of the locations, the users were invited to help

<sup>18</sup> Sosna`s profile: <https://www.facebook.com/SosnaDwadziesciacztery> [July 15, 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Kostek`s profile <https://www.facebook.com/KostekDwadziesciacztery> [July 15, 2018].

<sup>20</sup> De Bruyn: 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*: 52.

<sup>22</sup> “Remembering the Yellow Star Houses,” *The Economist*, June 11, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/06/hungarys-history>, [July 15, 2018].

them by taking a photo of the “air drop” and posting it on Facebook. In a different activity, para-documentaries were shot with mobile phones, starring the members of the Association of Tradition Army Historical Reconstruction Group *Watch 49* and the Scout Group *Wigry*. At the end of the 63-day commemoration, the creators also organized a closing event, which allowed followers and those interested in the stories of *Kostek* and *Sosna* to get to know the people behind the characters.<sup>23</sup>

**Conclusions.** Considering that “our consciousness of the past is inextricably bound by pictures”<sup>24</sup> it should be taken into account that the images selected by these projects and later used to interact with their audience are subject to disputes concerning the selection and the placement of their content. This is mostly the case for the *A mate from the past: 1944 LIVE* project, where dozens of pictures displaying people, objects and places were used to construct a narrative. Although their day-to-day stories of the events were based on history books and diaries,<sup>25</sup> no references were made to the actual sources that were used to construct the chronology. Moreover, this could also raise the question of how the sources were instrumentalised and mediated, through a scenario, to promote certain values, such as honor and heroism, considering the uprising’s failure.

In the case of the *Yellow-star house* project, a very important note concerns the position and the later usage of the collected stories. As Abrams suggests, memory is always mediated and there is no “pure or transparent oral representation of past experience”<sup>26</sup> and thus they should be regarded as such. Nevertheless, even though the act of listening and watching clips and images online is only touching upon the tip of the myriad of complexities generated by historical events or places, the World Wide Web allows users to face multiple and entangled recollections of those with hands on experiences, all this from the comfort of their homes.

Following Foster's argument, as the position of historians is increasingly more complex to delineate and characterize, they need to act in answer to the thrust of “user-generated histories” and the digital world, providing consultancy or serving as educators, authorities in the public process of making history.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, the purpose of this paper was to investigate two projects that aimed at remembering history via the World Wide Web and discuss their practical implementation and the use of community-based stories. Whereas the *A mate from the past. 1944 LIVE* project had the purpose of outreach and activism with a clear intention of influencing public opinion, the case of *Yellow-star house* project served not

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<sup>23</sup> De Bruyn: 52.

<sup>24</sup> Brown 2004: 253.

<sup>25</sup> “How City of Warsaw Used Social Media to Connect with History - Marketing Case” <http://www.utalkmarketing.com/Pages/Article.aspx?ArticleID=17015> [July 15, 2018].

<sup>26</sup> Abrams 2010: 55.

<sup>27</sup> Foster: 12.

only as a mean for outreach, but also as a method of archiving local history and thereby creating a way to generate micro-histories<sup>28</sup> and preserve oral testimonies. Their different purposes also influenced their legacy; as the website of the *Yellow-star house* project serves as an archive in the long run, the two Facebook profiles of the *1944 LIVE* project stand as possible inspiration for future digital storytelling projects, bringing their contribution to the diverse registry of approaches to commemoration activities.

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<sup>28</sup> Conrad: 462.

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