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The Library as an Online Community Touch-point

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Meeting: 182 — *What does the e-library mean for the public library users?*
                      — Public Libraries

Abstract:

In today's digitally-connected age, libraries must adapt and provide excellent online services and resources for our users. Usage of Singapore's physical public libraries remains high. The National Library Board (NLB) of Singapore believes that public libraries will still be desirable and relevant to Singaporeans as they are no longer just repositories of books but have been transformed into vibrant community touch-points through programmes and services. But beyond providing access resources (digital or print), NLB also believes that the Library has a role to play in bringing Singaporeans together through the co-creation of, and the engagement with, the Singapore Story. Thus, NLB is leading the Singapore Memory Project, a national initiative to collect memories of Singapore from individuals, communities, groups or institutions. The project aims to build a culture of community remembering, which will in turn, nurture bonding and rootedness. The Internet is a key engagement and distribution platform for the Project.

Libraries all over the world have had to address the paradigm shifts in information seeking and usage behaviours brought about by the ubiquity of Internet access and social media, and the massive proliferation of online digital content.

Let us first share a few facts about Singapore. Singapore is a city-state, with a total population of over 5.18 million. Our populace is a relatively informed and educated one; 66.6% of resident adults have Secondary or higher qualifications and our literacy rate is 96.1%[1]. We are also a very connected city: almost 3 in 4 own a smartphone[2] and over 80% of households in Singapore have home access to the Internet[3].

The Digital Library: Quality Digital Content, Anytime, Anywhere

Hence, for our digital library, NLB has needed to keep abreast of trends in the digital content sphere in order to remain relevant to our users. We have made a variety of subscribed eResources available online for the public to access, covering different formats, targeted age groups and Singapore's four official languages. Library users in Singapore can now access over 2.3 million eBooks, 900,000 eJournals, 4,500 online newspapers and magazines and much more.

Over the last few years, NLB has also spent considerable effort in developing and making accessible our own knowledge assets for Singapore. These include Singapore Infopedia[4], an encyclopaedia with articles on Singapore's history, culture, people and events, NewspaperSG[5], a digital archive of newspapers published in Singapore and Web Archive Singapore[6], a collection of digitally preserved websites

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[1] http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html#litedu
[2] http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Science%2Band%2BTech/Story/A1Story20120619-353711.html
[3] http://www.ida.gov.sg/doc/Publications/Publications_Level3/Survey2010/HH2010ES.pdf
[4] http://infopedia.nl.sg
[5] http://newspapers.nl.sg
[6] http://was.nl.sg/

showcasing different facets of life in Singapore. Librarians have also used weblogs as channels to proliferate reader's advisory[7] and information services[8].

In addition to providing rich content for self-directed online access, NLB has also further facilitated citizens' access to this content via physical services and programmes at the public libraries, for example, through the provision of personal computer stations, loan of iPads and accompanying iPad training sessions.

Usage of these e-services is high, with over 47 million e-retrievals carried out in Financial Year 2010[9]. This number is expected to continue to rise over time.

The Physical Library: The Heart of Community Reading and Learning

Although there are irreversible shifts in the way information is being sought and accessed, our physical public libraries continue to be well-loved social institutions with tremendous reach. Each year, our 24 public libraries and National Library welcome over 36 million visitors and loan out over 30 million items[10]. In the same way that going to a movie theatre is still a popular social activity despite the deluge of video content available over the Internet, we believe that visiting the library will remain an activity that is desirable and meaningful to Singaporeans.

This is because over the years, NLB has been actively developing programmes and services to engage its users, transforming the library from a repository of books and materials to a vibrant community touch-point for life-long learning. We have also used technology to enhance the user experience of physical library transactions and

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[7] http://blogs.nlb.gov.sg/highbrowseonline
[8] http://blogs.nlb.gov.sg/ask
[9] http://www.nlb.gov.sg/annualreport/fy10/content/NLB_AR10_11_statistical%20summary.pdf
[10] http://www.nlb.gov.sg/annualreport/fy10/content/NLB_AR10_11_statistical%20summary.pdf

account management via our Library in Your Pocket mobile application and mobile-friendly website.

NLB will continue to position the physical libraries as community learning spaces, with a focus on supporting a national vision of integrating arts and culture in our people's lives.

The Singapore Memory Project: A National Collection, by Singaporeans, for Singaporeans

But beyond providing access to various types of content, we also believe that the library has a role to play in bringing Singaporeans together through the co-creation of, and the engagement with, the Singapore Story. As such, NLB is leading the Singapore Memory Project, a national initiative driven by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts to collect memories of Singapore from individuals, communities, groups or institutions. The project aims to build a culture of community remembering, which will in turn, nurture bonding and rootedness.

Certainly, Singapore is not the first country to embark on a memory programme. The United States[11], the Netherlands[12] and India[13] are examples of other countries that have established memory programmes. However, for a young nation like Singapore, such a programme holds particular significance. Not only do we want to connect people in present through the recollections of the past, but we also want to connect the present to the future by capturing the Singapore Story, as told by its people, and as it unfolds. Our goal is to collect 5 million memories by Singapore's 50th anniversary in 2015.

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[11] http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html
[12] http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/?/en/homepage
[13] http://www.indianmemoryproject.com

Since the launch of the Project last year, over 300,000 memories have been pledged and collected. Of these, we have made over 138,000 memories available online. 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.

Building a Digital Collection by Growing an Online Movement

The Internet is a key engagement and distribution platform for the Project. Digital content disseminated online and across the social media channels helps us connect with the public on a far larger scale than before. The reach of social media allows content to beget even more content, and to spur public conversations and contributions to the collection of memories. It is important for me to state that our aim is not only to collect and preserve memories, but to promote their use and re-use across generations as "living" memories, as relevant memories, reflecting the growth and dynamism of our national identity.

NLB builds its digital memory collection in three ways. One, we make it easy for the public to submit their memories. The Singapore Memory Portal[14] allows users to log-in using their existing online identities or their NLB membership details. After logging-in, users can then easily upload text, photographs and videos. We have also developed an iPhone application, which can be used to capture and upload memories as they happen. Users can also easily share their uploaded memories with their various social networks.

Two, we disseminate viral content through social media channels to ignite new conversations and memory contributions. Since April 2012, we have been regularly

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[14] http://www.singaporememory.sg

releasing commissioned short films and eBooks as part of a series titled "Drawn from Memory". Local artists, illustrators, film-makers and photographers were invited to re-interpret what Singapore Memory meant to them. An eBook about Singapore's old mosaic playgrounds reached over 12,000 people, was shared more than 600 times and garnered over 600 likes in less than a day.

Three, we seek out and collaborate with individual, professional and organisational advocates. Individual members of the public are invited to get more deeply involved in the Project by joining the Memory Corps. This is a programme which allows the public to volunteer for the Project and pursue their individual interests at the same time. Memory Corps can choose to develop themselves along several tracks; they can contribute as research writers and interviewers, documenters, translators and transcribers, and trainers and mentors. NLB then equips the volunteers with the skills to conduct interviews and collect memories. Through the efforts of the Memory Corps, stories from those who do not have access to the Internet can be documented and shared with a larger audience.

Besides individuals, NLB is also cultivating Memory Corps by forming History Clubs in schools and reaching out to grassroots communities. These clubs and communities will build their own local memory collections as part of the Project.

Next, we engage influential professional bloggers to participate in our social media campaigns. Mr Brown, a popular blogger, kicked off a nation-wide memory tweet campaign. The campaign received 8,000 tweeted memories in 24 hours. These memories will eventually be ingested into the Singapore Memory Portal. A second campaign involving a 24-hour food trail with three bloggers saw the Project once

again achieve world-wide trending status on Twitter due to the number of tweeted memories.

Finally, we partner with Internet companies such as Facebook and Google as digital channels for hosting and collecting memories. Google+ recently sponsored a nation-wide memory PhotoWalk in collaboration with schools and local photographers. Students explored their schools and photographed memories of their school environments, campus life and activities and uploaded on Google+ during the walk. Facebook is working with us to archive memory-related stories and responses posted on our partner pages and the content of memory-themed Facebook pages and groups. Such organisation-level collaborations will serve to increase the Project's memory collection capacity as well as increase our social media fan base.

Conclusion

To conclude, the National Library Board (NLB) of Singapore will continue to leverage on digital content and the social connectivity of the Internet to engage Singaporeans in meaningful conversations and mutual learning. One of the ways we do this is to position the Library as an online community touch-point, through the collection and curation of digital memories via the Singapore Memory Project.