Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere

JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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PART 2
THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL 2014 AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

Theoretical framework for the study of memory in old and new media age

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Abstract

This chapter looks at the blossoming discipline of memory studies and aims to shed light on concepts which are useful starting points for enquiry into connections between memory and the workings of communication media. The chapter argues that there is a close nexus between memory and media which manifests itself in the ways memory is produced "in", "by" and "through" media (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009). It pinpoints principal sites of media memory scholarship with emphasis on journalism, media's engagement in the stimulation of individual memory, media's involvement in sedimentation of collective memory (mainly in channelling potential social hegemony) and transformation brought about by the transfer of memory processes on the digital platform.

Keywords: media, memory, collective memory, networked memory, cultural studies

1.   How time was made a social variable?

The concept of space entered imagery and the conceptual apparatus of social sciences resolutely and briskly, having been galvanized by the process of globalization, which had become of interest in many disciplines from philosophy to economics (Wallerstein, 2004; Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995; Lash and Urry, 2002). In contrast, the concept of time has been theorised in much more restrained fashion. Although the roots of the first philosophical treatises on time date back to the 19th century (Hegel, 1977; Hegel, 2012; Bergson, 2007; Heidegger, 2002), "time" took quite long before it grew into a perspective which enchants social scientists in droves.

We cannot say that there were no actual social processes inspiring the studies of how time flows, changing the present into the past which then remains accessible solely through history and memory. (Past, history and memory are the grand terminological triumvirate into which the social scientists' concern with time is translated.) Indeed there are two types of social processes that attracted social scientists to reflect upon time flow and its social consequences (and eventually made it a sound concept): the advent of modern society with all its stages in general and a number of more specific socio-political turnovers in the course of the 20th century, which carried the grand ideological narratives, and aspired to provide corresponding versions of history and even collective memory.

The overall process of modernization - transformation of the feudal world into the modern society - carved out a rupture between the two epochs which brought new awareness of the phenomenon of time. Its constitutive concepts of progress and change had the production of past as something that is divided from the present embedded in them. The modern world started to be understood as the future of the old world; just as the internal phases of modernity are understood to be its own pasts and futures. Legitimating the present by separating it from and juxtaposing it with the past - i.e. making *time* a social variable - is everywhere, starting from Enlightenment's refusal of the "obscurantist" tradition, and going to the swift replacement of fashions, styles, subcultures and generations by new ones in contemporary marketing.

The past-present dichotomy was captured by Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the Angelus Novus by Paul Klee.

> A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. […] The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole of what has been smashed. But the storm irresistibly propels him into the future […]. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 2003: 392)

In Benjamin's view, Angelus Novus represents modernity swept along by the urge of progress. Modernity's worship of progress, future and forward horizons also explains how the past, history and memory eventually entered its hype-period in social sciences. Modern ideals including modern obsession with the future were revisited and critically revised within the late modern (or postmodern) turn, which resulted in re-direction of focus towards "past", "history" and "memory".

Except the general framework of the shift from the traditional to the modern and the postmodern, there is a number of smaller-scale (but still gigantic), institutionalized ruptures between diverse socio-political orders which increased societies' sensitivity for thinking along the time axis and acknowledging the representations of the past to be a crucial part of their presence and future. The twentieth century produced a considerable number of "post-societies" - societies which had and have to accommodate various dislocations, discrepancies and discontinuities in the accounts of their pasts: post-war Germany, postcolonial countries, post-Franco/Salazar Iberian countries, post-apartheid South Africa, post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, post-Soviet states on the territory of the former USSR, the post-dictatorship Latin American countries … This is an impressive collection of societies whose development was fractured into incompatible ideologies and which are consequently prone to see reconcilement with their pasts through memory and history as a paramount problem. It is important to stress that these ruptures are underlain by strong continuities: genuine memory senses it intuitively from the beginning, and academic reflection arrives to this state of knowledge after it manages to deconstruct the narratives of the past-present divides, which are usually imposed by ideological official histories.

2.   How media made its way to memory studies?

Looking at the ways memory is intertwined with media is a relatively new thing that does not go beyond 2000s. The works published before that usually showed only marginal interest in media or most likely no interest at all.

This was the case not only of the initial philosophical works in the 19th century (Hegel, Bergson) but also of Maurice Halbwachs, who coined the term "collective memory", and whose work serves as the seminal book in the sociological study of memory. He first published his book "On Collective Memory" in French in 1950 without making a reference to the role of mass media, although he emphasized that memory is formed in the midst of social relationships between individuals as well as social groups so that "*memory is constantly made and remade from the perspective of those on the outside*"

(Gaarde-Hansen, 2011: 18). Nonetheless, it is arguable that Halbwachs' defini-tion of memory which sees it as "*an awareness of the past in the present*" has not been surpassed yet (Halbwachs, 1992: 54).

Another milestone on the way to the inclusion of media into memory studies was the work of the school of French historians known as École des Annales (from the journal title "Les Annales d´histoire économique et sociale") who, rather ironically, attempted a "dehistorification" of history. The Annales School, represented e.g. by Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, Jacques Le Goff or Philip Arries, paralleled the big history rooted in important dates and political events with a focus on the history of quotidian social and economic processes. Pierre Nora, one of the late adherents of The Annales School, has been exten-sively echoed in the context of media memory studies thanks to his concept of "the sites of memory" (lieux de memoire). According to Nora, sites of memory are situated on all levels of social life and encompass "*any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community*" (1996: xvii). The broadness of this concept already enables us to refer to mediascape as one of the "memory places" while on the other hand showing that mediation is an inbuilt affordance which all "memory places" have, because they ensure connection between the past and the present.

The heyday of media and memory scholarship arrived after cultural studies had been well established as a commonplace university programme, had freed its hands from some self-protective debates and started to diversify thematically in the 1990s and 2000s. An on-line catalogue of the U.S. Con-gress lists 14 books with "media" and "memory" in their titles published in the period 1980-2000, and 274 books searched for using the same keywords in the period 2000-2014. "Memory boom" (Winter, 2000) in media cultural studies owes its explosion to the actual political, economic and technological developments as well. Focus on niche audiences – especially in the television industry – brought about the rise of specialized television channels, with histo-ry channels as one of the most popular specializations (apart from e.g. art, sport or children programming). We could say that television enquiry became the flagship of media memory studies in the 1990s, with television taken to be "*the principal means by which most people learn about history today*" (Edgerton and Rollins, 2001: 1). The media and memory debate was further endorsed and heated by technological re-constitution of the process of symbolic exchange and its transposition on digital networked platforms. Affordances of the dig-ital technologies tickle the old human utopia about absolute memory capable of recording, storing and flawlessly retrieving life in its entirety (van Dijck, 2007: 149). However naïve this can be, even the most sceptical observer must acknowledge that the pace and scope of digital documenting and archiving has

been transformed far beyond the original meaning of these practices. Internet archives are not fixed repositories, but always unfinished sites of digital liquidity with ephemeral, emergent data.

3. What kind of nexus is there between media and memory?

Media act as agents of memory, together with other social institutions which have acquired positions enabling them to narrate the past (such as schooling system, museums, art, etc.). In many cases these "retrospecting institutions" seek to comply with the accounts of the past provided by the science of history, taking it to be the prime measure for the accuracy of their presentations. Nonetheless, the past must not be in every case equated with history. Whereas "the past" is a non-fabricated complex of events and processes which occurred in the past times, "history" (as a product of the science of history) is an account of the past constructed by professionally trained historians according to specific methodological rules. The way media inspect the past is unique precisely because they allow for a relatively low involvement of the official event history as an unparalleled source, or, more precisely, they combine it with other forms of access to the past based on memory. Media, compared to, for instance, education, do not take the historical account of the past to be the only correct and verified source of knowledge on the past. On the one hand, media give voice to the other institutional agents of memory; on the other hand they act as an agent of memory in their own right. "*Thus among possible memory agents, the media serve as a meta-agent because they constitute the most prevalent and quotidian site of recollection in modern national societies*" (Meyers, Neiger and Zandberg, 2011: 11).

Media involvement in sedimentation of collective memory is a complex and multi-faceted business. Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski identified three forms of articulation between media and memory: memory "in" media, "by" media, and "through" media (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 1). Memory "in" media points to cases in which media provide space for other retrospecting institutions or individual direct witnesses. Original "mediawork" (Deuze, 2013) resulting in the stories of the past manufactured by media refers to memory "by" media. Popular appropriations of the mediated past and memories of the past constructed and shared by the audiences meet the definition of memory "through" media.

The nexus between media and memory is thus delimited by the three dimensions which represent intersections of memory sedimentation and media operations. These are dimensions of how the past is represented *in* media contents, how it is constructed *by* media professionals and how media audiences produce it *through* the uses of the two above sources.

4.   Sites of media memory scholarship: Journalism

Media genres which aspire to transcend time and stimulate memory are re-markably diverse and different in their nature and functions. The range of me-dia genres relevant to sedimentation of memory covers everything from news and documentary to historical costume drama. Notwithstanding this diversity, journalism, out of all segments of media production, has somehow privileged status in the field of media and memory convergence. One reason is that jour-nalism's outline of current affairs and today's facts is seen as something that will become the chronicle of tomorrow. It is not an accident that many news-papers still bear the word "chronicle" in their titles. Robert E. Park already put it like that in 1940: "*Once published and its significance recognized, what was news becomes history*" (1940: 676).

The proximity of journalism to records of the past has been more often referred to as an uneven relationship in which one (journalism) does a worse job than the other (science of history). Journalism was originally depreciated for its fiddling with ephemeral actuality, focusing on the here and now; "*the popular assumption has been that it provides a first, rather than final, draft of history*" (Zelizer, 2008: 379). Barbie Zelizer (2008) further explains that this assessment was thoroughly re-evaluated and journalism is now understood as an efficient agent of memory in at least two ways: The past helps journalists to interpret the present; a glance at the rear-view mirror functions as a genealogy of present affairs, and provides better understanding of original contexts, caus-es and consequences. Journalists also refer to the past in a rather autopoietic way by learning about past events from their own previous media outlets, not the history textbooks or archives. This practice can be defined as a creation of what Andreas Huyssens (2003) calls "palimpsestic memory". Media write and rewrite their previous texts and that leads to a layering of the strata of cultural meanings with original historical connotations wiped out of them and re-filled with up-to date appropriations.

5.   Sites of media memory scholarship II: Individual memory

Media production and the ways it is used by the audiences contribute not only to the dynamics of the collective memory sedimentation - collective memory being understood as public opinion about the past - but also to "memory work" (Haug, 1987) on the individual level. Personal identity is inconceivable with-out individual memory; the way I understand myself deeply rests upon how I remember who I was in my previous life. Personal, private or individual mem-ory is tightly interconnected with communication media, in this case especially in the "through" mode (as explained earlier). Uses of media memory artefacts

(such as old audio cassettes, long playing records or watching re-runs of television programmes) engender associative processes of reflection upon what they represent or refer to. These processes have been studied predominantly in case of old photographs or entire family albums. Anette Kuhn (1985) compared browsing through family photographs to "memory work" consisting of phases of reminiscence, trauma, therapy and reconciliation. Marianne Hirsch (1997) discovered that memories stimulated by photographic images often refer to realities that the users could not witness personally. It inspired her to coin the term "postmemory" - the memory which is not entirely ours but which we remember - which we inherited from our cultural predecessors.

6.   Sites of media memory scholarship III: Collective memory

Maurice Halbwachs, who coined the concept of the collective memory, has broken a monopoly that psychology and neurology had over the concept of memory. As Jerome Bourdon (2009: 7) put it, Halbwachs attempted to: "*sociologize data that were thought to be individual and therefore belonging to the domain of psychology*". Halbwachs was convinced that "*the mind reconstructs its memories under pressure of society*" (1992: 51). He developed the idea that the way we remember our past is grounded in the broader social environment in which we are embedded and which draws us into the collective ways of remembering. He emphasized various types of social groups, starting with family, to be elementary "farms" where memories are developed. Collective memory is collective in two meanings of the word: one refers to the collectively-relevant layers of the past that are remembered; the other refers to collective mode in which it is remembered. Collective memory stores the segments of the past which affected large numbers of people in the past (usually political, cultural, public events) and which are remembered by large numbers of people today. The forms of collective remembering and remembrance can vary from symbolic acts like reading about and reflecting on the past to instrumental activities like taking part in the ceremony or visiting memorial sites or museums.

From psychological and neurological perspectives, individual memory is a function of the specific organization of brain tissue. Therefore it is taken for granted - not only by science but also by many popular metaphors - that individual memory resides in our heads. The question "Where does the collective memory reside?" is much more complicated. Wulf Kansteiner (2002: 180) makes a difference between "memory producers" (institutions which have capacity to act as memory agents) and "memory consumers" (ordinary people who receive their framings of the past). Definition of the memory producers and consumers is useful although the asymmetrical relationship as outlined by Kansteiner is untenable in the field of media cultural studies. With some

modifications we could say that collective memory resides at the intersections between producers' institutional performance of memory and culturally autonomous appropriations by memory users.

Although we assume the memory users to be self-determining subjects with significant capacities for peculiar interpretations, collective memory - as almost any collective, social process - is always endangered by conformism. Jeffrey Olick (1999) emphasizes that collective memory is different from "collected memories". Collective memory is not an aggregate of individual memories (which can be dubbed "collected memories") but more closely connected to mythologies, ideologies and dominant master narratives. Memory is a rather flexible substance. It was already Maurice Halbwachs who emphasized that collective memory is highly reconstructive and we remember the past only imperfectly, selectively and incompletely (Garde-Hansen, 2011: 19). The way we reconstruct the past is largely dependent on the interpretive schemes of the present moment which can derive from dominant ideology or deep-seated hegemony. When explaining reconfigurations of memory, Halbwachs noted: "*Here it is only one framework that counts – that which is constituted by the commandments of our present society and which necessarily excludes all others*" (1992: 50). Collective memory is inherently social; it is constituted in and by its social setting. Nonetheless, it can also result in enforcement of the "official" versions of the past that are perpetuated and cemented by powerful memory producers. The selectivity of collective memory may become systematic - the parts of the past which are uncomfortable from the perspective of the present hegemony then get systematically lower chances (or no chances at all) of being represented, remembered or memorialized. Collective memory is relatively open to substitution of some of its parts by memory reconfigurations compliant to the present social order.

Media representations feeding on collective memory are frequently blamed for the lack of accuracy and authenticity in their recollections of the past and for commodification of the past. These aspects of collective memory stand out especially when they are looked at from the perspective of critical theory. The field of film history is a basis for this kind of media bashing because film and television insights into the past fail to satisfy historians' notion of historical fidelity, and do not meet their expectations of faithfulness to history (Rosenstone, 1995). They often argue that media's accounts of the past are kitschy, superficial and biased and that they provide flawed input for the collective memory work. Garde-Hansen (2011) counter-positions Spielberg's Schindler's List and Lanzman's Shoah to show the example of two cultural products of which the first one is condemned as Holywood cinema and the second one is highly appreciated.

7.   Sites of media memory scholarship III: Digital technologies

The enormous boom in memory scholarship incited by social processes described at the beginning of this chapter was further amplified by the spread of digital technologies. The roots of this frenzy probably go back to the moment when Charles Babbage made his packet of punched cards instruct his arche-computer in the 1830s (Freidman, 2005: 22). Since then "memory" refers more to pathways which lead to the decomposing and re-creation of information than to simple preservation of information in its fixed shape. Computers' capacity to store and retrieve immeasurable amounts of data together with the interconnection of computers in global networks fundamentally impacted on both embodiments of human memory: memory as function and memory as archive. The entire World Wide Web, with its ever-changing, shimmering content, is now an archive, "location" accumulating newer and newer information, which then immediately trans-morphs into the memories of the past. Growth in the speed and extent of memory-making leads to viral proliferation of memories. Today we store and retrieve much more data than we can actually utilise in real remembrance.

   Just as the entire digital world does, digital memory provokes reactions from the two oppositional camps: humanist essentialism and technooptimism. Alison Landsberg (2004) as a representative of the first approach developed a notion of "prosthetic memory", suggesting that human memory relies upon an alarming amount of technological facilitation, which leads to deterioration of spontaneous memory. Andrew Hoskins, on the other hand, adopted the logic of technological determinism, especially when writing on transformation of the archive. Networked memory with an influx of updates on websites, social network sites, weblogs, wikis, internet forums or in databases is always in a state of emergence, memory is always "memory on-the-fly" (Hoskin, 2009: 94). According to Hoskins, archive was liberated from space and materiality: "*The idea of the static archive as a permanent place of storage was replaced by much more fluid temporalities and dynamics of permanent data-transfer*" (2009: 97).

8.   Brief conclusion

Independently of their paradigmatic identity, a majority of scholars in all disciplines under the umbrella of memory studies would agree (at least to some extent) that the field of memory was fundamentally penetrated and accordingly transformed by digital technologies. Apart from extent and speed, the range of actors contributing to the vault of digital memory has also changed. This transformation empowered non-institutional memory agents, in particular, the group which now embraces everybody who publishes on-line. Thus a concise

theory of collective digital memory has not been put together yet - and it might never be. Collective memory is unconceivable without Halbwachsian "pressure of society" while cyberspace has been mostly understood as the exact opposite, the province of bottom-up processes. On the other hand, plurality, or even abundance, of approaches to collective memory is useful in the continuum of the old and new media age. Potential attempts to compress them into a unified theory might bring simplifying reductionism instead of theoretical fixity. Digitisation of memory processes points to a fatal tension between societal pressures on and individual uses of the narrations of the past. Current paradigmatic diversity within memory studies ensures that both massive conceptualizations – "memory-as-structure" as well as "memory-as-agency" – are given well-deserved attention.

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Biography

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