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Special Section: Digital Media-Social Memory

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Digital media - social memory: remembering in Digitally Networked Times

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Editorial introduction

Memory studies emerged as a constellation of research drawn from across the social sciences and humanities in the late 1990s and the turn of the millennium. While its consolidation as a field was most significantly marked by the launch of the journal *Memory Studies* in 2008, memory remains a concern across the range of its constituent disciplines.

Media, Culture and Society, quite early into the field, published a themed section on social memory in 2003. A decade on, it is to this same theme that this collection of articles returns. The treatment of social memory in 2003 conceptualised it as ‘beyond but not distinct from the individual; it is not necessarily divided by the private or public, or bounded by the nation state. Social memory is taken to include aspects of culture as well as social practices and structures’ (Reading 2003: 5). This understanding of memory, as produced in the interstitial space between individuals who remember and social groups, and being communicated in and across time by media technologies and cultural forms, has been accepted across memory studies scholarship. Nevertheless, the particular processes of mediation and cultural transmission involved in the articulation of social memory remain only partially accounted for. Rapid changes in digital technologies, the greater availability of historical materials online, and increasing digital connectivity across the world, have kept the processes that constitute mediated social memory in flux. This themed section seeks to explore some processes of social remembering that are constantly on the move by considering how it is that we remember in digitally networked times. How does social memory work through the use of digital media?

The articles in this special section explore these questions from a variety of perspectives. Anna Reading considers the material requirements for digital memory technologies and explores the political economies that structure and support contemporary practices of remembering. She interrogates some comfortable metaphors such as ‘the cloud’ and ‘server farms’, showing how access to our own pasts and the pasts of others is dependent on real, material conditions and their exploitation. The subsequent articles explore the specific digital remembering practices that are underpinned by this set of political and economic relations. Brenda Chan and her co-authors consider how web-based technology is used by both the state and the public to archive and share memories of the Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad railway

between Singapore and Malaysia. Stephanie Benzaquen also explores the ways in which digital technologies mediate a specific site of commemoration and the public remembering practices associated with it. She takes the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum as her case study. Rachel Hughes also addressed this case in our 2003 issue. Hughes attended to the specific ways in which private groups were involved in the preservation and publication of prisoner portrait photographs beyond the museum itself in galleries and archives across the world and considered how the movement of these images raised questions about the politics of curatorship and ownership. Benzaquen also deals with the mobility of images and museum-based experiences, but – in an indication of how technological change has reconfigured the questions asked - does so by attending to the vernacular processes of remembering in which they feature. This has been made possible by digital archiving and is enacted through processes of digital remediation. In the final article, Christine Lohmeier and Christian Pentzold explore how the Cuban-American diasporic community uses a combination of material heritage, face-to-face practices, and digital media in practices of remembering migrant experience and the country of origin.

By reading across the 2003 special section, and the articles contained in the present collection, a number of questions emerge about the nature of mediated memory, the practices that it involves, and the specific ways in which digital media have shaped, transformed or extended these practices. Immediately apparent is the continuing importance of traditional media and material culture in the articulation and performance of collective memory, both on and offline. Writing this editorial just as Nelson Mandela's life has been celebrated before his burial, the shaping of news coverage and commemorative practices across the globe by television, radio and the printed press is striking. So-called mainstream media are far from dead and their articulation with the world online is still evolving.

It is hardly surprising, then, that in the discussions of the Cambodian genocide both by Hughes and Benzaquen, the now venerable photographic image – so central to news and documentary - remains a central vehicle for encapsulating and constituting the past for present-day social remembering practices. The politics of such practices' content and curation are just as important in, and indeed indivisible from, the exploration of their digital remediation. In Lohmeier and Pentzold's discussion of Cuban-American social memory, the role of material culture as a trace of home as well as face-to-face practices of remembering are considered as part of a 'media manifold', or as an essential part of what might be described as an 'ecology of memory'.

So, looking ahead, we must still consider how we go about developing an analysis of social memory in a digital context that both adequately accounts for the persistence of traditional media texts and technologies and how these interact with more recent technologies and textual forms. This perspective challenges the view that there has been a wholesale transformation of remembering by digital media. Instead, turning this into a question forces us to consider not only the relations between change and continuity but also the implications of an unprecedented accumulation of media and cultural resources, and their potential for ways of making sense of our own and others' experience over time.

Reading across the two themed sections raises yet another significant question. What are the roles that might be played by broader social structures and institutions, including the state, the nation, political ideologies and economic systems, in shaping, limiting and enabling particular forms of social memory? Current writing on remembering in digital culture has been quick to recognise the ways in which new media technologies, especially the internet, have allowed for novel memory-making practices that transcend established boundaries of space, time and social experience. Formulations such as ‘global’ memory (Reading, 2012), cybernetic memory (Goodman and Parisi 2010) and networked memory (Hoskins 2009) have been articulated to try and grasp these changes. They lay emphasis on the connective capacity of digital remembering, and are used to explore how traditional bearers and constructors of memory - such as the state or the press - are being challenged as key definers of collective memory by emergent communicative constellations through which dominant memory narratives may be challenged and reworked. However, what is clear in a number of articles in our 2003 issue (for instance, Molly Andrew’s exploration of truth commissions) and remains central for each of the articles in this issue, is that while digital media allow new articulations of memory to emerge and provide new resources for developing consensus around a shared past, their potentialities exist in a terrain already marked and structured by powerful institutions, social systems and dominant ideologies. Their possibilities for facilitating ‘alternative’ social memories and remembering practices are inescapably connected to the economic, political and representational inequalities in which they are being, or may be, performed. Adequately accounting for the mnemonic potential of new media, therefore, requires us not only to hold in view the persistence of older media technologies but also the socio-political contexts in which they, and the newer, are embedded.

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