

Singapore Memory Project: Producing Public Memory Through Social Media

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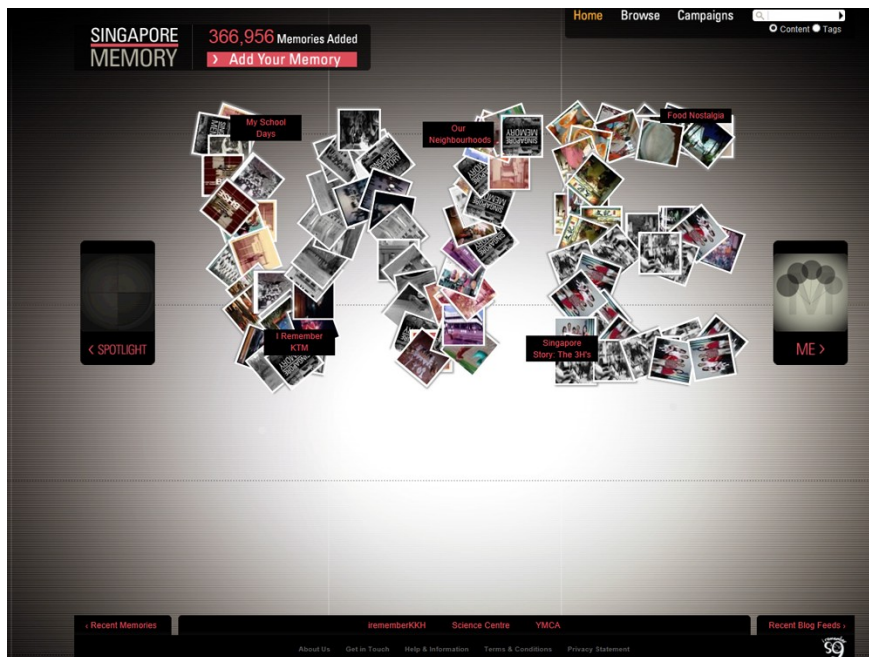
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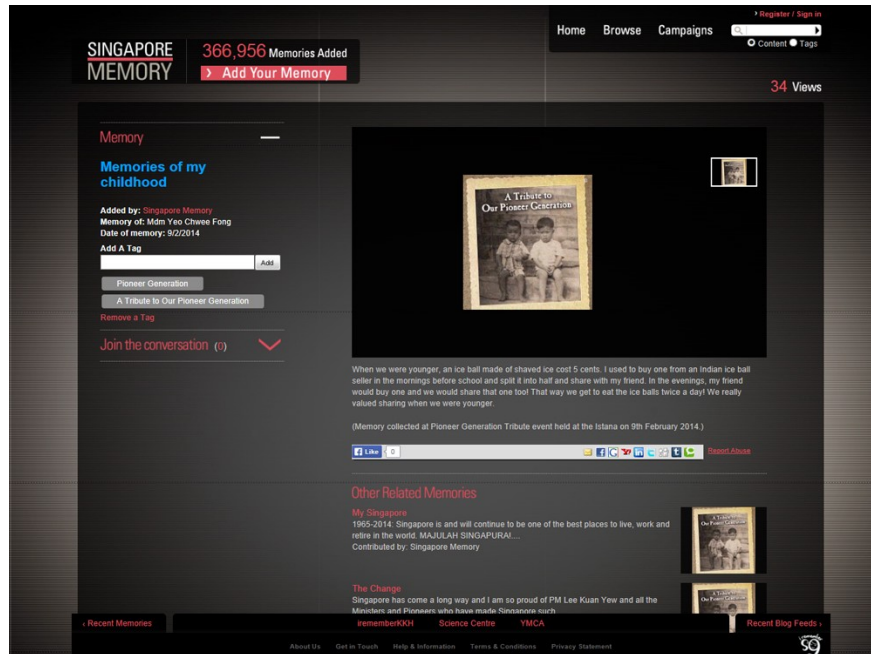
"...Memories come together to define the Singapore story for all of us and collectively bind us together to become the soul of the nation." —Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister, 5th September 2012.

The Singapore Memory Project (SMP) is a national initiative, led by the Singapore Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts and facilitated by the National Library Board in partnership with other institutions, such as local and national libraries, heritage agencies, and research institutions. It is a nation-wide project that started in 2011 to collect, preserve, and provide access to Singapore's culture and history. The portal aims to build a collection of national cultural content and make it available to wider global audiences for discovery and research. The project engages individuals, communities, groups, and institutions of Singapore to contribute their cultural content to the online portal to build "a culture of remembering, which will nurture bonding and rootedness" ("About us," Singapore Memory Project, 2014).

The Singapore Memory Portal allows online audiences to login using their online identities and upload text, photographs or videos to the platform. The portal has also an iPhone application that empowers users to dynamically capture and instantly upload memories (Elaine Ng 2011). Furthermore, the platform is designed to disseminate content through various social media channels—the ones most popular among Singaporeans. Since the project started in August 2011, more than 300,000 memories have been collected to preserve and provide access to the national culture, telling a true "Singapore Story" to the world ("About us," Singapore Memory Project, 2014). These include "recollections of historical events, documentation of recent events of significance, as well as personal memories of people, places and activities that resonate with the Singapore psyche" (Elaine Ng 2011).



The Singapore Memory Project is a timely online initiative that serves several political, economic, and cultural objectives of the country. Singapore is one of the best examples of national cultural rejuvenation, based on the principles of cultural diversity, actively utilized by the government for global promotion and nation branding. Building on the remarkable cultural diversity of Singaporeans who comprise the country's three main ethnic groups—Chinese, Malays, and Indians—the Singapore strategy is to embrace new technology, creative economy and the heritage of tradition “to mix the East and the West...as a way of harnessing the region's unique distinctiveness and promoting its renewed vitality” (Yue 2006). In this regard, in recent decades the Singapore government placed an increasing strategic emphasis on creating a sense of a new cultural identity and nationhood among Singaporeans, permanent residents and to some extent, foreigners in Singapore. The national cultural politics, dealing with an increasing level of multiculturalism within the national community, aims to utilize all available social communication tools, including social media, to construct a positive national cultural representation in the international arena and help people to acquire a feeling of belonging (Chong 2005, 560).



The image of the country communicated across borders as one that values minority cultures and builds new economy on the principles of cultural inclusion, helps the government to promote the country as a culturally and economically progressive society and expand economic opportunities by attracting external investments and developing tourism. “Singapore’s maturity as a city-state in the global context has also given rise to a critical need and urgency in ensuring that the Singapore story is collected and discovered to prevent the permanent loss of the nation’s heritage, national roots and nation development” (Foo, Tang, Judy Ng 2013). In this regard, the Singapore Memory Project online portal is an important activity on behalf of the

Singaporean government in the framework of national and international strategic communication. However, because it engages and heavily relies on the effort from the civil society and general population, the project has strong political and cultural implications on the level of public participation and involvement.

In the Western academic discourse on cultural policies, the Habermasian model of the public sphere (Habermas 1962) has been dominating the critical analysis as a main framework investigating various social and cultural movements within governmental agendas (McGuigan 1996). Because since the 1990s the community development has been regarded as an important tool to address various political, economic and cultural problems, “public participation” has acquired a particularly important role in cultural policy implementation (MacDonald 2006). In these regard, the contemporary design of cultural policy initiatives necessarily includes a “public deliberative” component based on constructing “demotic spaces dedicated to *representing* a variety of experiences and modes of citizenship” (Message 2007).

Drawing on the Habermas theory of public sphere and communicative action, it is possible to look at the Memory Project as an online social space representing two different communicative rationales, describing the social dimension of the online mass communication processes: strategic “colonization” and public “emancipation.” On the one hand, the “democratic” participative nature of the social media platform enacts the “communicative action of the life world” (emancipation), which contains ethical rationality, enabling participation of various social and cultural groups in “uncontrolled” media representation. In this regard, the social media space of the Singapore Memory Project can be understood as a cultural public sphere, where representatives of various cultural communities and traditions can share their identity, contest their cultural voice, and get an access to the media tools for cultural self-representation. For example, though the dominant linguistic environment of the portal is English-speaking, the memory portal contains stories written in three other official languages of Singapore, such as Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. This proves that the “memory” submissions, shared by the publics in the social media space of the portal, do refer to various cultural and linguistic traditions and help ordinary individuals to preserve and promote their cultures in a shared digital public space.

On the other hand, the Singapore Memory platform employs the logic of the “strategic actions” (colonization) of the Singapore government to

build through the online storage of memories a collective representational image of national cohesion, based on the principles of cultural unity.

The site serves as a life repository of cultural knowledge aiming to bring people from various cultural communities together in a shared activity of "remembering" that is supposed to evoke feelings of national pride and "a sense of place, community, belonging and opportunity." ("The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review," 2013)

By inviting ordinary citizens to construct their national memory narrative through their collective action, the portal shapes and defines public's self-identification on a national level. Throughout the project development the National Library Board organized more than 30 "memory campaigns," which aim to "tap into Singaporeans' nostalgia for the past" (Foo, Tang, Judy Ng 2013) and, in this way, control the public effort in sharing their personal stories, memories, ideas, and values. Such campaigns as "Reflections on our National Pledge," "A Tribute to Our Pioneer Generation," "Hands that brought us up," "The Singapore Story: My Heart, My Hope, My Home," and many others have been widely promoted within the Singapore public spaces, such as libraries, malls or parks. Likewise, these campaigns have been increasingly marketed through various social media sites, for example Twitter or Facebook, actively encouraging online audiences to visit the Singapore Memory Portal for learning and sharing. In this way, the portal frames a large body of public dispersed multimedia contributions to the portal and assigns a specific political and cultural meaning to the "memories" of individuals, contributing to a particular "campaign."

The Singapore Memory Project represents confrontational dynamic of digital communication within the online portal, where emancipative contributions from the "life world" are restructured and reframed by the authoritative memory institutions. Because the National Library Board takes an active role as a facilitator and moderator of the memory collection processes, the portal with public contributions acquires a strong political significance within national and international communication spheres, serving as governmental tool of national control and promotion. Framed and promoted as a genuine citizens' effort in self-representation, the portal in fact can be better understood

in terms of “pseudo-participative interactivity” (Stiegler 2010, 175) that only creates a frame of democratic participation without a real distribution of power. Political marketing exercised on the behalf of the National Library Board, thus, turns public discourse within the Singapore Memory Project into a simulacra of national community representation, strategically promoting cultural diversity and inclusion.

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