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Caroline Hood, Peter Reid,

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Social media as a vehicle for user engagement with local history

Social media

A case study in the North East of Scotland

Caroline Hood

*Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and Built Environment,
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK, and*

Peter Reid

*School of Creative and Cultural Business,
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK*

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine issues associated with user engagement on social media with local history in the North East of Scotland and to focus on a case study of the Buckie and District Fishing Heritage Society, a small but very successful and professionally-run community-based local heritage organisation.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach using photo elicitation on social media was deployed in conjunction with analysis of the user interactions and the reach insights provided by Facebook to the page manager. Additionally, a focus group was used.

Findings – The research, although focussed on an individual case study, offers significant lessons which are more widely applicable in the local history and cultural heritage social media domain. Key aspects include user engagement and how digital storytelling can assist in the documentation of local communities ultimately contributing to local history research and the broader cultural memory. The significance of the image and the photo elicitation methodology is also explored.

Social implications – The research demonstrates new opportunities for engaging users and displaying historical content that can be successfully exploited by community heritage organisations. These are themes which will be developed within the paper. The research also demonstrates the value of photo elicitation in both historical and wider information science fields as a means of obtaining in-depth quality engagement and interaction with users and communities.

Originality/value – The research explored the underutilised method of photo elicitation in a local history context with a community possessed of a strong sense of local identity. In addition to exploring the benefits of this method, it presents transferable lessons for how small, community-based history and heritage organisation can engage effectively with their audience.

Keywords Communities, Social media, Scotland, Photo elicitation, User engagement, Local history, Digital storytelling, Heritage organizations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In addition to the traditionally curated local studies section within the public library service, there are a significant number of independent and community-led local history initiatives operating throughout the UK. Social media offers new opportunities for documenting and remembering the society (Henninger and Scifleet, 2016) and for displaying the historical content of these community archives. In particular, the format of social media provides a readymade and easily accessible platform for sharing personal and family photographs, both of which are important in the development of cultural memory (Kuhn, 2007). Further, with the easy accessibility of technology, more people are telling personal stories via digital means, thereby indicating a shift from more traditional methods of storytelling to digital storytelling (Coudry, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to report an investigation into user engagement with local studies projects via social media in the North East of Scotland. Specifically, the research was undertaken with the objectives of evaluating how users interact with archival images in



both digital and physical contexts, and to analyse the role of social media in both the documentation of local history and as a contributor to cultural memory. This is an area of research which has been explored in limited circumstances so far, particularly in the context of local history. It will also contribute to the wider understanding of how social media impacts upon cultural memory and, importantly, how photo elicitation techniques are of value both in local history terms and for other information science fields.

In order to achieve the aim and objectives, the Buckie and District Fishing Heritage Centre (“the Heritage Centre”) was selected as an appropriate case study. Located approximately 17 miles from Elgin on the Moray Firth coast of Scotland, Buckie is a town with a rich fishing heritage. The Heritage Centre has a growing collection of over 8,000 photographs which are accessible in both printed format in folders in the Heritage Centre and also via computers located within the Heritage Centre. The photographic collection represents and encompasses every facet of local life from shipbuilding and fishing vessels to “weel kent” faces (well known). Although the Heritage Centre had an established presence on Facebook, prior to July 2016, the organisation did not make use of social media for showcasing this extensive photographic catalogue.

Buckie has a strong sense of local identity which includes the surrounding villages, and until the second half of the twentieth century, the fishing industry was predominant in these communities. The Fishing Heritage Society has benefited from this strong sense of community and identity and has the support, indeed affection, of large parts of the local population. It has succeeded as a heritage organisation because it is a community-led “bottom-up” organisation seeking to preserve the legacy of fishing and related industries.

Literature review

Photo elicitation

“Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002 p. 13), and although the process was first described by John Collier in 1957, it has been reported sparingly in academic literature since then (Baxter *et al.*, 2015). Despite this, photo elicitation has been identified as a valuable tool in social research (Hurworth, 2003) and has been successfully used in topics ranging from social class and historical ethnography to identity and cultural studies (Harper, 2002). Furthermore, within the context of research methods, it is regarded as being capable of aiding the rapport between interviewees and the researcher (Baxter *et al.*, 2015) and also of evoking a “different kind of information” (Harper, 2002) from the interview.

Ireland and Ellis (2005) used black and white photographs to demonstrate the potential for photographs to act as a medium giving collective meaning to both the past and future of a Cornish fishing village. Their research used the images “to stimulate remembrance of kin ties, experiences, and interactions” (Ireland and Ellis, 2005) and allowed the conclusion to be drawn that “photographs do play an essential role in the continuity of contemporary culture in Cornwall” (Ireland and Ellis, 2005, p. 386). Similarly, Baxter *et al.* (2015) investigated the value of photo elicitation as a method for exploring the role played by small town main streets in Scottish island communities in sustaining cultural identity, community and a sense of place. The techniques employed produced “a significant quantity of rich, qualitative commentary – data which we would argue, might have remained largely untapped through the use of conventional interview techniques” (Baxter *et al.*, 2015).

With the experience of both Ireland and Ellis (2005), Baxter *et al.* (2015) reinforces previous research in this area which has concluded that “even vague memories can be given the sharpness of focus, unleashing a flood of detail” (Banks, 2001) and that it “mines deeper shafts into a different part of the human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (Harper, 2002). Furthermore, in parallel with the research undertaken by Baxter *et al.* (2015) and their conclusion that “[...] the very act of identifying family, friends and ‘weel kent

faces' in the photographs of the main street seemed almost to reinforce the participants' Kirkwallian and Orcadian identity" (p. 27), it was also anticipated that the photo elicitation component of the research could potentially contribute to the personal cultural memory aspects discussed in further detail below.

Facebook as a forum for user engagement

In considering how individuals engage with Facebook, the social media platform has been likened to a scrapbook (Good, 2012), personal letters or diaries (Henninger and Scifleet, 2016) and more generally as a "repository for moments from people's lives" (Sinn and Syn, 2014). However, there is little in the literature that specifically connects the sphere of local history to user engagement with social media. In particular, as noted by Good (2012), there is a tendency in scholarly literature to describe Facebook as a solely social site and not one with the potential for archival activity. By extension, it could also be suggested that Facebook has therefore not been adequately considered as a forum for users to engage with specific local history projects. Furthermore, "the importance and potential of Facebook data as evidence of how contemporary people live has not been addressed in any detail in the information science field" (Sinn and Syn, 2014).

Ashmore (2013) examined various websites based in the Shetland Isles, including Shetland-themed Facebook groups from the perspective of both the physical and virtual realms. In analysis of the role and function of these Facebook groups, it was suggested that "Shetland themed Facebook groups may constitute a hybrid space in which communication in the virtual world adds details to places and social networks in the physical space of the Islands" (Ashmore, 2013). However, the capacity for user engagement with Facebook during research projects needs to be approached with caution. Baxter *et al.* (2015) set up a dedicated Facebook page to act as an additional photo elicitation tool for a project where digital versions of the photographs used elsewhere in the project would be displayed.

The public response to the Facebook page was characterised as "rather disappointing" (Baxter *et al.*, 2015) as it failed to significantly engage users and to elicit reminiscences and insights from the wider public. Unlike the experience of the research team in Kirkwall (Baxter *et al.*, 2015), it was anticipated that by utilising an already established Facebook page with over 350 "Likes", a greater level of user engagement with the digital images would be experienced.

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is a relatively recent concept and refers to the practice of telling personal stories via digital formats, distinct from previous modern forms of storytelling through photographs, radio and television (Couldry, 2008). The process is rooted in the narrative tradition but is enhanced through inclusion of the digital aspect (Rossiter and Garcia, 2010). Digital stories have been described as "short vignettes that combine the art of telling stories with multimedia objects including images, audio, and video" (Rossiter and Garcia, 2010) and as "personal stories [...] made for publication on the internet" (Meadows, 2003). The term "digital storytelling" was first coined by Atchley, a founder of the Centre for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, in the 1980s (Rossiter and Garcia, 2010).

Conrad (2013) states that telling personal stories with the use of multimedia acts as a powerful way of creating narratives and also as a means of building a connection with community members. This is of particular relevance to the local history sphere as a "significant proportion of user enquiries in local studies has always come from outside the catchment area of the service; these users are remote in the traditional, geographic sense of the word" (Reid and Macafee, 2007). Therefore, digital storytelling offers a medium through which to engage users outside of the immediate locale for "many contemporary community

archives use the web to share their resources amongst their communities and beyond” (Flinn, 2010).

Furthermore, as Conrad (2013) observes, digital storytelling offers a medium through which to archive local history. Mutibwa (2016) explores the relationship between memory, storytelling and the digital archive in the context of memory making in heritage projects. Mutibwa (2016) observes that local approaches to the telling of history offer new ways of understanding the past that are capable of providing meaningful connections for the local community. This observation demonstrates the value of alternative methods of storytelling to local history projects and confirms the relevance of analysing the role of social media in digital storytelling and documentation of local history. Furthermore, these new forms of communication, albeit ephemeral, are creating a platform through which individuals, who have never done so before, can tell personal stories (Couldry, 2008, 2010). However, as noted by Rossiter and Garcia, “[t]he key question to consider is always: does the multimedia element enhance the story or does it distract from the story?”

MacDonald *et al.* (2015) make use of a case study of the 100th anniversary of the Salford Lads Club annual camp “to explore transformations of access, interpretation and use, that occur when the archives of civic organizations are digitized”. The authors focussed upon the contribution that digitisation can make to the preservation of the past and how that preservation articulates the past to the present (MacDonald *et al.*, 2015). They conclude that “under specific conditions, digitization may contribute to enriching the process [...] whereby [...] groups can retain and pass on something important from a difficult past” (MacDonald *et al.*, 2015).

Personal cultural memory in the digital age

The potential for photographs to play a role in the development of personal cultural memory can be demonstrated by Ireland and Ellis’ case study of a fishing community in West Cornwall. This research utilised black and white photographs to demonstrate the role such photographs play in both the continuity of contemporary culture in Cornwall and as, “a medium through which indigenous people create their own being” (2005). The authors ultimately conclude that “the black and white photographs in circulation in Sennen Cove have a special significance when interpreted within the cultural setting in which they were taken, through what we have termed a ‘prism of membership of a social group.’ The function of the black and white photographs is to form a ‘ring’ that binds kin groups” (Ireland and Ellis, 2005, p. 386). This corresponds with Van Dijck’s (2007) belief that, “[w]e may remember events chronologically or spatially, but quite often we remember in terms of connectivity. As social creatures, humans experience events in relation to others, whether or not these communal events affect them personally”.

The observations of Ellis and Ireland and of Van Dijck are of particular relevance to the local history context where it has been observed that “[m]any initial studies scoping out cultural memory had consistently found that institutions versions of the past not only took precedence over community and alternative ones but that the former invariably suppressed the latter”. (Mutibwa, 2016). Therefore, the potential for Facebook to provide a forum for community engagement with local history, and how this interconnects with the telling of local history, represents a valid extension of research in this field.

Philosophical approaches and methods

Due to the research problem primarily seeking to understand human experiences, the theoretical underpinning for the research design is that of phenomenology; that is to say, in the context of this research, the commonality-lived experiences within a particular group (in this case, the distinctive community of Buckie and its fishing heritage). This particular approach has been deemed to have merit in the field of Information and Library Studies

(Budd, 2005) and removes constraints on methodological approaches which can be imposed by alternative theories such as positivism and constructivism. Furthermore, as the approach is regarded as being “an attitude; it is extra-methodological” (Budd, 2005), it is suggested that this approach is capable of accommodating the mixed-method design described below. The emergence of phenomenology in information science was noted as early as 1991 with Vakkari. Bawden (2006) noted that “while this particular philosophical approach has not gained universal acceptance [...] this general viewpoint now seems firmly established as an indispensable foundation for information research”.

For this study, it was therefore important to remove the constraints which approaches such as positivism or constructivism can impose; the project was primarily interested in the notion of the lived experience, and thus phenomenology enabled the research to view that lived experience without the lens of a philosophical construct.

Research design

In order to better understand the research problem identified above, a mixed research design was adopted. Essentially, at the heart of phenomenology is the desire to examine and understand the lived experience; therefore, the philosophical underpinning does not constrain the methods of data collection, whether qualitative, quantitative or mixed. It is proposed that in converging the two data sets, this has allowed for a fuller explanation of the phenomenon and has created scope for the research question to be addressed on different levels. Both forms of data were collected at the same time during the research project and subsequently integrated in the interpretation and analysis stage of the project.

In keeping with the mixed-method approach, the case study was designed to accommodate both qualitative and quantitative data and to encompass multiple sources of evidence that would be collected simultaneously. These sources took the form of: direct observation of social interaction with digital artefacts via the medium of Facebook (qualitative); and monitoring of data generated about user engagement via Facebook “Insights” function (quantitative).

Qualitative data

Over the course of a 30-day period extending from 30 July to 28 August 2016, an image was posted daily at 11:00 BST to the Heritage Centre’s page with a short caption describing the photograph and/or inviting user participation where relevant. At the end of the 30-day period, each of the posts was captured and coded according to the schemes outlined below, in two separate and distinct phases. First, the posts were coded for their “communicative intent” (Henninger and Scifleet, 2016) as shown in Table I.

Once this initial coding of the data had taken place, the analysis was further extended to identify the topics that the authors of the posts communicated about to allow the identification of common themes. As demonstrated by the research conducted by Henninger and Scifleet (2016), it was hoped that by extending the analysis beyond the purpose of the communication, a deeper understanding of the nature of the commentary would be revealed (Table II).

Considerable thought was given to internet mediated research and the ethical implications, particularly surrounding the naming of individuals. In the presentation of the research findings

Primary intent	Purpose
Comment	Open remark about event or topic
Comment mention	Remark including a “tag” to another person’s profile
Conversation	Communication that is clearly a conversation
Request	A direct request for further information from the page administrator

Source: Adapted from Henninger and Scifleet (2016, p. 288)

Table I.
Coding scheme

for this project, the names of “live” Facebook users were redacted (that is to say, the tag to their own profile). Where individuals were named in comments (either living or deceased), these were retained because central to the research was the exploration of the way in which end users engaged with the image to “crowdsource” a community understanding of their heritage.

Quantitative data

Operating the Heritage Centre’s page as the page manager allowed for the use of Facebook’s “Insights” function to gather quantitative data on user activity on the page and on posts appearing on the Page. A quantitative analysis of: general page metrics; page post metrics; and likes, shares, reach and engagement, was conducted. Facebook Insights allows for the exporting of collated data directly to Microsoft Excel of either page metrics or post metrics for a specific date range. Although there is the capacity to generate a significant volume of data through Facebook’s Page Insights tool, some of the data can only be captured for the preceding 28-day period and cannot be tailored to a specific timescale. It is acknowledged that this lack of specificity may limit the utility of some of the statistics, but that there is still research value in the data generated.

Analysis of findings

Both the language and cultural identity of the North East of Scotland is reflected in the qualitative research results through the use of local dialect, Doric. As can be observed from the comments of Facebook users, the use of Doric by individuals is commonplace. Doric is a distinctive set of dialects heard in the North East of Scotland and is regarded as being a distinctive form of Scots (McClure, n.d.) unique to the area. Indeed, the language itself is “instantly recognisable as a mark of the highly individual and proudly-proclaimed identity of the North-East” (McClure, n.d.), and is therefore inherently and strongly linked to the cultural memory and cultural identity of the area.

The use of local dialect is not only important from a digital storytelling perspective in demonstrating engagement with local history but also from the perspective of personal cultural memory and that “[...] use of local dialect constitutes a further marker of place and identity” (Ashmore, 2013). Due to the importance of the use of Doric for the wider research aim, the comments of Facebook users have been reproduced verbatim below.

The value and impact of digital ephemera

As noted above, for a period of 30 days, a post was made to the page featuring either a black and white or colour photograph, along with a relevant caption. As can be seen from the results of the coding exercise displayed in Table III, a clear majority (71 per cent) of comments related directly to the content of the photograph, with the remaining 29 per cent representing a comment on indirect content. None of the users engaged in discussion or conversation with other users on content which would be regarded as “associated content” according to the coding scheme described above. It should be noted that any comments consisting solely of user “tags” were excluded from this portion of the analysis.

Table II.
Coding scheme for
Facebook posts as
digital ephemera

Primary intent	Purpose
Direct content	Comment directly about the people/place/object/event in a photograph within the context of the photograph
Indirect content	Comment about the people/place/object/event in the photograph outside of the immediate context of the photograph
Associated content	General comment about people/place/object/event associated with a photograph

Digital storytelling and social media

To enable the analysis of the role of social media in digital storytelling and documentation of local history, comments made by users on Facebook posts to the page were analysed and evaluated on the basis of their content. The focus of this aspect of the research project was not only to analyse whether Facebook was capable of enabling user-created narratives but also to establish whether a connection with community members was built in the process (Conrad, 2013).

The content of comments made on each of the posts was coded according to primary intent and purpose, as detailed in Table IV.

While the majority of user interaction through comments was with the purpose of commenting upon the content of the photograph (45.6 per cent), a significant proportion of user interaction also centred around tagging of other individuals (22.8 per cent) and engaging in conversation about the content of the photograph (29.1 per cent).

Social media as a form of user engagement

As part of the data collection process for analysing the role of social media in digital storytelling, communications by users on photographs posted to the page were analysed, as detailed in Table IV. Secondly, quantitative data were drawn from Facebook's Page Insights function which allowed exporting of data for the designated 30-day period to Microsoft Excel for further manipulation and analysis.

Although a wide variety of data are capable of being extrapolated from Facebook Insights, it was concluded that evaluation of: daily engaged users, daily total reach, daily total impressions and daily reach of page posts provided an appropriate summary of the levels of engagement with the Page photographs as digital ephemera. What can also be seen from visualising the data is that the levels of engagement were not a constant throughout the 30-day period. Rather, certain posts appear to have engaged more users than others (see Figure 1). However, it should be noted that reach of a post may be less than the number of impressions due to the ability of one person to see the same post multiple times in their Newsfeed.

The photograph that elicited the most attention was the "Gutting Quines" (Plate 7) which was posted to the page on 3 August 2016. The level and nature of engagement with this post can be seen in the screenshot in Figure 2.

As can be observed from the "Reactions, comments and shares" data, the post elicited a high level of user engagement. These results confirm the value of the research methods and

Table III.
Coding of Facebook posts as digital ephemera

Primary intent	Number of comments	%
Direct content	34	71
Indirect content	14	29
Associated content	0	0
Total	48	100

Table IV.
Coding of primary intent of Facebook post comments

Primary intent	Purpose	Number	%
Comment	Open remark about event or topic	36	45.6
Comment mention	Remark including a "tag" to another person's profile	18	22.8
Conversation	Communication that is clearly a conversation	23	29.1
Request	A direct request for further information from the page administrator	2	2.5
Total		79	100

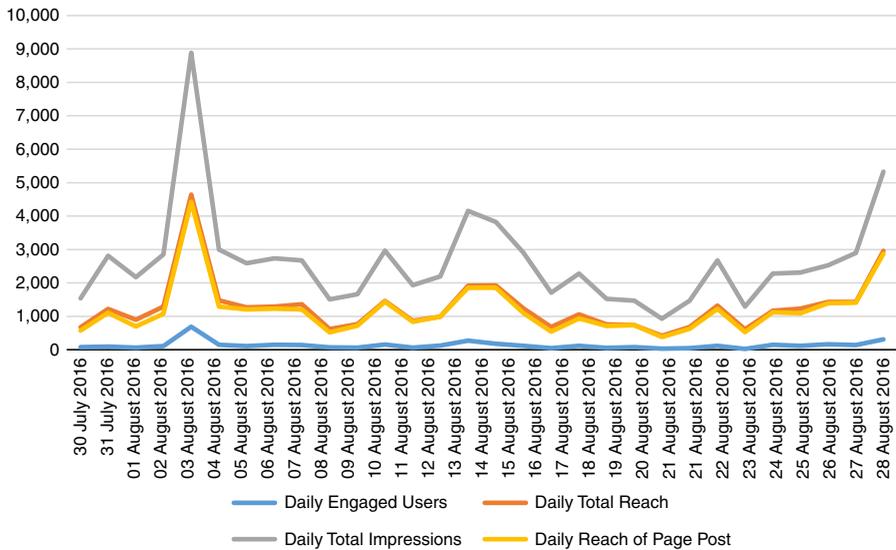


Figure 1.
Cumulative daily
post data as at
29 August 2016

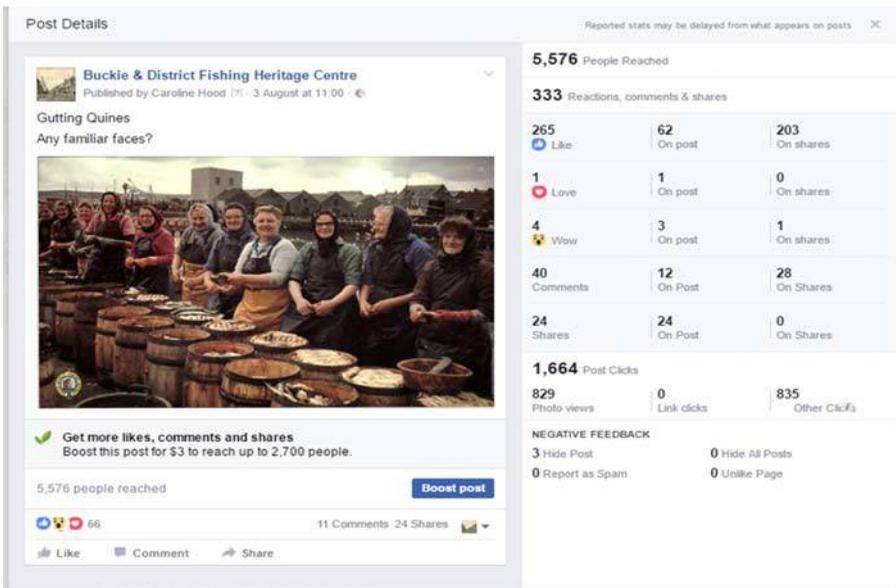


Figure 2.
Post details
3 August 2016

the merit and value of the photo elicitation approach. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the potential for digital ephemera to act as a valuable tool in engaging users via social media with local history.

Relationship between social media and personal cultural memory

Following the initial coding of the Facebook posts for communicative intent, the analysis was further extended to identify the topics that users of the page communicated about.

The overwhelming theme underpinning comments made on the photographs was that of family and personal connection. As can be seen from the photographs below, users readily engaged in the identification of family members in the images posted on the page. This engagement was not restricted solely to confirmation of identity; the photographs elicited reminiscences and strong emotional connections that were not anticipated at the outset of this project. It should be noted that all user comments are reported verbatim and that any spelling or grammatical errors have not been corrected.

For example, the comments made in connection with Plates 1 and 2 demonstrate that users made the photographs part of their own personal cultural history through linking the past of previous generations with their own contemporary lives:

- User 1 – This is a great photo – would it be OK to use it for the Moray’s War project? You can see what information we have gathered already at www.scotlandswar.ed.ac.uk/moray (under Casualties) but this would add to the story.
- User 2 – My home town. Brilliant.
- User 3 – Love it. Part of my mums heritage.
- User 3 – [tagging of several individuals, names redacted]
- User 4 – Amazing pic xx
- User 5 – I wonder if one of the women in the front centre is Mrs Symington the wife of the Minister of Rathven who had a hand in establishing it. There’s a few bits in the old Buckie papers, opened in January 1915. In 1918, the sister in charge, Alice Hunter, received the Royal Red Cross from the King.

Viewing the comments in Plate 1 collectively, it can be seen that users were not only engaging with the post from a personal, familial perspective but from a general historical perspective and the image’s connection to the wider local community. The presence of such images on



Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Plate 1.
The First World War
hospital auxiliary
staff – Portessie



Plate 2.
Staff and patients at
the auxiliary hospital
in Portessie

Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

social media also allows for individuals to contribute to the present understanding of the content of the photograph (See User 1 and User 5):

- User 1 – My mum told me that she snd [sic] and her brothers and sisters all boarded in the old Buckie Hospital building as children, until a house was found for the family at Enzie. This would be the late 1930s I think.

Another more obvious manifestation of the photographs being assimilated as part of users' personal cultural history was the use of local dialect (Doric) in post comments (Plate 3):

- User 1 – Is that yer Grand and Great Uncle [name redacted]?
- User 2 – Aye it is [...] Ma mam was on about this foto I nite [...] X
- User 3 – Is Tam the ane we the hipster haircut ?
- User 1 – Grandas the ane hingin oer i side [...] Uncle John ahin him stannin x
- User 4 – Love old photos! Can Def tell it's Granda x.

Also evident from the user comments on this post is that the digital images were becoming part of conversations away from social media. For example, the comment made by User 2 that "Ma mam was on about this foto I nite [...]" illustrates the capacity of the photographs to become part of a more general conversation about people's lives and not to be solely confined to the digital world of social media but rather becoming part of the physical world. This is similarly demonstrated in Plate 4:

- User 1 – Is at Maureen Smiths Mam ? (Nellie).
- User 2 – I was asking my mam n auntie pat that inaa!! We are nae sure!! Ha ha!



Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Plate 3.
Crew of SD primordial



Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Plate 4.
Fish quines

Without exception, the photograph which engaged the most interest on the page was the photograph of the “Gutting Quines” at Lerwick (Plate 5). The content of the photograph allowed for knowledge of the past to be recounted (see the comments of Users 4 and 11) but also for family connections to be made (User 12). Female users also appeared to identify with the content of the photograph from the perspective of the lives the “Gutting Quines” led (Users 1 and 9):

- User 1 – A very hard life these women had. I looked after a lady who was one of them! She died aged 101!
- User 2 – Anybody ken far that is?
- User 3 – Lerwick
- User 4 – Dinna see their fingers tied?
- User 5 – Wow. What a smashing fotie.
- User 6 – [tag – name redacted]
- User 7 – Wonderful photo, love the faces of these women.
- User 8 – Hard life but they could always have a good laugh together
- User 9 – Love this photo
- User 10 – I see Margaret Wiseman, 5th from the right
- User 11 – The reason fingers not tied they are not gutting. What they are doing is filling up the barrels that were packed days before. After that time the level of the herring drop, some barrels were emptied into a big tub, the women then used that herring to fill the barrels to the required level before they were fitted with the lid and sent to the country that bought them.
- User 12 – My Nana, Margaret Thomson, 3rd from the right, great photo of them all.



Plate 5.
Gutting quines

Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Some photographs, such as that of “Jimmy Macrae selling fish on the pier” (Plate 6) allowed for reminiscences about deceased family members and the eliciting of memories of these individuals by relatives. In particular, the grandson of one of the men featured in the photograph depicted by Plate 8 specifically refers to memories being recalled as a result of the photograph:

- User 1 – [tag – name redacted]
- User 2 – Sadly missed and memories treasured.

In addition to images allowing users to make a direct connection with their past through family, other reminiscences allowed users to make a connection between their childhood and the more recent past. For example, the image featured in Plate 7, of the unfinished hull of the fishing vessel *Heathery Brae*, elicited both childhood and more recent memories:

- User 1 – The last time I saw anything like this was in the Roman shipworks museum in Mainz. They uncovered a shipyard while building the Hilton Hotel and found several boat carcasses. The method of building the framework looked exactly the same as I remember from my childhood, only the planning was done differently!
- User 2 – Beautiful workmanship.

However, perhaps the most unexpected reminiscences were elicited from the photograph of a steam drifter and its skipper, Simon Flett (Plate 8). The level of detail supplied about the individuals featured in the photograph, in particular by Simon Flett’s daughter, demonstrated the validity of such photographs as forming part of the personal cultural history of both those immediately connected with the photograph and the wider local community. From a



Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Plate 6.
Jimmy Macrae selling
fish on the pier



Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Plate 7.
Building of the
heathery brae

research perspective, these results also confirm the validity of the research methods and the value and merit of photo elicitation work:

- User 1 – Looks like my grannie [name redacted] x again name?
- User 2 – That’s what I thought X
- User 3 – That’s my Dad, Simon Flett. In the photo the quinine is Sheila Cathcart and her Mam Belle. Am nae sure o the ither woman.
- User 4 – hi [name redacted], ive tagged you cause youre mum doesnt go on very often, maybe ypour Grandad knows about this xx
- User 5 – Two of my uncles are on the boat. Seeing this photo brings back lovely happy memories for me.
- User 6 – Is that Jovie 3rd fae the left mam [name redacted]? Xx
- User 5 – Aye, it’s uncle Jovie n next to him 2nd fae the left is uncle Wildie (Auntie Annie’s man) The man next, on the end is Alexander. Div ye mind on Jeannie thit bade ahin Granny Elsie? XX



Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Plate 8.
Simon Flett
on the pier

- User 5 – Aye Buckie and District Fishing Heritage Centre, it's a bonny photo of my lovely Dad. Thank you for sharing it. It's 49 years ago since he passed away and I still miss him.
- User 7 – Good fotie, i'll hae to show mam x
- User 8 – Great seeing Simon, Jovie and Wildie in the photo. They were lovely men as were their wives. The community looked after each other in those days.
- User 2 – The other lady is my great great aunty kitty flett she was my granny iris Robertson (married to tam Robertson finechty) aunty I believe the boat was launched at Great Yarmouth where kitty use to work at the herring X [user names redacted]
- User 1 – Thank you for that [user name redacted], thought it was her xxx
- User 5 – Aye [user name redacted], great days. X.

Photographs did not necessarily require to feature family members for a personal connection to be made. For example, a photograph of the fishing vessel *Carinthia* BK 41 was featured on the page (Plate 9). It was anticipated that this photograph would elicit a significant user response and some poignant comments due to the loss of the ship with all hands in June 1979. However, the memory of the *Carinthia* was different for one user (User 4) who served time on the vessel. The contrasting interpretations of the image content demonstrates how a single image can play a differing role in each individual's personal cultural memory. Again, the user reactions to this photograph also confirm the value of the research methods and the merit and value of photo elicitation as an approach:

- User 1 – i rememner this tragedy like it was yesterday, very sad
- User 2 – The sea owes this town, and the whole industry a huge debt, ☹
- User 3 – Can never forget [...]
- User 4 – My first berth after leaving school at 15.



Plate 9.
Carinthia BCK 41

Source: Buckie and District Fishing Heritage

Discussion of findings

The value and impact of digital ephemera

A significant proportion of this research project has been based around the research method of photo elicitation. From the literature review, to analysis of the results and, finally, the discussion of the results, it is evident that photo elicitation is a powerful technique for extracting information from individuals that would not otherwise be possible through alternative research means. Like the experience of Ireland and Ellis (2005) in West Cornwall, it is suggested that the results of the photo elicitation aspects of this research demonstrate that photographs play an essential role in the continuity of contemporary culture for the local community. Comments such as “Ma mam was on aboot this foto i nite [...]” (Plate 3) demonstrate the capacity of the photographs to become part of a more general conversation away from Facebook.

The importance of the results obtained through photo elicitation cannot be overstated; the level of openness and detail generated through the photo elicitation technique tapped into a rich seam of information. It is suggested that there is value in photo elicitation as a research method with digital ephemera, with the research results also demonstrating that this represents a valuable technique in both local history terms and for the wider field of information science. The dominant but neutral nature of the photograph described by Baxter *et al.* (2015) was evident in the current research and accounted for the type of information elicited through this particular technique. Indeed, the success of this technique recommends it not only to local history work but also to the wider information science community as a mechanism for obtaining information from participants that would not be uncovered through traditional, structured interview techniques.

Analysis of the role of social media in digital storytelling

The assessment of the communicative intent of user comments revealed that users were responsive to the photographs in a number of different ways: general commentary on the content of the photograph; tagging of other users to engage them with the post; conversing directly with other users about the content of the photograph; and requesting further information or clarification from the page administrator on the content of the photograph.

It is suggested that Facebook has been a successful mechanism for eliciting digital stories and that, in common with the observations of Conrad (2013), these digital stories are not solely about personal history but also local history. Further, the experience of observing users commenting on the page throughout the duration of the research project confirms that “[d]igital storytelling can allow individuals to represent the world around them using what Couldry (2008) defines as a ‘shared infrastructure,’ which can invigorate the community thereby encouraging participation, action, or perhaps just emotion” (Conrad, 2013).

In particular, an example of this shared infrastructure as a mechanism for encouraging emotion was observed in the reaction to and comments on a post featuring the fishing vessel Carinthia. Indeed, some exceptionally poignant comments and Facebook “reactions” due to the loss of the vessel with all hands were recorded upon analysis of this post. The response of users to the photograph not only demonstrates the outcome of photo elicitation work through a digital medium but also hints towards the role personal cultural memory plays in recognising and identifying with these images.

Furthermore, in evaluating the comments made on the Facebook posts, it became apparent that users were making a connection between their family’s past and their own present through the medium of digital storytelling. This echoes the experience of MacDonald *et al.* (2015) with reference to how digital preservation of the past assists in articulating the past to the present. For example, Plate 3 features a comment by a user stating that the photograph is “Part of my mums heritage” and, by extension, their own heritage. Therefore, users were connecting with the photographs and recognising something familiar in the content that related to their own knowledge of the local community. In doing so, it is suggested that users are assimilating the pictures posted to the page into their own personal cultural history and thereby solidifying their connection and sense of identity within the local community.

This connection between past and present is also evident in other posts where users identified family members. For example, Plates 3, 5, 6 and 8 all feature comments from individuals connected with a specific person featured in the photograph. These comments range from simple acknowledgements of identity – “My Nana, Margaret Thomson, 3rd from the right, great photo of them all” – to comments that conveyed a real strength of emotion in the user’s response to the photograph – “it’s a bonny photo of my lovely Dad. Thank you for sharing it. It’s 49 years ago since he passed away & I still miss him”. The imparting of such personal commentary contributed to the story being told by the content of the photograph and afforded an unexpected level of detail and provided the photograph with an important place in the “shared infrastructure” to which Conrad (2013) refers.

This connection of past and present discussed above demonstrates the value of Facebook as a simple medium for digital storytelling within a local history context and the value which can be gained by local history organisations in engaging with social media to gather information about the past. Not only does it offer an opportunity on a very superficial level to gather details about the content of the photograph but it also offers a platform for engaging users in storytelling who might not otherwise participate in such practices. Further, the multimedia element only serves to enhance the story, rather than distract from it (Rossiter and Garcia, 2010 p. 41).

Furthermore, the above analysis of the Facebook posts and user comments confirms Conrad's (2013) assertion that the telling of personal stories with the use of multimedia acts as a powerful way of creating narratives and as a means of building a connection with community members. The research also proves that Facebook can act as a valuable contributor to local approaches to the telling of history, offering new ways of understanding the past that are capable of providing meaningful connections for the local community to which Mutibwa (2016) refers.

Evaluation of social media as a form of user engagement

With respect to levels of user engagement with photographs posted to the page, Figure 1 demonstrates that levels of engagement were not constant throughout the 30-day research period and that fluctuations in user engagement from post to post were common. Indeed, it is apparent that certain posts engaged users more than others and the photograph eliciting the most user attention was the "Gutting Quines" photograph posted to the page on 3 August 2016. This particular post reached over 5,000 unique users and elicited over 300 reactions, comments and shares from users. At this point, the page had less than 500 "Likes"; therefore, the ability of the photograph to engage so many unique users demonstrates both the potential value of photographs and social media to local history projects.

Finally, evaluating the qualitative data gathered from analysis of the Facebook posts, while the majority of user interaction was with the purpose of commenting directly upon the photographs, users also engaged in the process of "tagging" as a means of engaging others with the posts. This action of "tagging" also links back to the act of digital storytelling and how these "tags" act to enrich the story by adding another user to the story's content.

However, in spite of all the perceived benefits of engaging users through Facebook, it is agreed that as a form of user engagement Facebook is fleetingly temporal and ephemeral in nature (Henninger and Scifleet, 2016). The level of response and user-generated content created in connection with the posts suggests that consideration needs to be given as to how libraries and local history organisations deal with social media as a forum for participation and information gathering. Like any other form of local history, despite the perception of the permanence of posts on social media platforms, there is a risk that the information will be lost unless an appropriate means of capturing and storing the data is found.

The nature of the user engagement with the post – in the form of likes, comments and shares – demonstrates that the research results concur with Good's (2012) suggestions that social media sites such as Facebook are not solely repositories of social activity but can be regarded as "expanding archives of personal artifacts" (p. 560). Therefore, building on both previous research and the results of the research project, it is suggested that not only can Facebook be regarded as an archive of personal artefacts but also, for the purposes of local history, an archive of community artefacts, as demonstrated through the collective user comments on posts to the Page.

Indeed, Ashmore's (2013) suggestion that community themed Facebook groups "may constitute a hybrid space in which communication in the virtual world adds details to places and social networks in the physical space" of the community (p. 271) also finds favour within the context of this case study. Evidence was gathered suggesting that users were discussing the digital images in the physical space of the "real world"; what could be construed as the digital world informing the physical space of the community (see commentary in Plates 3 and 4). The nature of this engagement and interaction demonstrates the role social media can play in the development of local history projects and wider community engagement by providing a starting point for conversations akin to

the function of physical photographs in a photo elicitation interview. Again, the success of the photo elicitation aspects of the research project confirms the value of the approach and commends it to the field of local history and the wider information science field.

Analysis of the relationship between social media and personal cultural memory

It is suggested that, like the experiences of Ireland and Ellis (2005), the photographs displayed on Facebook operated as a “ring that binds kin groups” (p. 386) and that they acted as a neutral party inviting participation from users while providing a commonality of interest for discussion and engagement. Of particular importance was the analysis of the connection between Facebook posts and what is described as “personal cultural memory”[1]. Evidence was sought of user’s individual memories being discussed within the context of a wider community memory, represented through the medium of the photograph, and reflecting upon how that individual memory was shaped. In parallel with the research undertaken by Ashmore (2013), the connection between memory and “place” as an influencing factor on personal cultural memory was also explored.

It has been suggested that social media challenges “many of the prior orthodoxies of cultural memory practice by forming a new kind of dynamic institution where networks of people and communications form the record” (Henninger and Scifleet, 2016). However, although Facebook represents a new frontier for cultural memory practice, at its core remain the common questions of social identity, such as:

Who are we? What binds us together and what makes us different from others? What is our past and where is our future? How do we make a place for ourselves in the world? What are our traditions and how do we react to the new? How do we represent ourselves and what is important to us? (Tilly, 2006).

Indeed, following coding and analysis of the Facebook posts, it was observed that the overwhelming theme underpinning comments made on the photographs was that of family and of personal connection to the content, thereby relating the comments of users back to this sphere of social identity and how individuals view their own place in the local community.

This outcome corresponds with Van Dijck’s (2007) observation that “[w]e may remember events chronologically or spatially, but quite often we remember in terms of connectivity”. It is suggested that for users, it was this sense of connectivity with the photograph, demonstrated by the themes of family and/or personal connection observed in the comments, which influenced their response to the digital image. The positive identification of family members in a number of posts specifically demonstrates this connectivity and how responses to the posts were shaped by an individual’s personal cultural memory.

However, it was not only depictions of family members that caused users to engage with the content of the images. The connectivity with the past in more general terms was exhibited, for example, through the comments of users on the “Cutting Quines” photograph, from the nature of the work to the perceived hardship of the women’s lives (Plate 5). Similarly, the photograph featuring the hull of a fishing vessel under construction (Plate 7) allowed a user to recall not only memories from their childhood but memories from the more recent past.

Not only did users engage with posts from a personal perspective, but also from a wider historical context and the connection of the photograph to the local community (see Plates 2 and 3). For engaging with posts in this manner, it is suggested that the reminiscences elicited from users formed part of their own personal cultural memory and that, by

extension, these digital artefacts too become part of their personal cultural memory. Further, the use of local dialect (Doric) in comments by users on images posted to the page concurs with Ashmore's findings that, "[...] use of local dialect constitutes a further marker of place and identity" (Ashmore, 2013).

It is suggested that the outcome of the Facebook-based research confirms the idea that "[i]n addition to photographs' functions as material keepsakes, once primarily intended for veneration or actual use – stored in the family archive or exposed on the walls of the home gallery – photographs metamorphose into virtual objects of exchange and versatile coded artifacts" (Van Dijck, 2007). The outcomes of the Facebook aspects of the research project have also confirmed that "[a]s commonplace material artefacts, family photographs and albums contain meaning, and also seem infinitely capable of generating new ones at the points at which photography and memory work meet" (Kuhn, 2007).

Specifically, this aspect of generating new meaning was evidenced in user responses to a number of photographs posted to the page. For example, user responses to Plates 8 and 9 demonstrate the capacity of a photograph that was taken to record a moment in time, taking on renewed significance and meaning following the loss of these individuals. Users therefore derive different meanings from the photograph within the context of their own personal cultural memory when compared to an objective consumer of the photograph.

Finally, the research results echo the experience of Baxter *et al.* (2015) and that "the very act of identifying family, friends and –weel kent faces' in the photographs" reinforced users' cultural identity.

Conclusions

The research contributed to a previously underresearched area and, within the confines of the case study, demonstrated that social media represents a new opportunity for engaging users and displaying historical content that can be successfully exploited by community heritage organisations for whom a social media presence can often have disproportionately significant impact (and, indeed, be a requirement for funding from bodies such as Heritage Lottery Fund or various tourism- or visitor attraction-related organisations). Importantly, as noted above, the research has also demonstrated the merit and value of photo elicitation techniques not only within the local history context but also for the wider information science field due to the quality and depth of the information obtained and the levels of user engagement experienced. The research reinforced the emotional, visceral reactions that images can have within a community and its sense of its own identity. Several instances within the research strongly emphasised the collective memory of the community and the power of photographs, together with a storytelling narrative to affect or to move individuals and, indeed, the wider community.

The research, although focussed on an individual case study, offers significant lessons which are more widely applicable in the local history and cultural heritage domains. The key aspects focussed on in the paper have been user engagement and digital storytelling. Digital storytelling and the documenting of local communities through social media can engender real participant engagement which ultimately contributes to local history research and the broader cultural memory. Photo elicitation has been shown to be a method which can be deployed very effectively as tool for gathering rich and varied information in a way that perhaps more traditional techniques do not encourage. The wider application of these techniques in social research as shown by Hurworth (2003) are also of significance and have been reinforced in this particular study.

Note

1. For the purposes of this paper, this concept is defined as a “culturally framed autobiographical memory [that] integrates the sociocultural with the personal, and the self that emerges from the process is explicitly and implicitly shaped by its environment’s norms and values” (Van Dijck, 2007 p. 4).

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Further reading

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Corresponding author

Peter Reid can be contacted at: p.reid@rgu.ac.uk

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