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# Handbuch Soziale Praktiken und Digitale Alltagswelten

mit 12 Abbildungen und 3 Tabellen

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# Collective Memory and Digital Practices of Remembrance

Dilek Özhan Koçak

## Contents

1	Introduction .....	56
2	Memory, History and Media .....	57
3	Spaces of Memory .....	58
4	Archive .....	60
5	Permanence of Digitalized Memories .....	62
6	Conclusion .....	63
	References .....	64

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## Abstract

As digital media lead to a transformation of the experience of time and space, they evoke new questions for the field of both personal and collective memory and history. While the bonds that held groups together in pre-modern societies once guaranteed the sustainability of social memory, patterns of common belonging have changed in today's computerized world. This chapter argues that digital communication technologies have given rise to new unique forms of collectivity through the opportunities they afford for bringing people together around the globe. Furthermore, digital media provide emplacement for collective and global memory. The chapter also raises the issue of whether digital records have the potential to oppose official historiographies with grassroots counterhistory.

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## Keywords

Collective memory · Global memory · Digital media · Digital archive · Counterhistory

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## 1 Introduction

Transition from oral to written and then to electronic forms of cultural production brings about radical changes in our experience of time and space, and with that in individual as well as collective mnemonic practices (Hoskins 2004, p. 109). The collective past is increasingly becoming a subject of negotiation in various media (Hoskins 2001, p. 334; Garde-Hansen 2011, p. 1). The revolutionary influence of photography in the nineteenth century and television in the twentieth century is nowadays surpassed by the impact of digital media that play a pivotal role in cultural production and the constitution of social memory. As Lev Manovich argues, “new media is created on computers, distributed via computers, stored and achieved on computers,” and by this token, “we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer” (Manovich 2002, p. 46). Indeed, this seems to be the case. As far as the construction and maintenance of collective memory as “wide variety of mnemonic products and practices” (Olick 2008, p. 158) in the digital age are concerned, the consequences of technological advance are twofold. For one thing, the ICTs enable creation, manipulation, storage and distribution of information on an historically unprecedented scale, transforming memory practices into “global narrative witnessing” (Garde-Hansen et al. 2009, p. 132). For another thing, they also make for a drastic increase in social interaction (Kitchin and Dodge 2001, p. ix) and therefore facilitate the rise of novel forms of collectivity and new collective identity projects no longer exclusively predicated on such traditional factors of common belonging as language, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or territoriality. As Andrew Hoskins postulates, “in late modernity, the collective is forged, or at least *mediated*, at a global level, if not a global ‘community’” (Hoskins 2001, p. 334). Since such “mediated collectives” often originate in a transnational rally for a common humanitarian purpose and their members’ sense of community bears on shared memory of the event or events that triggered it, the solidification and maintenance of their group identity can only be vouchsafed by the lasting preservation and accessibility of the respective records as well as the continuous flow and exchange of information, both within and without the borders of a local, or national, community. Modern communication technologies and digital media play here a central role inasmuch as they enable social groups to shape, and partake in, the collective mnemonic practices, develop and maintain bonds of common belonging, and position themselves in the transnational networked space while largely evading the surveillance by, and effectively putting up resistance to, local and/or governmental authorities that traditionally held control over the maintenance and accessibility of historical knowledge.

Although the chapter is primarily concerned with the relation between memory and history, as well as the politics of digital archiving, it shall also touch on the central aspects of “discrimination between forgetting and remembering” (Luhmann 2000, p. 37), or, else, “retention and loss” research paradigm (Schwartz 1991, p. 302) that informs much of the contemporary memory studies and lies at the core of the ongoing “digital amnesia debate” (for an overview see Donk 2009, pp. 7–8).

## 2 Memory, History and Media

“Memories are never formless” (Wagner-Pacifici 1996, p. 302), nor are they once-for-all fixed fragments of information stored in people’s brain and available for retrieval at any time. Rather, they are the result of complex revision and (re-) construction that take place each time we recall something (Bal et al. 1999, p. vii; Rose 1992) and rely on various media that provide “frameworks for shaping both experience and memory” (Erll and Rigney 2009, p. 1). In oral and later, writing cultures, collective memory was created, maintained, and passed on to new generations through “texts, icons, dances, rituals and performances of various kinds” (Assmann 2008, p. 117; see also Halbwachs 1992, p. 22). Given the dependence of both individual and collective memory practices on various media, the evolution of the role and form of memory is influenced by technology in a significant way: “[w]e inscribe experiences in the present to facilitate future recall; such material inscriptions are always filtered through discursive conventions, social and cultural practices, and technological tools” (van Dijck 2004, p. 261; see also Mitztal 2003, p. 22; Mayer-Schönberger 2009; Van House and Churchill 2008).

Today, “remembering is a process that [...] is increasingly media-afflicted” (Hoskins 2004, p. 110; see also Lessard 2009, p. 127). Andrew Hoskins has coined the term “new memory” in order to emphasize the novel characteristic of mnemonic culture in the digital age: namely, our ever more mediated and thus “‘manufactured’ rather than remembered” connection to the past (Hoskins 2001, p. 336). While the scholar is primarily concerned with the “top-down” process of production of historical knowledge and social memory in and through media of mass communication, other researchers concentrate on its “bottom-up” corollary, namely, the individual use of digital technologies as personal memory tools (Garde-Hansen 2011; Garde-Hansen et al. 2009; van Dijck 2004, 2006, 2007).

These two foci in the contemporary memory and media studies inform, among other, the ongoing multifaceted discussion on the relationship between memory and history that in its turn raises the fundamental issues of authority, authenticity, truth, power, and identity. Raphael Samuel summarizes its intricacies in a succinct statement: “Memory-keeping is a function increasingly assigned to the electronic media, while a new awareness of the artifice of representation casts a cloud of suspicion over the documentation of the past.” (Samuel 1994, p. 25). The advocates of a traditionalist view on collective memory and history decry the former’s necessarily limited and partial, “in crucial senses ahistorical, even anti-historical” character that altogether devoids past events of their complexity (Novick 1999, pp. 3–4; see also Özhan Koçak and Koçak 2014, and Klein 2000 for the concept of memory in historical discourse). Nowadays, the increasing mediatization of collective mnemonic practices that previously served as a fundament for the development of historical consciousness results in the “collapse of memory” (Hoskins 2004) and is accompanied by its growing commodification in a society fearing “collective amnesia” (Le Goff 1992, p. 95; see also Sturken 2007). As Hoskins argues, “[t]he space of and for history appears to be shrinking. [...] [T]he global media saturate new times and places that quickly collapse the memory of

the once unforgettable.” (Hoskins 2004, p. 121). The scholar traces this phenomenon back to the technologically radicalized transformation of time that enables a “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Brose 2002, cit. in Hoskins 2004, p. 110) and destroys the historicity of the (re)presented events by tampering with their chronological dimension.

While agreeing that the new media are dramatically altering the ways we view, recollect, and connect to, our personal and collective past, other scholars contend that although these compel “an end to history and the beginning of memory” (Garde-Hansen 2011, p. 3; see also Garde-Hansen et al. 2009, p. 5), it is to be viewed on the whole as a progressive and liberatory development (Hoskins 2009, p. 29).

Tapping into the ongoing debate, Astrid Erll outlines two different collective memory concepts: namely, the “backward-looking,” nostalgia-ridden and socially unproductive memory as contrasted with the “forward-looking” memory that is socially progressive and sustainable. This differentiation relies on two equally prominent approaches to memory studies and practices of remembering. Whereas the backward-looking stance is chiefly concerned with epistemology of historical knowledge, the forward-looking approach to memory firmly foregrounds its ethical aspects (Erll 2016, pp. x–xi).

Indeed, while “collective memory is both more mobile and mutable than history” (Zelizer 1995, p. 216), its malleability, “continually emergent state” (Hoskins 2009, p. 94), and strong reliance on popular media (Zelizer 1995, p. 216) also enable it to reframe old narratives and forge new bonds of collective belonging in the pursuit of common interests. Arjun Appadurai comments on the decisive change in the way social groups cohere brought about by digital media: “Where natural social collectivities build connectivities out of memory, [...] virtual collectivities build memories out of connectivity” (Appadurai 2003, p. 17), thus transcending the local and tapping into the transnational, and global, space.

### 3 Spaces of Memory

Space plays a central role in the (re)production and maintenance of social memory predicated on its continuous (re)enactment (Assmann 2011). The major transformation of space began in the 1990s with the emergence of “virtual reality” engendered by new computer technologies. Already by the early 2000s, urban landscapes were inundated with electronic and virtual information and devices (Manovich 2003, pp. 75–76), and the boundaries between the analog and the digital life-worlds are growing ever more blurred. A mere “add-on” to the physical space at the onset, cyberspace soon became both a natural habitat and a creative lab for the adept “netizens” (Hauben and Hauben 1997) engaged in the co-construction and expansion of Web 2.0. Rampant connectivity and ubiquitous computing, new communication paradigms predicated on technologically induced novel temporalities and space ontologies, as well as the emergence of the generation of tech-savvy

“producers” (Bruns 2008),<sup>1</sup> – all these developments account for the sweeping transformation of mnemoscapes, their growing democratization and new transnational collectivities brought into being by, and partaking in, new memory practices in the mediated “augmented space” (Manovich 2003).

Since May 27th, 1995, the so-called Saturday Mothers conduct a sit-in protest every Saturday at Galatasaray Square.<sup>2</sup> This group consists of people, mainly women, whose relatives have disappeared in government custody or were murdered under unsolved circumstances. They may not know each other or have anything else in common. Their sense of collectivity is based on their personal losses, grief and suffered injustice, which they share with many others worldwide. While the Galatasaray Square is the physical place of their weekly gathering that is by necessity limited in terms of time and space, the online platform *Justice Memory Center* (*Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Çalışmaları Merkezi*) on which Saturday Mothers interact provides them with continuous transnational visibility and gives permanence to their subjective records. Established in November 2011 by a group of lawyers, journalists, and political activists with the aim to strengthen collective memory of human rights violations and thereby contribute to peace and democracy,<sup>3</sup> the *Justice Memory Center* connects people from Turkey with their “relatives in suffering”<sup>4</sup> worldwide. It keeps, among other, a database of all people who forcibly disappeared, thus promoting public awareness of the issue and not allowing the matter to be forgotten in the country where some 200–500 citizens went lost yearly between 1990 and 1995.<sup>5</sup> Communication and interaction between the Saturday Mothers community members also takes place in the group @saturdaymothers on Twitter; furthermore, there is an eponymous group on Facebook as well as posts on the upcoming sit-ins hosted by other groups belonging, for instance, to the international Kurdish diaspora. While the actual longevity of tweets and Facebook posts is a far cry from that of the online publications issued and digital multimedia archives kept by the *Justice Memory Center*, they represent further effective means of building interpersonal rapport feeding in the shared memory of the collective.

Beside their function as vehicles and spaces of communication between the members of translocal communities, multimedia file repositories and places of inscription of subjective narratives into social history, internet platforms also play an increasingly important role as commemoration sites completing and/or replacing

<sup>1</sup>This term was conceived of as an “update version” of the older portmanteau word “prosumer” coined in 1980 by Alvin Toffler and describes simultaneous producers and users of digital media content.

<sup>2</sup><http://bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/139114-susmak-kaybedenleri-cesaretlendirir-susmayacagiz> and <http://bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/139289-savasa-degil-barisa-yatirim-yapin>.

<sup>3</sup><http://hakikatadalethafiza.org>, <http://hakikatadalethafiza.org/tag/cumartesi-anneleri>.

<sup>4</sup>An expression used by Raket Dink, the widow of the journalist and chief editor of the newspaper *Ağos Hrant Dink*, in a public statement after the murder of her husband by nationalist forces on January 19, 2007.

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.bianet.org/bianet/medya/166379-carpitilmis-hafizaya-alternatif-bir-hafiza-icin?bia\\_source=facebook&utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=facebook](http://www.bianet.org/bianet/medya/166379-carpitilmis-hafizaya-alternatif-bir-hafiza-icin?bia_source=facebook&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook). Accessed: October 30, 2016.

the traditional “places of memory” (Nora 1989) in physical space. Such is, for instance, the platform *toplumsal bellek platformu.org* that keeps record of politically motivated murder victims in Turkey, thereby collecting the stories told by their relatives and thus contributing to the lasting preservation of their memory. While the platform also provides information on forthcoming public commemorations of the death anniversaries, the visual design of its title page in sober, predominantly black and dark blue shades featuring a large group of people and a tree shooting upward amidst them points at its primary function as a memorial site. Since the link to the main page is embedded on the title page with animated graphics and appears only after several seconds, this delay in access furthermore conveys a feeling of transition to a (virtual) heterotopy (Foucault 1994). On the whole, the interface architecture of the site including the organization and sequencing of space as well as its evocative aesthetics capitalizes on the constitutive spatial logic of both lay places of memory and sacral heterotopies, appealing to a mindset not dissimilar to that of the physical memorial sites’ visitors.

#### 4 Archive

One further form of memory emplacement in digital space draws on the logic of an archive. For instance, *Anıt Sayacı* (The Monument Counter) is a virtual memorial dedicated to the Turkish women who lost their lives due to domestic violence. The website is dominated by a black-and-white counter showing in triple digits the number of victims in the current year, with their names listed below in small font and separated by vertical bars that in their totality resemble the front surface of an old file cabinet with nomenclature labels on individual drawers. When clicking on a name, a small pop-up window (a virtual “file drawer”) opens that contains keyword information on the murder victim, crime circumstances as well as a link to the respective report in the online press.

The archive imagery, on which the visual interface of the website capitalizes, raises a broad array of ontological, epistemological, and ethical issues. Not least inspired by the works of Foucault (1979) and Derrida (1995), the concept of the archive stands in the focus of a vivid contemporary discussion on the organization and politics of historical knowledge (Manoff 2004). In the opening lines of *Archive Fever*, Derrida draws attention to the twofold nature of an archive, whose semantic origin, *arkhe*, connotes at once the *commencement* – the physical, historical, or ontological principle, and the *commandment* – the nomological principle of law and order (Derrida 1995, p. 9). As Derrida argues, the power of archons, the Ancient Greek officials and guardians of the state archives, lay not only in their authority over the material records in their custody, but also – and perhaps even more so – in their exclusive right to organize separate signs in a totalizing system where the meaning of each item hinged on “the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida 1995, p. 10).

The access to and control over information, and with that the monopoly over the production and distribution of knowledge have always been closely related to the issue of power (Lyotard 1984). As Derrida states, “[t]here is no political power without

control of the archive, if not of memory,” and for that reason, “[e]ffective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.” (Derrida 1995, p. 11). While “[w]ith the totalitarian archive, the archivist and the historian are essentially the same person, [. . .] with the liberal kind of archive there is always some other who can come along to re-interpret things” (Osborne 1999, p. 57). New media technologies are often celebrated as the “key players in [the] process of freeing information and knowledge” (Garde-Hansen 2011, p. 70) insofar as they enable the creation of and access to digital archives on a more democratic footing and global scale. While personal and collective memories produced with the help of, stored and archived in, and distributed via electronic media and networks might still be shaped and ordered by the data architecture and politics of the major economic players such as Facebook that assume the archontic power of consignment in Derrida’s terms (Garde-Hansen 2009; see also Mosco 2004), they are no longer subject to an exclusive control by local governmental authorities (Appadurai 2003), and the user-generated content of online archives often effectively contests the sanctioned accounts with an alternative multifocal version of the events (Grossmann 2006, pp. 22–23).

With its terse structure and design, the Monument Counter abstains from any interpretation of the facts it collects and stores. Instead, it encapsulates them in the form of counter digits while relegating the ultimate making of meaning to the visitor. By merely providing the external links to the press reports within the virtual card files, it also problematizes the tacit complicity between power, media and collective memory. While daily mass media duly reported on the occurrences of domestic violence, those were framed as individual cases whose public visibility and memory had therefore a very short lifespan. In this regard, the Monument Counter positions itself not as an authoritative agent of history but, rather, as a guardian of social memory. As Thomas Osborne puts it, the “principle of mundanity” in the archival reason of social sciences (and, we should add, in the efforts of many activist platforms and online archives) “is not just a question of a romantic focus upon the powerless. What is at stake here, in fact, is a distinctive way of making visible the question of power itself.” (Osborne 1999, p. 59). As Foucault remarks in his *The Life of Infamous Men*, an essay on the archive and the relationship between authority and historical records, “all these lives which were destined to pass beneath all discourse and disappear without ever being spoken, have only been able to leave behind traces – brief, incisive, and often enigmatic – at the point of their instantaneous contact with power” (Foucault 1979, pp. 79–80), and the Monument Counter not least crucially exposes issues related to the politics of collective remembrance. In doing so, it also epitomizes the complex relationship between “thin” and “thick” memory in a (digital) archive. The distinction between the two is postulated by Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin as follows:

[. . .] thin memory is factual and easily formalised within a media [sic!] as textual or numeric records, sound, image, etc.; it is *capta* – selected facts captured from the sum of all material data. Thick memory is embedded, emotional, context rich, immaterial [. . .]. Thick memories are much more than various strands of thin memory tied together, they have emotional and contextual depth that is more than the sum of its parts. (Dodge and Kitchin 2007, p. 438, italics added).

The Monument Counter derives much of its denunciatory impact from the dual role assumed by its constitutive elements: the statistics, the virtual files, and the hyperlinked press reports that function here as referential signs and contexts of signification at once. As a three-tiered crystallization of “thin memory,” with the digits rendering the sum total of the name entries and the latter pointing at the perfunctory newspaper articles, the structure continuously implodes into the individual stories of murder victims, situating these in the chasm between subjective experience of violence and objectified numerical records, and the ensuing relentless tension condenses “thin memories,” providing them with social situatedness and historical depth.

## 5 Permanence of Digitalized Memories

Although memory is a tool protecting the individual experience of ordinary people against absorption by grand historical narratives, history has always had the edge over memory in terms of permanence. Nations inscribe and promote their identity in official historiography, and indeed, nation-states traditionally used history as a powerful instrument of self-legitimation. Conveyed through the means of common language and perpetuated in images of a glorious collective past, such histories are often complicitous with discourses of power reinforcing and maintaining political influence. For that reason, official historiography is subject to continuous control and surveillance by the authority that thereby secures its preservation and continuity. Memory is, on the contrary, steadily reorganized and therefore subject to a “remembering-forgetting dialectic” (Nora and Kaiser 1998, pp. 13–14). The question is, therefore, whether and how memory can be made permanent despite the fact that remembering is inextricably connected with forgetting.

The technological advance has brought about a “[monumental] shift from forgetting to remembering” (Mayer-Schönberger 2009, p. 14), with the latter taking place nowadays by default. While digital records stored and distributed simultaneously and multilocally in cyberspace appear to be in many regards more sustainable than the material data, they are not infallible either. In their discussion of the *Gone Dark Project*, a research study dedicated to the disappearance of websites and online archives containing important scientific, political or social information resources, Francine Barone et al. indicate six main reasons thereof including neglect, technological failure, costs of site maintenance, natural calamities, governmental prosecution, as well as “web wars” between major web corporations resulting in the abandonment or absorption of popular services by the “winners” (Barone et al. 2015; see also Donk 2009). Especially in the case of human rights activist sites, financial and political issues become major factors of risk for their lasting preservation. At the same time, voices have also been raised in the current research that propose to regard digital forgetting as a natural condition: “not a weakness or a fallibility, but [...] an emancipatory process” saving humans from the burden of history (Dodge and Kitchin 2007, p. 441; see also Mayer-Schönberger 2009).

The other problem connected to digital memories is the overabundance of information and unordered structure of web contents. Cyberspace has become a place where any form of documentation is possible (Benedikt 2007, pp. 19–20). Yet unless these archived documents are presented in a form of a narrative, protected and actively transmitted, they cannot become repositories and carriers of collective memory and are doomed to remain mere fragments of data. In this regard, the Internet and World Wide Web are often compared with the character of Ireneo Funes from Jorge Luis Borges's *Funes the Memorious*. Ireneo Funes is a man haunted by his inability to forget anything. His mind embraces recollections of every minute detail and yet his memories – “big data” – equal at the same time to a Big Nothing (Gould et al. 2000). In an absence of filtering and structuring mechanisms, information cannot get transformed into knowledge. At the same time, the question of authority over selection of the data to be kept and its ordering principles once again prominently raises the issue of power and control over social memory, which, as Viktor Mayer-Schönberger observes, “is especially important in a world with a continuing digital divide in which few collect information about many” (Mayer-Schönberger 2009, p. 204). Yet – and it is but one of many paradoxies of the digital age – electronic media of communication have also given rise to sousveillance cultures (Bakir 2010, pp. 156–157; see also Mann 2002; Mann et al. 2003), in which political activists and human rights defenders record scenes of power abuse and spread the collected footage globally,<sup>6</sup> so that it is predominantly the users themselves who watch over the contents of the digital archives on the principle of “soft security” (Rasmusson and Jansson 1996).

## 6 Conclusion

Cyberspace has indeed become a “treasure trove” of documents and data that might effectively oppose the oppressive state power by fostering and promoting counter-histories, microhistories, or “history from below”. At the same time, mere accumulation and storage of big data does not automatically lead to the empowerment of the socially underprivileged who are often additionally incapacitated by the effects of the digital divide. When the historian Peter Burke speaks of “information giants and knowledge dwarfs,” he is talking about a change in knowledge society.<sup>7</sup> As information flow intensifies, knowledge decreases, while effective transformation of information into knowledge remains a problem. Still, as Viktor Mayer-Schönberger remarks, “we are only at the dawn of big data” (Mayer-Schönberger 2013, p. 11), and the new techniques of dealing with it that in his view will forever transform “the

<sup>6</sup>For instance, the platform *bak.ma* (“Do not look”) documents the recent history of Turkey with images, sound recordings, and eyewitness accounts that critically contest, among other, the official rendering of the Gezi Park protests in June 2013, or the national media coverage of the Soma mining accident in May 2014.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr3aikx2DsI>. Accessed: October 9, 2016.

way we live and interact with the world” (Mayer-Schönberger 2013, pp. 6–7) are still to be developed.

However, new media have brought about a change in the ways in which social groups emerge, develop, and maintain their identity through mnemonic practices. Elaborating on the relationship between collective memory and new media, researchers often speak of global, or, else, “cosmopolitan memory” as “a memory that harbours a possibility of transcending ethnic and national boundaries” (Levy and Sznajder 2006, p. 4). Electronic communication media enable the emergence of cosmopolitan memory in the above sense inasmuch as they bring together people from different places and backgrounds in a fundamentally new form of collectivity and make them aware of the similarities of their life experience. By this token, the digital online archive also attains a formative power over social groups contributing to and rallying about these. As a “hyperstore” of subjective recollections continuously updated, expanded but also critically questioned by its users, it does not only contest official history with personal memories but also provides a platform for transnational practices of “multidirectional memory” – a “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing” (Rothberg 2009, p. 15). Social memory thus produced, maintained and made visible on the transnational level with the help of digital media technologies has the potential to challenge the authority-controlled “Big Histories” with “small histories” of ordinary people engaged in a common struggle for human rights and justice. The totalizing claims of official history on the collective past (Hobsbawm 2008) are increasingly questioned and undermined by the alternative narratives of collective memory as “countermemory”, or “counterhistory” (Foucault 2003, p. 66).

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