

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Communicative remembering: Revisiting a basic mnemonic concept

Christian Pentzold<sup>1</sup> , Christine Lohmeier<sup>2</sup> and Thomas Birkner<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department for Communication and Media Studies, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany and

<sup>2</sup>Department for Communication, Paris Lodron University Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria

Corresponding author: Christian Pentzold; Email: [christian.pentzold@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:christian.pentzold@uni-leipzig.de)

### Abstract

The article attempts to clarify what today constitutes communicative remembering. To revisit this basic mnemonic concept, our theoretical contribution starts from available approaches in social memory studies that assume a binary distinction between cultural and communicative modes of memory making. In contrast, we use concepts that treat them not as structural, historically and culturally distinct registers but as a repertoire of retrospection that hinges on the evoked temporal horizon and media usage. To further interrogate this practical articulation of memories, we direct our attention to the habitual, communicatively realised engagement with the past. We finally turn to the ways communicative remembering is done in digitally networked environments, which provide us with a pertinent mnemonic arena where rigid dichotomies of communicative memory versus cultural memory are eroded.

**Keywords:** communicative memory; cultural memory; *modi memorandi*; practice memory

Collective memory comes alive in communication. It happens as an exchange about what is to be remembered and, in a more reflexive twist, about the ways in which it is to be remembered, for example, in the circle of a family, between generations, or in engagement with media messages. Indeed, if collective memory is understood ‘not as a collection of individual memories or some magically constructed reservoir of ideas, but rather as a socially articulated and socially maintained “reality of the past,” then it also makes sense to look at the most basic and accessible means for memory articulation and maintenance – talk’, as Irwin-Zarecka (1994, 54–55) puts it. We start from this elementary idea. Or, to follow Huyssen (1995, 3): ‘The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory’.

Although talk is a prime mode of collective memory making, recollections do not necessarily take shape in face-to-face conversation. In fact, *communicative remembering*, which is first and foremost a practice and not a state of communicative memory, encompasses various ways of conveying the past. It involves all sorts of expressive gestures, semiotic resources, and forms of cultural representation (Erl 2011, 113). In this kaleidoscope of articulation, the available past is reactivated in light of current societal conditions, cultural relations, and systems of knowledge and is therefore constituted as meaningful and significant in a specific present (Bal *et al.* 1999; Bietti 2014; Lowenthal

2015). What is more, acknowledging that collective memory is an inherently communicative affair implies that it is processual in nature. A principal tenet of social memory studies is that remembering is a process through which temporally anchored and spatially bounded versions of the past are reconstructed. This processuality has been stressed by Olick (2010, 159), who notes that '[c]ollective memory is something – or rather many things – we do, not something – or many things – we have'.

Surprisingly, while communication processes are fundamentally important for collective remembering, theories of and empirical research on social memory studies have focused elsewhere, namely on media formats, public institutions, and technologies that influence the propagation and canonisation of references to the past. In these studies, cultural history and the genealogy of memory practices intertwine with media archaeology (Erlil and Rigney 2009; Garde-Hansen 2011). In other studies, communicative memory is often contrasted with cultural memory and located within a time period of three to four human generations, during which the exchange of immediate, lived experience gives way to transmission through hearsay and material records (Assmann 2011; Vansina 1985). In yet another set of studies, periods in history, during which particular media are believed to have moulded the cultural dynamics and practices, are consecutively placed one after another (LeGoff 1992; Leroi-Gourhan 1993). In such *longue durée* approaches, communicative remembering stands at the dawn of civilisation as a trait of oral cultures that did not have access to writing, recording, and storage media, meaning that memory had to depend on rhetorical devices such as formulaic chants and metrical poems (Havelock 1988; Lord 1991; Parry 1987).

However, communicative remembering cannot be reduced to a practice of bygone eras or to an ever-shifting phenomenon of intergenerational communion, since the techniques and cultural forms that carry it are always accomplished according to the affordances of expression, mediation, and preservation available at a given time. As such, they criss-cross established categorisations that hope to distinguish moments of crystallised cultural memorialisation from more fluid kinds of reminiscence. In this respect, Welzer (2010, 285) writes that '[c]ultural' and 'communicative memory' can only be strictly separated in a theoretical context; in the actual memory practice of individuals and social groups, their forms and methods are linked together'. Rather than using the notion to distinguish periods in time or to mark out historical transitions, we face the task of clarifying what constitutes communicative remembering as a perennial, though shifting, set of mnemonic practices.

Taking the practical side of communicative remembering seriously, our conceptual contribution revisits this basic mnemonic concept by looking at the routine articulation and propagation of memories in their corporeal and mediated accomplishment. To this end, we discuss the term communicative remembering, bring together existing approaches that aim to capture the habitual, communicative engagement with the past and address the ways communicative remembering is done in digitally networked environments, where rigid distinctions of communicative memory versus cultural memory fall apart.

Drawing this eclectic collection of perspectives together, we argue that communicative remembering is not the counterpart to cultural memory. In fact, the dichotomy may serve analytical purposes but it does not help us to appreciate the forms of expressive and interactional memory making. Rather than establishing a catalogue of criteria that define and distinguish communicative memory, we suggest interrogating the inconstant practice of communicative remembering, which changes with shifting social constellations and media environments. By focusing on communicative remembering, we seek to avoid hierarchising the relationship between cultural memory and communicative memory.

## Communicative memory/cultural memory

Memories are commonly invoked as ‘the present past’, Terdiman (1993, 8) states. They are not portrayals of past events or experiences but present-day recollections of the past. In Halbwachs’s (1992 [1925], 1980 [1950]) classical reflections on socially shaped individual memory, the collectively shared frames of reference (*cadres sociaux*) – and thus the horizons of meaning and interpretation in which and through which remembering becomes meaningfully possible – are conveyed primarily through communicative exchanges. In social groups, above all the family, religious communities, and social classes, collective memory is constituted in interaction and communication, and members of these constellations locate their personal reminiscences within these mnemonic frames, through colloquial talk and narration or via the production and sharing of images or written records. ‘All individual remembering, that is, takes place with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues’, as Olick *et al.* (2011, 19) have summarised.

Communicative remembering thus prefigures individual perception and memory (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Middleton and Edwards 1990; Welzer 2010). It provides fertile ground for interdisciplinary inquiry, including in cognitive science and (neuro-)psychology. One notable area of interest pertains to collaborative remembering, that is, studies of the interplay of individual and group processes. Collaborative remembering, meaning ‘remembering with an intended future audience, remembering in the presence of others, remembering in direct collaboration with others, and remembering in larger social and cultural contexts’ (Meade *et al.* 2018), is predicated on conversation. Research has, for instance, shown how individuals tune their stories with respect to audience reactions, to serve an intended audience and in line with cultural expectations. Further, work by Maswood *et al.* (2019) indicates that collaborative remembering of a shared event leads to down-regulated negative emotions and increases the recall of details from the event and its environment.

This does not mean that remembering must always be consensual or generate uniform binding memories. Rather, the unifying element lies in the continuously performed acts of shared, intergenerational and intragenerational remembering in which pasts are retold and passed on (Bellah *et al.* 2007 [1985]; Bietti 2014; Markowitsch and Welzer 2009). Social affiliations and the formation of identities, both individual and collective, therefore rely on the communal evocation of the past.

### *Uses of the past: communicative memory versus cultural memory*

Arguably, the most influential treatise on communicative memory comes from Jan Assmann (2011) and Aleida Assmann (2006, 2012). In their writings, they mainly conceptualise it as a foil for the more prominent notion of cultural memory, which also features in the title of Jan Assmann’s (2011) seminal study on memorialisation in Ancient Egypt and among the Israelites. Communicative memory and cultural memory are understood as two distinct registers of collective memory; the former is based on everyday fleeting conversations, whereas the latter is tied to permanent objectifications that are passed on over time.

Cultural memory, then, is defined as ‘a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation’ (Assmann 1995, 126). As such, it relies on material storage and preservation. Its fixed documents and canonised interpretations are recalled and reconfirmed over long periods of time in recurrent, ritualised form and through fixed, ceremonialised procedures. Often, this repetitive

commemorative re-enactment is reserved for members of the cultural elite such as priests, shamans, or seers.

In contrast, communicative memory ‘includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications’, Jan Assmann (1995, 126) writes. It is bound to its bearers and moves along with the succession of generations and their horizons of experience and reminiscence. It thus includes, he (2011, 36) further notes, ‘memories related to the recent past. These are what the individual shares with his [sic] contemporaries’. The process in which communicatively mediated memories are lost or reshaped as part of cultural memory is what Vansina (1985, 23) calls the ‘floating gap’ between two memory frames that replace each other (Barnes 1990 [1947]). Because communicative memory is deemed to hinge on the presence of generational contemporaries, the transition from communicative to cultural memory seems unidirectional – once the carriers have disappeared, there is only a chance for cultural memorialisation that may perpetuate some but not all lived memories.

In Jan Assmann’s conception, the ‘two uses of the past’ (2011, 37) of communicative memory and cultural memory are distinguished from each other by five polarities (Table 1). At the level of *time structure*, they differ in scope and thus either encompass three to four generations in a timeframe of 80–100 years or extend to an imaginary pre-history. The second level, the level of *forms*, locates communicative memory in everyday life and thus in informal routines, while cultural memory is marked as being extraordinary; it has its place in festive events and days of significance within liturgical, regimented, and repeatedly performed rituals. Hence, a distinction is made between the profane and the sacred. This results in a contrast at the level of *content*, between memory as biographical experiences in the recent past versus the memory of an individually inaccessible, mythical time in a distant past. In this way, a polarised structure of participation is created, with diffuse involvement in communicative remembering, in which the *carriers* of memory share various and differently elaborated accounts and experts take no priority on one side, and cultural memory, where participation is exclusive and limited to specialists like scholars, scribes and clergy members on the other. Finally, the two uses of the past are separated by their *media*. Here, orally transmitted experiences and hearsay are juxtaposed with symbolically coded and fixed objectifications as well as ritual celebrations.

**Table 1.** Communicative memory and cultural memory

	Communicative memory	Cultural memory
Time structure	80–100 years, horizon of 3–4 generations moving with the present	Mythical prehistory
Forms	Informal; unstructured; arising from interactions and conversations in everyday life	Initiated; high degree of formalised, ceremonial celebrations
Content	Experiences of history in the context of individual biographies	Bygone ages; events in an absolute past
Carriers	Contemporary witnesses in a memory community	Experts and cultural elites
Media	Orally transmitted experiences and hearsay	Fixed objectifications; traditional symbolic encoding/staging in words, images, dance, etc.

Source: Assmann (2011, 41).

The two registers and their differences are metaphorically captured by the terms ‘fluid’ and ‘fixed’ memory (Assmann 2011, 43). In the same vein, Aleida Assmann (2012) has gone on to speak of an ‘inhabited’ functional memory and an ‘uninhabited’ storage memory (Erll 2011, 36). In their relationship, dynamics of actualisation and forgetting become salient, with functional memory constituting the selective, present-day commemoration and storage memory providing a bank of potentially rememberable content that is curated and manifested in art, literature, media, museums, or science. Selectively, not in total, can they pass into functional memory, where they become reappropriated and reconfigured.

With Jan Assmann (2011, 41) stressing that communicative memory and cultural memory are seldom sharply separated realms but reside on a ‘sliding scale’, the relationship between the two registers is far from straightforward. Even though the two registers are treated as discrete mnemonic modes separated by time structures, forms, contents, carriers, and media, it is difficult to establish and uphold such a partition in practice. Neither the binary of ‘fluid’ and ‘fixed’ nor that of ‘functional’ or ‘storage’ memory neatly map onto the distinction of communicative versus cultural memory. As a case in point, when Jan Assmann (1995, 130) claims that memory might appear ‘first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivised meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance’, he is referring to cultural memory, not communicative memory. Indeed, when conceived as such, communicative memory becomes confined to recollection tied to the embodied experiences of a finite group of human carriers and their mundane communications. This, however, does not include all types of communicative actualisation that may happen in the exclusive rituals of cultural memory.

Nevertheless, for all the inconsistencies that emerge when seeking to uphold a meaningful distinction, the catchy juxtaposition of two forms of collective memory surfaces in various concepts, such as vernacular and official memory (Bodnar 1992), lived and distant memory (Hirst and Manier 2002), or fluid and crystallised memory (Pentzold 2009). All of these try to capture the conditionality of memory as well as the different practices, media, and social contexts of remembering. They are all rendered problematic when the dichotomies are not primarily taken as analytical categories but treated as if they are empirical characteristics.

### *Modi memorandi: communicative memory and cultural memory*

Acknowledging the somewhat artificial nature of a clear-cut division into communicative versus cultural memory, Jan Assmann (2011, 37) asserts that there are ‘two modes of remembering – two uses of the past – that need to be carefully distinguished even though they are largely connected in real historical culture’. Regarding the different kinds of media associated with communicative memory and cultural memory, he (2011, 43) further stresses that this does not necessarily coincide with the distinction between cultures based on orality and those based on writing.

Indeed, communicative memory or, to put it more succinctly, remembering, is not diachronically replaced by cultural memory once communities are able to chronicle their memories. Instead, both registers coexist synchronously, though writing cultures usually possess a more elaborate apparatus of media-based mnemotechniques and means of expression. Yet, in terms of engagement with a past, communicative memory may not be deficient per se as it, too, rests on a versatile repertoire of practices. In turn, the formation and instantiation of cultural memory are grounded on conversations and personal storytelling, whereas cultures without scripture rely on oral traditions that afford both a communicative and a cultural framework of memory making.

Ultimately, the question then is if these suggestive dichotomies should be treated as conceptual or as historical categories. In these terms, Erll (2011, 31) explains that the pairs of terms may serve as designations for two *modi memorandi*: they are distinct from one another when theoretically regarded as different ways of remembering and different modes of mnemonic referentiality. But the attempt to locate the abstract categories empirically is prone to fail, she argues, when the modes are meant to be bound to concrete historical moments and cultural circumstances. Consequently, whether a past is remembered in everyday communication or through ritual depends on the chosen register and not vice versa. Thus, communicative memory and cultural memory present themselves as a repertoire of retrospection that can be employed to articulate memories within the finite timescale of a given situation or by invoking the temporally distant horizon of bygone times.

In other words, recalling and mobilising a past might be done in the communicative mode within a narrow scope of the everyday, based on biographical experiences and in relation to social reference groups. Or it can be done in the cultural mode that reaches more distant temporal horizons, pertains to events that assume collective significance and mobilises far-ranging systems of meaning. ‘This means’, Erll (2011, 31; emphases in original) concludes, ‘that in a given historical context, the same event can become simultaneously an object of the Cultural Memory *and* of the communicative memory’. It is not the temporal structure of an experienced and non-experienced past or the linear progression of time that is crucial, but a temporal consciousness that renders it possible to modulate and adjust the mnemonic proximity or distance of events (Wodianka 2005). ‘The central criterion to differentiate the “Cultural” from the “communicative” mode of remembering is therefore, it seems, not the measurable time . . . It is rather the way of remembering chosen by a community, the collective idea of the meaning of past events’, Erll (2011, 32) adds. One example mentioned by Erll is the Christian practice of biblical reading, which can take various forms, from creating distance through liturgy and dogma, making it the property of the few, to creating biographical closeness by personal practices of piety. Another one could be the classical ideals of friendship in antiquity, which can either be an object of learned study or a guide for practical friendship. Hence, the intertwining of cultural and communicative memory predates digital media.

Media, as communication technologies and institutional systems, exert an important influence on the mode in which a past is or ought to be remembered. This mnemonic potential of news media and documentary formats, but also of fictional reappraisals of historical moments, has become particularly evident with events such as 9/11 (Grusin 2010; Simpson 2006), the fall of the Berlin Wall (Sonnevend 2016), the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Zelizer 1992), the death of Lady Diana (Seidler 2013), the release of Nelson Mandela from Victor Verster prison (Wasserman 2018), or the Bhopal gas disaster (Bisht 2013). As media events, according to Dayan and Katz (1992), they interrupted everyday life; as fixed points in a culture of memory, they monumentalise public remembering and shape personal reminiscence. From the second half of the 20th century until recently, television not only created the possibility of worldwide attention and mediated eye-witnessing, it also opened up the framework in which an event could be remembered at all. ‘Media events endow collective memory not only with a substance but with a frame: they are mnemonics for organising personal and historical time. To members of the same generation, media events provide shared reference points, the sense of a common past, as well as bridges between personal and collective history’, as Dayan and Katz (1992, 212) have put it.

So, for instance, the memory of 9/11 was not only borne by the communicative exchange of experiences of a worldwide life audience. Quickly thereafter, it became the focus of official commemoration ventures meant to anchor and direct biographical

historical experiences (Hess and Herbig 2013). This entanglement of cultural memorialisation and communicative memory work has, it can be assumed, gained traction in the age of reflexive modernisation, when ways of life and experiences are short-circuited with mediated stores of meaning (Giddens 1994; Levy 2010; Pentzold *et al.* 2016). In contrast with these types of immediate ceremonialisation, musealisation, and monumentalisation, Erll (2011, 32–33) points out that events that happened far in the past may again become part of communicative remembering, for example, when the study of religious texts is not first and foremost perceived as a tradition with a complex legacy of translation and redaction but as a living source of experience that is intimately connected to personal life.

Furthermore, Levy (2010) has underscored that the modes of cultural and communicative remembering are not congruent and that a publicly established cultural memory does not need to determine more personally shared communicative mnemonic practices. The mode of communicative memory is not inescapably subject to dominant institutionalised cultural memories, and communication research on media appropriation has not ceased to emphasise the resistance and self-determination of audiences and the polysemy of media offerings (Fiske 1989; Hall 1997). Neither are mnemonic media formats read and understood in an unambiguous way nor is there a direct transfer into the beliefs and knowledge of a public. It is precisely in the relation between familial and personal recollections that possibilities of creative and resistant readings of the available mnemonic narratives open up, and it is questionable how much attention and allegiance is to be demanded from purportedly authoritative views. Thus, Kansteiner (2002, 193) suggests that ‘the more “collective” the medium (the larger its potential or actual audience), the less likely it is that its representation will reflect the collective memory of that audience.’ The patterns of interpretation and symbolic cues taken for granted by social elites, the media, educators, and cultural institutions may not, as a matter of course, also be carried by the people or even be acknowledged at all.

Still, with media, and mass media in particular, there seems to be a collectivisation of communicative memory, as it informs media events and broadcasts. This, however, does not challenge the relationship between the two modes, nor does it call into question the significance of communicative memory vis-à-vis cultural memory. It instead makes us aware of yet another false distinction that underpins this dichotomy. Communicative memory is not per se bound to personal communication, and cultural memory does not hinge on collective arenas. In contrast, the two modes scale from individual memory work to extensive societal endeavours (Keightley *et al.* 2019).

### Communicative remembering as practice

Having discarded the strict dichotomy between cultural and communicative memory in favour of a more flexible notion of convertible *modi memorandi*, we now turn our attention to the practical articulation of this repertoire of retrospection. Instead of being a structural condition, it becomes a matter of practical choices and media usages that evoke the registers of communicative remembering or cultural memory. This consequently requires us to explain the kinds of practices through which they come into being, are formed, and are collectively shared in patterns of action. To grasp communicative remembering, we need to inquire into the practical accomplishment of mnemonic practices, which include, according to Olick (2010, 158), communicative activities such as ‘reminiscence, recall, representation, commemoration, celebration, regret, renunciation, disavowal, denial, rationalisation, excuse, acknowledgment, and many others’.

Basically speaking, communicative remembering is done through practices that evoke a past. More precisely, Connerton (1989) distinguishes between inscribing practices and

incorporating practices. Inscribing practices are used to produce representations; incorporating practices refer to the corporeal rehearsal of knowledge and the learning of skills that are directed towards evoking a past. Thus, the activities aimed at materialising memory artefacts, media content, and memorabilia together with bodily anchored and performed doings and sayings are catalysts for and components of collective memory. Of course, inscribing practices in the arts and media, in journalism, and in culture have received most of the attention, whereas incorporating practices have still attracted comparatively little critical reflection. Likewise, early contributions, such as Bergson's (1990 [1896]) notion of 'habit memory', which is thought to consist of the habitual dispositions gained through mimicry and repeated acts of memorialisation, have not yet been analysed in terms of communication. More than creating all kinds of material mnemonic texts and artefacts, the practices themselves are memory devices too that carry and perpetuate habitual ways of enacting retrospective references.

Engaging more seriously with remembering as a practice, Schatzki (2010, 219–220) employs the term 'practice memory', that is, 'the continuing presence of an ability acquired in the past, not knowledge, belief, or thought about the past'. The practical side of communicative remembering is, however, not only an individual matter. Mnemonic routines are socially shared, and it is through the collective enactment, propagation, and regulation of the corporeal conduct of recollection and commemoration that its carriers come to form part of mnemonic communities of practice (Wagner-Pacifici 1996). Hence, communicative remembering is structured by narrative templates, dramaturgical schemes, and conventional combinations of textual, visual, audio, and audiovisual elements. They are furthermore accompanied by expectations regarding communication roles and by the relational ties established with them. In essence, such patterns can be understood, drawing on Bergmann and Luckmann (1995, 289), as communicative genres. They are 'solutions to specifically communicative problems'.

Genres solidify structures of communication and constellations of participation that guide the realisation of a particular communicative act in a concrete situation. In terms of memory, Knoblauch and Günthner (1995) use the concept of reconstructive communicative genres to stress that communicative remembering is based on the institutionalised forms through which mnemonic references are established and memory practices become socially intelligible. This constitutive relationship between communicative routines and sociality has, for example, been at the heart of the formation and transformation of *ars memoriae* since antiquity (Carruthers 1990; Yates 2011 [1966]). They afford the ways by which remembering happens in particular constellations of memory agents, and they continue to shape orders of knowledge and recurring tropes (Blair 2006; Hutton 1993).

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the practical linkage between the two registers of communicative remembering and cultural memory can be understood as resulting in steps of externalisation, objectivation, and sedimentation – of both mnemonic content and mnemonic forms, the references to pasts and the communicative practices with which they become articulated. For this purpose, Berek (2016) uses the idea of an inventory of knowledge, which, according to Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Schütz (1967), represents the reservoir of personal and communal objectivations. Collective memory then refers to a subset of the more general inventory of available practical and propositional knowledge by its retrospective orientation. Experiences, opinions, and beliefs take shape in objectivations, whereby semiotic systems, first and foremost language, ensure that these can be intersubjectively shared. 'As far as social relations are concerned, language "makes present" for me not only fellowmen [sic!] who are physically absent at the moment, but fellowmen in the remembered or reconstructed past', as Berger and Luckmann (1967, 54) have declared. Objectivations render individual memories

explicit and thus transferable to other temporal or spatial contexts, that is, they form sediments upon which ongoing memory work rests. Put differently, individual impressions and experiences must be publicly expressed in order to feed into the collective stores of knowledge that make up social reality. Being more than the sum of personal ideas and statements, they are organised along shared epistemic classifications and cultural orders of value and worth (Dimbath and Heinlein 2022).

### Communicative remembering in digitally networked media

The distinction between cultural and communicative memory is not only conceptually problematic; the boundaries between the two mnemonic modes have also been blurred by the shift towards digital, networked communication services, and platforms. Indeed, communicative remembering is done in digitally networked environments. These digital environments constitute a pertinent mnemonic arena where rigid dichotomies of communicative memory versus cultural memory practically fall apart.

The constitutive entanglement of communicative remembering and cultural memory has become particularly evident with today's comprehensive mediatisation: while, in writing cultures, little communicative remembering has typically occurred in pure face-to-face exchange without any kind of technological mediation, the volume and systemic impact of media in all spheres of life and society, propelled by digitisation and networking, has fundamentally reshuffled the two registers of memory making beyond written language (Birkner and Donk 2020). The increasing penetration of all spheres of life and work contexts in and through media – the 'mediation of everything', as Livingstone (2009, 1) has dubbed it – has deprived existing mnemonic distinctions of their plausibility. In effect, as van Dijck (2007, 15) claims, they are 'fallacious binary oppositions' with regard to the importance of media for all kinds of memory making that are reconfigured in the course of an ongoing mediatisation and cannot be clearly separated into cultural or communicative modes. Instead, she (2007, 21) proposes to speak of 'mediated memories' as 'activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves and in relation to others'. A case in point concerns the difficulties in defining much of what is written online in terms of existing text genres. Given its stylistic orientation towards spoken discourse and the constant innovation of paratextual elements such as emoticons and emojis, it might be more helpful to think of the pragmatics of online communication on a continuum between orality and literality (Herring *et al.* 2013).

Moreover, Wertsch (2002, 6) underscores the essential mediation of collective memory that is always dependent on being expressed in some kind of semiotic vessel. Consequently, there is no socially relevant remembering without the multi-layered media-based articulation, transmission, and propagation of things past. 'Memory – both individual and collective – is viewed as "distributed" between agents and texts, and the task becomes one of listening for the texts and the voices behind them as well as the voices of the particular individuals using these texts in particular settings' he asserts. Mediated remembering, in which media technologies and communicative formats are fundamental conditions and not mere facilities, makes it necessary to redefine the relationships between communicatively and culturally realised memory references, between past-oriented self-reassurance and communalisation, and between differently public forms of retrospective communication (Pentzold *et al.* 2016).

At the same time, the obsolete distinction between communicative and cultural memory demonstrates how closely the categoric pairs were tied to given media (Neiger *et al.* 2011). This holds true for other similar dichotomies, such as the ones between internalised corporeal memory and externalised media memory or private and public memories.

Yet whereas mnemonic concepts from the beginning of the 20th century were closely linked to the establishment of mass media, such as the press, cinema, radio, and television, the rise of the internet and services emanating from it, as well as the ubiquitous use of mobile media, has required a reorientation. In that sense, Hoskins (2018, 85–86) explains: ‘Collective memory . . . needs upgrading in light of the digital’s ushering in of much more complex dialogic modes of communication undermining previous configurations of individual-group-societal relations, and the forging of new flexible community types’.

Whereas memory collectives used to be formed along the lines of a common orientation towards media events, which were transported and produced by mass media, these synchronous collective experiences are vanishing. In media terms, they are being complemented by automated, algorithmically controlled mechanisms for recording, evaluating, curating, moderating, and personalising information and messages in ‘multimodal memory practices’ (Burkey 2020, 185). For the retrospective repertoire, this change means that the roles of producers and recipients of mnemonic communication are being modified. Their experiences with and participation in collective memory are no longer organised through the active production of content and passively imagined spectatorship but along unequal possibilities of participation and diverse memory practices in the networked evocation of the past (Garde-Hansen *et al.* 2009; Lohmeier and Pentzold 2014; Neiger 2020; Prey and Smit 2018).

To make this shift explicit, Hoskins (2018, 86) has spoken of the ‘memory of the multitude’, which is characterised by technological and social connectivity but not by traditional forms of collectivity. Elsewhere, he (2011, 272) explains what this means: ‘Memory is not in this way a product of individual or collective remembrances but is instead generated through the flux of contacts between people and digital technologies and media’. This reconfiguration of communicative and thus also of mnemonic references and types of participation is not to be equated with the dissolution of collectively connecting and binding memories. Rather, the traditional institutions and actors that have controlled a collective’s coming to terms with the past have been supplemented and reshaped by new ones, prominently in the guise of platforms as well as transnationally emerging, only loosely organised ad-hoc movements (Kaun 2016; Merrill *et al.* 2020; Smit *et al.* 2018). The services and applications they employ also aggregate and channel representations and reports; however, they follow different criteria oriented towards measurable attention and quantifiable engagement and do not obey the agendas of mass media and legacy institutions as the traditional arbiters of collective memory.

The basis for this transformation is the archival function of digital networked communication media. Today’s Big Five (Alphabet-Google, Meta-Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft) and their Chinese counterparts Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu, and JD.com provide a comprehensive infrastructure through which many communications and transactions take place. Yet their mnemonic potential lies in the permanent recording, accumulation, and perpetual evaluation and reorganisation of data (Annabell 2022; Corry 2023; Kang *et al.* 2023; Kidd and McAvoy 2023). Invoking a distinction made by Garde-Hansen (2011, 72), we can say that digital media first create archives of past activities. As archival instruments and vast commercial repositories, they occupy a powerful position in processing and mediating socially relevant memory. Second, digital media are self-archiving. As a ‘system that is permanently archiving presence’ (Ernst 2018, 144), they are not merely conductors, since all the data they capture are also stored, recombined, and transmitted in dynamically adapted arrangements. Finally, digital media are creative archives, or ‘rogue archives’, as De Kosnick (2016) calls them; they allow users to engage with the media evidence of their past or materials of recorded events made available to them, and this affirmative or critical engagement can range from reproductive repetition to

creative redesign. That includes, for example, Facebook Memories features such as ‘On this day’ or the Timehop app, which retrospectively pulls entries and material from other platforms and services on a given calendar day and invites users to revisit these memories and again make them part of their communication (Hoskins 2016).

The permanent availability and reactivity of data traces increase their mnemonic potential. Sure, not all postings and comments, images, or videos are stored and shared with explicit mnemonic intent. However, they are constantly available for memory work and are also placed in retrospective contexts by platform features that relate personal and social remembering to each other (Holloway and Green 2017). ‘Products of memory . . . are rarely the result of a simple desire to produce a mnemonic aid or capture a moment for future recall’, van Dijck (2007, 7) explains; she continues: ‘Instead, we may discern different intentions in the creation of memory products: we can take a picture just for the sake of photographing or to later share the photographed moment with friends’. On a similar note, Burkey (2020) highlights the mnemonic potential of shared content, which might prompt, accidentally or not, recollections and further memory work.

In this context, the boundaries between functional and storage memory ultimately become blurred, because reciprocal processes of archiving and updating take place dynamically and have become an almost inevitable aspect of communication. Modes of communicative remembering and cultural memory deemed separated from one another by temporal, material, and sociostructural conditions have been superseded by datafied memory practices. Databases are not archives in which information is immediately visible or available. Their relevance, presence, and presentation instead hinge on the interlocking selection, filtering, and evaluation by automated operations and user choice (Jacobsen and Beer 2021; Makhortykh 2021). Because references to things past are not only intentional and planned but also arise randomly and in unforeseen ways, Schwarz (2014, 7) speaks of ‘neighbourly relations’ of sharing potentially memorable content, by means of which users will encounter the past based on data that feed into communication. Similarly, Hoskins (2018, 92) has pointed to the ‘accumulative digital potential to return (and transform) past personal, semi-public and public relations through the unforeseeable re-activation of latent and semi-latent connections of shadow archives’. This does not necessarily just include reactions to happy memories – algorithmically determined relevance can also confront users with painful recollections (Humphreys 2018).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have revisited the positioning of communicative remembering in conceptualisations dealing with the articulation of memory. Scrutinising theoretical approaches in social memory studies, we have questioned the binary distinction between cultural and communicative modes of memory making. Especially when we include recent technological innovation and everyday mnemonic practices, we find that the intuitive distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory as originally outlined by Jan and Aleida Assmann no longer holds. Indeed, the mnemonic dichotomy between communicative memory and cultural memory that undergirds other binary distinctions, like vernacular and official memory (Bodnar 1992), lived and distant memory (Hirst and Manier 2002), or fluid and crystallised memory (Pentzold 2009), is conceptually problematic and empirically hard to pin down. Rather than denoting states of what memory is, they at best serve as analytical sensibilities that direct our view towards the varying ways, media and social constellations people employ to engage in memory making.

Instead, building on Erll’s understanding of *modi memorandi*, we proposed to conceptualise memories as part of a mnemonic repertoire for evoking the past in two different registers, one referring to a distant past of cultural commemoration and canonisation and

one to the recent past of social and biographical sensemaking. The articulation of specific memorial incidences is interconnected to different temporal horizons and the type of media available at a given moment. Digitally networked environments bring their inherent logic, including algorithmic sorting, to the practical articulation of memory. Although questions of the power and agency needed to actively shape mnemonic articulations are certainly relevant, it is the inner workings of the current media that configure the practical possibilities of expressive memory work. This means that it becomes difficult to determine the characteristics of communicative remembering once and for all, as it is an ever-changing socio-material practice that evolves with the available media.

Now, the ongoing formation of expressive memory work is going in different directions. One is the more-than-human dimension of today's communicative remembering. In the past, the classic binary construction emphasised the material side of cultural memory. This is predicated on the durability and recognition of media carriers, which afford certain kinds of records and acts of recollection, be they collective or individual. In contrast, communicative memory was believed to not require any material objects except its human carriers, who are in conversation. We found that these strict separations were no longer plausible when considering the multifarious semiotic ways of expression available in computer-mediated communication. This has made us aware of the contribution of non-human agents to memory work.

For one, there are platforms and apps that prefigure people's ability to recollect things past. They reposit digital keepsakes, be them images, music, or texts, and they provide forums for reminiscence and commemoration. What is more, next to human users, other communicative agents like virtual personas, 'thanabots', and voice assistants are taking on an increasingly important role in shaping communicative remembering (Henrickson 2023; Kansteiner 2022; Sisto and Mclellan-Broussard 2020). Their power is grounded on the exploitation of large troves of data, which in itself renders them inherently past bound. Together with other AI-driven creative software, such as image generators, they are likely to alter our understanding and practice of collective remembering once again.

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