

EDITORIAL

Communicating memory matters: Introduction to the collection

Christine Lohmeier¹  and Christian Pentzold² 

¹Department for Communication, Paris Lodron University Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria and

²Department for Communication and Media Studies, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

Corresponding author: Christine Lohmeier; Email: christine.lohmeier@plus.ac.at

Memory is a communicative affair. It is inherently intertwined with communication, representing a complex interplay that has evolved throughout history. An expanding array of symbols and communication genres has played a pivotal role in influencing the ways in which we remember and forget the past. The significance of memory truly comes to the forefront when it is communicated: individuals establish connections with a collective past, revisit personal reminiscences, and resurrect bygone moments. Concurrently, the act of communication has the power not only to enhance and revive memories but also to impair, inhibit, or even prevent them. Communication serves as the primary mode through which the past is brought to life in the present, thereby rendering it meaningful and relevant for the future.

The special collection on *Communicating Memory Matters in Networked Environments* aims to interrogate current forms of communicative memory making. It starts from the idea that while communication is at the heart of commemorative processes, it has recently been sidelined by a focus on (media) technologies. These rapidly changing material environments attracted much scholarly attention around questions of living digital archives (Cardoni *et al.* 2022), virtual memory places (Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2021; Reading *et al.* 2021), and media archaeology (Parikka 2012). While it is without question that these studies form an essential part in the furthering of our understanding, the actual communicative exchanges that happen on the cognitive level, in the often machine-mediated interactions between people, and the social realm at-large have received considerably less interest.

A primary objective of this special collection is to bring together insights into the intricate interplays between media technologies and the processes of remembering by understanding not only the ways in which media technologies mould the practices of memory and remembering but also the strategic utilisation of media as a fundamental tool for interaction and sensemaking concerning the past, present, and future. Furthermore, while we see the number of actors engaged in memory-making increase (Schwarzenegger and Lohmeier 2020), we can also observe exclusion on a micro, meso, and macro level, as well as the fragmentation of memory collectives. The call for papers for this special collection was based upon three propositions:

(1) The media, with its diverse modes of interaction and facilitation of sensemaking, profoundly moulds the manners in which individuals establish connections with a shared historical narrative, archive personal recollections, and revisit epochs long gone. Consequently, each successive evolution in information and communication technology

heralds transformations in mnemonic culture, dictating the contours of remembrance, influencing the utilisation of the past, and determining which facets of history are seamlessly transmitted into the future. A salient aspect of this evolutionary trajectory is the occasional rendering of the past into a more palatable and readily accessible form.

An example of this phenomenon is the commemoration of Sophie Scholl (1921–1943), a young woman who resisted the aggression of the Nazis as a member of the White Rose group. To commemorate Sophie Scholl's 100th birthday, the Südwestrundfunk (SWR) and the Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) collaborated to produce audio-visual content for the Instagram account @ichbinsophiescholl. The initiative has provoked substantial public criticism and scholarly critique (Thiele and Thomas 2023). Another example of this is *Eva Stories*, an Instagram account telling the story of a Holocaust victim (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022).

Notwithstanding the outcry around @ichbinsophiescholl, the SWR and the BR argued that even though there are numerous books, documentaries, films, and online sites dedicated to the memory of Sophie Scholl, their Instagram initiative had the potential to engage younger audiences by leveraging the user profile of the platform. The pattern can be found in the statements issued by the makers of *Eva Stories*. Despite the contentious reception, these projects and others may be construed as indicative of a current inclination towards creativity and playfulness in the (re-)presentation of the past, something for instance also showing up in Holocaust-related #POVchallenges on TikTok (Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022). This leads to our second proposition.

(2) People shape the ways media are employed as a form of interaction and sensemaking of the past, present, and future. While acknowledging the affordances characteristic of networked environments, individuals exhibit a proclivity for leveraging platforms in inventive, occasionally unforeseen, and indeed intriguing manners. To delve further into the illustration of commemorating historical figures on Instagram, the work of Lohmeier *et al.* (2020) unpacks a spectrum of actors utilising the platform for diverse purposes: museums utilise Instagram to showcase their exhibitions; others engage in a commentary on contemporary political phenomena by assuming the persona of a deceased politician. Additionally, creators employ Instagram to draw attention to the artistic legacy (eg books and music) of historical figures.

Beyond human agents instrumentalising media for their idiosyncratic ends, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly exploited for memory work. The re-presencing of deceased living beings, as elucidated by Kopelman and Frosh (2023) in their recent exploration of the *Deep Nostalgia* venture, can be profoundly evocative. *Deep Nostalgia* facilitates the animation of photographs featuring past relatives, a phenomenon that the authors identify as an example of the 'algorithmic as if' – 'a computational apparatus designed to envision and incarnate one's heart's desire – a desire that is inherently related to human life, but which cannot happen in real life' (Kopelman and Frosh 2023, 2). Users of *Deep Nostalgia* report elation upon witnessing animated depictions of their departed relatives smiling and winking 'at them', with some even moved to tears. Numerous endeavours experiment with such AI resurrections like the re-staging of singers and actors like John Lennon or Whitney Houston. There are plenty of socio-political scenarios too where the effigies and voices of victims of crimes or fallen soldiers are animated so as to present cautionary, explanatory, and pedagogical narratives, thereby providing valuable insights and warnings for the living (Divon and Pentzold 2023). Simultaneously, instances abound where users feel a sense of disquiet, shock, and profound ambivalence regarding the act of remembering within the realms of algorithmic cultures (Gyu-lee 2020). These diverse encounters prompt inquiries into issues of control, transparency, and the perceived unpredictability inherent in the dynamic interplay with non-human agents. This brings us to our third proposition for this special collection.

(3) Our third proposition is that memory making within and through these technologies means the inclusion of some voices and views, and the exclusion of others, while it also raises issues around transparency, reliability, and control. Aligned with the long-standing segmentation of audiences, some have posited that memory has thus undergone a similar fragmentation that intertwines with the formation of new alliances and mnemonic collectives (Lagerkvist 2014; Liebermann 2021; Reading 2020; Smit 2020), and some have pointed to memory's precarity in the face of gargantuan archives of digital traces (Hoskins and Halstead 2021). Fragmentation is particularly conspicuous in networked environments, where users are often separated by age and their proficiency in accessing platforms. In addition, the networked environments we see now are conducive for groups of friends, social movements, and collectives with similar interests. They are not necessarily accommodating traditional memory collectives such as families. And while there is a wider array of actors involved in comparison to traditional 'memory agents' (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014, 12), people engaging passively far outnumber creators, commentators, and contributors of all sorts.

Furthermore, the characteristics of algorithmic culture, while enhancing the experience for some users on platforms, introduce an element of opacity. This lack of transparency leaves users with a sense of being out of control and resigning (Draper and Turow 2019). Alterations in terms of use can render a seemingly stable and dependable platform suddenly unreliable, with content becoming ephemeral and potentially challenging to locate. The 'management of visibilities' (Flyverbom 2019, 12) is another indicator for the unreliability as well as for processes of inclusion and exclusion taking place in these dynamic environments.

Reconsidering how communicative remembering has changed and how it is done today will ultimately allow us to scrutinise some standard distinctions on which the field is built. Hence, dichotomies such as communicative memory versus cultural memory, personal versus family versus public memory, and cognitive memory versus social memory seem in need of re-thinking and renewal when considered from the point of digitally networked communication. With its focus on the active side of remembrance, the special collection aims at a tenet of memory studies, yet it promises to also reach out to connate disciplines which share this interest, like cognitive science and psychology, science and technology studies, communication, political science, anthropology, and sociology.

Acknowledgement. We would like to thank the German Research Foundation for its support of the Memory and Media Research Network (<https://memoryandmedia.net>). The funding facilitated the meetings, conferences, and further research activities by members of the network from 2017 and 2022. We are grateful to Andrew Hoskins and Amanda J. Barnier for their support of this special collection, and to Rachel Hendrick for the excellent assistance throughout the process. A heartfelt thank you to the anonymous reviewers who engaged with the diverse papers and arguments brought forward in this collection.

Funding statement. This study is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Project-ID 389196641 – AOBj (641868)

References

- Cardoni G, Fabbri F and Iannucci A (2022) The digital living archive and the construction of a participatory cultural memory in the DARE-UIA project (digital environment for collaborative alliances to regenerate urban ecosystems in middle-sized cities). *Bibliothecae.It* 11(2), 350–380. doi:10.6092/issn.2283-9364/16278
- Divon T and Ebbrecht-Hartmann T (2022) Performing death and trauma? Participatory mem(e)ory and the Holocaust in TikTok #POVchallenges. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* 11(1), 1–5. doi:10.5210/spir.v2022i0.12995
- Divon T and Pentzold C (2023) *Virtually Alive. The Spectacle of AI Resurrection in a Post-Mortem Society*. Denmark: Talk in the Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen.

- Draper NA and Turow J** (2019) The corporate cultivation of digital resignation. *New Media & Society* 21(8), 1824–1839. doi:10.1177/1461444819833331
- Ebbrecht-Hartmann T** (2021) Commemorating from a distance: the digital transformation of Holocaust memory in times of COVID-19. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(6), 1095–1112. doi:10.1177/0163443720983276
- Flyverbom M** (2019) *The Digital Prism: Transparency and Managed Visibilities in a Datafied World*. Cambridge: CUP. doi:10.1017/9781316442692.
- Gyu-lee L** (2020) “Meeting You” Creator on his Controversial Show: “I Hope it Opens up Dialogue” [VIDEO]. *TheKoreaTimes*, 10 April 2020.
- Henig L and Ebbrecht-Hartmann T** (2022) Witnessing *eva stories*: media witnessing and self-inscription in social media memory. *New Media & Society* 24(1), 202–226. doi:10.1177/1461444820963805
- Hoskins A and Halstead H** (2021) The new grey of memory: Andrew Hoskins in conversation with Huw Halstead. *Memory Studies* 14(3), 675–685. doi:10.1177/17506980211010936
- Kopelman S and Frosh P** (2023) The “algorithmic as if”: computational resurrection and the animation of the dead in Deep Nostalgia. *New Media & Society* 0(0), 1–21. doi:10.1177/14614448231210268
- Lagerkvist A** (2014) A quest for *communitas*: rethinking mediated memory existentially. *Nordicom Review* 35(s1), 205–218. doi:10.2478/nor-2014-0113
- Liebermann Y** (2021) Born digital: The Black Lives Matter movement and memory after the digital turn. *Memory Studies* 14(4), 713–732. doi:10.1177/1750698020959799
- Lohmeier C, Schwarzenegger C and Schreiber M** (2020) Instamemories: geschichte in digitalen medien als lebendige Erinnerungskultur jenseits formaler Bildungskontexte [Instamemories: history in digital media as a living culture of remembrance beyond formal educational contexts]. *MerzWissenschaft* 6(64), 48–61.
- Parikka J** (2012) *What is Media Archaeology?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Reading A** (2020) Afterword/Afterweb: The antisocial memory assemblage. In Merrill S, Keightley E and Daphi P (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media: Mobilising Mediated Remembrance*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 275–288.
- Reading A, Bjork J, Hanlon J and Jakeman N** (2021) The labour of place: memory and extended reality (XR) in migration museums. *Memory Studies* 14(3), 606–621. doi:10.1177/17506980211010697
- Schwarzenegger C and Lohmeier C** (2020) Reimagining memory. Digital media and the new polyphony of memory. In Filimowicz M and Tzankova V (eds), *Reimagining Communication: Experience*. New York, NY: Routledge, 132–146.
- Smit R** (2020) Connective memory work on justice for Mike Brown. In Merrill S, Keightley E and Daphi P (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media: Mobilising Mediated Remembrance*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 85–108. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-32827-6_4.
- Thiele M and Thomas T** (2023) Really?! Sophie Scholl on Instagram: an analysis of the journalistic discourse. *Journalistik* 6(1), 6–31. doi:10.1453/2569-152X-23021-11525-en
- Zelizer B and Tenenboim-Weinblatt K** (2014) Journalism’s memory work. In Zelizer B and Tenenboim-Weinblatt K (eds), *Journalism and Memory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1–14. doi:10.1057/9781137263940_1.

Cite this article: Lohmeier C, Pentzold C (2023). Communicating memory matters: Introduction to the collection. *Memory, Mind & Media* 2, e8, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2023.11>