

PROOF

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## Touching Tales: Emotion in Digital Object Memories

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Every object tells a story. Depending on just how ‘talkative’ a thing is, or how it relates to other objects we know, it might tell us about its origins, design, consistency, uses, or monetary value. Some objects are deemed more significant (and expensive) than others – because they are old or rare, used to belong to an important person, or are emblematic of a nation’s culture and history (Leder Mackley et al., 2010). Yet, there are also idiosyncratic, affective stories behind physical objects’ places in ordinary people’s homes and hearts. This is because some objects hold and evoke personal memories. They remind us of people, places, times and feelings, of who we are, who we used to be, and who we aspire to become (Miller, 2008). In other words, they mean by implicit association, and their history is intertwined with ours in a whole network of meaning.

This chapter is part of the interdisciplinary pan-UK research project TOTeM (Tales of Things and Electronic Memory). TOTeM explores the applications and implications of tagging technology and homemade digital media in the context of ordinary people’s stories of personally ‘meaningful’ and significant objects. Key outcomes are the creation and exploration of a digital archive of object stories, hosted at [www.talesofthings.com](http://www.talesofthings.com), which enables people to virtually and physically attach digital memories (text, audio, video, images) to objects in the ‘real’ world.

While much of the website content is self-generated, a number of contributions come from participants whose tales have been facilitated by project partners at Brunel University, West London. Inspired by oral history and digital storytelling techniques (Meadows, 2003; Hartley and McWilliam, 2009) but eventually taking a more naturalistic visual-ethnographic approach (Pink, 2007), we have been recording tales of personally meaningful things within a range of community contexts.

1 This chapter offers some preliminary reflections about these kinds  
2 of 'researcher-induced' materials, with a specific focus on the role of  
3 emotion in both object stories and the process of tale-telling. Further,  
4 we discuss differences and similarities between emotional discourse in  
5 self-generated and facilitated digital content and, in the process, evalu-  
6 ate the tensions that emerge from sharing previously hidden meanings  
7 with other people, in on- and offline settings.

### 9 **Connecting things that matter**

10  
11 TOTeM is partly inspired by the emerging technological paradigm of  
12 the Internet of Things (IoT). The Internet of Things is a framework for  
13 describing contemporary developments in ubiquitous computing (ubi-  
14 comp) in which communication moves beyond the established realm  
15 of human interaction, to enable a whole range of possible interactions:  
16 'person-to-device (e.g. scheduling, remote control, or status update),  
17 device-to-device, or device-to-grid' (e.g. in the form of automatic data  
18 accumulation; Valhouli, 2010: 2). Potentially, the Internet of Things  
19 would see objects take on a kind of 'agency': equipped with sensors,  
20 transmitters, different degrees of processing power, and linked via wire-  
21 less networks, such objects will be able to record and exchange data  
22 about themselves, their locations and their environments, and respond  
23 to Internet protocol in the process. Routinely tagged and indexed with  
24 unique identification codes during production, they will be traceable  
25 'through space and time' (cf. 'spimes', Sterling, 2004), turning into  
26 'protagonist[s] of a documented process', as they accumulate and com-  
27 municate information about their history and status (ibid., 77).

28 An early and relatively simplistic instance of this kind of technology  
29 are passive radio frequency identification tags (RFIDs) as they are used in  
30 pre-paid public transport cards (e.g. London's Oyster card), automated  
31 vehicle identification, and the tracking of packages, pets and livestock.  
32 Whether these forms of ubiquitous computing enable ultimate con-  
33 venience or signal the end of privacy in a surveillance-centred society  
34 is a contentious issue (for a more comprehensive discussion, see Van  
35 Kranenburg, 2008). The Internet of Things raises a whole host of ethi-  
36 cal questions about how we conceive of our future societies. Even social  
37 networking sites, as extensive and networked everyday archives of infor-  
38 mation about people and their relationships, can be considered signs of  
39 a move towards an era of 'information capitalism' (Beer, 2007: 233).

40 TOTeM is not detached from these tensions and, in fact, fosters pub-  
41 lic debate about the issues at stake (see Leder Mackley, Macdonald and

Speed, 2010). At the heart of our engagement with these future imaginings lies a concern with ordinary people's agency to make use of new technologies on their own merits and for their benefits. Thus, while much has been written about the technical, commercial and political dimensions of automated data accumulation, we are interested in the human, social and, by extension, *affective fabrics* of creating personal object stories as 'digital overlays' (Valhouli, 2010: 2) of the physical things we care about. As such, we ask real people to 'tag' real things and to enhance communication by sharing stories with others.

The TOTeM website has been online in its beta version since late April 2010. It sets out to provide both a context and a mechanism for enabling individuals and community groups to share object-related stories and memories through digital media, via a custom-built platform of 'tales of things'. Once created through video, audio, photographs, text, or a mixture of the above, an object's tale(s) can be uploaded to the Internet and embedded in our digital archive, along with its 'profile' photo, associated locations, dates and searchable keywords. The website then generates unique identification tags, currently in the form of QR (Quick Response) codes, which can be printed and attached to each item. When scanned with a webcam or smart phone (using our free *talesofthings* app, currently available for Android and iPhones), these tags enable access to each object's tales online. Thus, TOTeM allows for a persistent link between an artefact and its social history as told by its owner (or, potentially, anyone who comes into contact with it) in their own words. At the same time, the website allows users to interact, comment on object stories, and form object-related interest groups. *Talesofthings.com* provides the infrastructure for an Internet of people, objects and object memories, via Web 2.0 and mobile technologies, with the potential to concretize and make explicit possible links – and networks of meaning – between people *through* objects (see also Leder Mackley et al., 2010).

Of course, talking about things that 'mean' something to us almost automatically involves some kind of personal disclosures: of taste, traits, values, politics, ways of life, of memories and experiences. People 'differentiate' themselves from others (Bourdieu, 1984), and know that they may be judged, by speaking about the meaningful things in their lives. They can be more or less successful at controlling how much they share about themselves, with whom and in which context. It's an act of (self-)construction and a response to a given situation as much as it may be one of reflexivity. This reflexivity is both an emotional and a social process, which involves 'taking the role of the other and seeing the

1 self from the other's perspective', with the individual becoming 'both  
2 the knower and the object of knowledge' (Rosenberg, 1990: 3). This  
3 complex interplay of the personal and the social, the emotional and  
4 the reflexive, which is involved in talking about why personal objects  
5 are meaningful, creates a high risk of sensitive, moving, and indeed  
6 unexpected encounters.

7 We knew this when embarking on our research project in the summer  
8 of 2009. We expected that things could become 'emotional'. Yet, this  
9 chapter developed out of recognition that feelings or emotions (and  
10 we use the terms interchangeably here) play an even bigger role in our  
11 research of people's relationships with things, and in the process of talk-  
12 ing about these relationships, than we had previously anticipated. Part  
13 of our aim here is to explore emerging patterns in the kinds of things  
14 and situations which gave rise to 'emotion' in the early stages of our  
15 project, and to draw out how feelings are mediated and negotiated in  
16 on- and offline settings.

### 18 **Sharing stories – a risky business**

20 We first encountered different kinds of 'feelings' during our auto-  
21 ethnographic pilot phase of tale-telling (following the example of  
22 Thomson and Holland, 2005), which required the then 13 members  
23 of our research team (plus 4 industry advisors) to choose an object  
24 of personal significance and narrate its tale to camera. Videos were  
25 uploaded to a private YouTube channel and viewed among the team,  
26 with the knowledge that they were eventually going to be embedded on  
27 the project's blog and introduced to the outside world ([www.youtotem.com](http://www.youtotem.com), see 'Object Stories').

29 At the time, some of the more recent additions to the research team  
30 had not yet met their colleagues at collaborating universities. The  
31 fact that the videos were often their first point of contact somewhat  
32 increased the 'risk' of sharing stories. It also alerted us to a more gen-  
33 eral issue of the possible stigmas attached to object choices and self-  
34 presentation. As one team member explained her object selection,

36 I suppose embarrassment overruled another choice. The one I chose  
37 is far more personal but my other option would have made me look  
38 even more of a strange person. There was definitely a pressure to pick  
39 a 'good' object and probably one that I perceived wouldn't damage  
40 my image in other people's eyes.

(Interviewee 4, 8 October 2009)

1 There was also clearly a sense that focusing on the self and sharing  
2 something personal was considered a somewhat 'narcissistic' activ-  
3 ity (cf. Meadows and Kidd, 2009: 109). As one team member put it:  
4 'I become very self conscious about coming across as a pretentious idiot  
5 who takes himself too seriously!! So the process was tough' (Interviewee  
6 1, 6 October 2009).

7 Although we expected the chosen medium to enhance the experience  
8 and communicative potential of sharing stories with each other, the  
9 relative artificiality of the experience of narrating our pieces to camera  
10 soon became apparent. Team reflections further illustrated that pieces  
11 to camera would not have been people's first choice, and that indi-  
12 viduals felt they had to follow the format that had been established by  
13 colleagues before them. Team members found the experience of being  
14 filmed at best awkward, sometimes unsettling, and at worst nerve-  
15 wracking. Those who felt uncomfortable with the idea of making their  
16 videos available to the public retained their privacy settings. It was at  
17 this point that we realized that talesofthings.com might not only work  
18 as a kind of social networking site but also as a personal memory box for  
19 individuals who wanted to document digital object memories for their  
20 personal use, and revisit them at a later stage (cf. Van Dijk, 2005; for  
21 an extreme form of digital storage for personal memory, see Gemmell  
22 et al., 2006). While we were keen to hold on to video tales in some of  
23 our ethnographic outreach, we realized that it was not vital for story-  
24 tellers to appear on camera themselves, as long as their objects were  
25 visible in at least parts of the video footage. Indeed, a second round  
26 of test tales with students in Edinburgh and London confirmed that,  
27 when left to their own devices, these students opted for a range of shot  
28 types – medium and long-shots of speakers or close-ups of individual  
29 objects – and some did not use the camera at all, choosing to work  
30 through other forms of expression – music, poems, collages, graphics  
31 and image manipulation.

32 Some members of our team who decided to make their videos avail-  
33 able online subsequently attempted to forget their videos were still out  
34 there. In that regard, our experiences seem to reflect those of partici-  
35 pants in the BBC digital storytelling project, 'Capture Wales', described  
36 by Jenny Kidd in her evaluation of their workshop outcomes (Meadows  
37 and Kidd, 2009). Kidd writes that while participants often saw their  
38 computer-generated digital story as 'intimate and personal expression or  
39 achievement', the "'global" stage enabled by its Web presence [did] not  
40 appear to frustrate that perception' (ibid., 108). In our case, the fact that  
41 we were less concerned about the potential reactions of close friends or

1 complete strangers than we were about those of people we only knew  
2 in passing, may partly account for the apparent paradox. Also, there  
3 always was that (false) notion or hope that one's seemingly insignificant  
4 video might get lost in the vastness of the Web. The less we were con-  
5 fronted with the video's 'publicness', the less we seemed to care:

6  
7 It is quite embarrassing thinking of other people viewing my video  
8 (and listening to all my 'em's') but now that it is up there, I don't  
9 mind too much as [I] don't really think about it. So [I] am fine with  
10 the public watching it, just so long as I don't have to see it again  
11 myself!

12 (Interviewee 5, 9 October 2009)

13  
14 As well as going through the process, and the emotional aftermath, of  
15 recording our own stories, the auto-ethnographic 'testing-out' enabled  
16 us to reflect on the experience of viewing each other's stories. Talking  
17 about meaningful objects provided us with unusual insights into oth-  
18 ers' past and present, character and quirks. While we subsequently  
19 decided to move away from digital video as the sole medium for use on  
20 talesofthings.com, this first phase gave us confidence that the poten-  
21 tial of sharing tales on camera might outweigh our initial moments of  
22 emotional turmoil. Of course, such optimism was put under scrutiny  
23 when dealing with the feelings of others, specifically those of research  
24 participants.

## 25 26 **Touching the personal**

27  
28 While it might be true that cultural norms are on the whole chang-  
29 ing towards a society of increased self-disclosure and online self-  
30 presentation (Turkle, 1997), there is a real danger that some narratives  
31 fall by the wayside (Burgess, 2006). Consequently, one TOTeM aim has  
32 been the collection of object stories from groups and individuals who  
33 may not have easy access to digital recording equipment or the Internet.  
34 Although there are complexities to identifying just who belongs to this  
35 group of 'neglected storytellers', an initial focus has been on the recruit-  
36 ment of older people, people with disabilities, people from low-income  
37 households, and members of diasporic communities. In the light of our  
38 own tale-telling experiences, working with these groups creates particu-  
39 lar challenges. Not only are they more likely to be digitally excluded,  
40 they might also potentially be amongst some of the most vulnerable  
41 members of society.

1 Our research has led us to work with a range of community groups  
 2 and organizations across the UK, including charities, museums, local  
 3 councils, and a community theatre group of older volunteers near  
 4 Birmingham. Although emotions did not initially constitute a concrete  
 5 focus in our study, we soon found that, across contexts, the feelings  
 6 associated with objects came to dominate their memory. This is for  
 7 instance evident in materials we gathered in drop-in sessions with a  
 8 group of older regulars at Uxbridge Library, West London. One story  
 9 came from an 84-year-old woman who had brought along a small  
 10 wooden rolling pin. Her story is interesting for a number of reasons; we  
 11 include the complete 'tale':

12  
 13 I remember a beautiful moment, memory ... which is always close  
 14 to my heart [gets emotional, composes herself], of my grandma ...  
 15 and myself. I must've been ... about four years old ... I'm now 84 ...  
 16 And ... those days you wore the long Victorian ... dresses, and I was,  
 17 remember I used to, erm ... hang on to her s', err, these black skirts,  
 18 I never saw her face, and she didn't l'., live very long ... in my life,  
 19 and ... I remember the kitchen ... all dark, and the old-fashioned ...  
 20 stove ... and the table where she was *always* baking, *always* baking ...  
 21 and ... obviously, I must have been right next to her, maybe she put  
 22 me on a stool, because I was high as the table ... and she'd given me  
 23 a little piece of dough while she was making everything. [excited]  
 24 And I would have my little *rolling* pin, it was a little *tiny* one, and  
 25 I'll never forget tha', those, that ever. But as time goes by all sorts of  
 26 other things come in, and things fade. One day, about two years ago  
 27 [...] I went into Wilkinson's ... downstairs, it was in the basement,  
 28 and there looking at me amongst everything, you know, pots and  
 29 pans and all sorts of things, [excited] was my little rolling pin! [clears  
 30 throat] I was [coughs] completely ecstatic. I cou', if I could dance,  
 31 which I could years ago, I'd have danced all the way around the  
 32 building, [laughing] regardless of everybody else. And so I bought  
 33 it. And I brought it home ... with so much pleasure ... and I put it  
 34 in my home. And that is the story of my beau', one of my beautiful  
 35 memories [laughs].

36 (Interviewee 26, 8 July 2010)

37  
 38 We stopped recording at this point, partly because we had reached  
 39 the 'official' end of the story and partly because the participant was  
 40 clearly moved, and it felt intrusive to continue. In the conversation  
 41 that ensued, she spoke of the feelings she most associated with her

1 rolling pin memory: love and a very strong sense of safety. Clearly,  
 2 these feelings have persisted over the years and, mixed with a good  
 3 dose of nostalgia perhaps, became ever more powerful. Astonishingly  
 4 to us, the woman soon became apologetic – about the story itself,  
 5 which she felt was probably irrelevant to others, about the rolling  
 6 pin, which seemed so insignificant an object, and about being ‘silly’  
 7 and emotional *per se*. Although we do not know for sure whether this  
 8 was the first time her story was told, there was a clear sense that the  
 9 act of telling two complete strangers about hitherto implicit personal  
 10 meanings was both peculiar and poignant. It is important to note that  
 11 while she appeared to doubt the ‘value’ of her contribution, both in  
 12 terms of content (‘insignificant’) and the style in which she told it  
 13 (‘silly’), the woman did not wish to withdraw her participation; rather,  
 14 having unexpectedly lost her composure, and with it, her reflexivity,  
 15 she seemed to be looking to us for validation that her story, and the  
 16 way in which it was told, were acceptable in this particular social  
 17 context.

18 Reflecting on that research encounter in its entirety, from the ini-  
 19 tial agreement to participate, to choosing the object, sharing its story,  
 20 becoming emotional in the process, and then almost immediately  
 21 apologizing about both the object story and the associated emotional  
 22 response, we are struck by the way the unfolding story of the rolling  
 23 pin follows the framework of what William James (1890) termed ‘coarse  
 24 emotions’. James divided human emotions into ‘coarse’, which he  
 25 thought had an obvious biological component, and ‘subtle’, the biologi-  
 26 cal component of which was unclear (Scheff and Bushnell, 1984: 241).  
 27 The coarse emotions ‘conjoin two realms that we usually keep rigor-  
 28 ously separate: the world of the body, “My heart was pounding with  
 29 excitement”, and the world of consciousness, “The memory filled me  
 30 with excitement”’ (ibid.). As the story of the rolling pin demonstrates,  
 31 the act of telling memories associated with significant objects, perhaps  
 32 particularly when prompted by the material tangibility of holding the  
 33 object while telling its story, foregrounds the ‘mind–body problem’  
 34 (ibid.) associated with coarse emotions.

35 That meanings are so personal they seem too insignificant to record  
 36 is a common first response to our inquiries about meaningful objects,  
 37 especially when working with older people. Once participants are  
 38 persuaded that we really *are* interested in the personal, the subjective  
 39 and the ordinary, initial scepticism often turns into excitement as they  
 40 begin to share something idiosyncratic, which they do not usually have  
 41 the opportunity to talk about.



1 On the whole, we have not encountered anybody who seemed visibly  
2 distressed about sharing an object memory with us. However, it has been  
3 common, especially but not exclusively amongst female participants, to  
4 become tearful in the process of recounting experiences or talking about  
5 loved ones who had long gone but whose memories live on in treasured  
6 objects. Working with video recordings is a particularly tricky under-  
7 taking in these contexts, not least when bearing in mind that stories  
8 are gathered to be shared online. Reflecting on this fieldwork, we have  
9 had to strike a difficult balance between building relationships of trust,  
10 in which participants feel safe and comfortable to open up to us, and  
11 ensuring that respondents are aware of the wider-ranging consequences  
12 of participating in our project. We make on-the-spot decisions about  
13 when to stop recording, and each tale gets reviewed and approved by  
14 participants before being uploaded as an unlisted clip on YouTube, and  
15 embedded on our website. Interestingly, while participants are usually  
16 somewhat embarrassed about emotionally opening up to us and our  
17 cameras, surprisingly few of them voice their discomfort with their  
18 appearance on *talesofthings.com*. This is despite our lengthy explana-  
19 tions of the Internet's 'publicness' and a video's possible longevity on  
20 the Web. At times, perhaps we feel overprotective.

21 Perhaps we also underestimate the positive value of emotional expres-  
22 sion, and in particular of crying. The extensive literature on catharsis,  
23 'across fields as diverse as psychology, medicine, religion, and drama ...  
24 [implies] that emotional expression leads to feelings of relief and/or  
25 a release of tension' (Bylsma et al., 2008: 1171). In a large-scale inter-  
26 national empirical study, '[t]he majority of respondents ... reported  
27 improvement in their mental and physical state after their most recent  
28 crying episode, which was expected and similar to findings from pre-  
29 vious naturalistic studies' (ibid., 1181). Thus, while the experience of  
30 telling an object-related memory can be unusually and unexpectedly  
31 'emotional', and upon immediate reflection, perhaps even unsettling,  
32 clinical literature suggests that this kind of experience is overall largely  
33 positive. Indeed, even the experience of deliberately recalling a trau-  
34 matic or upsetting memory, which would seem far more emotionally  
35 demanding and 'risky' than the kinds of stories we ask our participants  
36 to share, appears to have far-reaching positive effects on both emotional  
37 and physical health (see Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005).

38 We have yet to systematically gather responses from participants to  
39 see if feelings change once their tales have appeared online. However,  
40 some have been in touch on their own accord. Interestingly, in the  
41 aftermath of recording the rolling pin story, the above respondent,

whilst not having Internet access of her own, involved relatives and library staff in replaying her video story, thus revisiting and sharing her emotional recollection online, and gaining renewed confidence in its significance. One respondent, whose object was a painting associated with childhood memories of following the Apollo 8 mission, voiced his pleasure of revisiting his painting in a novel context:

Thanks for all your effort and time, the painting looks so good alongside the video – and the text is perfect. I had no idea last week that a work of mine which hangs in the living room would now be available to view online.

(Interviewee 42, 6 August 2010)

Another person, who had not taken part in the project herself but who helped a friend to create a tale, e-mailed to say, ‘thanks ... I’ve been to the website and feel almost famous!’ (‘Anna’, personal communication, 18 July 2010). For these contributors at least, adding a tale to talesofthings.com appeared an exciting, not at all daunting, prospect.

### Emotion in self-generated content

In *Stuff* (2010), Daniel Miller describes media of communication as ‘instruments of relationships’, noting the dialectic nature of the process through which people ‘simultaneously [create] a relationship with each other and with the media’ (ibid., 121). He focuses specifically on mobile phones, and on the ways in which they can either be instrumental, complementary or incidental to personal relationships. Of course the question of how technology shapes personal relationships is not a new one. It’s also a vast question and one which goes beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is useful to consider our platform, talesofthings.com, as an infrastructure for possible personal and object relations. Already, it has become apparent that, in comparison to our personal encounters with participants in the field, we miss some important cues and clues to grasping the meanings and significances behind user-generated object stories. It is tempting, for that reason alone, to focus on some of the richer and more emotionally expressive instances that have thus far occurred on the website. In order to avoid (or at least delay) giving in to this temptation, we briefly sketch the overall content of the site.

The archive on talesofthings.com works chronologically, starting with the latest tales and going back, via browsable pages, to the object stories

1 added when the site first went live in April 2010. A crucial observation is  
2 that most initial stories were typed. Some included hyperlinks to other  
3 relevant materials. Only few included video tales, and some of those  
4 were created by members of the research team or their professional net-  
5 works. Although we cannot provide any comprehensive demographic  
6 data of site users at this point, it was noticeable that the platform was  
7 most frequented by said professional networks, the press, and people  
8 who had come across our work through technology blogs, that is, the  
9 so-called early adopters.

10 The kind of content that was generated in the first few months of  
11 talesofthings.com can be broadly split into four categories: tests, art  
12 and intervention, collecting, and 'advertising'. Of course, all initial  
13 tales can be understood as testing-outs of the website and, as such, the  
14 boundaries might be blurred. There is also a difference between simply  
15 going through the motions and submitting what can be described as  
16 some form of narrative. However, this difference is not always palpable,  
17 especially when stories are short or seemingly 'impersonal'. The follow-  
18 ing, for instance, could be a test as well as a legitimate object story (it  
19 did include a photo): 'Magnet light: The lamp in the fridge blew, and  
20 the spares shop is far away – but the pound shop is around the corner.  
21 2 for £1' (added by pollux, 16 April 2010).

22 Something slightly more 'involved' but still relatively 'detached', for  
23 lack of better terms, is the following:

24  
25 'Morning routine: This manual coffee grinder has been an important  
26 part of my morning routine since 2006, and has followed me from  
27 Dresden, via Zurich to London.' (added by **anders**, 16 April 2010) –  
28 Comment: 'I have one similar to this. It has been in my family for  
29 as long as I can remember. My parents owned it and now I do (and  
30 I am a pensioner) and it still works wonderfully.'

31 (ironjawcannon)

32  
33 If any themes emerged in the first few weeks of talesofthings.com, cof-  
34 fee was certainly one of them, or rather: coffee and other hot beverage  
35 utensils. Users tagged coffee grinders, coffee makers, and a range of  
36 mugs. The latter is possibly the result of testing out the website at work  
37 and finding one's office mug as an obvious (perhaps no less meaning-  
38 ful) contender: 'mug of tea, with hearts on, its [sic] big. it makes me  
39 happy. I bought it to celebrate my first day at work [...], it now holds  
40 copious amounts of tea for me every day' (added by clairey\_ross, 11  
41 May 2010).

1 The remaining three categories highlight the ways in which people  
2 wanted to exploit the publicness of the platform. What we categorize  
3 as art and intervention included displays and descriptions of personal  
4 artwork and contributions with ethical undertones (e.g. 'africa: for every  
5 light you buy, Ikea gives one to an african child, so they can read after  
6 dark' [sic], added by jurgen 2005, 14 May 2010). Examples of collecting  
7 included the tagging and brief description of comic books, record play-  
8 ers and vintage calculators. For these users, talesofthings.com obviously  
9 functioned as some sort of virtual exhibitions space, an idea which  
10 has since been entertained by museums and charity shops. The most  
11 contentious while comparably microscopic category was that of (unso-  
12 licited) advertising. A range of Panama hats began to emerge in the  
13 early stages of the project. Because the person who posted these 'ads'  
14 had gone to some length to include relevant 'stories', we gave them the  
15 benefit of the doubt.

16 Beyond these broad categories, some themes began to emerge in the  
17 more elaborate narratives. For instance, people presented objects which  
18 they had acquired during their travels, and they gained further signifi-  
19 cance either as mementos of those travels or because they marked a new  
20 life stage or interest (e.g. the beginning of a passion for ceramic art from  
21 across the world).

22 Most importantly perhaps, at least in the context of this chapter, our  
23 preliminary review of website content indicated that some of the more  
24 obvious instances of emotional expression regularly related to networks  
25 of meaning in and among different generations of families. This is inter-  
26 esting, partly because this notion of objects as emotional bond between  
27 family relations is reflected in many of the tales we have thus far gath-  
28 ered in face-to-face fieldwork. We close with two particularly striking  
29 and emblematic examples of these postings on talesofthings.com – one  
30 short, one more elaborate:

31  
32 Dad's penstand: I bought this penstand from Mumbai for my dad.  
33 When I gifted him, his eyes watered and he return-gifted the same to  
34 me with the words – 'My boy is now a man'.

(added by shwetank, 26 May 2010)

36  
37 When I was a child, as every child, I had my favourite toy. It was a  
38 small house that looked like a mushroom. It had a lift and a garage  
39 for a red sport car. The roof was blank with red circles on it and there  
40 was a family 'living' inside the mushroom: father, mother, daughter  
41 and son. Also, there was a dog that was part of this family, but it used

1 to stay outside, in a smaller mushroom home (suitable for a dog).  
 2 I cannot say how many hours I spent playing with this mushroom  
 3 called *Mundo Feliz* in Portuguese. I would translate it into English as  
 4 Happy World. It was sold by Troll, a 80s famous Brazilian company.  
 5 My toy was imported – I discovered it later, of course – from the  
 6 Orient.

7 I wasn't raised under material values. I remember when I saw this  
 8 toy at the store. I looked through the show window and felt some-  
 9 thing special, but I did not asked [*sic*] to my parents: – Hey, I WANT  
 10 this one for Xmas! Lucky me: they got my thoughts and they bought  
 11 'my' mushroom as a Xmas gift. There is a photo with me holding my  
 12 gift before to open it. [...] I cannot describe what I felt when I opened  
 13 it and I found the mushroom inside.

14 I lived in a small city and I was the only child who had this toy.  
 15 Years later, my youngest sister discovered my old toy and I remember  
 16 her playing with it at the yard. There is a photo of her playing as  
 17 well. It was the last time that I saw our toy.

18 When I was in France, Lille, going out with some friends, we  
 19 passed by a tradicional [*sic*] fair that happen in the end of the  
 20 summer. It was at night and people were in front of their houses  
 21 selling stuff. So, there was a 8 years-boy selling his old toys. One of  
 22 them – guess what – looked like the toy that I had when I was in  
 23 his age! He called it 'The Magic [Tree]'. It was almost the same: lift,  
 24 dog's house, garage. I bought it immediately ... for 3 Euro. There  
 25 are some funny photos of me, going to the concert holding this  
 26 toy. When I arrived in Brazil and visited my mid-sister to meet my  
 27 niece – she was a baby at that time – I gave her 'The Magic [Tree]'.  
 28 I cannot describe how I felt taking a photo of her playing with it. It  
 29 was like a circle going on. [...].

30 (added by josipazbrazil, 27 May 2010)

31  
 32 Unlike the materials gathered by us in face-to-face research encounters,  
 33 the website contributions are, in a sense, volunteered rather than solic-  
 34 ited. Those which are textual rather than video-based certainly come  
 35 across as less 'emotional' because inflections of emotion can be less clear  
 36 or obvious in text. Nevertheless, it is quite remarkable how much the  
 37 story of the mushroom home from Brazil, volunteered by a technically  
 38 savvy early adopter, has in common with the earlier story of the rolling  
 39 pin from West London, told by a pensioner who does not personally  
 40 use the Internet. There are the narrative similarities (a favourite object  
 41 from childhood, long gone, a chance encounter with a modern 'copy')

1 of that object, the immediate excitement of recognition, the purchase  
 2 of that 'copy', and the joy it still evokes as a reminder of the memories  
 3 associated with the original object), but there is also, in both stories, the  
 4 constant interplay between the physicality of emotional response and  
 5 the consciousness of remembering which marks both stories as clear  
 6 instances of complex 'coarse emotion'. Despite the differences in the  
 7 way the two stories came to be on the site, the different media in which  
 8 they are told, and the vast geographical and, presumably, generational  
 9 gap between the two storytellers, the similarities indicate not only a  
 10 common set of experiences, but a common impulse to share them, be  
 11 it in a single face-to-face encounter or with an unseen but potentially  
 12 vast Internet audience.

### 14 Conclusion

16 As indicated above, the study of emotion was never a concrete objec-  
 17 tive in our project and, indeed, remains only one aspect in a multitude  
 18 of current research angles across the team. What we have learned so  
 19 far is that we may need to retain some flexibility in our approach to  
 20 the subject, specifically with regard to the kinds of 'information' we  
 21 gain in different research settings. All the while, we must keep in mind  
 22 that as much as emotions are lived bodily experiences, people also  
 23 always *do* things with emotional expression and emotion talk. They  
 24 construct their emotional selves, they account for emotions or situa-  
 25 tions, and they attach values to certain kinds of feelings, depending  
 26 on whether they are welcome or unwelcome, justified or unjustified,  
 27 socially accepted or frowned upon (Potter and Whetherell, 1987). As  
 28 such, emotional expression can be an act of performativity as well as  
 29 one of self-reflection. What differs between on- and offline contexts is  
 30 our knowledge of immediate and longer-term story 'recipients'.

31 Alice Maverick and danah boyd have pointed towards the collapse of  
 32 social context(s) and the negotiation of a range of known and imagined  
 33 audiences in networked media, specifically on Twitter. They note a ten-  
 34 sion between catering towards a public audience, or one's 'fans', and a  
 35 'desire for pure self-expression and intimate connections with others'  
 36 (2011: 132). In our observations, objects become vessels through which  
 37 such varied and imagined contexts can be played out. Yet, while we  
 38 gradually add facilitated content to *talesofthings.com*, which in itself  
 39 may impact on future appropriations of the website, our understanding  
 40 of self-generated content is largely reduced to discursive analyses of what  
 41 seem like snapshot tales. This is different from building relationships of

1 trust, sharing laughter or shedding a tear in face-to-face offline contexts  
2 where we are participants' first and 'known' audience.

3 Our 'offline' encounters with participants remain exciting and reward-  
4 ing. They are also very varied and, before allowing any meaningful com-  
5 parison, need to be more fully understood in relation to the contexts in  
6 which they occur. In the course of our project, we hope to more system-  
7 atically evaluate the *kinds* of stories and emotions which are shared in  
8 relation to particular objects within different on- and offline settings.  
9 The selection of media (so far, self-generated tales have chiefly focused  
10 on the written word) may impact on whether or how a story 'works' on  
11 talesofthings.com. Emotion is likely to play a role in creating links and  
12 connections between people. Yet, while we imagine memories and emo-  
13 tions to build bridges between people, there may also be a function in  
14 private and hidden meanings. In time, we hope to evaluate the relative  
15 success of the platform as a 'network' of people and object memories.

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22 via Facebook, Twitter, blog ([www.youtotem.com](http://www.youtotem.com)), and digital archive  
23 ([www.talesofthings.com](http://www.talesofthings.com)).  
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