

Evolving Empowerment in an Online Community Collecting Memories of Amsterdam East

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Abstract: In this article we study the evolvement of empowering and dis-empowering aspects of a local memory website, initiated by the Amsterdam Museum and currently active for more than a decade. The results partly fill a gap in the available literature about this field, because the relation between collective empowerment and online behaviour in these communities has been underexposed. Departing from a narrative perspective on memories as resources for empowerment, we show how the online dynamics around these memories exhibit collective processes of identity formation, social learning and networking. However, certain patterns in the online dynamics also uncover that, although the online activity is increasing, the diversity in the content and the number of participants are decreasing. Describing the organizational development of the local memory community, we argue that the growth into a self-organizing community is the cause of increasing activity and decreasing participation. This implies that the online community has become a small, empowered group, which at the same time has developed dis-empowering characteristics, i.e. limitations to include 'other' locals, neighbourhoods and topics. We illustrate how the current self-organization, unintentionally, fuels the decreasing diversity in content by a natural selection process of a rather homogeneous group of participants. In addition, the conviction of what constitutes a successful online community is discussed for emphasizing individual empowerment and attracting empowered locals instead of vulnerable ones.

Keywords: Empowerment, Digital Memories, Community Memory, Online Participation

Introduction: a gap in the literature

In the slipstream of what Assman and Hoskins call a contemporary 'memory boom', an increasing number of people present their memories online (Assman, 2010; Hoskins, 2011). A considerable part of these online collections concern memories of and experiences in neighbourhoods (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a). As such, they form 'local memory websites', which are studied for their possible contributions to the social sustainability of the community. These studies lack an empirical foundation of the claims made with respect to benefits for groups or larger collectives.

Based on an analysis of the available studies on local memory websites, we have shown elsewhere that the empowerment framework offers an applicable model for explicating the contributions local memory websites can offer (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013b). Our systematization of the existing concepts used to describe these websites' social benefits is congruent with the notion of empowerment having individual, group or organizational and communal levels of analysis. However, the research conducted on the benefits in this field has mainly been based on data collected in real life situations and limited to individual and some group levels of analysis. Data about online participation is nearly absent in the cases studied, simply because the affordances of the websites in the existing studies were not facilitating interactivity. It is important to fill this empirical gap in the body of knowledge, because the current literature claims that specifically empowerment on collective levels is related to the accessibility and the continuity of the online nature of local memory websites (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013b).

To determine whether and how empowerment evolves empirically on collective levels, we need to increase our insights into the dynamics of the online activity and participation in these settings. In this article we partly fill this need by analysing the online dynamics of an interactive local memory website based in Amsterdam which started in 2003 and is called 'the Memory of East'. After describing its main features and basic figures, three successive phases

of analysis will follow. In the first phase, we built on Rappaport (1995) who was one of the first to regard narrated memories as crucial resources of collective empowerment. We illustrate how the online dynamics around the memories include three types of resources that contribute to collective levels of empowerment: resources of identity, and resources for learning and networking. From these types of resources, we derive three indicators for empowerment in the transition to the second phase: online activity, online participation and diversity in the online content. Consequently, we scrutinize the online dynamics in terms of numbers of visits, comments, memories, keywords and producers. This shows that the online activity grows during the last four years, but it also uncovers that the number of participants and the diversity in content are decreasing. In the third phase we describe three stages of organizational development of the Memory of East and relate them, from empowerment perspective, to the increasing online activity and decreasing online participation. In the conclusions we shift to the evolvement of empowerment in the online community in terms of diversity.

Main features and basic figures of the Memory of East

The website mainly contains memories that consist of written, personal stories of approximately 350 words with pictures related to their content. The website's database used for analysis covers a period from June 19th 2003, to March 13th 2014. In that period 2662 memories were published. Figure 1 shows the main features of the digital memories that were exported from the database into a data matrix for exploratory data analysis.

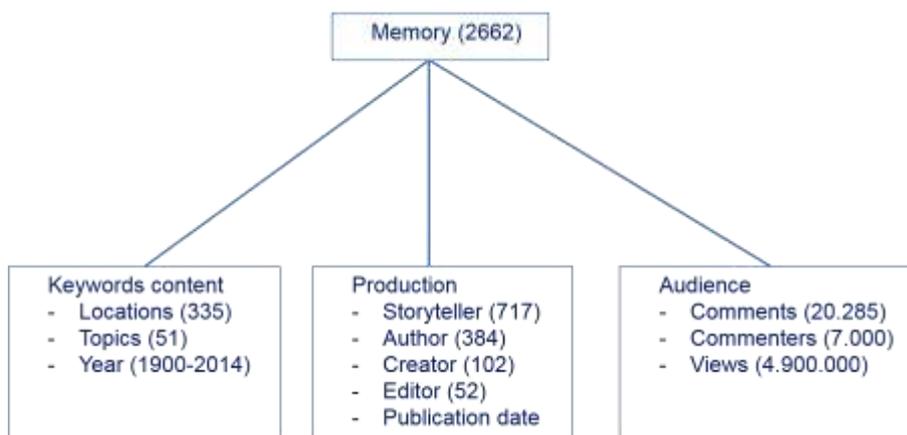


Figure 1: The main features of an online memory and their basic aggregated figures.

The digital memories are labelled with an average of two location keywords like neighbourhoods or streets, with an average of five topic keywords related to the content and one year keyword for the period the memory is about. A memory also has various production details assigned to it: a storyteller, an author, a creator and an editor. For a memory based on an interview (1198 occurrences) the storyteller's name is different than the author's name. The storyteller and the author bear the same name in case the author writes stories based on his own memories (1464 occurrences). A creator makes an online concept of the digital memory after which the editor checks it and publishes it for the public with a publication date. Creators can become editors after a certain number of published memories. Finally, each memory shows a number of times it has been viewed and a number of comments contributed by commenters who also leave their name. More detailed aspects of the online activity and participation will follow in the next sections.

The website as a complex system of narrative resources

In this section, we explore the online activity following a narrative turn within empowerment theory initiated by Rappaport (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport,

1995, 1998). He considers narratives, including memories, to be crucial resources for empowerment and accessible narrative settings as empowering. To explore the resourcefulness of the memories, we assume that the dynamics of the online system reflect aspects of the collective behaviour of the community of participants. With this assumption we adopt Luhman & Boje's ideas (2001) about narrative research of a complex system in organizational discourse, except that we apply their suggestions in a local, online community context. In order to arrive at appropriate analyses, we mainly rely on the approach of 'story network analysis' as described by Boje (2001) according to which various characteristics of stories are modelled into story network maps. Based on these maps emerging social patterns can be identified that transcend the individual contributions. Below, a selection of the collective patterns is related to empowerment by discussing them as narrative resources of identity, and resources for learning and networking.

Resources of identity

We depart from Rappaport's assumption of the relation between memories told and collective identities. He suggests that that "stories told and retold are indexed in memory" (1998, p. 228) and that these indexes serve "a recall function for the collective" (1998, p. 229). Based on this we propose that anomalies in keyword use can be considered as indexes indicating collective identities. As an illustration, we map the frequencies of the topic keywords on the time dimension of the period keywords. Chart 1 gives an illustration of periods being characterized by certain topics, but also of the existence of more continuous topics.

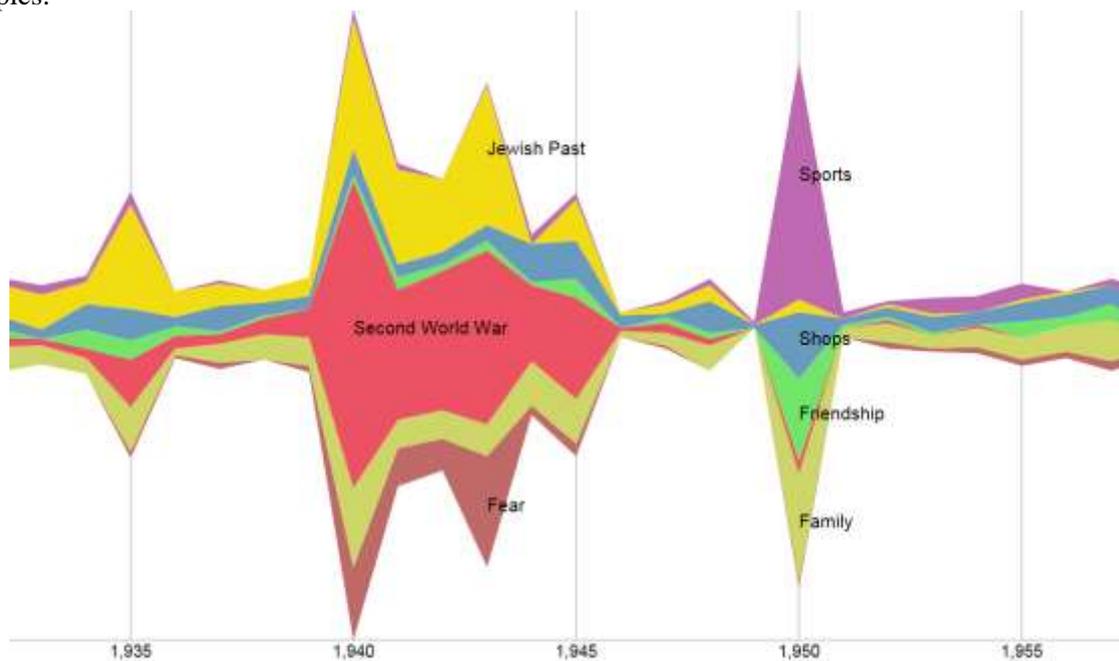


Chart 1: Distribution of seven common keywords across the period 1935-1955.

An example is the 'Second World War' in the period 1939-1945, which obviously, goes together with 'Jewish Past'. In addition, 'Fear' is more present in the war period than before or after. Another example consists of the keyword 'Sport' which peaks in 1950 together with 'Friendship'. This is the period many participants in the online community had their youth period. Note, that except for the war period, there is a preference of assigning the beginning of a decade or a quinquennium to a memory. Consequently, the memories with '1950' cover more than one year, and possibly the whole decade. As a final example, the keywords 'Family' and 'Shops' are more continuous in their presence across the whole period than the other topic keywords. They represent topics 'of all times'. An exploration of the topic

keywords in space, i.e. across the location keywords, leads to comparable findings (Otjens et al., 2014).

The resulting anomalies in the data can be regarded as results of collective identification with certain topics in neighbourhoods or periods. This way a layered patchwork of collective identities emerges that depend on common sense of place or social history, or a combination both. Some of these identities exist on neighbourhood level, others on period level or both. And still others manifest themselves across nearly all neighbourhoods or periods. When regarded as such many participants can relate and contribute to some layer of collective identity with their own personal memories, which is a condition for an empowering narrative setting according to Rappaport (1995).

Resources for learning

Here we follow the distinction Schank & Abelson make in what kinds of knowledge people transfer by sharing memories (1995). They distinguish facts, experiences and beliefs in the social learning process of remembering. In order to identify illustrations of these three kinds of knowledge sharing, we explore the comments on some memories.

The comments on the Memory of East predominantly add pieces of factual knowledge to a memory or to other comments on it. Many of these are about persons and locations as we can see in many of the 118 comments on the memory ‘Simply happy in the Pekelharingstraat’ (Kunnen, 2003):

I lived on Robert Kochplantsoen 26 from 1957. I attended to Clara Feyschool on the Linnaeushof. In 1979 we moved to the Ritzema Bosstraat. Most of the names here are familiar to me, but I am from 1956. Joke and Koos Bos lived above us. I was even married to Paul Stift. (Commenter a)

This was the first comment of this specific person contributed after approximately 89 earlier ones of other commenters. Other comments add experiential knowledge about places, periods and events to the online interaction. Here a part of the third comment of the similar person on the same memory:

Last week I parked my car on the Robert Kochplantsoen to go to dentist Verburg on the Middenweg. Too bad it looks so neglected there. (...) I also paid a visit to Mrs. Terpstra at nr 14, Corries mother. Her living room is so small! (...) And the delicious slices of sausage at the butcher! (Commenter a)

A third group of comments is characterized by more critical beliefs about developments across time up to the present. For example the memory ‘The escaped cow’ about the delivery of cows at the abattoir, received these comments (Penseel, 2003):

I know, many of the commentators here were related to the abattoir and then a cow is just a product instead of a living and sensitive animal that really does not want to dy. But I saw this all happening when I was a child and it broke my heart in two. (...) I don't see anyone among the commentators who felt similar. (...) (Commenter b)

Hi Ellen, we were no executioners; we just did our work. I had friends who shot sparrows out of the trees, but I did not see the fun in that, despite the fact that I just slaughtered 600 pigs. I always say that you have to eat what you kill and otherwise you leave it alone. (...) (Commenter c)

Yes, Ellen, my heart also broke when I saw the situation of these animals. But I do eat meat one in a while (not much). (...) I believe that if an animal has to be slaughtered it should be done in a HUMANE way. (...) (Commenter d)

Zooming out from the level of concrete comments, Chart 2 offers us insight into what topics are most commented on the Memory of East.

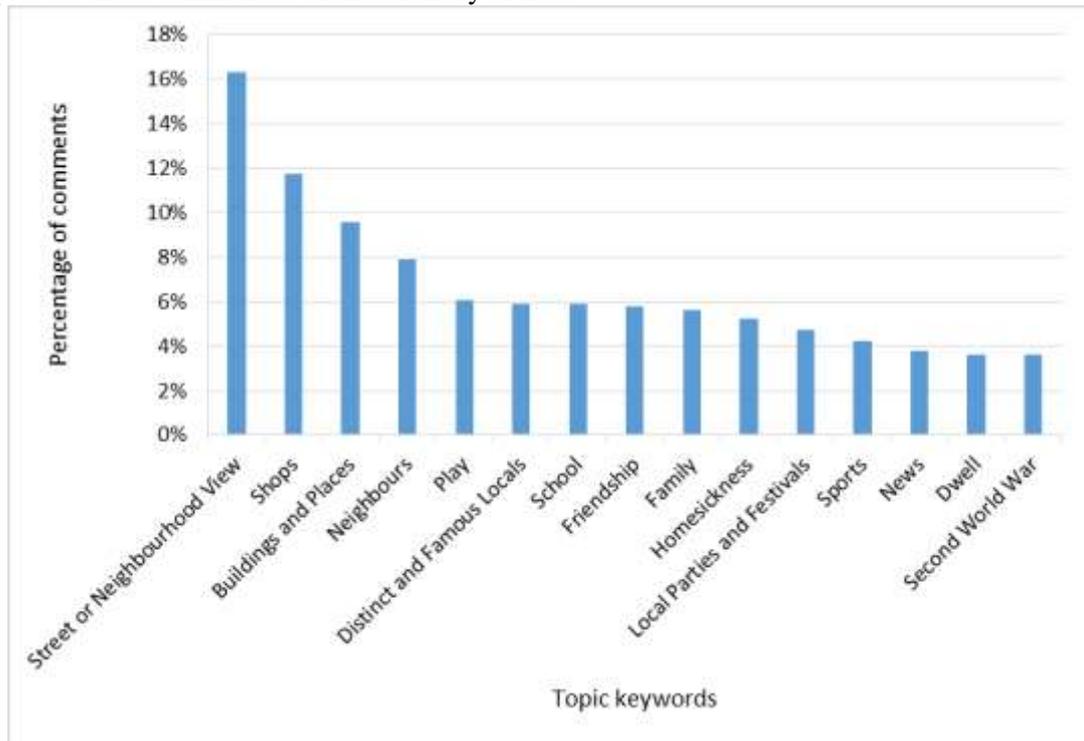


Chart 2: Top 20 topic keywords in terms of number of received comments.

The distribution in Chart 2 does not follow the distribution of the topic keywords based on occurrences in general. For example the keyword ‘Jewish past’ (458 memories/ 714 comments) is absent in Chart 2, whereas it is the third most used keyword for labelling memories. On the other hand we see the keywords ‘Neighbours’ (231 memories) and ‘Play’ (227 memories) are on the fourth and fifth place in Chart 2 with 2648, respectively 2032 comments. These patterns imply that participants have their preferences for which topics they want to share knowledge about and which ones they prefer less.

The examples and patterns indicate that various kinds of knowledge are shared in the comments. Sharing the more factual elements is a process easily triggered by a memory. Participants like to complement the memory or the ongoing series of comments with the facts they know about related people and locations. Once part of the interaction, a person might also share related experiences from the present or the past. Finally, discussions might develop that transcend the memory by picking up a moral topic that is not directly related to the memory but introduced by a commenter. Especially the exchange of and interaction about the last two kinds of local knowledge, we claim with various academics (Burgess, Foth, & Klaebe, 2006; Burgess, 2006; Maton, 2008) to invoke empowering, reflective practices that facilitate social learning in which cultural values are negotiated. Obviously, it has to be investigated more thoroughly which knowledge actually is shared across the memories, but it seems safe to assume that a larger number of comments on a memory increases the chance of the interaction moving into sharing believes.

Resources for networking

Here we depart from the Wellman’s ideas about how people are networked in the digital age (Wellman, 2002). From Wellman, we derive three networking characteristics: strong networks, light networks and boundary crossing. We assume that that the participants of the Memory of East are webbing around the content following these characteristics and as such lay the bedrocks for social forms of power.

The strong networks consist of persons who ‘stick together’ across different memories. An example is a small group which calls themselves ‘The street kids of the past’ (261 comments) after a digital memory with the same name. Chart 3 gives a visual impression of the distribution of the number of comments on this memory across the various commenters. It clearly shows that four persons are doing most of the commenting.

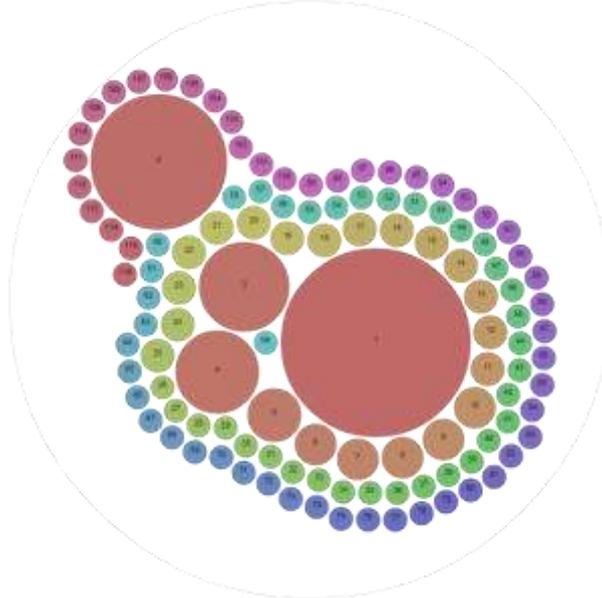


Chart 3: Commenters visualized by their comments on ‘Street kids of the past’.

Groups like this use the memories as a kind of digital meeting places, where the interaction kicks off about memories but quickly shifts to discussing personal life and society in the present. The relationships were present in the past, but, according to their comments, the persons met again through the website.

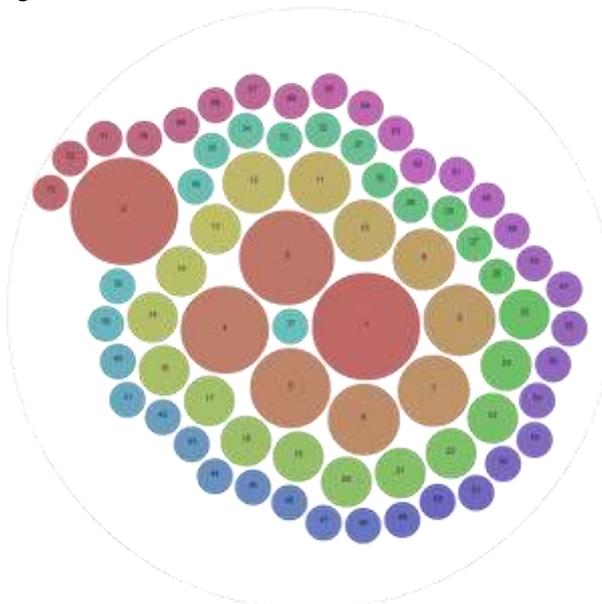


Chart 4: Commenters visualized by their comments on ‘Archipel as marriage agency’.

These digital meeting places of strong groups have another dynamics than the lighter networks that manifest themselves more spontaneously around certain memories. Chart 4 above shows the commentators on a Korfbal club memory ‘Archipel as dating agency’ (134 comments). The distribution among the commentators’ number of comments is more equal than in Chart 3. The comments here stay closer ‘on topic’ than in the case of the street kids above

and are mostly additions of memories about persons and events related to the korfbal club. The current differences between the two can be explained by the character of the original social configurations. A small group of street kids has clearer boundaries and stronger relations than a sports club as a whole. Presumably, both configurations have been revived and reproduced online in the present.

Some active commentators remain mainly within the boundaries of certain groups forming at the meeting places. One of the persons of the street kids members, for example, clearly sticks to four digital memories where he leaves most of his 766 comments as Chart 5 shows.

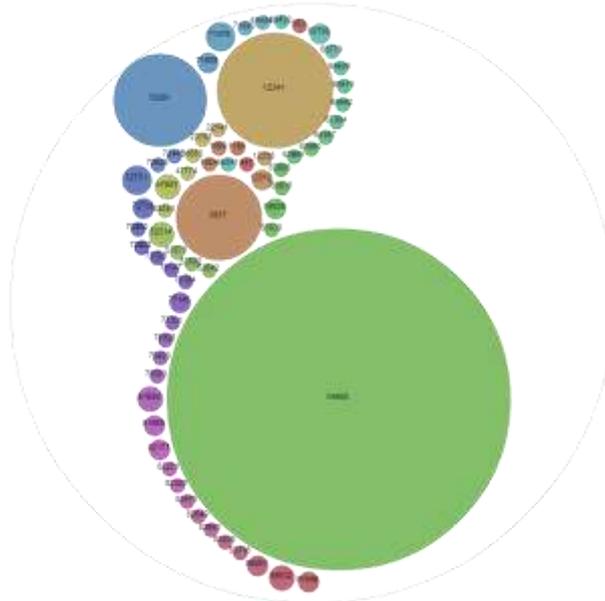


Chart 5: The distribution of the comments of one of the street kids' members on 67 memories.

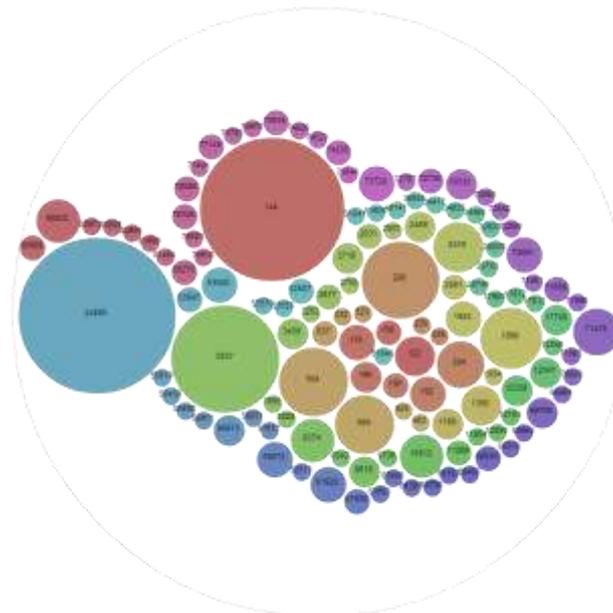


Chart 6: The distribution of the comments of a boundary crosser on 127 memories.

Other active commentators can be considered as crossing the boundaries of various groups. Chart 6 above shows a participant with 468 comments who is also involved in the street kids' interaction, but at the same time in many more commenting groups compared to the person in Chart 5.

Examples of social power in the various networks are best illustrated by taking into consideration social learning and collective identities. Although the street kids of the past do not have a strong identity in terms of many memories which create a cluster, they do have a strong presence in terms of the number of comments they contribute to a few memories.

Inspecting the comments on one of them more closely, we see that a member writes poems and semi-fiction in which he incorporates aspects of the discussions that are going on. Part of the other comments was directed against his contributions, because some visitors disliked his, sometimes, rough language. At a certain point one of the editors of the website removed one of his contributions, which sparked the members of the strong street kids' network to ask for the constitution of the Memory of East and insight into who were members of the editor group. The korfbal network, on the other hand, has a stronger identity as part of the 19 sports memories on korfbal. In addition, it has its own page where these memories are collected to memorize the eight disappeared clubs, but also to organize enthusiasm for the survival of the two remaining clubs. Both these forms of social power can be thought as the 'pathways of influence' described by Maton (2008). With the boundary crossers linking networks together, larger parts of the Memory of East as a whole can be considered to influence its environment in various ways.

In this section we explored three areas of collective patterns in the online dynamics and related them to empowerment aspects. However, in order to study the evolvement of empowerment in the Memory of East, we have to follow the online dynamics across the years it has been active.

The online dynamics across a decade

From the narratives-as-resources approach adopted in the previous section, three indicators for empowerment can be derived that play a role in this section. First, the level of online activity in terms of memories and comments is related to social learning processes. Second, the number of participants is crucial for safeguarding the variation in and across networks. And finally, the diversity in content is important to facilitate multiple collective identities. Below, we combine the first two indicators, before moving on to the third.

Increasing activity and decreasing participation

A more nuanced picture of the online activity and participation arises if we probe beyond the aggregated level of the basic figures in Chart 1 from the first section. Data collected by Google Analytics covering the last five years – more data is unavailable – give additional information about increasing online activity of the whole website. Table 1 shows an increasing number of sessions, session time, pages per session and page views. However, the number of unique visitors does not change significantly and the number of new visitors even decreases.

Table 1: Google Analytics details on sessions, page views and visitors in the period 2009-2013.

Year	Sessions	Session time	Pages/session	Page views	Unique visitors	% new visitors
2009	180.479	0:03:13	3,77	680.026	131.018	72,57%
2010	208.200	0:02:51	3,51	731.663	149.218	70,07%
2011	212.922	0:03:49	3,97	844.672	133.273	60,88%
2012	224.945	0:04:32	4,34	977.300	142.305	61,61%
2013	224.988	0:04:55	4,98	1.120.885	141.061	60,84%

If we look closer to certain periods in Chart 7, it becomes clear that the first year and the last two years are exceptional in terms of numbers of published memories. Note that 2014 is neglected, because the data used for the analysis covered only two and a half months of that year. Chart 7 also shows that the number of memories is increasing during the last four complete years.

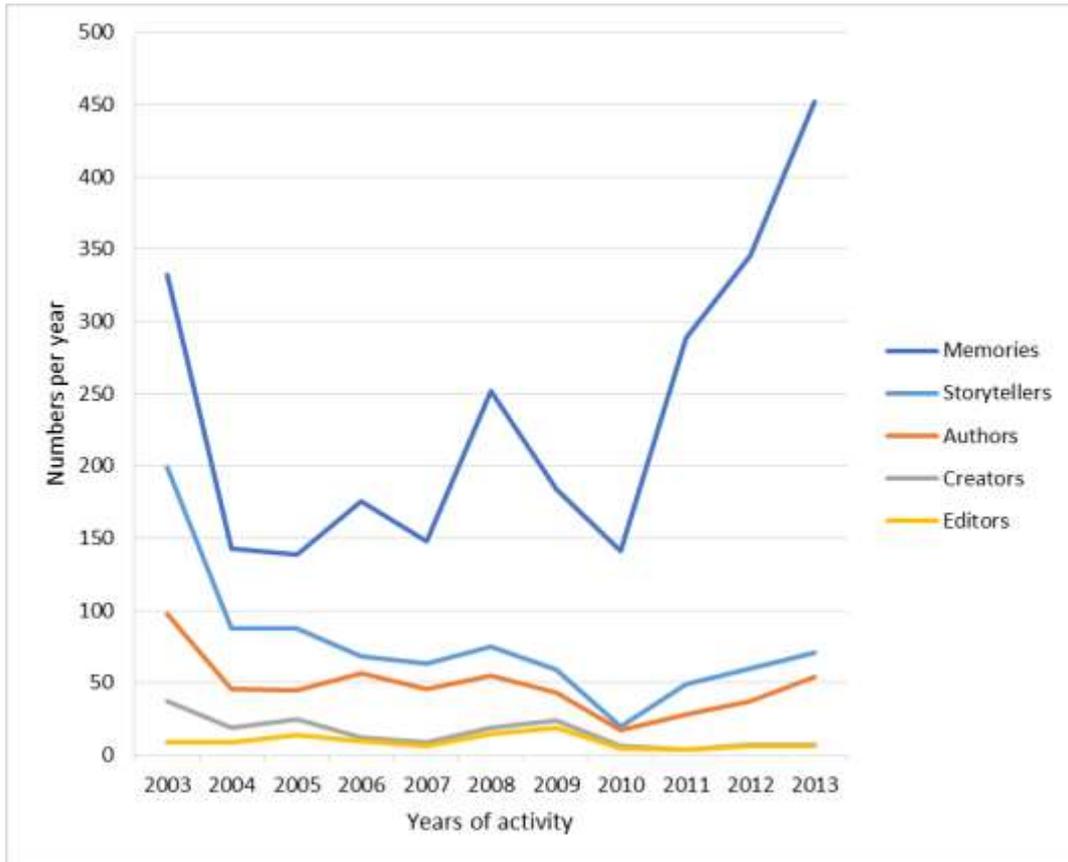


Chart 7: Numbers of memories and producers across the years of online activity.

Despite the increase in activity, the total number of participating locals in various production roles decreases over time. During the last four years, the numbers of creators and editors have fluctuated around five persons who actually fulfilled both roles, which in fact means that the role of creator has disappeared. Although the numbers of storytellers and authors are rising since 2011, one should bear in mind that, relative to the recent high, yearly numbers of memories, participation should be considered low compared to the years before.

With respect to comments, Chart 8 illustrates that a growing number of comments is left by the website's visitors. At the same time, after a period of divergent growth, the number of commenters is decreasing since 2011.

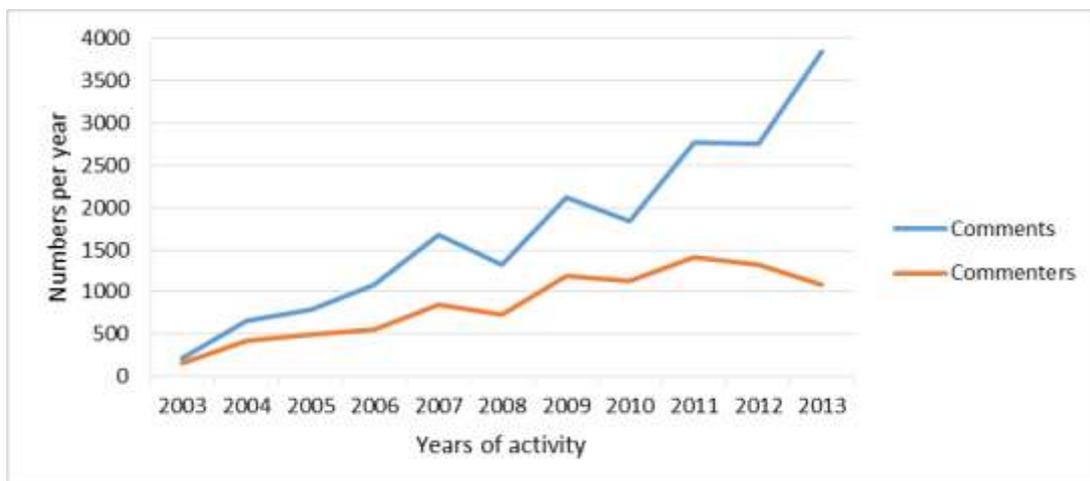


Chart 8: The number of comments distributed over the years of online activity.

Having insights into the growing online activity and a decreasing online participation, one might rightly wonder how the diversity in the online content develops.

Decreasing diversity in the content

The cumulative use of location keywords during time, in Chart 9, shows that five neighborhood keywords are rising relatively fast while most of the other neighborhoods remain stable.

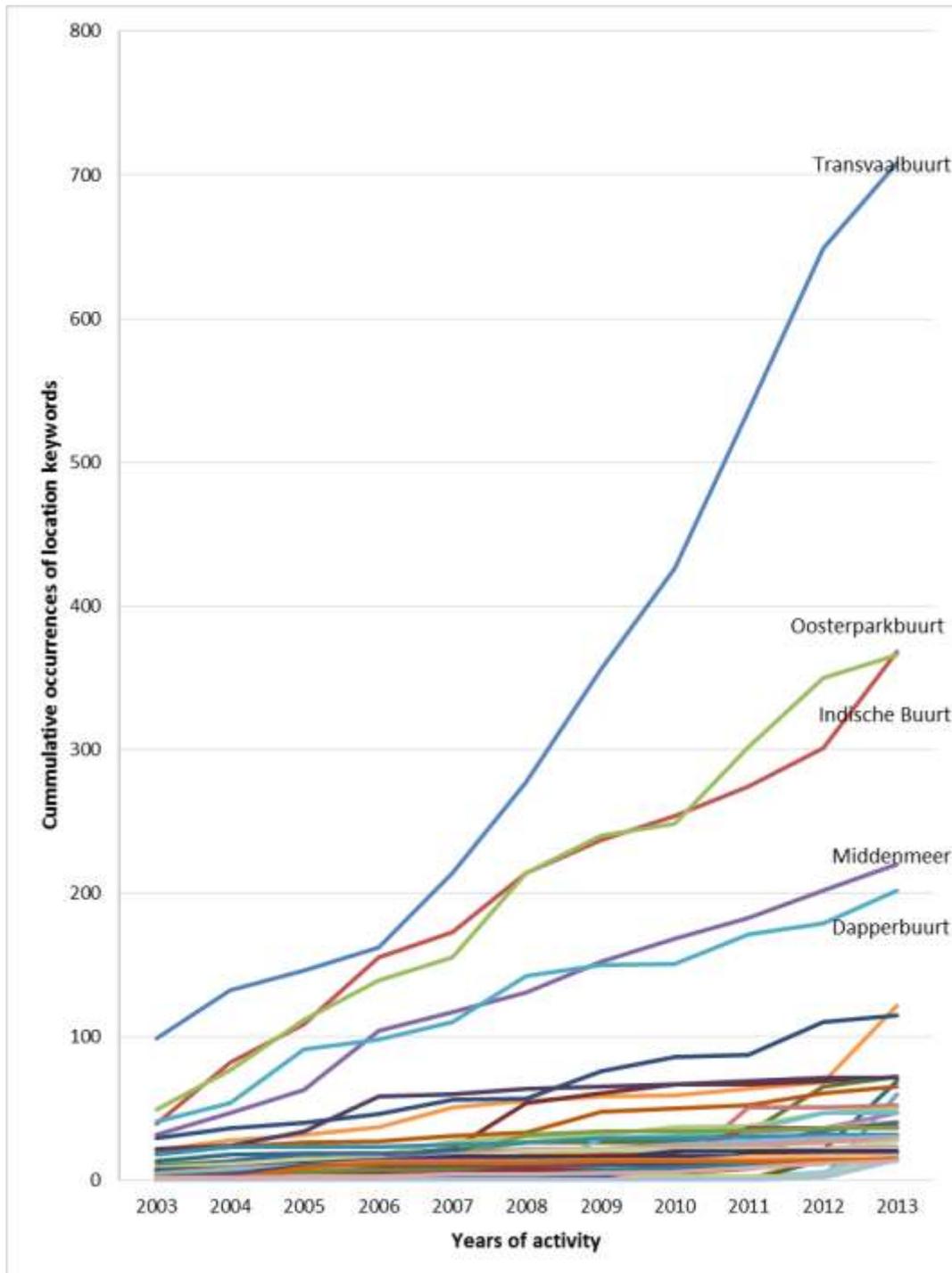


Chart 9: Development of location keywords during the years of online activity.

Stability for a neighborhood keyword means that after a certain moment no more new memories are contributed with that keyword. Most of the fast growing keywords grow proportional. The exception is the number of occurrence of ‘Transvaalbuurt’ which grows disproportional, i.e. it grows faster as time passes by.

Similarly to the location keywords we see in Chart 10 that there are various topic keywords the numbers of which are growing disproportionate. Examples are ‘Jewish Past’, ‘Family’, ‘Second World War’ and ‘Buildings & Places’ that seem to have grown in popularity among the participants’ memories during time.

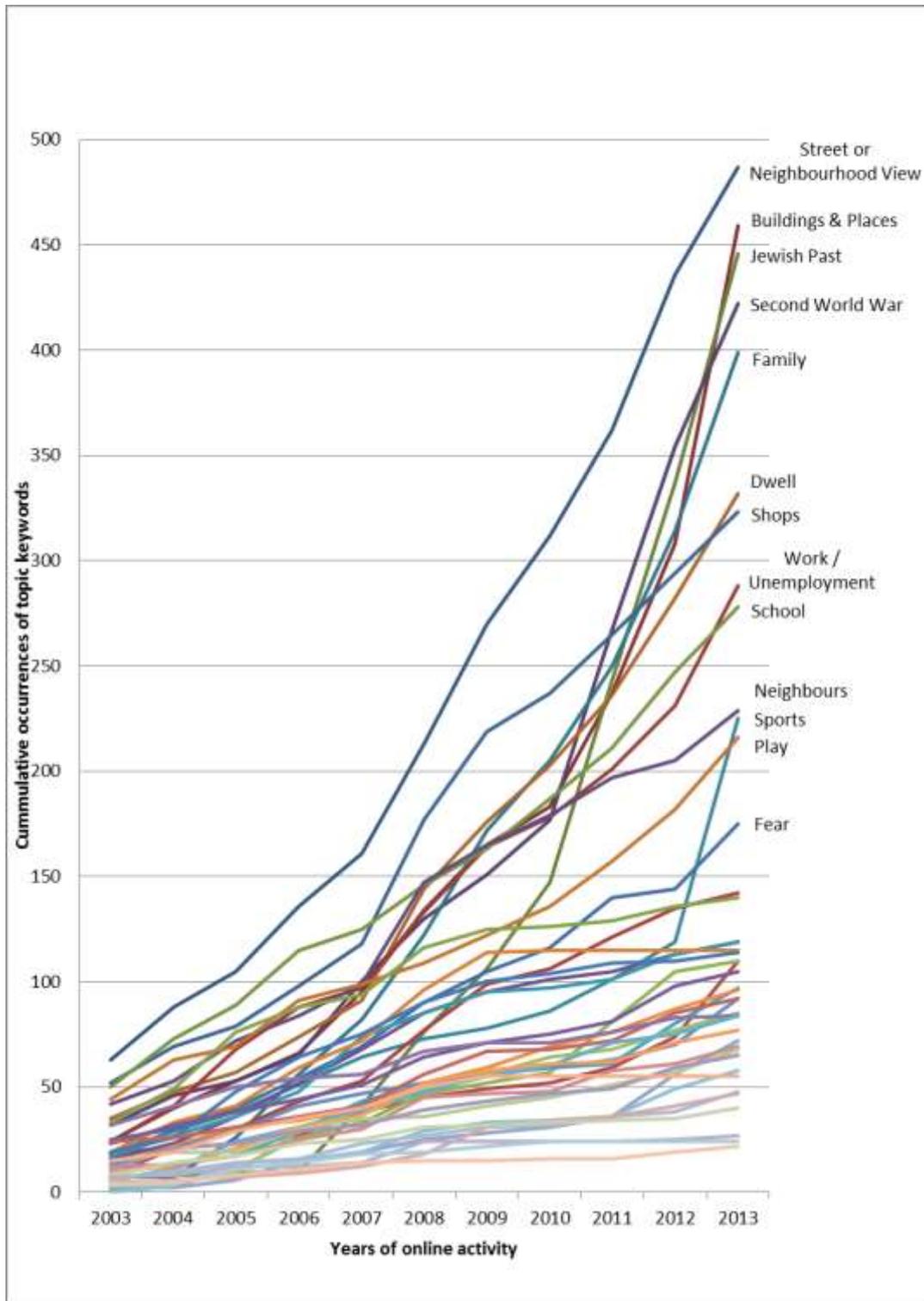


Chart 10: Development of topic keywords during the years of online activity.

In Chart 11 the period keywords are grouped in 5-year periods in order to facilitate interpretation. In this case, the periods 1940-1944 and 1950-1954 grow disproportional compared to the other periods.

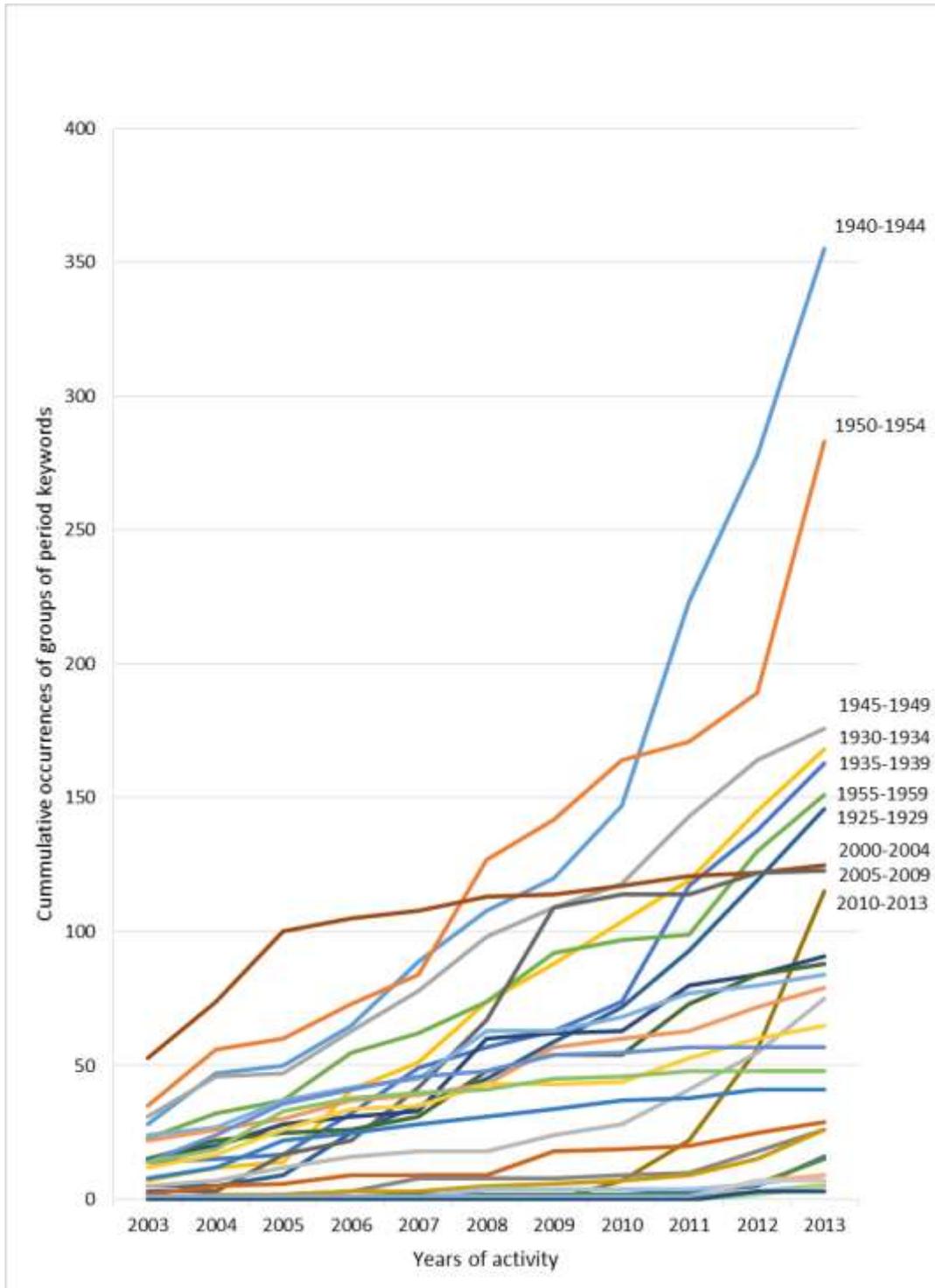


Chart 11: Development of period keywords during the years of online activity

This section illustrates how the three earlier derived collective aspects of empowerment evolve in the online community. The online activity in terms of numbers of memories and comments is increasing, but it is also caused by a decreasing group of participants. At the same time the community's content seems to become increasingly dominated by certain

neighbourhoods, topics and periods. What possibly causes this evolvement is explored in the next section by studying the organizational context of the Memory of East.

Organizational aspects behind the online community

Kreek & Zoonen (2013a) related the success of a local memory website in terms of online activity and participation to some tentative organizational rules of thumb. Participants should have a high level of autonomy to contribute memories or comment on them. In addition, and partly following from this autonomy, they should have control over the content of their contributions in order for them to be authentic. This implies a combination of partners and aims, a minor role for professionals in the methods, a combination of all formats, memories up to yesterday and, finally, a reasonable set of affordances. These characteristics maximize the chance of a local memory website to mature into a longer term phenomenon with a critical mass of memories and comments carried by many people from the local community in different roles. These guidelines will be discussed against the organizational background of the Memory of East over time, taking into consideration the development in online activity and participation from the previous section.

The exhibition period 2001-2004

In a longer tradition of trying and succeeding to reach out to new target groups, the Amsterdam Museum started in 2001 with the preparations for its first neighbourhood exhibition in 2003 'East, an Amsterdam Neighbourhood' (Ernst, 2006). The choice for this specific, mainly pre-World War II, area called Oost-Watergraafsmeer with 60.000 inhabitants was based on the high diversity among its population, which lead to a range of life styles and social backgrounds. At the same time, some of its quarters' reputations were low, partly because of high unemployment and neglected apartment buildings where mostly minority groups were living. In other quarters the houses were better maintained and inhabited more elderly people of Dutch origin. In most of the neighbourhood's quarters the Amsterdam Museum was thought to be relatively unknown, which is why the museum also wanted to promote there what it had to offer. Against this background, the museum wanted to develop this exhibition in cooperation with the residents living in the various quarters. This approach is part of the museum's conviction that historical consciousness and knowledge about the local history can improve relations between residents and, as such, contribute to social cohesion (Oosterbroek, 2008). In this context, the museum conducted a number of outreach projects with the help of internship students from the program Cultural and Social Development at the Amsterdam University of Applied Science. One of the outreach projects consisted of collecting local memories on a website called 'the Memory of East'. The museum partnered with a social welfare institute, Dynamo, in Amsterdam East which ran a number of computer club houses under the name 'Neighbourhood Online' where residents could follow computer courses. Their joint objectives were formulated as follows: "improving social cohesion and accessibility, increasing skills and helping people to become better acquainted with art and culture, as well as the history of Amsterdam" (Ernst, 2006, p. 110). The text on website formulated its purpose towards the public as "lively portraying Amsterdam East from the past to the present" with "a website where ordinary, everyday memories and stories of locals are being collected and told by motivated volunteers" (Amsterdam Museum, 2003b). In addition, the homepage stated that "Everybody – you too – can participate" (Amsterdam Museum, 2003a).

Ten months before the opening of the exhibition, training started of a group of 32 volunteers. The partnership with the local Neighbourhood Online made it easier to attract a group of residents that mirrored the social and cultural diversity in the district. To include youngsters, a secondary school was successfully approached (Ernst, 2006). Organized by the museum, professionals trained the participants in collecting stories of maximal 350 words and related objects. Neighbourhood Online trained them in using the internet for presenting the

stories and pictures of objects online (Eekeren, 2012). Some of the locals wrote down their own stories and others interviewed neighbours to collect their stories. Although the website's name has the word 'memory' in it, the stories could cover the past up to the present day (Ernst, 2006) and contain both everyday as well as historical topics (Eekeren, 2012). A set of 50, rather broad, topic keywords was developed in cooperation with the story collectors, whereas the set neighbourhoods was could grow organically depending on the stories coming in. It was regarded as crucial for the success of this project that the volunteers could decide themselves on what topics, periods or places they wanted to collect stories. This made the stories easy to identify with, which in turn invited others to contribute new stories (Eekeren, 2012; Ernst, 2006; Oosterbroek, 2008). The involved volunteers were also present at the exhibition at what was called the 'Memory Square' with four computers where visitors could look at the website, and its, at that time, 200 stories. The volunteers informed them about the use of the website and invited them to contribute their stories as well (Eekeren, 2012).

On the website, the main features for navigation consisted, and still do, of what is described as mimicking the way humans recollect stories. Human remembering functions largely by associations in which one story makes one think of another (Oosterbroek, 2008). Analogously, on the website each story is presented in a context of related stories. The strengths of these relations are calculated based on the overlap in a number of features among which keywords, the storyteller and the author. The related stories are presented to the right of a page's main story in decreasing order of strength. Other main ways of navigation are menu items for the latest comments and the latest stories, locations such as quarters and streets, and, finally, personal profile pages. When it comes to the interactivity of the website, an important affordance was that participants with a specific login account could create a concept version of their digital memories on the website to be published by one of the editors. Another, more accessible way to contribute, is commenting on a memory, for which one only has to leave a name and an e-mail address in order for it to be published.

In the period 2003-2004 the organizational aspects seemed to be aligned according to the earlier mentioned organizational rules of thumb with respect to online activity and participation. The more formal aims formulated in terms of cohesion and skills, and the more informal purpose of bringing alive the older and recent past of Amsterdam East, form an adequate combination. The former legitimated the actions of the museum professionals in their jargon and the latter was considered more likely to motivate locals to become participants. Obviously, both were inspired by the idea of contributing to an exhibition in the museum. Although the role of the professionals was considerable in starting the project, and facilitating and training the participants, their involvement was absent in the actual collection or self-writing of memories. Decisions about new topic keywords and adjustments of the website's affordance were realized in co-creation between the professionals and the memory producers. The invitation to contribute everyday memories about last week or 70 years ago within a broad range of topics attracted many to do so, because this way everybody was potentially positioned as an expert. In addition to the mimicking of the associative character of human memory, the possibility to add your own concept digital memory and the accessible way of leaving a comment, as the website's affordances, seem to have been in 'right place'. All these aspects are claimed to have contributed to the engagement a high number of online participants (approximately 200) and to the high numbers characterizing the online activity in terms of new memories (approximately 330) during this period as illustrated in the previous section. Ultimately, the success of the website was awarded a prize for the best 'Digital Playground' initiated in 2003.

The supporting period 2004-2009

Although the Memory of East was a temporary project until the beginning of 2004, it was extended after the exhibition had finished at the request of the story producers from the neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood Online volunteers and some museum employees. Some "experienced volunteers set up new groups and gave training sessions themselves for Turkish and Moroccan women, helping them to overcome language problems when writing for the

website” (Ernst, 2006, p. 111). This kind of activities were in agreement with an additional aim that was added to the website in this period: “The Memory of East strives for social integration and social participation of various groups in Amsterdam East, including people for whom it is sometimes difficult to participate in social life” (Amsterdam Museum, 2008). The museum slowly drew back from the intensive role it had played during the first years of the project, partly to be able to start other outreach projects (Oosterbroek, 2008). Nevertheless, its intention was to keep supporting the community and the website at a more basic level, which was made possible until 2006 through finding subsidies from, among others, the local government. At this time, the group of volunteers had grown to about 100 in various roles and a total of 600 stories were published. After the subsidized period, the museum supported the community mainly by facilitating internships for students. This resulted in a fluctuation of the quality of the outreach work that was available for facilitating the volunteers. Together with the wider availability of computers at home and, thus, less reason to visit Neighbourhood Online, the weekly gatherings of the volunteers became quieter. Consequently, the number of volunteers decreased from 2007 onwards. Interestingly enough, the growth of stories stayed more or less equal, about 175 stories per year, reaching a total of 1000 in 2008. In 2009 the museum started to make plans to develop the website into a complete independent community run only by volunteers, except for the hosting of the website.

In the beginning of this period there were some important organizational changes that presumably have influenced the decline in online participation in terms of producers. One change is that the common goal of the exhibition was now absent, which made what first was a project, become more like a community of practice in which locals from Amsterdam East told stories about their neighbourhoods. The other aims of a lively portrait of Amsterdam East and improvement of social cohesion and skills remained the same and a new one, concerning vulnerable citizens, was added. Another change is that volunteers began to organize their own activities first with help of subsidized professionals and later with internships. Looking at the online activity at the transition with the exhibition period, we see a decline with respect to the number of memories published. It seems likely that this has to do with the exhibition being finished early 2004, because the other organizational changes arrived more gradually over time. During the period between 2004 and 2009, the online activity remains more or less stable, apart from some location keywords starting to dominate the others. This can be explained by the original choice of the museum to focus on two districts with various quarters. Memories about other surrounding quarters remained sparse.

The self-organizing period 2010-2014

The process to become more self-organizing was finalized in 2010 during a symposium with 100 visitors in the museum consisting of a review and a prospect of the Memory of East (Soolsma, 2010). Around that time, about 1500 stories had been collected on the website (Eekeren & Spies, 2010). Since 2010, a group of about eight volunteers have focused on a limited number of activities. The incoming stories are edited, if necessary, in consultation with the author and then published on the website with one or more pictures. The web editors also experiment with new rubrics, such as a monthly photo contest ‘Spotted in East’ and short movies about the area ‘Moving East’. Other new main ways of navigation are offered by clustering memories traditionally on one page (e.g. ‘Jewish Past’ and ‘Former Neighbourhood Shops’). New affordances, or adjustments to the ones available, are brought forward to and discussed with the professionals of the museum as the financier of the website. It has shown to be important and productive to align with Facebook and Twitter in order to draw visitors to the website, but also to gather new content. Various activities are organized that are within reach of the group of volunteers. Interested people can, for example, attend writing and interview workshops that are focused on producing stories for the website. Another activity consists of the story walks that are organized on regular basis for grown up residents and schoolchildren. In 2010, the Amsterdam East Administration was expanded with some other, adjacent districts, together making an Amsterdam East ‘at large’. Through presence across this new area at neighbourhood events such as markets and festivals people get the chance to

become acquainted with the Memory of East. Early 2013, a ten year jubilee book was composed with more than 50 stories from the website, which at that time contained about 2400 stories and attracted 142.000 unique visitors per year. Since 2013 the core group of participants has formulated a new mission:

On the Memory of East people from various ages and backgrounds tell their stories about their Amsterdam East. Individually, they consist of joyfully made personal stories, but on neighbourhood level the memory of East connects people and stimulates contacts between neighbours (also ex ones and new ones). The website fosters feelings of belonging and offers locals a place where they can present their memories and share their emotions. Together they make the story of Amsterdam East (Volunteers, 2013).

Some important changes in the organizational aspects in this period influences online activity and participation. The core group of participants has set up a new associational constitution with its own rich mission and aims. In this mission and aims, diversity is important again, although the vulnerable citizen that was introduced in the previous period is absent. The slogan “The future starts with the past”, omnipresent on the website, fuels the inspiration of all the participants and visitors. The decisions to experiment with new rubrics, clusters or keywords are more often made solely by the core group than in the previous period in which decisions often were made with the professionals. Related to this are specializations that some of the core participants have developed, for example in sports, former neighbourhood shops and the Jewish past. Both these observations imply a growth of autonomy of the core participants. With respect to the methods of involving new participants, the focus in this period lays on offering activities like writing or interviewing for any interested locals. The approach in the previous periods of certain target groups like youngsters or the Moroccan community by collaboration with other organizations has moved to the background. An important change in the use of the affordances is that the use of the login accounts to allow people to create a concept version of their digital memory has disappeared. In 2014 there are only five persons form the core group who possess and use the permission to create and publish stories, so all of the memories from other participants arrive through the central e-mail address. This change implies less autonomy for the participants who are more incidentally involved in the community, but it also creates a bigger time lapse in which they cannot control the content of their memories.

Conclusions and discussion

In previous three sections, we analysed the evolvement of empowerment in the online community of the Memory of East in three phases. From the perspective of memories as resources for empowerment, in the first phase, we arrived at illustrations of collective identities, social learning and networking. In addition, we derived three indicators for empowerment in an online community: online activity, online participation and diversity in the online content. In the second phase, an analysis of the online dynamics over time showed how the increasing online activity is delivered by a decreasing group of participants, while the diversity in the content is decreasing at the same time. The third phase, in the previous section, gave insights into the causes of the increasing online activity and the decreasing group of participants. We return to decrease of diversity in the content in this section.

Empowered, but less empowering

Over time the Amsterdam Museum and its professionals have drawn back from the Memory of East in order to give the group of involved people the possibility to grow into an empowered and self-organizing community. The participants of the Memory of East have indeed grown into a group with a considerable amount of control on where the community as

a whole is going. The core group enthusiastically produces content on special themes and makes use of Twitter and Facebook to attract high number of visitors who leave their comments. They publish the incoming memories and organize activities to attract new participants. Everything seems to be aligned with the community's mission, but although it is doing well in terms of online activity, the group of participants is decreasing and the content is getting less diverse. We have to look beyond the surface to conclude why this is the case.

Although the present group invites anyone to contribute a memory about the far or recent past, not all the people who are reached with this invitation, feel they have something interesting to tell or are insecure about their writing. To deal with this, people are invited to participate in workshops, which is again a threshold for many locals. More natural collaboration with schools or self-organizations has proved to be hard to organize during the last few years. An additional issue is that the present core group does not mirror the composition of the population of Amsterdam East anymore. The result of these aspects is a natural selection of elderly participants with a Dutch education and a youth in Amsterdam East which is indeed mirrored by the content on the website. Consequently, elderly with no youth in Amsterdam East, youngsters, middle agers, among others, are groups currently underrepresented in the memories on the website. This decrease in diversity gets enforced by the specialization of some very active participants in specific themes such as sports or shops. Moreover, the natural selection causing the decrease is a self-enforcing process, because people can become insecure not being able to identify with the online content. For example, for some of the communities or neighbourhoods in Amsterdam East the 700 memories about the Jewish past is a minor part of their past and thus might be experienced as overwhelming or unknown.

Summarizing, we can conclude that the empowerment of the core group of participants has succeeded in terms of independent self-organization, but that the empowering aspects of the community have decreased by a natural selection process which limits participation and diversity. There is yet another risk of becoming independent which we will discuss next.

Empowering the empowered individual?

The conviction of what constitutes success of and within the online community steers towards individual empowerment at the expense of collective empowerment. The success of the website is more often discussed in quantitative terms than in qualitative terms. Taken to the extreme, this means that numbers of visitors are more important than a few stories from locals who are underrepresented on the website. Especially, when this thinking justifies the high speed content production of a few locals, collective benefits move to the background. This is a variation on what Christens and Riger warns for with professionals with too much focus on 'productive' individual empowerment: it fosters instrumental thinking and it neglects collective empowerment in which relationships play a central role (Christens, 2013; Riger, 1993). In other words, the challenge for this community, as Christens formulates the issue, is "to focus not only on the ... values of mastery and independence, but also on the ... values of connection and community" again (Christens, 2012, p. 117).

As stated above, it is attempted to involve 'others' with the workshops and the publicity, but the ideas about success also unintentionally exclude dis-empowered persons to participate. It seems that the self-organizing community of the Memory of East has inherited some classic, often neglected, challenges in the field, including the accompanying professional language. For example, the earlier discussed thresholds for some groups to participate, indicate the 'built it and they will come'-approach professionals often grapple with (Foth & Adkins, 2006; Lambert, 2002). The core-group is convinced that offering workshops and publicity is enough effort for vulnerable people to come and contribute their memories. It often results exactly to the opposite, namely, it attracts empowered individuals and it does not appeal to dis-empowered ones. Obviously, further comparative research of more cases is needed to discover what forces can bend back these developments in the Memory of East to a more empowering setting.

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